

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

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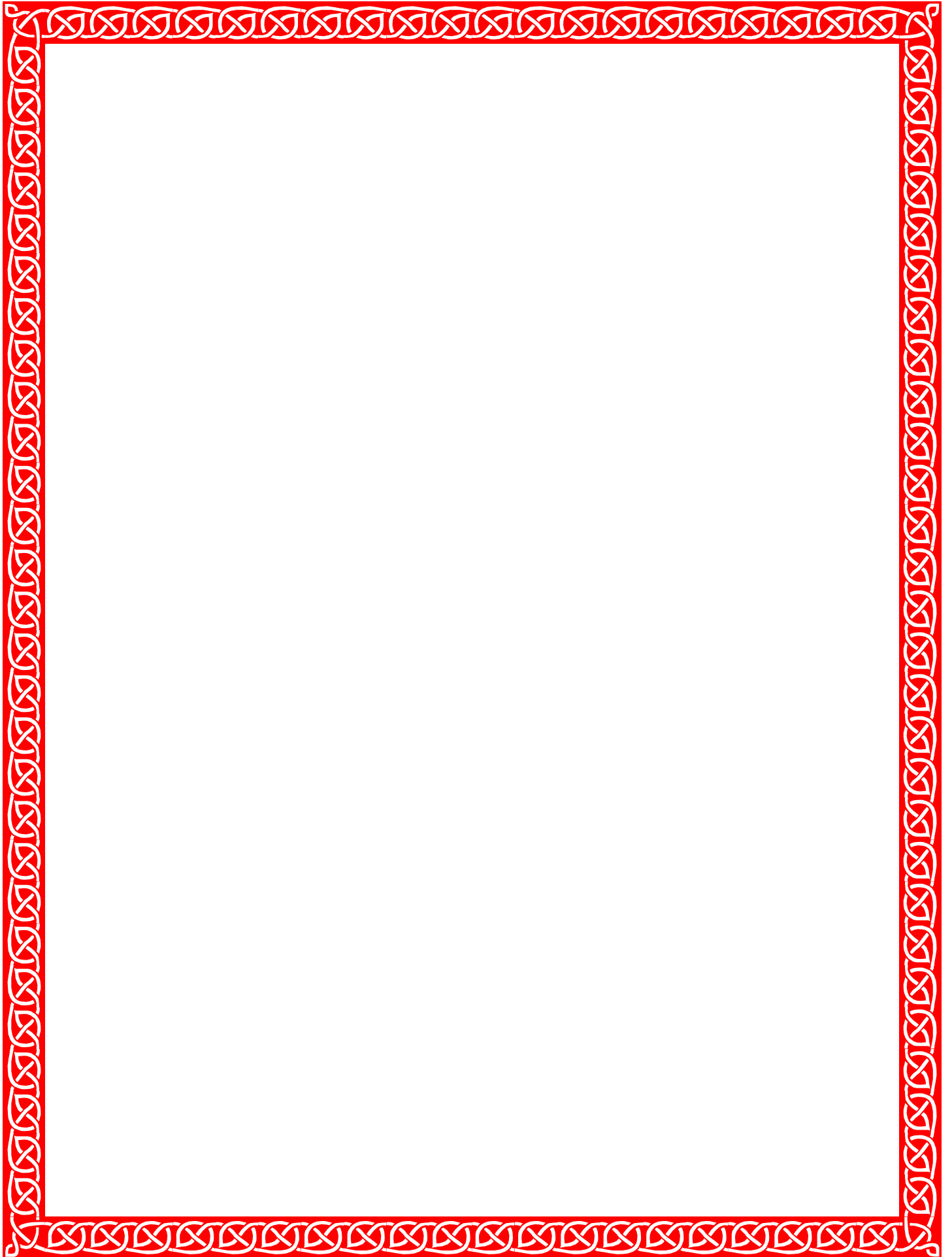
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Editorial

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

Some of our major reviewers are announcing vacations, all at about the same time, in the foreseeable future. We may therefore skip a month of publication here.

We thank A. C. Cargill for permission to reprint her articles. You can see the originals at <https://mewe.com/i/accargill> and <https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com>



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FICTION

Absolution by Rick Partlow

Review by Graham Bradley

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Rick Partlow spent years self-publishing dozens of books before he signed with Aethon, a small press that actually does the hard work of marketing. Now he's enjoying a well-deserved bit of recognition as he continues to reach new readers with old titles. Absolution is his latest audio release.

The story

Our MC is Grant Masterson, a former space cop who's now a space bounty hunter. He's good at his job and unlike a lot of corrupt types in his line of work, he's got a moral code. When a new target comes his way, he's prepared for a run-of-the-mill pickup with a decent payout...until new information comes to light, and he's got to figure out just how many powerful people he wants to piss off.

The characters

Grant's our POV character. He's also got an awesome robot dog (simply named Dog) that looks like a real animal, but has an advanced AI. The two banter with each other really well, and Dog is a good foil for Grant.

I liked that Grant had a moral structure that he didn't want to violate. (It's why he's a former cop.) I especially appreciated his vulnerable moments, his weakness with regard to his ex-wife and estranged son. I half-expected him to be your average hard-boiled emotionally numb action hero, but the fact that he still had emotional sore spots was refreshing.

His primary bounty for this book is a woman named Delia Beckett. She's serviceable enough as a female lead, her character doesn't shine through a whole lot until the third act, but she's got an interesting secret that changes the parameters of Grant's mission toward her.

The world

We're many, many years into the future on this one. It's more like Firefly than anything else—we've pushed past Earth, set up camp in the stars, built some space stations, and we've got a general sort of intergalactic Union going for us.

But in the poorer parts of the poorer worlds, crime runs rampant, and that's where Grant makes his money. The setting was advanced enough but still similar to a lot of the problems we face in 2022 (corporations buying up all the housing, for example). Partlow struck a good balance.

The politics

Nothing from our world. All of the in-world politics are related to corruption in government and law enforcement. Standard fare.

Content warning

Lots of language and sensual references. (A few key scenes take place in a robot brothel, for example, though the main characters are never actually there for sex. Partlow shows a lot of creativity with a grungy setting.)

Who's it for?

Fans of military sci-fi and space opera, without the aliens.

Why read it?

Partlow has a really good pulp series going here. It's fast, it's interesting, and it doesn't drag on and on. Mind you this one ends on a cliffhanger, but still has a satisfying arc, and does its job of getting the reader interested in book two.

The Breakroom of a Thousand Nightmares by Roy Griffis Review by Michael Gallagher upstreamreviews.substack.com

Griffis' finale of the Cthulhu, Amalgamated trilogy manages to keep things fresh.

The Story

In Roy Griffis' wonderfully crafted world set in the inner workings of the cosmic bureaucracy that deals with all things Not Meant To Be Known, our hero-shoggoth Narg'Lah is finding things changing around his corner of the dimension. Demons have begun sharing company space, in addition to the standard many-eyed, many-tentacled Lovecraftian sort; Narg finds himself fending off accusations from co-workers that all his time among the Poo Flingers has made him soft; but worst of all, he returns to his office to find everything being moved and his beloved secretary Bugg being reassigned. Our boy is movin' on up, as it were, tasked with a new mission personally by Uncle Beefbits. Before long he's swept off to Earth, with the now-standard lack of any sort of explanation.

Upon finding himself in his new "meatsuit", he finds his largely unwilling but unfailingly faithful pal Murph sharing the body's consciousness. After an initial stint of realizing they are in total darkness and immobile, they are hauled out of a car trunk by an ominous bunch of ruffians in the middle of a parking lot, and realize they are a) female b) alive and c) both completely out of their element in the present-day world. What unfurls after is another of Griffis' trademark jaunts combining his signature comedy, dash of mystery and this time, Greys and feds. The one thing that does immediately present itself as strange (well, stranger than usual), is that CERN (where their host is employed as a janitor) is currently housing a massive high-tech somethingorother that bears a remarkable resemblance to the atrocity-summoning Sun Stone from the second book.

The Characters

Narg and Murph, our buddy-duo protagonists, have been profiled in my reviews for Griffis' two previous books in the series, The Thing From HR and The Auditors of Doom, so by all means check those posts out for a more in-depth run down on them. They basically boil down to a nebbishy Shoggoth and a surfer dude who died in the 70.

Helena is this entry's "meatsuit", and is by far the book's most well fleshed out and sympathetic figure. Unique to this entry, she is very much alive, and eventually becomes aware of the presence of Murph and Narg sharing her headspace, though she initially believes them to be demons. So why doesn't this freak her out? Helena, it is learned, has been regularly visited by aliens (malevolent ones, known as The Greys) since childhood, and suffered a life of loneliness and isolation because of it. Her parents never believed her stories, and her ingrained paranoia has left her single living in a tiny apartment in her 60s. She actually finds herself grateful for the company of the voices she hears. Murph, in this regard, takes on a particularly sweet role as her companion, giving her a friend to talk to while Narg parses their surroundings for clues as to their assignment.

Of course, Murph and Narg use this to learn as much as they can about her and the world they find themselves both a stranger in, eventually learning that she works at a janitor at CERN, and that -- surprise surprise-- there's work being done to discover new dimensions in space.

But the Greys aren't the only people pestering Helena; I don't want to say too much here, because the character relations do get quite layered rather early on, but I'll only say that other notable characters include an old flame of Helena's who's now working for the government, Ilsa-babe (Murph's main squeeze, read book one at least) shares brain space with one of the Greys, and someone who's a very big fan of a certain failed painter with a distinct mustache and one testicle.

The World

This one skips around quite a bit, which is perhaps fitting for an big, epic trilogy finish. While Thing and Auditors remained in a single setting, Breakroom begins in modern-day Germany and by the end warps back to 1940s Antarctica. As is generally the case with Griffis' books, the outer world settings (save for the climaxes) tend to take a backseat to dialogue and character development, and this entry is no exception. The current world time setting that makes up the majority of the book does make for some interesting new drama, as even Murph finds himself hopelessly out of his element. Both he and Narg marvel at the small black boxes that modern humans worship, for instance; and the addition of Helena as an added member of the team was a spin on the formula, and is an easily likable and sympathetic reader avatar to help give the lay of the land to the two.

The Politics

As with Griffis' previous two entries, Breakroom does not venture into any serious political hectoring, borrowing only what historical geopolitical elements might be necessary to service the plot.

Who's it for?

Being the third book in the series, it's for anyone who's read and no doubt enjoyed his previous two entries. It's also just straight-up funny, and accessible enough that one need not be a fan of Lovecraft to get most of the jokes; even a passing familiarity with his monsters will suffice.

Why Read it?

Obviously I'm a huge fan of Griffis; horror comedy is a tough nut to crack, and Lovecraftian comedy tougher, but he does so in ways that have had me genuinely belly laughing for three books now. If it could somehow land in the hands of the right people, I'm convinced Griffis, with his keen screenwriting chops, could turn this into one of the most original franchises in a generation. It's that good. If you're tired of the constant mainstream slop being shoved into your face, splurge this summer and grab the trilogy. You'll have good vibes from beyond the stars.

Body and Blood by Michael Gallagher

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Body and Blood is Gallagher's first effort at writing a novel. Frankly, it's awesome

Story

Father James Keenan heard a disturbance in the church, so he put on his Kevlar blazers, grabbed the pulse rifle. He expects to find more thieves trying to steal from that Sunday's collection. Instead, he finds two literal ghouls trying to steal the consecrated hosts from the tabernacle. With the help of his 6'3" fellow priest (and former pro-wrestler) Akono Nwosou, the two creatures are barely beaten back.

This is the opening scene of Michael Gallagher's Body and Blood. There's a bounty on all things religious, and every local temple and church is being raided, tags left on their doors.

After this, nothing gets easier. Keenan and Nwosou have to wage spiritual and literal warfare against a demonic street gang, led by a demonic witch, operating out of the "Black Hollow projects." But they have allies of their own. And this war is going to be Hell on Earth.

This is the first book by Michael Gallagher, and I hate him just a little now. Aside from one or two difficulties in the last few pages, this book is damn near perfect. There's no preaching, except for an occasional doctrinal element that acts as a plot device, then it can go on a few sentences too long.

Character

Body and Blood has a colorful cast of characters, from our two main characters, to the parish secretary, who looks like Jeanine from Ghostbusters, only armed. Along the way, we have the motorcycle gang whose members all bring their Abuela to church. There is also the Russian restaurant owner who the demonic gangbangers try to strong-arm.

Our villains are represented by two characters. The gang leader Ojo is the primary point of view character for the dark side, and he follows the darkness, despite being wary of it. He is entertaining, and he gives us a perspective of why anyone is following the witch of Black Hollow. The witch herself looks like Mister Roger's grandmother, until you scratch the surface to the eldritch horror beneath.

Personally, I enjoyed the assassin for hire who is the little man who wasn't there, who makes dad jokes.

And seriously, do not mess with the parish secretary.

World

This is a world where we don't know the events of the day. We don't know how this world came to be, or even what city this is. This may as well be "once upon in a time, in a galaxy far far away." The location itself is a living breathing thing that gives you enough of an idea what's going on. When the world has fallen so far that Keenan casually refers to his four exorcisms a month, and that it's become so bad that they needed a one-shot exorcism format, you can tell the world is in pieces. Yet somehow, this isn't a dystopia. This is science fiction horror.

You get a sense of the world in the first scene, when Father Akono's bedroom is "on the other side of the church for a better flanking position."

There are heavy elements that imply a near-dystopian society, but honestly that could just be this section of this city. There is just enough world-building here to make the plot move, and it moves fast. But readers can't get a good grasp of how much this parish is in or near the projects, or if it's the wider world. Honestly, it doesn't matter. We may get more in subsequent books set in this universe.

Politics

None really. I've seen more politics in the John Wick movies.

Content Warning

There are elements of body horror here. There is child sacrifice and lots of blood. There's one scene where someone is basically tortured to death, but he had it coming.

Who is it For?

If you like the horror of Tim Powers, the action of Larry Correia or the world building of Jim Butcher, you're going to love this.

Why you should buy

Body and Blood this is a fun novel that will grab you by the throat and not let you go until it's finished. It is a fun, entertaining romp through a near-future world where things are slowly going to Hell in a handcart, but no one here is going down without a fight.

Captain Trader Helmsman Spy by Karl Gallagher

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Karl Gallagher's last Fall of the Censor novel, *Seize What's Held Dear*, showed us the taking of the planet Corwynt, and holding it against Censorate attack fleets. Now, Karl uses his latest novel to take us deeper into the Censorate empire, and the planets it controls.

The Story

Captain Trader Helmsman Spy takes place almost concurrent with the previous novel, *Seize What's Held Dear*. In *Seize What's Held Dear*, we saw Niko Landy, Captain of the Azure Tarn, agree to delve into the world of the Censor, to explore the systems, discover planets, chart paths through the stars, and open up lines of communication and possible allies on the ground for when the Fierans come knocking on the Censor's door.

Obviously from the title of the novel, Karl Gallagher has written a science fiction spy novel. Unlike *Seize What's Held Dear*, this isn't a military science fiction novel, but mostly world and character driven. Going from world to world, interacting with the different systems and people felt on par with Flash Gordon going through the worlds of Mongo... only with much fewer blasters, swords, and fights with space tigers. Only the threat is no less than a Flash Gordon serial. Every step along the way, Niko

Landry and his crew are under constant threat from Censorate authorities, and Niko and his crew have to invent their own version of Moscow rules.

But of course, this is one of Karl's novels, and we have to have at least one death-defying escape through hyperspace, a battle with an unarmed freighter ship versus a fully armed destroyer, and along the way, having all the threats that would come from a submarine novel—only instead of crush depth, the hull ruptures and everyone is either blown out into space or blown up by hyperspace aether.

And the entire time, there is a Censor spy on the ship, ready and waiting to sentence everyone on board to death.

I really feel like David Weber should be taking notes, it's just that good.

Also, there's just a hint of smartass.

“It's not a moon!”

“What?”

“That's a space station. Look how shiny it is.”

Characters

As I've said, two things carry this book, the character and the world-building. Both are done in quick, efficient sketches. The book opens with how our heroes get sucked into / volunteer for this mission ... because they know what they're doing. (And the government made the mistake of trying to commandeer their ship) Something as simple as bartering for fuel was a barrier for professional spies.

I do like how we get multiple layers of character development for multiple characters just with simple personal observations.

Niko Landry looks at a newcomer and concludes.

[He wasn't Navy.] They weren't that fond of exercise or as alert to their surroundings. The muscles and swiveling head said Marine.

And if that doesn't tell you how observant Niko is, you're not paying attention.

The World

Karl manages to make the economics of a system interesting. One of the ways the Censorate works is to prevent a common monetary system, so negotiations between worlds is strictly barter. Part of Niko's mission is to find good places and planets to infiltrate with the equivalent of Marine Raiders.

This also covers a little bit of how the Concord (the government of our heroes) operates... poorly, inefficiently, and with WD-40... but by God, does the Censor make them look like the model of efficiency.

Also, it's nice to see that inter-service rivalries never change.

“Why wasn't this part of the Navy's mission brief?”

“The Navy only does favors for Marines when it’s a line item in their budget.”

Karl also does some interesting things with language ... especially with words that don’t translate into other languages.

Karl also builds at least four different planetary cultures along the way. One is a planet of slavers, another is built along the lines of an Asian Matriarchy, as well as the planet of “zebra.”

We also get to see the workings of the Censor, which can be nicely interpreted as the bureaucracy of Screwtape.

Politics

The politics are mildly libertarian. If you couldn’t tell by the fact that merchants are doing a better job of spying than the government, you could tell by lines like “Problems are never over. But free people have better problems.”

Who is it for?

For fans of David Weber’s space opera, Timothy Zahn’s sci-fi espionage, or the various and sundry worlds you’d experience in Flash Gordon.

Why read it?

This is a fun Sci-fi espionage thriller.

Cold As Hell by Rhett C. Bruno and Jaime Castle

Review by Graham Bradley

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The first full novel that follows up on 2021’s Dead Acre brings us back to the undead outlaw James Crowley, working for heaven to wrangle baddies in the Wild West. And it delivers very well on the pitch from its predecessor.

Note: this review is based on the audiobook, narrated by Roger Clark, who has a perfect cowboy drawl and really brought the story to life.

The Story

As we learned in the prequel novella, James Crowley used to run with a group of bandits and baddies led by the heinous Ace Riker. He and Riker butted heads over how to treat a couple of captive women—Riker wanted to force himself on them, and Crowley intervened—ultimately resulting in Crowley’s death.

Now resurrected by a meddling angel, Crowley serves the White Throne in the ongoing effort to keep hellish creatures off of the earth. He goes from place to place as the angels prompt, solving mysteries and slaying supernatural villains all the way.

In this particular book, Crowley goes up against a powerful trio of bank robbers who are able to freeze

things even in the desert. As he tries to get to the bottom of things, he meets old friends and new enemies, leading to revelations about his past and making big promises about his future. I really liked how the authors weren't afraid to make "big moves" as opposed to settling comfortably into a formula for a dozen books.

Crowley works on (and solves) the central case, and it results in massive changes to his personal status quo.

The World

This story is anchored in our world and our history, even if the town names might be fictional. It's a wild west story. The authors don't mention dates with too much specificity, but some historical figures come into the tale, like Bram Stoker. The fact that Stoker meets a revenant gunslinger working for God without knowing it was somewhat amusing to this reader.

The Characters

The aforementioned Crowley is a man who grudgingly accepts the reality of his situation, because it beats the alternative (hell). His chief rival is Ace Riker, who he hasn't seen in twenty years, since Ace shot him and left him for dead. And rounding out the principle trio is Rosa Massey, whose connection to Crowley goes back decades, but she doesn't know the truth of his condition.

Because I listened to the audiobook, it's hard to know how to spell the names of some of the supernatural characters—like the angel who's basically Crowley's handler, or the Native Americans who feature heavily in the second and third acts. But this is an interesting cast and the story rewards your attention.

The Politics

The only thing that made any impression on me was how much Crowley made a point about saying the Indians got screwed and everyone should be nice to them. It came off as a departure from his attitude toward anything else in the book and it made me wonder if the authors' own opinions were coming through a little too strong.

Other than that, it's a period piece, and you won't find any presentisms in it.

Content warning

In my review of *DEAD ACRE* I compared James Crowley heavily to Harry Dresden, but the content in *The Black Badge* is a lot more...gruesome. Bruno and Castle aren't afraid to drop F-bombs or use defensibly accurate western outlaw speech. There were times when it felt excessive and could have been toned down, so be advised.

Who is it for?

I'm hesitant to recommend it to fans of westerns, since they're notorious sticklers for accuracy...but if there's an overlap between readers who enjoy sci-fi and Louis L'Amor books, they'll be the ones who like *Black Badge*.

But if you like urban fantasy, a lot of this will appeal to you as well.

Why read it?

“Familiar, but different.” Having read two volumes now, I feel confident in saying that Black Badge plays a lot of familiar notes for you if you like supernatural/paranormal stuff, or longstanding grudges between brutally hard men. It’s the setting—and the authors’ use of it in the story—that makes it stand out.

As a final note, I’ll emphasize that while COLD AS HELL sets up big things to come in the future, it doesn’t copy the slower pace of more protracted series, where it takes several years for big changes to happen in the protagonist’s life; plenty of bombs get dropped, and the biggest one of all comes in the epilogue, showing that Bruno and Castle aren’t messing around. They’re aiming big at the future of the series. I’m pretty excited to see where it goes.

Driven to the Hilt 1: The Deepest Cut by D.G. Lamb

Review by Jim McCoy

JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com

(Once upon a time, I became aware of an author named D.G Lamb who was looking to do a blog tour to promote her new book. I volunteered to host a guest post, but apparently my message wasn't received until too (maybe I should've responded to the Facebook post instead of sending someone who didn't know me a DM) late for that. Instead, I was offered a chance to review her book as part of the blog tour. And it's Science Fiction and reviewing SF/F is what I do, soo...

Yeah, it worked.

At any rate, that's my way of saying "Welcome" to any of you out there who stopped by because they were following the Driven to the Hilt Blog Tour. I hope you enjoy yourselves while you're here and if you like what you see, stay. We love new followers here at Jimbo's!)

Joshua is the main character of D.G. Lamb's Driven to the Hilt I: The Deepest Cut. He is also a survivor. That's probably the best thing I can say about him and that's awesome. I didn't start out thinking that. I wasn't sure I was going to like the kid much at first. I'm a nerd. He starts out as a jock. We're kind of natural enemies. It's not that he seemed like a bad kid. He's actually a good guy. And the series is really well named. He is legitimately driven to the hilt. I don't know how a human being could survive more than what this kid went through, but he toughed it out.

And what's more, I really do like him. He has to go through some serious stuff and make some hard decisions, but he doesn't flinch from what he has to do. He's got both brains and guts and that's a rare combination. Joshua is a teenager, but he has more maturity, at least by the end of The Deepest Cut, than a lot of adults I know. Joshua is not always a nice guy. Sometimes being nice and being alive don't go together all that well. At the end of the day though, he makes the right decisions in circumstances I wouldn't like to face personally.

Oh, and he's both intelligent and well educated, especially for his age. The story begins with his mother home schooling him and he seems to be able to understand and explain the written word better than a lot of college students I've had classes with. He's read at least some of the classics of Western literature, including Machiavelli. He also has a love for and knowledge of show tunes that even my girlfriend would envy.

He's resourceful too. When he finds himself alone in the world at a young age he does what he has to do. He's creative. He's intelligent. He finds sources of food that no one else would think to try and thrives off of them. He builds things. He finds work in unlikely places. I can't say enough about this kid and how much he impresses me.

He has a willingness to do research that a lot of adults lack as well. I've known people who get upset at kids who just google everything, but when you think about it, it makes sense. Granted, Lamb doesn't actually call it "googling" but if when Joshua needs knowledge and doesn't have a lot of time to get it, he knows where to look. That much is good in and of itself, but he also has confidence THAT he can learn what he needs to know if he tries.

The world Joshua lives on is not Earth. This makes me happy. Some of the wildlife in *The Deepest Cut* is quite frankly terrifying and the more light years away it is, the more comfortable I am. Spidervipers sound like something I'd have loved to talk about as a young kid, in a weird kind of way. Remember the conversations you had as a kid about "Would a wolf win a fight against a bear?" Yeah, a spiderviper would fit in well with that. Except that spidervipers are legitimately creepy on top of being badass. I'm not the kind of guy that runs from a spider but I'd pretty much soil my shorts if one of those showed up. There are other creatures as well. Joshua learns to contend with all of them.

He also seems to be more than he seems to be. I know that doesn't make sense but you'd really have to read the book to get it. Joshua does have a trick about slowing down time that seems to be some type of power, but there are other characters who talk about him. What they say leads me to believe that this kid has some kind of destiny, but he's not Harry Potter. There are hints but no outright statements about what the destiny is or even why they think it's Joshua. There are more books coming and that's a good thing, because Lamb seems to have asked more questions with her first book than she answered.

I don't want to take things too far though. Joshua is far from perfect. He screws up a couple of times and almost gets himself killed more than once. Still though, you can't help but root for the kid when he tries this hard and refuses to give up. He's one resolute kid and his failures only accentuate how hard he's working at what he has to do.

I'm guess that Lamb spent a lot of time doing research of her own. I don't have any real survival experience of my own, but I've done some reading (Surprising, I know) and most of what Joshua learns in his research matches what I've read almost word for word. When I say he does things in a "textbook" manner it's not just a figure of speech. The actions he performs are exactly the ones that I've read about in the textbooks. I like that. I already stated that he make mistakes sometimes, but not once did I put my phone down and scream "MORON" the way I have at some other books. It's a refreshing change.

Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that parts of this book bring me back to my days as a fan of both CSI and mobster movies. At some points, I almost forgot that I was in a Science Fiction novel because a lot of the action was so realistic that it could have been happening five miles from where I'm sitting right now. Lamb did an awesome job mixing the fantastical elements of her story with the mundane ones.

My only complaint about *The Deepest Cut*, and it's one I've mentioned with other books a few times lately, is that it starts off kind of slow. Now, I know it's the first book in a series and that they always start out slow, but it still took me a wee bit longer to get through the first chapter or two of the book than it should have. Overall though, *The Deepest Cut* is still an excellent work and was a true joy to read.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Spiderviper Teeth

Dusklight by NR LaPoint
Review by Declan Finn
www.declanfinn.com

In Chalk, we met Raven Mistcreek, whose journey down the rabbit hole went all the way to Hell. It was a fun ride. Along the way we met her kitsune friend Kasume (with a katana named... Katana), the knight Percy Dayspring with his smart metal swords that throw plasma, and August, Raven's chalk golem. There was also Damien Mistcreek, Raven's brother, and her sister Ariadne, who walks through shadows and feels like Wednesday Addams.

In Chalk, Raven, her family, and the entire knights Templar defeated three of the horsemen of the apocalypse. What could she possibly have trouble dealing with next?

Story

After the fall of Death in Chalk, Cults dedicated to said horseman are on the rise everywhere. The Holy Inquisition have been rooting out these cults, one shotgun blast at a time. And then they hear about an evil book, bound in human skin. And the cults have a new target, and they have only one name to go by: Mistcreek.

Cue the music to Evil Dead, we have an evil book to burn.

Meanwhile, Lady Raven and her fiancé Baron Percy Dayspring (they've both had a promotion), are ambushed on the way to his Dusklight castle. The fiends are of a type that don't exist in their world, but could only be from the lower depths. What fresh Hell is rising to threaten the world this time? Last time it took the entire Templar order to beat back the forces of Hell; can Raven and Percy do it with a handful of knights and some Inquisitors found along the way?

How do I sum up NR LaPoint's work? He's John C, Wright, only he speaks in sentences instead of paragraphs. He will leap headfirst down that rabbit hole, conjure up every horror from everyone's mythology, multiply it by the square root of HP Lovecraft, and then hit it with plasma from orbit because it's the only way to be sure.

Then the fun really starts.

Despite all of the action (which may be half to three quarters of the book) it's still heavily carried by character. And somehow, the climax of the novel is NOT the three-way Kaiju battle between the Thing from Hell du jour, the dragon and the golem, but surprisingly low-key and personal... and it still feels like you went through the final battle in Highlander.

One of the nice things with Dusklight is that even though we're going down a slightly new rabbit hole, LaPoint doesn't spend this novel explaining things to us. The characters know the world, they understand the world, and convey exactly what's going on clear crisp fashion. The reader should be lost without a clear, in-depth conversation, but we're not. It's easy to track the who, the how and the "What the Hell?"

I also appreciate that Nate went through an entire novel with the inquisition, and he didn't use a single variation on how unexpected they were. Probably because, at this point the joke is so overused, everyone expects them.

And I will always appreciate someone who knows the difference between sapient and sentient.

Characters

In Chalk, we had one real point of view character, and that was Raven Mistcreek. Imagine the girl from Ghostbusters: Afterlife if she made it through puberty in a Catholic girls school. Her brain works in some interesting ways, and she approaches problems from different angles. She isn't a physical powerhouse

Dusklight has a slew of characters, all balanced out fairly well. Even the golem is a point of view character, and he has an interesting perspective on things. It has members of the Holy Inquisition and the Templars. It has a half succubus who was raised by nuns. We see things through Percy's eyes. And it's all terribly well balanced.

Everyone has had some good solid character development since book one. It's enjoyable to watch them grow.

World

Oh, this world is so interesting. It's supposed to be a backdrop, but it feeds the plot so heavily they're indistinguishable.

Politics

None. No, seriously, none. Unless you think that having Templars and the Holy Catholic church are heroic figures is political. If that's how you think, I worry about you.

Content warning

None. It's a credit to Nate's writing that he can have a succubus as a character, an incubus as a villain, and Deadly sins as demons, and still be on this side of PG-13. In fact, it would probably be considered a relatively soft PG-13... however, you can't go by me, I read Jurassic Park when I was ten.

However, it is horror. So if you're squeamish about tentacled monstrosities ... I still wouldn't worry. This isn't Hentai, and there aren't even any jokes along those lines. Not even from the Kitsune.

Who is it for?

If you like the action of Larry Correia or John Ringo or Jim Butcher, with the mind of John C Wright, you should already own this book.

Why Buy it

If you like insanely good action with a fantasy world that stops just short of over-the-top, you are going to enjoy this one.

Ghost of a Chance by Dan Willis

Review by Jwstepanek

upstreamreviews.substack.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 hard boiled 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 of 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's 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.

Gun Magus by NR LaPoint Review by Declan Finn

In *Chalk*, NR LaPoint had a Catholic schoolgirl fall down a rabbit hole and end up harrowing Hell. In *Dusklight*, Hell came to her.

In *Gun Magus*, if John Wick fell into the realm of *Final Fantasy VI*, it might be half as badass as all this. It's an insanely fun time. Michael Gallagher already reviewed it, but I thought I'd give it a crack as well.

The Story

On his way home after being fired from his job, Ken Jericho witnesses the kidnapping of a 10 year old girl. Being Texan, he charged in to get her out. During the firefight, he is disappeared into another world.

Meanwhile, in another world, a wizard is trying to conjure up lunch, but instead, he gets Ken. And a minute or two later, hordes of monsters attack. Ken finds himself with unlimited ammo, and the mage concluding that Ken is a "Gun Magus." The wizard—who is a six-foot tall rabbit who is NOT named Harvey—has been fighting a villain for the past year who seems ever illusive, and these are his monsters. Ken, the mage and the mage's apprentice are off to kill the insidious SOB.

Along the way, Ken and company collect others to their cause, a spider-girl, an Irish redhead woman pirate Captain, a pirate elf and a red panda Templar knight.

Once again, the depth of story, character, and the seemingly infinite imagination NR LaPoint effortlessly uses throughout the story reminds me of John C Wright. We need to get those two in a room and see if they come out ready to take over the world. Or at least write a 12 part fantasy epic.

This is an epic fantasy that has all the fun of fantasy, but none of the modern pretension.

The Characters

LaPoint has a vivid array of characters this time. The rabbit mage, Rolfwin, throws fire like pyromania was going out of style. The apprentice, a woman named Zephyr, is delightfully histrionic around Ken, "defending her virtue" against no assaults whatsoever, and when Ken calls her bluff, she folds like a house of cards. It's especially entertaining when she pretends to slip into the wrong room, calls him a pervert, then telling him that "only matrimony will have me yield my virgin frame to you!" Ken does

little more than simply agree and sends her off, so he can just fall asleep already.

There are a lot of cute touches like that scattered throughout.

Mercifully, while LaPoint seems to threaten harem fiction, Ken's first response is to kick everyone out of his bedroom so he can sleep.

Then there are the Templar battle pandas... No, I'm not making it up, nor did I coin it.

The World

When I describe this as John Wick falling into the world of Final Fantasy VI, I wasn't kidding. There is a ghost train (no one suplexes it, however), and a minion that nearly takes over the world (and close to breaking it). There are plant monsters with status effects. There are airships that are more like tanks. There are flying fortresses that become eldritch horrors. The world is just deep enough to keep the story going, and it is delightfully bonkers.

There are gaps, of course. We don't know why or how the red panda Templars are Catholic. There are no interdimensional Catholic missionaries, and if there are, I don't get their newsletter.

Politics

The closest this comes to politics is when Ken Jericho suggests that he doesn't want to go back home, because if he returned his gun with the human traffickers would probably result in his arrest. Everyone here concludes that his world is stupid, and we get on with the plot.

Content Warning

None. There's no sex. The violence is PG-13

Who is this for?

Gun Magus uses the imagination of John C Wright, the action of Jim Butcher, and the genre tonnage of every pulp novel put together.

Why read it?

John Wick fell down a rabbit hole, found an actual rabbit, and now has to fight off a Dark Lord with a spider girl, a pirate, and a red panda Templar.

Seriously, what's not to love?

In Another World I Must Defeat the Demon King by Miles English

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It's not hard to find a LitRPG novel that really just...sucks. So it's cool to find one that's actually plenty of fun to read.

The Story

A royal prince from a fantasy RPG world gets teleported into our world. Being a fish out of water, he has to make quick allies, and they show him how to get along in 21st Century society.

However, the normies that end up helping him also get pulled into his quest, and soon they have stat sheets and character bios like he does. They start putting points into different attributes, leveling up to be better members of his troupe.

As it turns out, the prince is on a quest to kill a demon king...who's hiding in our world. And there are minions here to stop him. Things can get ugly from there.

The Characters

Henry is our warrior-prince who needs to catch up on real-world life in a hurry. Handsome, handy, humble, possessed of many chivalric and knightly qualities. You want to be like Henry.

His first ally is Shana, a waitress at a diner who isn't afraid to jump into the fight, wielding her boss's shotgun from behind the counter. She's grounded and inclined to be helpful, while also not taking crap from people.

(I really liked the casual normalcy about firearm use in this book—people carried, and it wasn't a big deal. They weren't all crack shots, they just had guns and knew how to use them.)

Rounding out the main cast are Daniel and Bri, siblings who also get pulled into Henry's war band. They bring different assets to the table (Daniel is smart and has money, Bri is hot and feisty) making for a well-varied group of characters.

Sometimes the "fish-out-of-water" trope can take too long to write, but that's not the case here. English didn't drag it out or overplay the oddities that Henry encountered; he gave them their due, then carried on with the story. That's what I want from this sort of thing.

The World

Our world, with a lot of the name brands scrubbed off of it, ha-ha. There are just invisible magical elements to it, an underside full of things that escaped Henry's RPG. Our characters walk between both sides, but end up doing a lot of their exploring and fighting in the RPG pockets of the world.

The Politics

Literally zero. Unless you count certain types of court intrigue that Henry dealt with "back home."

Content Warning

Very clean book. A little hell here, a little damn there, and one use of “big-titty Asian” to describe Bri, coming from a scumbag character.

Who’s It For?

Well, presumably there’s a market for LitRPG/Isekai books, right? And while I don’t usually find myself sitting in that audience, I do enjoy a fun concept done well. This book came to me on a recommendation and I had fun reading it. It’s accessible even if you’re not big into the genre.

Why Read It?

Because it was refreshing to have fun with a book like this, that would normally focus too hard on how Henry struggled to fit into our world. A book that might otherwise be full of cookie-cutter GenZ characters worried about social justice causes and microaggressions. Here are normal, hardworking young people who have jobs and ambitions and don’t dabble in pointless BS. They handle guns. They think about their futures. And when a cartoon knight lands in the middle of their lives, they take up with him to make things more interesting. I liked that.

The Killing Moon by NK Jemisin Review by Chris Nuttall

“We tell them stories about your kind, you know. ‘Be good, or a Gatherer will get you.’”

His face twisted in disgust. “That’s a perversion of everything we are.”

“You kill, priest. You do it for mercy and a whole host of other reasons that you claim are good, but at the heart of it you sneak into people’s homes in the dead of night and kill them in their sleep. This is why we think you strange—you do this and you see nothing wrong with it.”

NK Jemisin is one of the more prominent voices calling for ‘diversity in science-fiction and fantasy,’ a platform that has always struck me as dangerously misleading. I have no objection to diverse backgrounds or worlds that draw on non-western influences, although they do have their limits (as I have discussed in this series on ‘diverse’ books), but I care nothing for the race, gender, sexual orientation or culture of any given author. I judge an author solely by their work, not by any aspects of their life and times that are utterly irrelevant to me. Indeed, Jemisin deserves credit for putting her money where her mouth is – unlike most social commenters – and actually writing ‘diverse’ books herself.

And *The Killing Moon*, in many ways, showcases both the strengths and weaknesses of ‘diverse’ books.

On one hand, it cannot be denied that *The Killing Moon* takes place in a universe that is refreshingly different from many more mundane fantasy books. The background is largely – although not entirely – unique, drawing from Ancient Egypt and Hinduism rather than Medieval Europe or Native American. And yet, the characters remain understandable and human, even when they are often unsympathetic. But, on the other hand, the basic assumptions of this universe are so different from our own – and the bog-standard fantasy backgrounds we know and understand – that it can be hard, at first, to follow what is going on. The names of people and places – even the curious background mythology – are alien to most readers. *The Killing Moon* rewards a second reading, like most good fantasy novels, but it has problems getting its readers to want a second reading.

The plot is both surprisingly simple and remarkably complex. In the ancient city-state of Gujaareh, the night belongs to the Gatherers, priests of the dream-goddess who harvest the magic of the sleeping mind and use it to heal, soothe ... and kill those judged corrupt. Their word is law, at least within their city. Foremost amongst them is Ehiru, who has recently accepted a new apprentice (Nijiri). Ehiru, however, has problems of his own. After a Gathering – a mission to grant a peaceful death – goes badly wrong, he finds himself questioning both his calling and his order's innermost secrets.

In the meantime, Ambassador Sunandi – a representative from a nearby country – discovers that Gujaareh is plotting war. She attempts to warn her people, only to alert the hostile factions to her knowledge. Ehiru is told that she has been judged corrupt and ordered to grant her peace (i.e. kill her). Faced with her worst nightmare – a Gatherer in her bedroom – Sunandi manages to convince Ehiru that she has been wrongly named. Reluctantly, realising that there are worse problems at home, Ehiru and Nijiri flee with Sunandi to her homeland in hopes of discovering what they know. However, powerful forces are after them and Ehiru – deprived of the dream-stuff he would normally have harvested from Sunandi – is starting to lose his mind. He warns Nijiri, who has fallen in love with him, that the time may come for his apprentice to kill him. But the war begins before they can act.

Returning to Gujaareh, they discover that the leader of the plot is none other than the Prince himself – Ehiru's brother. The Prince points out that the Gatherers are little more than drug lords, harvesting dream-stuff and distributing it to addicts. (One of the more interesting aspects of the story is that it is clear the Prince has a point.) Regardless, he has to be stopped; his researches into long-lost magics, and the reason Sunandi and most of her countrymen fear and hate the Gatherers, have offered him the chance to make himself an immortal king. Ehiru stops him, saving the city from one enemy only to hand it over to an invading and occupying army. Nijiri 'gathers' Ehiru, then goes back to the temple to begin his career as a full Gatherer.

In many ways, my brief summary has not done full justice to the plot. There are many neat aspects that only revealed themselves during the second reading, from the subtle (and somewhat inconsistent) message of 'chosen' – i.e. adopted – families being better than birth families to the obvious comparison between abuse of the dream-stuff and outright drug abuse (and how it can be used to control people). In hindsight, it is clear that 'corruption' is present well before it makes itself overt. Indeed, Jemisin definitely deserves a reward for creating a society that is loved by its members and yet regarded with entirely-justified fear and loathing by outsiders. I haven't seen this done so well since SM Stirling created the Draka, with the added bonus that Ehiru – at least – is brave enough to take a stand against his society.

But then, the book also showcases the flaws in such an approach. Ehiru's stance might have saved millions of lives, but it also opened the gates to allow Gujaareh to be occupied by its enemies. This is, of course, a repulsive (and distressingly common) historical problem. People born into an 'evil' society cannot simply give up without being destroyed by their society's enemies, a problem Nelson Mandela understood and most modern-day SJBs do not. Why take your boot off someone's neck, even if you understand that it is an unpleasant and wrong thing to do, when that person will destroy everything you hold dear? I don't know if Jemisin did this intentionally, but it is definitely a point to ponder.

The characters themselves are a little weaker than one might expect. Ehiru himself is very much a 'lawful good' character, which allows him to be manipulated by both his brother and his superiors in the temple. He has no understanding of compromise and rails against corruption wherever he finds it, without realising that aims and intentions are sometimes more important than actions. It never crosses his mind that his superiors might be evil – or find themselves forced to make evil decisions – and he is rightly horrified when he discovers the truth, nearly having a breakdown (and he must have found death

to be a relief). Nijiri, by contrast, comes across as a flatter character with a homoerotic crush on Ehiru. This becomes more than a little edgy at times, although nothing actually happens.

Sunandi, by contrast, is a curious choice for ambassador. Jemisin does an excellent job of making it clear that she's a good character, although she shares the same fear and loathing that other outsiders feel towards the Gatherers and Gujaareh itself. (This is completely justified in-story, a curious choice on Jemisin's part.) She is also brave and resolute when necessary, talking her way out of being assassinated by Ehiru – and yes, this would have been a political assassination – and doing everything in her power to resist the invasion. Jemisin hems and haws a little on Sunandi's role in the counter-invasion, although no one would have blamed her for wanting to crush the beast in its lair.

And the Prince himself is an oddity. He is a devoted family man – in stark contrast to the father he shares with Ehiru – and has a very strong point, but he throws it away as he descends into madness. In a normal book, he'd be the hero. Instead, he is the darkest person in the story. His seeming decency only makes the truth worse.

There are, it should be noted, a series of curious aspects within the text. Jemisin does not, it seems, understand the role of an ambassador, an interesting oversight given that ambassadors were regarded as sacred in ancient times. It is hard to believe that any government, ancient or modern, would tolerate the legalised murder of an ambassador, or even accept that it might happen. (Carter effectively did tolerate it, leading to many of the problems facing the US today.) It's also hard to believe that any halfway responsible host government would tolerate religious factions attacking diplomats – that is, bluntly put, an act of war. And Sunandi allows herself to be seduced by the Prince, which may have been intentional (it let her take a look at his chambers) but the text isn't clear on this point.

The city also has a curious mixture of sexual freedom and repression. On one hand, both homosexual relationships and temple prostitution are treated as normal. No one appears scandalised by Nijiri having a crush on his teacher (although they should be, as Ehiru is Nijiri's mentor). But, on the other, the locals seem to feel that their women should not work; this is treated as a sign of respect, but it should be obvious how this is also a sign of repression. It's also worth nothing that the city is racially-diverse, but not particularly culturally--diverse. No one makes an issue of skin colour within the book, a refreshing change, but aspects of the plot are driven by cultural clashes between the city's locals and outsiders.

The text also highlights the problem with religious extremists. Both Ehiru and Nijiri are fanatics, by modern standards; they do things that Sunandi (rightly) finds appalling, because they feel they have divine sanction. In this universe, they may have be right; however, it doesn't stop them (and their followers) from being regarded as monsters. You cannot argue with a fanatic because he knows he's right. The text also illustrates the dangers in such an approach. Religious institutions are dangerous because their followers will refuse to question them, even when they are clearly in the wrong. Ehiru is a good man, but what happens when a religious nut is not a good man?

This raises yet another curious issue. At the end of the book, with Gujaareh under enemy occupation, Nijiri tells Sunandi that Gujaareh will not resist ... if she and her customs are treated with respect. But why should they be treated with respect? Why should the civilised man respect barbarian customs? Respect is earned, not given. The deep-seated corruption within the temple – neatly foreshadowed by Jemisin right at the start – has rendered it institutionally guilty. A little more of 'we will respect your right to burn widows if you respect our right to hang murderers' would do wonders for our modern-day problems.

Overall, Jemisin deserves credit for creating a very different magic system that – by and large – hangs

together very well. It is nowhere near as detailed as any of Brandon Sanderson's creations – I thought I saw elements from Mistborn worked into the system – but it does manage to both look different and provide an understandable and well-foreshadowed ending to the story. In hindsight, both the real nature of the Prince's plan and the resolution are clear to see. Given the challenge facing Jemisin, she rose to it very well.

She could not, however, avoid many of the weaknesses of 'diverse' books. She needed to explain her society to us, but that inevitably slowed down the plot; she needed to make her characters likable, which she did, yet she needed to keep reminding us that Ehiru and Nijiri may be good people, but they serve (by our standards) a monstrous society. Jemisin is a remarkable world-builder, but the sheer alienness of Gujaareh works both for and against the plot. There are aspects that should have been detailed, but were simply glossed over. The Killing Moon really should have been a trilogy. The plot was certainly big enough to spread over three books. (There is a sequel, but it isn't a direct sequel.)

The Killing Moon has not won any major awards, which is something of a shame. It is – in my less than humble opinion – the greatest work Jemisin has produced. Indeed, unlike The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms or The Fifth Season, it is strikingly groundbreaking and should have been nominated for a Hugo. The world is different, but understandable; the characters are not-us, but understandable even though (some) of them would be regarded as villains or monsters in our society. Or even simply too alien to be accepted easily. The most understandable characters, from our point of view, are Sunandi and the Prince.

But, on the whole, The Killing Moon is definitely an excellent book that rewards its readers.

The Mask Shop of Doctor Blaack
by Steve Rasnic Tem
Review by Jim McCoy
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

(My apologies to Steve Rasnic Tem. I had originally planned to have this out much earlier in the Halloween season but life got away from me. Oh, and that's not a typo. It really is Dr. Blaack with two "a"s.)

Everyone loves a good Halloween tale and that includes your loving blogger, slaving away over a hot keyboard to bring you his latest review. This is a time of year that I look forward to starting on November first, and I was really looking forward to reading Steve Rasnic Tem's The Mask Shop of Dr. Blaack. And I'm happy, because I was really impressed. Tem did a good job with this one.

I haven't read much YA Horror. I'm aware of the whole Goosebumps thing and I read the first three books from the Series of Unfortunate Events series, but it's not something I'm well versed in. That might have to change though, because I really got a hoot out of this one. It was creepy enough that it made me feel a little apprehensive, but not bad enough that I would hesitate to let my twelve-year-old daughter read it.

I'm going to mention something here that's kind of a spoiler. I don't generally do spoilers and, generally speaking, anything that I absolutely HAVE TO include to make a review usually show up in the first few pages and don't ruin anything, but this time it's a bit different. The fact is that The Mask Shop of Doctor Blaack is a good to great story. The caveat is that this thing takes a long time to get started. I was just having a conversation with a friend. I mentioned to him that it took me longer to get through the first fifty pages than it did for me to get through the remaining two-hundred fortyish pages after

that. Once it gets moving though, it rocks.

Our heroine is a girl named Lauren. She's twelve years old and too mature for trick or treating. She could give some of the kids in my neighborhood a lecture here. Maybe she should. Err... well if she existed anyway. At any rate, she's got a problem. Her parents want her to take her little brother Trevor out trick or treating and she's kind of stuck. The first part of the story deals with mainly this issue. It's not until after she accepts it and heads off to the Mask Shop to get costumes for both herself and her brother that things really get started, but once they do...

The Mask Shop of Doctor Blaack really gets going when Trevor's mask gets stuck to his face. And I don't mean stuck as in "pour some hot water in to dissolve the glue." I mean stuck as in "this thing is magical and isn't coming off until Halloween and then only if you're lucky." The even bigger problem is that Halloween isn't for a couple of days and she has to keep the world from discovering the problem. It's a lot of fun.

I won't go too far into Lauren's character arc except to say that it's pretty amazeballs. She does a lot of maturing over the course of a single novel and it makes sense in the context of the story. It builds slowly but it's nice to see. I grew up in an era where a lot of children's books (there was no such thing as a YA genre in the long ago era of the Eighties) dealt with minor problems and the protagonists didn't change much. Tem puts his heroine through a situation that not every adult would be equipped to deal with and she takes it head on. If things don't always go as planned, well, that's life. She finds a way through and that's what's impressive. There is one specific issue that I don't seem to agree with her on, but she makes her own decision and at twelve, that's pretty impressive.

Lauren shows more leadership than a lot of the adults I've known too. There are times when she has to take the blame for things she didn't do. There are times when she has to deal with problems she has no way to anticipate. There are times when she has to keep Trevor encouraged. She can't take credit for any of it or the secret of the stuck mask will be out. None of it would be easy, but she does what needs to be done and doesn't complain about it. This is a young lady with chutzpah.

Trevor, for his part, is a little trooper too. There are times when I'd expect a child that age (like my daughter) to break down and cry. The fact of the matter is that he does whine a bit but in his case, so would I and I'm a grown man. He gets through things though, even when they're not easy. I like this kid.

The thing that makes The Mask Shop of Doctor Blaack work so well is that everyone else acts the way you would expect them to if everything was normal. Tem has built his world so well that it's almost seamless with our own. There's just that one tiny little exception about weird masks that stick on faces and do crazy stuff and nobody knows about that. It's close enough to be familiar and just far out enough to be weird. It works perfectly.

I know I got into this a bit already, but it really did take this book a long time to get started. I spent the first fifty pages or so wandering off to do laundry, or checking my Facebook or checking to see how many hits my last post had, etc. Once it took off, it really took off, but if you're going to read this one you need to be patient. The thing is, I do kind of wonder how much of the lead in to this book was really necessary. It really feels like the first fifty pages could have been condensed down to one or two. I think the book would honestly have worked a lot better that way. All in all though, it's still an enjoyable read and, if you're into the Bella character from Twilight, it does kind of work I guess.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Dangling Straps

Ordinary Monsters: A Novel by J. M. Miro
Review by Bob Jennings

This is easily the best stf book I have read in the past three years. “J.M. Miro” is a pseudonym of Steven Price, a Canadian poet and writer living in California with his author wife Esi Edugyan and their two children. He has written other science fiction stories, but according to an interview he did recently with Sean Loughran for his Avocado Diaries website, Price adopted a pseudonym for this massive book because he wanted to free his mental state from his past constraints and linkage with the science fiction world to write a story that is a fantasy horror thriller.

This novel is indeed exactly that, a fantasy horror thriller. It is also a complex story with multiple personalities involved, and many on-going intertwined and sometimes cross conflicting plot threats that unwind and then re-cross in unexpected way. Characterization is an essential part of the plot work, and the author goes to some trouble to effortlessly fill in the reader about the major characters, and most of the minor ones as well, in detail, giving this novel the kind of treatment that first class mainstream novels try to develop. In this case, the merging of unique, deeply interesting characters involved in a fantastic plot works remarkably well.

Set in the early 1880s in the United States and Victorian England, the story revolves around an ongoing mission by agents employed by the Cairndale Institute in Scotland to locate and bring in children with unique, often bizarre special abilities. These “Talents” fall into five distinct classes, and their powers which always first develop in childhood are almost always shocking, and very alarming to ordinary people.

At the same time, an adult talent whose mind and abilities have become aligned with a supernatural entity from beyond the realm of death known as a Drughr, is also seeking the child Talents. Some of the young talents become food for his supernatural mentor, and others are to be used for the purpose of having the Drughr destroy the portal separating the worlds of the living from the strange realm of the dead, so the Drughr can completely cross over and become part of the world of living humans. The forces of supernatural evil are relentless; and in addition they have the services of a few liches, reanimated death corpses with incredible speed and strength, to aid them.

The story is told thru the eyes of multiple characters, but the primary protagonist is a teenage Talent named Charlie Ovid who regenerates when harmed in any way. Charlie is a mulatto who has been convicted of killing a white man in Louisiana and condemned to death. Except he can’t be killed. He heals up every time the authorities try to kill him. That doesn’t stop them from trying, repeatedly, using more ingenious, savage methods.

The quest leads to other young talents in the United States and in England. All of the young Talents encountered are orphaned and either trying to survive on their own, or living in protected situations where their unique talents are either suppressed or are being used to eek out a precarious living, such as being employed as circus freaks or existing in virtual slavery to malicious adults who use them for their own profit.

The other major Talent in the story is young Marlowe, a child whose abilities are unique, largely unknown, and whose talents partially manifested themselves even as a new born baby.

Everybody wants Marlowe: the Institute, the bad guys, his biological father, who is a wealthy man with great influence in Scotland where he was born, and any number of regular people who want to exploit

his peculiar talents for their personal profit.

This is a very fast moving adventure with a great deal of historic background provided. The world of the late Victorian period is largely unknown to modern audiences, so the sights and descriptions of the people and the living conditions will seem as strange and alien to most readers as any science fiction trip to a far away alien planet. The plot and the interwoven characters combine to create an intense, fast moving story that you will not soon forget.

My sole objection is that this is supposed to be the first of a three part series. This novel could be concluded nicely at the end of page 660 without any additional follow-up at all. Since there will be at least a second book in the series, it is likely that we will have to wait several years, or longer, before it comes out and we can read more about these very interesting characters and their extraordinary world.

Read this book. Do it now. If you can't afford to buy a physical copy yourself, or even to purchase the e-book version, then borrow a copy from your local library. If your local library doesn't have a copy, ask them to order one, or at least get a copy thru inter-library loan. You might suggest to your local library that this novel is clearly going to be one of the top contenders for the Hugo, the Nebula, the World Fantasy Award, the Neffy, the Locus Awards, the Bram Stoker Prize, the Dragon Con Awards and any other awards associated with the field. And when those awards come around and it comes your time to cast a ballot, you will be glad indeed that you read this superb novel and had the opportunity to cast your vote for it in the best novel categories.

Stand Against the Dark by Denton Salle Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Denton Salle's Stand Against the Dark is another solid, epic fantasy novel that is theoretically YA, but is really too good to waste on children.

The Story

Young Jeremy has been in training with Master Anthony and the others of the Wizards keep for years now. He's more or less tamed his inner panda avatar, he's become a warrior, and the jury is out about whether or not he could level cities if he were annoyed enough. He's now at the point where he acts as point man for Anthony on a serious threat: A plague has hit a major port city, and Anthony suspects that it is a necromantic bioweapon, as in the dark times. Jeremy's mission is to find the source of the plague and stop it if he can, by any means necessary.

Denton's books continue to get better with each novel. Stand Against the Dark had epic battles that Edgar Rice Burroughs or Tolkien would have enjoyed. Unlike previous novels, Denton didn't show us the battle in an epic after action report, but went over the battle step by step, with strategy and tactics, and showing us just how deadly Jeremy and his fellows can be.

Character

This one is a little light on character development, with the exception of Jeremy. Our hero has progressed a lot since book one, and it's clear that he's come into his own. He doesn't need a lot of backup and support until the end, when it the book goes from fantasy mystery to multi-stage combat.

And there are cute bits of business with Jeremy like, well, this.

“I thought you were going to walk through the door. That’s how the legends say Oleg entered the Iron Mountains.”

“Why? When I can undo the lock?” Jeremy was confused.

“Jeremy, you got an image to uphold. A volkh war-wizard. Unrestrained power, bloodthirstiness, and more than a bit mad.” Bolgor was laughing as he said it.

“Master Anthony values efficiency,” Jeremy said. “He says showy will get you killed.

The next best character explored here is Jeremy’s girlfriend, Galena. They’re charming together, with a matching sense of humor that can be a touch dark.

Outside of Jeremy and Galena, the various characters are a weakness here. Unless you’re reading the books back to back, you may have trouble tracking who’s who. Jeremy has gathered a lot of friends along the way. Remembering all of them can be a challenge. Though I will admit, some of Jeremy’s friends get to indulge in an awesome bit of blarney.

Jeremy also gets a dog ... okay, he’s a supernatural hound called a Grimm, and he’s called Vetter. As WC Fields noted, he didn’t like working with children or animals, because they would steal scenes.

Like the following.

“Vetter, can you manifest again please? I bet Galena will scritch behind your ears again if you do.”

“You try to bribe the very wind of polar cold like he is really a dog, pup?” Vetter’s voice rumbled in his mind.

“Yep. Is it working?” Jeremy replied. He felt more than saw the shadows condensing into the familiar black dog shape.

“This time. But I want tummy rubs too.”

I laughed.

The World

Most of *Stand Against the Dark* involved heavy world building, since the bulk of the book takes place in a new city and a new culture. The culture and regulations surrounding duels are explored for a bit. Since there is a bit of a mystery involved in this bioweapon attack, the plot goes into cultural norms, local history and even what local diets look like.

Also, the dwarves have moonshine. Because of course they do.

Politics

The only politics here is that “we find evil, and we kill it.”

For example...

“Ah, to be young again and ride into battle for a good cause, with a song on your lips, laughter in your heart, and your companions beside you,” Master Anthony said, shaking his head. “To bring the sword and fire, terror and fear among the dark’s servants, while crushing them underfoot, and hear the lamentations of their women.

I don’t know when Conan the Barbarian became Russian, but sure, why not?

Content warning

Unlike most YA, there isn’t anything cringe here. Fantasy violence is the worse warning I can give.

[The locals] are neutral about his people and he’d seem less threatening than a predator, like Galena, or an evil volkh warrior, like you blood-drenched spellcasting seducers.”

... “Yeah, that’s us. Eating small children and enchanting maidens.”

Let’s see Harry Potter get away with lines like that.

There are sword wounds, which are never neat. And there is at least one moment where Jeremy goes full Fist of the North Star and an assassin gets his organs ruptured and vomits blood.

At one point, the fighting gets so bad, they create a desert and call it peace.

Who is it for?

For anyone who wants better character and world building than Harry Potter, and something more on this side of Tolkien or John Carter of Mars.

Why read it?

For anyone who wants a fun fantasy epic with solid world building and solid action.

Ten Thousand Skies Above You by Claudia Gray

Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

After finishing the first book of this Claudia Gray trilogy, A Thousand Pieces of You, I did search for the second book, Ten Thousand Skies Above You. Happy to say I’m glad to be continuing down this path...in this dimension.

When we left Marguerite Caine, Paul, Theo, and her brilliant physicist parents, their adventure through the different dimensions had ended, her father safe and Triad, the evil corporation behind her father’s kidnapping, slinking back into the shadows...for now. However, all good things must end and the company has made it clear they will do whatever they can to get the Firebird technology for themselves. We knew from the first book they would kidnap but now they’ve made it clear they are willing to go farther than that — even destroying a person’s soul or worse.

This time they target Marguerite's soft spot, Paul, splintering his soul into four pieces in different dimensions as leverage to force her to do their bidding. Theo helps her while trying to stop Triad's plan, whatever it may be...until they find out the darker truth behind the company, leaving her to wonder if it's too late for the multiverse.

And yes, I did just use that popular phrase that we seem to be hearing in just about everything these days. But honestly, I can't say much more on it because that appears to be more for book three and I've not gotten there yet. So back to this book.

I will stand by my last review and paraphrase myself: You had one job, Gray. And you nailed it.

Normally the middle stories are the hard bowties between the beginning and the end. I feel that this is a good set up for the final book. Sure, *Thousand Pieces* could have been a standalone story if it had needed to be, and *Ten Thousand Skies* is definitely a middle book, stepping into the story and leaving you hanging. However, it does have its own unique tale that falls within.

We learn more about how Marguerite and Paul have had to navigate their relationship since it's not the "typical" type, meet, flirt, date, etc. They are destined to meet and be together and in love no matter what dimension they're in, no matter what the circumstances. In this book, Gray plays with the destiny belief almost as if she's testing the two. It may appear that they're not going to be together but that indescribable draw their two souls have are woven together so that there's not a doubt in the truth. Now I understand this could appear to be manipulated a bit because of Marguerite being a "perfect traveler" — not forgetting anything of her original self when she's in another Marguerite's body, which other travelers do over a short time. So her knowledge of Paul and her emotions never fade where his are hidden underneath that dimension's Paul. Yet it's the small things that come out, regardless of who that Paul is, that shows the connection. And Gray makes these obvious without being too obvious. I like that.

Gray also does a good job in her world building of these new dimensions we visit. While showing up in a new location, she takes something familiar and asks "ok, we are here, now how can we push the boundaries more to make this world familiar but not really?" I do enjoy this. And again, I look at this and that she writes *Star Wars* books and wonder if she's as clever there as here. So I will repeat myself, I should probably try one of those books.

What got me on this book was her twist. I honestly can say I didn't see it coming. I was messaging a friend after complaining that first, I didn't see that coming and second, it's already way past my lights off time and I really need to sleep. The twist of Marguerite and Paul becoming a item was as out of left field as this. I love it. Plus, it's going to be a driver for the next book.

Which means, YES, I will be looking for *A Million Worlds With You*. As I said above, *Ten Thousand Skies Above You* manages to be bet that between story that holds together the beginning and the end while pushing you to the end of the story. There is a bit more to go through with Marguerite Caine and I'm looking forward to every dimension of it.

This Is Not a Game by Walter Jon Williams
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Right before WorldCon became an open vortex of politics and furry pronouns, I attended the Reno 2011 spectacle and was gifted several paperbacks by different publishers. This Is Not a Game was one of the few that was worth the read, and has merited a recommendation over the years.

This book starts off with one of the most intriguing opening chapters I've ever read: a programmer goes into work, boots up his computer, decides to check his bank account, and sees that four billion dollars have been deposited. His reaction?

“This has got to stop.”

What's going on? Well, it's hard to explain without giving away a shocking third-act reveal, and that alone is worth the time it takes to read the book. Basically the central characters are game developers, and they spend 90% of their waking hours in cyberspace. They were friends in their early days but have since gone in different directions. Three are very successful, while the other is forced to grind out as living as a “ninja” and a “farmer” in MMO games like World of WarCraft.

The “farming” aspect of MMO games plays a big role in this story. For the uninitiated, “farmers” are RPGers who spend all their time collecting in-game money and then selling it online for real-world cash. Pretty much every MMO has rules against it but it still happens, as there are always people looking to shortcut their way to the top in these worlds.

That desire has created an underground market for fantasy cash. A market hot enough to kill for. When one of the original four developers gets murdered, the others realize they're not far behind, and have to figure out how to save their own necks.

This is the kind of book that I might NEVER have picked up on my own, yet once I started, I blew through it and kept thinking about it.

The Characters

Dagmar is a single woman in her late 20s, and she gets most of the screen time in this story. Her introduction has her stranded in a top-floor hotel room in a third-world country whose economy has just collapsed. As Dagmar is a developer of “alternate reality gaming,” her rescue comes in the form of hundreds of gamers from around the world, figuring out how to get her to safety. Once she's back on US soil, she's got to figure out what went wrong in southeast Asia.

BJ is the man who fell out after he broke some rules in the early days. Now he's a call-center grunt and a ninja, but he's looking to make his way back into the group as they struggle to figure out what's crashing world economies—and who's trying to kill the developers.

Austin is the venture capitalist who funded the group's projects in the beginning, and now he's embroiled in the controversy that threatens all their lives. Dagmar trusts Austin and BJ, even if they don't like each other.

Rounding it all out is Charlie, who unfortunately dies early on, but left some clues that will help the

others resolve this overbearing threat.

Having known a couple of developers and coders in my college days, I really liked how spot-on these characters were in terms of their portrayal. I kept my emotional investment in their adventure because they felt authentic to me.

The World

Ostensibly this is set in our own world. The speculative element is the “alternate reality gaming,” which is something like old-fashioned turn-based story RPGs, with clues in the real world.

The games that Dagmar develops require casting, photography, cyphers, and more. Images get posted to forums, along with videos and fake articles about real events or places. Players get cryptic clues a la Dan Brown novels, and have to work together across chat rooms to decipher it all.

And apparently this is a legit type of gaming that I’d never played nor heard of prior to reading this book. Williams explains it all well enough to the unfamiliar reader without excessive info-dumping, so even if you’re an outsider like me, you can follow it with ease. Very cool stuff.

The Politics

This book doesn’t concern itself with politics. It’s much more about economics and interpersonal relationships. You get real characters in a fascinating gaming subculture and no soapbox moments about climate change or gender binaries or whatever.

Content Warning

Profanity up to the F-bomb, and some sensual humor. (After Dagmar’s rescue, she’s gifted a leather-bound copy of sexual fanfic that the gamers wrote about her during her ordeal, because gamers.)

Who’s It For?

This book sits right on the intersection of sci-fi readers and thriller fanatics. It moves much more like the latter, while bringing in plenty of elements of the former to keep it from being a generic grocery store checkstand book.

Why Read It?

It’s the kind of thriller that feels like it could really happen, with all of the devious moves perpetrated by the RPG nerds you know in the flesh. Between that and the cool idea of “alternate reality gaming,” this one kept me intrigued and I blew through it in a couple of days.

Give it a shot.

Titan by Robert Kroese
Review by JE Tabor
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The story

If you can imagine an Ayn Rand plot as written by Robert Heinlein, you will get an idea of what it is like reading Titan. In the near-future, the United States is, as today, deep in debt. But by the time Titan takes place, the country is in danger of defaulting on its debts and sending its economy spiraling down the toilet. Tech-industrialist Kade Kapur has a crazy plan to save the economy that just might work: he is going to capture an enormous asteroid worth \$10 trillion. Uncle Sam gets to sell shares of the profits to eager investors, and Kade will take his dream of colonizing space one step closer to reality. But when the project is sabotaged, Kade's dreams fall apart along with the United States.

The disparate elements of Titan's plot fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Each twist and turn follows logically from the last, each puzzle piece put into place until the full picture of the impending disaster is finally revealed.

The characters

The characters in Titan run the gamut from world leaders to billionaires to everyday people just trying to get by. Jumping from these disparate points of view gives the reader a view of the full scope of the consequences of impending final collapse on various aspects of life.

Titan's characters are invariably competent, but believably so. Kade Kapur has ambitious dreams that he successfully brings into reality, but only after finding the support of brilliant technical experts and the backing of established venture capitalists. His heroes are likeable and good-hearted, but they also have their blind spots that lead them to tragedy.

Kroese skillfully uses the scientific and economic experts in his story to explain technical details in the way that a layperson will understand not only the background of what is happening in the world, but also the implications for future events.

The world

The near future world of Titan is largely the same as our own, following current trends to their logical conclusions. The USA is on the brink of bankruptcy but private enterprise is making large strides in the form of space travel, self driving vehicles, and alternative currencies. As someone with a degree in astronautical engineering, I can tell that the capture of asteroids in the story was meticulously researched, but the explanations were not so detailed so as to overwhelm or bore a layperson.

The fictional aspects of the story, whether the companies founded by Kade Kapur or the small island in the South Pacific that serves as a tax shelter and much more, all feel real. Every fictional aspect of this future works as a natural outgrowth of current technological and social trends.

The economics that drive the story are explained in clear and simple terms. These explanations lent enough credibility to the collapse of the dollar that it made me seriously considering how much preparation I need to be ready for something like the events occurring in Titan.

The politics

Titan's politics will resonate most strongly with libertarians, but while there are a few characters' voices lend an ideological lens to view the events of Titan, there are no political screeds to be found. The idea that too much government debt will lead to disaster may be controversial among proponents of Modern Monetary Theory, but the average reader should have no trouble connecting the dots, whether they are on the left or the right.

Content warning

Titan portrays a collapse of the financial system that leads to a breakdown in order, including civil unrest, but almost all of the violence occurs off screen. There are depictions of adultery, but no onscreen sex. Any use of profanity was sparse enough for me not to notice.

Who is it for?

Titan is for anyone who is a fan of Ayn Rand, Robert Heinlein, or well-thought out hard sci-fi disaster stories.

Why read it?

Read Titan for the terrifyingly believable view of America's descent into financial chaos and the hope that whatever rises out of the ashes might change the world for the better.

PROSE BONO

Writer's Groups Grouped by Type

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

The topic of writing groups came up, as it will, this week. I'm of mixed mind on them. I've been involved with very good ones, but also very bad ones. It seems when I talk to writers who've been around for a while, like me, that they have seen similar things. Writer's groups who were great for helping and encouraging – and what I've noted is that these tend to be less focused on critique of the story, and more about learning the business and providing accountability. The critique groups... well, those can get nasty. I saw that in Critters when I was part of it, and talking with JL Curtis this week, he told me about an incident with a pair of writers he knew, who were almost crushed by the savagery of anonymous and ignorant critique. Because a crit group is designed around being critical.

You know who you really want feedback about your writing from? Readers. Not necessarily other writers, because as odd as it may sound, writers aren't always readers. That, and writers get so focused on the mechanics of writing, they may not be able to pull back to the 20,000 foot view and see the story as a whole. Is it a good story? Only a reader can answer that, and there are very few readers (who are only readers) in a writing group. The difficulty here, I'm told by some beginning writers, is finding beta readers. I've heard complaints like 'I can't find anyone I know who wants to read my stuff...' and I have to cock my head and wonder. Some writing is very niche, yes. But there are audiences, I think, for almost anything. Starting by finding that audience, hanging out with them, figuring out what they think

of your stuff, then, is a better path than handing your story to Aunt Betsy who isn't sure what to make of it, but she doesn't like it.

I know a lot of young writers think they need a writing group, and perhaps they do. However! Only if that group is focused on development. Which does not mean endlessly passing chapters around and verbally shredding them. No, you want a group that is pushing you towards finishing something, and then finishing another thing, and along the way you all celebrate one another's successes. If this sounds too idyllic to be true, well, there's a reason most writing groups don't last forever.

There's another thing, while I'm noodling along and it popped into my head. Writing groups can sometimes push the authorial voice of a member in a direction it isn't meant to go in. Writing to fit into the group's perception of what is 'good grammar' can even lead you astray, as I've heard stories of paper sheets coming back to an author with the dialogue all fussily corrected. Dialogue is very rarely proper English, and if it is, the character is saying far more than is on the page about them. Other issues arise when the members of the group are all writing very different genres, don't understand other genres, and want to have stories changed to suit their comfort zone.

All of this to say: writing groups can have a place. But don't get so wrapped up into one that you aren't also getting input elsewhere. And find where readers are hanging out (which is not, I say again NOT, Goodreads) and discussing books and listen. At least, if you want to be a professional. If you're just writing to get it off your chest, this probably doesn't apply to you. Writing groups, speaking of profession, are great for business. That is, if you don't know how to make your work into a business, which is a skill you must learn, whether you intend to publish independently or traditionally, then finding a group of pros to learn from is the only way to go. Writing business has its own quirks and downfalls, and it's so much better to learn from other's mistakes... I mean, this is part of why Mad Genius Club continues to exist after all these years! You have the chance to learn from us. And we, from you in the comments.

Inspirations

By A.C. Cargill

<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/>

Readers often wonder what inspires an author. I certainly do. For example, I wonder what inspired an author to write about a ghostly gunslinger dead for over 100 years, or another author to write about traveling in time using a map.

For those of you wondering what inspired me, here are some things that inspired the first novel of my trilogy:

Living in Hammil Valley and dealing with its issues as well as seeing its unfulfilled potential

Reading fiction and non-fiction by Ayn Rand and wanting a way to express her ideas through my own view in a fictional setting

Thinking "heck, others can do it, so why don't I give it a go?"

Ideas are more easily thought than put into concrete form. I mulled over the basic idea of this novel – a traditional romance – for about a decade before attempting to write it. By then, I had polished my already well-honed writing skills as writer and editor for several online sites. But they weren't fiction. Even so, my imagination was flying, and events in my past were coming to mind as I sat to begin.

Before long I had a fairly good idea where things were going and in conversations with my husband

some fuzzy parts became more clear. Days of sitting at the desk and typing on my laptop computer turned into weeks and months. As my husband read it, I was nervous, but his overall reaction was positive. He added in some great parts, including two whole chapters, and enhanced others.

For both of us, that time living in Hammil Valley was a seed that blossomed. And that kind of life experience can be an inspiration to you. You may not think your life experiences are exciting. Some may even be bad ones, tough to relive as you write about them. Just remember that you have some distance from those events and can reshape them as you want. Our lives in Hammil Valley were nothing like I portray in the trilogy, but that's what makes the novels works of fiction.

Make use of your experiences. Let them inspire you and set your imagination on fire. Even those bad ones can be useful. Think it all through and begin typing.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

Editor:

At first I thought Ghost of A Chance was a novelization of the TV show from which a character in Tim Powers' Expiration Date comes, and was disappointed to find that wasn't the case. My problem, not the author or reviewer's.

Christopher Nuttall's review of Rebecca Kuang's The Poppy War was excellent, and I agree with most of what he had to say about Kuang's book. Having read The Dragon Republic, its sequel, the parallels to the Second Sino-Japanese War are even more obvious to me, although the substitution of the "Americans" for all the Western colonial powers is a tad bothersome, and what of the Manchurians and Koreans? How do they react to their Japanese overlords getting nuked (so to speak)? The Empress being an expy for Chiang Kai-shek was amusing, though. Honestly, I'm almost afraid to read the third book in the trilogy, because it seemed to me that while Rin was doing her best to do the right thing, everything she did turned out horribly. I guess we shall see.

...Kevin Trainor

Hi George,

N3F folks may be interested in this: [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®-\(barnesandnoble.com\)](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!

Melody Friedenthal

Editor:

At more than 80 pages, the N3F Review of Books must be one of our most sizable clubzines! (Eep! Only 35 pages have text on them. Still, an impressive issue length.) With more than 20 reviews—and the five-page article by A.C. Cargill, “Types of Editing for Your Work of Fiction”—there’s plenty to ex-

plore as a reader and a writer.

The book reviews—all reprints from apazines, fanzines, blogs, Web sites, and a Substack newsletter—laudably consider mostly new books: Four from 2022, six from 2021, one from 2020, and three each from 2018-2019. Then we have one each from 1962, 1965, 1972, 1974, 2005, and 2014, so there are some older classics (though that's debatable!) thrown in. I think Mr. Middlemiss and I contributed most of the older work reviews.

The lion's share of writing still seems to be reprints from Upstream Reviews—now a Substack newsletter rather than a Web site—Declan Finn, and sympathetic reviewers, so the overall sensibility remains focused on urban fantasy and adjacent subgenres, as well as works written by reviewers—even if reviewed by someone else. (Declan wrote or reviewed five of the books included, more than 20 percent of the issue.)

Of the titles reviewed, I'm most interested in the new Timothy Zahn book and the two anthologies edited by John Carnell and Stephen Lawson. I'll continue to do my best to contribute book reviews myself, as well as to enlist other reviewers from broader fandom. Fellow Neffers: Surely you're reading books; please consider submitting reviews to the Review.

As an aspiring fiction author myself, I was also interested in the Cargill Prose Bono piece, also seemingly a reprint. I found the breakdown of editorial approaches relatively comprehensive and informative—and I applaud self-published authors seeking some editorial support. It improves the quality of our self-publishing, for sure. One quibble I had with the piece was that the recommended articles at the end weren't linked—perhaps they are in the original article online. (Indeed they are, at <https://tinyurl.com/544capu6>.)

I always enjoy reading and assessing the content of the Review—and walk away with several more books to check out. Please don't interpret my comments as criticism; it's pretty clear we could diversify the reviewzine. Kudos on another thought-provoking edition.

Putting it on a tight beam,
Heath Row