

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

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~FINIS~

# Editorial

We're back!

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



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# Fiction

Alternating Currents by Frederik Pohl

Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

At the time of this book's publication by Ballantine in 1956, Frederik Pohl was 36 years old. He died in 2013 at the age of 93. All but one of the 10 short stories included in the collection were previously published—the first piece was written especially for the book. All of them are excellent, representing a relatively wide range of approaches to sf.

"Happy Birthday, Dear Jesus," is the original in the book, a wonderful Christmas-time novelette that takes a look at a missionary family that's spent time with indigenous people on Borneo in the South China Sea. The father and his younger daughters, who were born in Borneo, don't necessarily respond well to the young salesman courting their older sister—and bringing the near-future intensified commercialization of the holiday into their home. But the older sister takes to him, and they reach a compromise. The overtly commercial Christmas verse recited by the salesman is priceless, the dream machine and erotic tapes another touch of the near future, and the scene in which the father is leading a more traditional, small group church service provides a counterbalance to the future Pohl portrays. One to remember for when December rolls around, if you recognize Christmas—or enjoy stories related to the season.

"The Ghost-Maker" originally appeared in *Beyond Fantasy Fiction* (January 1954) as "The Ghost Maker." It's an interesting concept. Someone hunting for practitioners of magic or the occult turns to the subscription list of a magazine called *Beyond* to locate and track down a water-witch, a necromancer, and a ghoul. If identified thusly, the occultists need to share at least one spell in exchange, and the hunter is looking for something with which he can take revenge on one of his colleagues at a museum. He obtains a spell that helps him elicit the ghost from the bodily remains of the once living. That goes pretty well for a time—he gives his colleague a pretty good scare—until it doesn't. It's an intriguing approach to magic and the undead, and the story pokes gentle fun at the readers of *Beyond*: "I wasted an afternoon ... and the better part of a day ... without turning up anyone over the age of fourteen."

"Let the Ants Try" was first published in *Planet Stories* (Winter 1949). A fun—though dangerous—consideration of biology, evolution, and time travel. A survivor of the Three-Hour War goes back in time 40 million years to leave some ant larvae, hoping that they evolve to create a population and society more peaceful than that of humanity. When he returns to the resulting future, there is indeed a civilization—but not the one he expected. So he returns to the past again to undo his doing.

Pohl's story "Pythias" appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction* (February 1955). The friend of a Senate guard discovers 23 words that allow him to manipulate matter and energy, enabling him to shield his friend from a grenade blast with his body—without injury. The ending addresses the concerns one might have about such abilities in the hands—or mind—of the wrong person. But who's the wrong person?

The novelette “The Mapmakers” was originally published in the July 1955 issue of *Galaxy*. A ship is compromised while traveling through hyperspace, and navigation becomes near impossible. There’s a character named Eklund; a crew member Recorder who embodies the Celestial Atlas, now unusable by the Captain and crew; a female crew member who lapses into a fugue state to recite data or a portion of a novel on command—leading to some interesting gender power dynamics—and another crew member who’s been struck blind. “Where is ‘there’? ... [Y]ou never know until you get there. And sometimes not even then.” This story was adapted for an episode of *X Minus One* (Sept. 26, 1956).

Fantastic Universe published the short story “Rafferty’s Reasons” in October 1955. The story features A Clockwork Orange-like “machine treatments” that predate the novel, a foul-mouthed murderer, and societal efforts to stamp out political discord. It’s a shorter piece and the muttering and obsession are occasionally distracting, but it’s a satisfying concept and read.

“Target One” first appeared in *Galaxy* in April 1955. Two people go back in time to kill Albert Einstein and end the future threat of nuclear annihilation. When they return to their own time, they discover that while the future might change, science often stays the same. This was also adapted for *X Minus One* (Dec. 26, 1957).

*Galaxy* published “Grandy Devil” in June 1955. The short story is an intriguing take on the strength of a family line, immortality, and imprisonment.

The novelette “The Tunnel Under the World” was originally published in *Galaxy* (January 1955) and was adapted for *X Minus One* (Sept. 4, 1956). It’s a critical commentary on advertising and marketing, as well as a mysterious story about an invasion of some kind. The ending was definitely not expected.

And finally, “What to Do Until the Analyst Comes,” which first appeared as “Everybody’s Happy But Me!” in *Imagination* (February 1956), returns in some ways to the themes of “Rafferty’s Reasons” and “The Tunnel Under the World”—only the threat, a tobacco replacement called Cheery-Gum, is much more obvious. It’s a good setup for any number of stories: Something is wrong, one person notices, the others don’t—or don’t care, in this case. And it’s an interesting take on the lassitude that can be brought by supposedly non-addictive substances and pastimes.

*Alternating Currents* is an excellent collection that shows the many sides of Pohl—at that stage in his writing career. The stories are different in form and structure, address various topics and themes, and do so applying different sf methods. There’s not a bum story in the bunch. Worth seeking out either as a collection or story by story in other formats. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #32.)

### **Battling in All Her Finery: Historical Accounts of Otherworldly Women Leaders**

**Edited by Dawn Vogel and Jeremy Zimmerman**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So when a dude with a love of strong female leads (that's me) gets a chance to review a book named *Battling in All Her Finery: Historical Accounts of Otherworldly Women Leaders* he takes it. I mean, why not right? If it's what I love and someone is going to give it to me, why wouldn't I take it? I'd have to be stupid to turn down a chance like that. I'm glad I took the chance too, because I really enjoyed this anthology.

I'll get into the individual stories in a minute, but I just wanted to include a note about how many different types of leaders there are here. I'm the guy with the history degree and an interest in both military and political history, so when I saw the word "Battling" I immediately thought politicians and warriors. They're the people who fight battles right? I mean, I wasn't wrong but I seem to have left some other types of leadership out of my original thought process. My bad. A lot of these are military type stories, but not all.

Oh, and if you haven't read anything from the Mad Scientist Journal and/or Defcon One Publishing you need to check out them out. Pretty much all of their stories are told in the first person perspective and there are two biographical blurbs at the end of each story about the main character and the author that wrote the piece. I really enjoyed that feature.

Having said all of that, this is an anthology review. And following my usual pattern for anthology reviews, here are my thoughts on each individual story:

"The Dissolution of the Niamh" by Alicia A. Knaff is a story about a group of women trying to escape from a ship. It's a good one. The only problem I find with this is that it reads like a series of excerpts from a novel instead of a true short story. The solution to the problem is obvious: Somebody throw money at Ms. Knaff until she agrees to write the novel that would tell the whole story. The quality of the writing here is better than some novels I've read and we could get a chance to see what's missing. It might never happen, but if it does, I'm in.

"Curiassiere" by Blake Jessop is an alternate history piece. As such, I'm supposed to hate it because I have a history degree and it might fool some people into believing incorrect things about the history of the Napoleonic Wars. In reality, I loved this story. A woman fights for her country and rises through the ranks by earning the respect of those around her. I was impressed by the character and the story. Blake Jessop is an author worth keeping an eye on.

"Self Selection" by Mathew Murakami is the story of a serving girl who rises above her station to become a warrior and serve with a princess. There is a lot here for such a short story. It's the story of both girls maturing into women. The battles themselves are never detailed. They don't need to be.

"Chasing the Wombship Echidna" by L. Chan was kind of a weird experience. I originally found myself bemused by the concept of a "wombship" and not at all convinced that this would be a good story. Oops. This is a story of survival and escape. It is an action-packed tale of fighting and winning at all costs. It's the best story in the whole anthology. I should know better than to judge a story by its title. This story isn't really long enough to make a movie out of it and that's too bad because I bet it would be a special effects extravaganza and a lot of fun to watch.

"Swing That Axe" by Nathan Crowder is a story about a band in search of their missing leader. The method they use to find her will surprise you. It's crazy because I can almost hear the music in my head and it hasn't actually even been written. I'm going to call this one an Urban Fantasy out of lack of a better fit, but I love Urban Fantasy. It's a good time.

"The End of the World" by Matt Moran is the story of facing off an army of intelligent undead. It is a tale of a forlorn hope and a battle lost. It's still a strong story. It could stand to be a bit longer, I think, but that's a good thing. A good author always leaves his audience wanting more.

"Iron Out of Vulcan" by G. Scott Huggins is an alien invasion story with a twist. I don't want to give too much away, but just know that the secret to fighting the aliens isn't what you think it is. Our heroes are a highly unlikely lot but they do what they need to. I really enjoyed this.



"The Dishonorable God" by Priya Sridhar is the story of a young girl forced to rule in a male dominated world after the death of her father and brothers. This is another one that needs to be longer. I mean, I really enjoyed the story but there is a novel to be written here, as she fends off challenges and raises her little brother. Regent-Queen Rajani is the kind of woman I'd like my daughters to be someday. She literally faces down a god. That's guts right there.

"Cassiopeia, Queen of Ethiopia" by Aimee Kuzenski is a stunner. About all I can say without spoiling the story is that it takes place in the ancient world and involves an invasion. It didn't go the way I thought it would, that's for sure. I enjoyed it though.

"The Weeping Bolo" by D. A. Xiaolin Spires is not set in the Bolo Universe created by Keith Laumer. It doesn't need to be. Not only is this story action packed but the main character has a unique method of solving problems that is absolutely unexpected and awesome. Although really, how can you go wrong with a sword that weeps blood? Does it get any cooler?

"Caro Cho and the Empire of Light" by Lin Darrow is a story of technology and subterfuge. This is one of the stories I talked about in my introduction. Our female leader here is a corporate mogul and not a kick ass military type. Her weapons are illusion and deceit. It's not a spy story per se, but it kind of works like one. This was a fun one.

"Why are we standing on the broken wall, clutching swords too rusty to take an edge" [sic] by Tais Teng is a war story but not. It tells of building an army and conquering territory but never gives the specifics of the battles. It held my attention though and I really did enjoy it.

"Dropping Rocks" by Jennifer R. Povey is a story about a war between humans as told by an alien. Something I always enjoyed about Star Trek is the way that Gene Roddenberry and his writers liked to include an alien point of view to make commentary on the human condition. Povey does that here and does it well. Her bio notes that she's working on an urban fantasy series. I'll be looking for it.

"Paladin" by Shirley Vogel is a story about uhh... well, I don't want to spoil it. Let's just say that it satisfies my sense of justice and I'll let it go there. I liked it.

"Unbroken" by Elisa Bonnin is the story of growth from an injured youth into a leader of explorers. It is also the story of a girl and a boy and some complications. It deals with both responsibility and the mental consequences of combat, but in a fantasy setting. There is a lot here in a little space. Oh, and our heroine Eshai is a bit of a badass. That's a good thing.

"Aquarius Ascendant" by Christine Lucas is the story of the search for humanity. We have left the planet and abandoned all of the mythological creatures there. When the rules are broken...

Yeah, read it. It was good.

"There is Only the War" by AJ Fitzwater is a story of reunion, ambition and disappointment, with more than just a bit of disillusionment. I like this one.

"Adelita" by Frances Sharp is a story about a war. It is also a story about responsibility and the cost of power. It is a story about refusing to fail. This is a really good story.

"Pop Magic" by Patrick Hurley is an Urban Fantasy about a messenger and is flat out full of awesome. I love the way magic works in this world. I love the fights there. I love the ending.

"Breath and Roses" by Leora Spitzer is a SF story with a socialist bent. I can't really evaluate this one because of political differences. Let's just say that I don't doubt that corporations could act the way they do in the story. I just find her belief that a socialist government wouldn't act the same way for different reasons to be a bit naive.

"The Leximancer's Rebellion" by Jennifer Lee Rossman is awesome and needs to be a series instead of a short. The main character is a badass. The fight is important. I find myself trying to decide if this is an Epic Fantasy in an urban setting or an Urban Fantasy with epic overtones. Either way it kicks ass and the magic system here needs a bigger exploration.

All in all, this was a really good anthology. I had fun with twenty out of twenty-one stories (assuming that I counted that right) and the one I didn't like wasn't really poorly written, it was just too far out of alignment with my politics to work for me personally. Seriously. This one is worth both your time and your money.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Stars

### The Burning Land by Victoria Strauss Review by Sam Lubell <http://N3F.org>

Author Victoria Strauss is trying to do something beyond the ordinary fantasy quest in her novel *The Burning Land*. While she does not quite pull it off, she should certainly get credit for writing seriously about religion, faith, and belief.

The book has perhaps an overly complex background. Its prologue tells the story of the creation of the world by the god Ârata, his fight with the dark god, and his long sleep to heal himself in the wasteland that became the Burning Land. As Ârata slept evil entered the world and so the god's spirit gave the First Messenger the principles of Ârata's religion, a crystal of the god's blood, and a prophecy of the Next Messenger who also would bear Ârata's blood.

The actual story opens with the Âratists retaking control of their temple and the country from the secular Caryaxists. The book's main character, Gyalo, is given the assignment to go into the Burning Land and find a group of Âratists who had been banished into the desert. Gyalo is a Shaper, who is required by the Church to use a special drug to control his magical power to create objects through force of will. The Âratists fear that some of the exiled Âratists may be out-of-control Shapers, who do not limit their use of their power to religious rituals as the Church-controlled Shapers have since the ancient Shaper wars. But storms, desert conditions, and mutiny leave Gyalo and a few others unable to survive unless Gyalo breaks his vow and the rules of the Church to use his Shaper powers for personal ends.

Meanwhile the descendents of the banished live in their Refuge from the demons they think have taken over everywhere else but the Burning Land. Only Axane, who has kept her power to dream true Dreams secret, has seen beyond the Dream-veil protecting the Refuge and realized that the world is populated not by demons but humans like herself. The people of the Refuge have their own legend that someday the Next Messenger will come to lead them out of exile. So when Gyalo arrives many are convinced that he is the Next Messenger while others fear he is a fake created by the demons to destroy Refuge. For his part, Gyalo is shocked by the various heresies the secluded group had developed until he sees the empty cave that the people of Refuge are certain was the resting place of Ârata – meaning that the god must now be awake.



Strauss does several interesting things here. First, she has created a situation in which neither group has all of the correct story. And the reader never finds out how much of these myths are true. Another innovative twist is the question of whether Gyalo really is the Next Messenger. He is convinced he is not but the prophecy keeps falling into place by sheer accident. Unfortunately, the author could have done more to show his internal questioning over this question. Also, although much is made of Gyalo's breaking of his vow and his acceptance of the consequences, the author fails to show the internal struggle convincingly. Strauss tells what happens but never lets the reader feel Gyalo's emotions and doubts.

There's a lengthy and largely unnecessary subplot about prisoners being used for mining that appears to be there largely to show increasing corruption and conflict between Church and State. And only Axane and Gyalo (and one other character late in the novel) emerge as real three-dimensional creations. Too many characters exist solely to manipulate these two and even Axane adapts remarkably easily to what should be an alien outside world once Gyalo takes her out of the Refuge.

Still, this book's strength is its willingness to break the usual patterns for fantasy novels. There is no quest to save the world and Gyalo never tries to become a religious revolutionary. Nor is there a typical romantic relationship as Gyalo is required to be celibate. Even the ending is not the typical happily ever after. In a genre full of "collect the plot coupon objects" and "farmboy becomes king/sorcerer" novels, it may be enough that *The Burning Land* tries to do something different with serious religious issues, even if, at least for this reader, the novel faltered in the execution of this goal.

### City of Shadows by Declan Finn

#### Review by Michael Gallagher

Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

At the end of *Infernal Affairs*, our hero Thomas Nolan had been sent packing for Rome courtesy of the NYPD's foreign intelligence office after his battle with the warlock / mayor tore half a suburb apart. He's shipped off to Rome, and Rome ships him off to London. There, the weather has turned unnaturally nasty (even by English standards), a brazen and violent museum heist has seen an ancient artifact stolen, the city's Muslim population is being whipped into a violent frenzy thanks to a charismatic and zealous imam and even the shadows themselves seem ready to strike.

#### The Story

Given that this book begins a new arc in the series, it's suitable that *City of Shadows* is a different kind of ride than past entries in the Saint Tommy NYPD books. It's a slower burn than the far more chaotic *Infernal Affairs*, and moves along much more like a mystery novel (don't worry, there's still plenty of action).

Before Nolan has even landed in London, the smell of evil is so overwhelming he has to pray for God to turn the ability off. Once off the plane, the sky is unnaturally cloudy and dark at all times, even in midday, and the shadows seem impenetrably dark wherever he looks.

His liaison is the chipper priest Father Pearson, who happens to be an exorcist (and not just any old exorcist, a "combat exorcist"), who has got more to his past than he initially lets on. Wasting no time, the two hop a cab over to the British Museum, where they come across one hell of a crime scene. Scorch marks, rubble and broken glass lay strewn all about, leading right out the front door. Security footage shows a group of armed Middle Eastern men attempting to steal a large gem known as the Soul Stone, which annihilates the first guy who lays hands on it. Thanks to London's status as a gun-free zone, the

thieves eventually do manage to pilfer the thing and make it out without being bothered by much return fire from the police.

The gem is said to be a precious ancient artifact rumored to have been reclaimed from Saddam Hussein's personal torture chamber. According to legend, Anubis brought it up from the Underworld and gifted it to the Pharaohs, giving them vast supernatural powers, among them the ability to control light and dark and the weather. The gem is said to feed off of human angst and misery, so naturally in a major metropolitan city, it's brimming with power. Nolan can hardly begin piecing together a timeline before jihadists show up, not only throwing bottles of acid but also flying and shooting lightning out of their hands ('jihadi X-men', as Nolan calls them).

However, the deck is truly stacked against Nolan this time; he's not only up against the cultural cowardice of London politicians (which includes their police happy to stick their heads in the sand while Muslim rioters go unpunished out of fear of being labeled something-phobic), angry extremist Muslims out to claim the fatwa on his head, the unrelenting pummeling of battering winds, rain and darkness that assail him whenever he's outside, and of course the actual, live carnivorous demonic shadows that lie in wait for him everywhere.

Refreshingly, this entry has an almost Cthuluid flavor to it (the Elder Gods even get a passing mention early on in a conversation Nolan has with a bishop). The story has a constant, slowly tightening dread that builds throughout.

After the volcanic finale of the previous entry, Finn shows he can master the more taut, skillful pace of the crime thriller as well as the white-knuckled action he's famous for.

### The Characters

Tommy Nolan needs no introduction at this point, but here's one if you need it. Newly introduced are the aforementioned Father Pearson, whose mysterious past turns out to have made him a surprisingly effective combatant in both the spiritual and physical senses, and whose friendly demeanor makes him an unassuming threat. He doesn't even blink when Nolan levitates, manages to bareknuckle his way out of a scrap or two, and is a capable native guide to help aide to the perpetually besieged Nolan.

Imam Kozbar is the firebrand leader of the local mosque to which the museum thieves belonged. He's a rather rude host to Nolan and Pearson when they stop by for questioning and is the first one to get in front of a TV camera to hold a press conference to crow about imagined incursions to his civil rights. Of course, he's naturally up to far more than acid-to-the-face interfaith outreach. He sees London, and by extension the West in general as decadent and weak and wishes to use the power of the Soul Stone to raze it to the ground, even if it means allying himself, at least temporarily, with ...

Lord Newby Fowler and Lady Poly Toynbee, museum partners who are perhaps my only sticking point in this book in terms of character development. Compared to some of Finn's far better written characters like this book's Father Pearson, Alex Packard from the previous books and personal guilty favorite Bokor Baracus, Toynbee and Fowler come across as over the top in their personifications of any given edition of The Guardian's opinion pages. They're social elites who view religion only as useful for controlling others and who see it as their duty to use their vast amounts of wealth to attempt to reengineer society in their own perverse image (and by perverse, I mean Plato's idea of age of consent perverse). They're convinced the Soul Stone is actually an alien artifact, since demons can't be even considered, and have taken to feeding the metaphorical alligators in aligning themselves with the Kozbar's jihadists

in hoping to usher in a grand new age of civilization by destroying everything that civilized it in the first place.

To be fair, even Nolan acknowledges their stupidity, and the good Imam seems to spend the book barely tolerating them for as long as is necessary. Thankfully, they weren't too much of a distraction from all the cool firefights and explosions, so no harm done, and your personally mileage may vary.

## The World

Modern day London, the perfect laboratory for the self-immolating cultural effects of untrammelled liberalism. The police are ineffectual and neutered if not outright hostile at those actually attempting to make society safer. Roving gangs of middle eastern thugs harass and assault in broad daylight knowing the local politicians will protect them. Criminal operations go unreported despite being an open secret. It's a powder keg ever on the verge of exploding, needing only that one thing to spark it off.

Of course, as I mentioned before, in addition to this, the ancient city is literally covered in darkness; Finn clearly has fun describing the dreary overcast skies and the unnervingly long shadows in what should seem like benign places. Even settings that should be safe, such as his hotel room, simmer with some malignant aura of unease as Tommy contemplates his surroundings, feeling at every moment that something is just ... off.

Evil benign is a difficult thing to pull off, requiring masterful subtlety, and it's a welcome change of pace here.

## The Politics

It wouldn't be a Saint Tommy book without firmly planting a flag in some political hill. Finn's targets this time are. naturally enough, radical Islam and the damage political correctness does to harvest the poisonous fruits of its ideology, especially as it applies to Britain and Europe at large. Something tells me Finn's not a popular guy in Rotherham.

## Why Read It?

It's a Saint Tommy novel with a fresh shift in pace and tone, going for a (somewhat) slower burn and full of brooding atmosphere and danger around every corner. Plus there's a stinger in the end that will make you eager for the next stop on Tommy's European tour, Crusader.

Dark Harvest by Will Jordan  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Pretty ballsy move for one of the Internet's top film critics to put his own work out there, but this isn't Will Jordan's first rodeo. What's more impressive is his willingness to have skin in the game, where others would butter their bread only with the criticisms of mainstream work. DARK HARVEST proves that he knows what he's doing and can throw curveballs when needed.

## The Story

In the early days of the Cold War, a group of Russian hikers stumbles into a cave in the Ural Mountains, unknowingly stirring up an ancient virus that has been preserved in the cold. The entire group

dies brutally in a matter of hours, some of whom endure gross physical trauma on their way to the after-life. (It turns out this is based on an actual event called the Dyatlov Pass incident, which for my money REALLY ups the creepy factor.)

Sixty years later, in the present day, the virus appears again in the Middle East, this time as a bioweapon that briefly turns people into pseudo-zombies before they croak. It's up to Definitely-Not-Jason-Bourne protagonist Cameron Becker to hunt it down and figure out who controls it, where it came from, and why it's in play.

Along the way he uncovers a plot to unleash it on the world, obliterating the vast majority of humanity on purpose, proving that someone has spent WAY too much time on Twitter. (But seriously. This book is what would have happened if someone other than Dan Brown wrote INFERNO.)

## The Characters

The aforementioned Becker. He has a familiar pedigree for this kind of story, a modern techno-thriller that doesn't rely on any speculative elements to carry the worldbuilding.

Opposite Becker is Lori Dalton, an epidemiologist tasked with figuring out how to contain and counteract this horrible virus. She's the one who explains it to Becker (and the reader) along the way, but that's not all her character does for the story. Her presence has an impact on several of the power players along the way, that I can't divulge without getting into spoilers.

I liked that the characters—while obviously supposed to be supermen in their fields—still felt realistic, flawed, capable of goofing or coming up short. There were times when I legitimately thought they were going to fail in their goals because they were human, and bad crap just happens to people.

## The World

100% our world, our tech level, our history, all of that. Jordan gets bonus points for writing a story set in 2019 about a virus that's about the end the world, hey-oooooh.

## The Politics

Doesn't really play into it. This is a "We've got bigger problems than politics" story.

## Content

Rated R for violence and profanity.

## Who's It For

Anyone who likes a grocery store thriller that has a little bit more brainpower behind it. There's nothing speculative in the worldbuilding, but Jordan takes the real stuff as far as he can, doing all but convincing you that somebody engineered a super zombie virus and wants to unleash it on the world because they're sick bastards.

## Why Read It

Your mileage may vary, but as for me, I love the Drinker. While I have tried (and rejected) his main Ryan Drake series, I thought this one was really damn good. He took a basic thriller concept that we've

seen done before (and recently!), made it better, tied it to an historical event, and added a few other pieces to the mix (sorry, no spoilers) to elevate it above the staples of its genre. I liked this book and you will too.

**Dead Man's Hand by James J. Butcher**  
**Review by Sam Lubell**  
<http://N3F.org>

Dead Man's Hand is debut fantasy-mystery that shows some promise, especially in the author's characterizations and general story-telling, but suffers from a few flaws.

Author James J. Butcher is the son of Jim Butcher, the author of the Dresden Files, Codex Alera, and The Aeronaut's Windlass. Now there is nothing wrong with a child taking on the same profession as a parent—until recently that was more normal than not. Science fiction/fantasy has a number of second generation writers, most notably Joe Hill, son of Stephen King. And I am sure Jim the elder gave useful advice in both the writing and marketing side of the field. Still, readers need to recognize that it is unfair to judge this book by the standards of the most recent Dresden books, even though there are some definite similarities.

The book opens with a retired Leslie Mayflower waking up amidst empty whiskey bottles only to be told that his former partner, Samantha Mansgraf, the toughest witch he'd ever met, was dead. Mansgraf worked as an Auditor for the Department of Unorthodox Affairs, the government agency that polices witches and magic. Mayflower, although completely without magical ability, had been known as the legendary Huntsman, a consultant to the Department who worked with Mansgraf to kill monsters and evil witches.

The other main character, Grimshaw Griswald Grimsby, a witch, had once tried to become an auditor and even went through nearly all the training before Mansgraf kicked him out. Due to scars from past injuries in a fire, he has only partial control of his magic. At the start of the book he has been reduced to doing magic for a mediocre kids' birthday party restaurant, Mighty Magic Donald's Food Kingdom. The descriptions of the kid's party here is some of the most disturbing writing I have seen in a while.

Since Mansgraf left a message, "Kill Grimsby" and he has a motive for the murder, Grimsby is the logical suspect. But Mayflower cannot believe someone as incompetent as Grimsby could have killed such a powerful witch. Then, after a familiar tries to kill Grimsby, the two begin to work together (in part because Mayflower needs a witch to perform a tracing spell and in part because he thinks Grimsby needs a babysitter). The book becomes a mystery as the two try to find a hidden wardbox that could give clues to the real murderer.

Butcher also believably develops Grimsby's character growth. Instead of having him suddenly become competent and fearless, the author has him gradually becoming more useful. At a few places in the book he has to decide between what drove him to want to become an Auditor and his current pathetic but safe existence. Then, late in the book he has another moral choice to make between loyalty and his dreams. Mayflower does not show as much character growth, but he does become less driven by revenge and overcomes the doubts he has had since his retirement.

World building in the book is disappointingly minimal. It seems clear that society knows about magic and witches, but there is nothing in the book on how this has affected society. There is only a couple of mentions dismissing job opportunities for the magic using Unorthodox (although any fantasy reader would have no trouble coming up with lots of ways magic could be used on the job, some even legal). Hopefully this will be addressed in a future volume. And, although the book is set in Boston, there is

little here that provides the feel of Boston. The book might just as well have been set in a fictional city anywhere in the U.S.

The biggest problem with this book is its predictability. From the time Mayflower and Grimsby meet, it is clear that the two will work together to find the real murder and that Grimsby will grow a backbone and discover that he is more competent than he thought. And the actual villains are obvious too. The only real surprise is the absence of any romantic element.

Still, despite these issues, the book has a strong drive that keeps the reader interested. Fans of the senior Jim Butcher's Dresden Files will welcome his son's efforts to follow in his father's footsteps. Although this debut novel shows that James J. Butcher has a lot to learn, he already knows how to tell an involving story.

**Destination: Universe! by A.E. van Vogt**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
<http://N3F.org>

Nic Farey quoted one of my letters of comment on the cover of This Here... #27: "Now I want to read van Vogt!" So I have been. You can read my review of Mission: Interplanetary (Signet, 1952) in the May 2022 N3F Review of Books, and I also recommend the somewhat similarly named Destination: Universe!, which was published by Signet in 1953. The similarity of the titles gave me pause: Had I already read this? I had not.

Not only are they different books, but they are very different books. While Mission: Interplanetary is a retitling of The Voyage of the Space Beagle and a fix-up linking several short stories, Destination: Universe! is a collection of short stories along with a "Postscript" by van Vogt. The stories, all reprints, appeared in sf magazines between 1942 and 1950.

"Far Centaurus" first appeared in Astounding Science Fiction's January 1944 issue. Astronauts are en-route to Alpha Centauri, alternating stints in suspended animation enabled by an Eternity drug that allows them to rest for 50-150 years at a stretch. When they awaken, automated massagers bring their bodies and muscles back to functionality. The journey is expected to take something like 500 years.

Along the way, one dies, one mourns, and they pass a fiery wreck of a spaceship, interpreting it as an alien craft. But when they reach Centauri, several surprises await them. The ending's a bit of a cop out, but it's a fine story about interstellar travel, a generation ship, and human nature.

Astounding also published "The Monster," in August 1948. Aliens land on Earth after a planet-wide genocide and piece together what happened by examining human remains and a museum in the abandoned city. They revive several dead people, including a pharaoh of sorts, and eventually communicate with one of the more modern men. His advancement—and the advancement of his society before the end of the world—is more than they bargained for.

"Dormant," which originally appeared in the November 1948 Startling Stories, is one of my favorite stories in the collection. Soldiers assessing an island formerly used by the Japanese discover a very large rock that seems to move about the island. Its awareness, near-intelligence, and inability to sense water or people is fascinating. The soldiers accidentally bring the rock to full awareness, and it remembers its initial purpose from 10 thousand million centuries ago. That doesn't bode well.



Other Worlds Science Stories published “Enchanted Village” in its July 1950 issue. This is also an excellent story, reminiscent of Ray Bradbury—in that it takes place on Mars. The village of the title is different from that of Bradbury’s “The Third Expedition.” A stranded traveler comes across a Martian oasis and sets out how to help it learn how to meet his needs instead of that as a Martian. Eventually, he adjusts instead.

“A Can of Paint” first appeared in *Astounding* (September 1944). It’s a humorous story about the first human to land on Venus, where he discovers a can of paint. It’s actually a problem-solving test to determine whether first contact is worthwhile, and the man struggles to figure out what to do.

The next piece, “Defense,” which was originally published in *Avon Fantasy Reader* #4 (1947), is the shortest story in the book, covering just two pages. It details mankind’s first—and only—trip to the moon.

The political content of “The Rulers,” reprinted from the March 1944 *Astounding*, reminded me of Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth’s novel *The Space Merchants*. Less so because of the focus on advertising and marketing, and more because of the role the Consies played. This story posits the existence of an Illuminati-like group of men that “were ultra national, beyond all loyalties to any flag.” In fact, “We’re a very old organization, very old. Our leader group ... can trace itself back to the year 3417 B.C.” A psychomedician—an intriguing parallel to Isaac Asimov’s psychohistorians, perhaps—bumps up against their attempts to take over the United States. Another interesting concept: Can you hypnotize someone who’s already been hypnotized?

“Dear Pen Pal,” first appeared in *The Arkham Sampler* (Winter 1949). It’s a fun, slightly humorous, epistolary story in which an alien on Aurigae II corresponds with a human through the international—or interstellar—correspondence club. The letter writing is an advanced form of phishing that backfires.

The February 1950 issue of *Astounding* offered “The Sound.” It’s an intriguing story exploring preparing for spaceflight, the coming of age, espionage, and an alien invasion. Van Vogt addresses several interesting concepts, including a Play Square learning device that might teach children more than their parents are aware, an “exploring night” during which 9-year-old boys have the run of a town, the use of bacteria as a security device against aliens, and aliens—the Yevd—which communicate through light.

And “The Search” (*Astounding*, January 1943) is a compelling mystery involving amnesia, immortality, time travel, and door-to-door sales. The business and political parallels to Pohl and Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants* are enjoyable, as are the new product developments. The piece also resonates slightly with “The Rulers”: “He had run across the peculiar logic of fuzzy-minded people before, but it always shocked him when facts were so brazenly ignored in order that a crackpot theory might hold water.”

The book ends with a five-page “Postscript” by the author addressing new, old, and all readers of sf, as well as his readers. Highlights include the then-current statistic that 50 percent of sf readers are professionals: doctors, lawyers, engineers and scientists. He mentions Ward Moore’s coining of the term “improbabilia” for the field, suggesting that “probabilia” might be better. And van Vogt remarks on how sf can help foster a forward-thinking attitude. It’s a great ending to the collection of stories, less a synopsis of the works and more a perspective on the author’s approach to sf and what it can do. It turns out that van Vogt does it very well. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #33.)

Fallen by Patrick Abbott  
Review by Michael Gallagher  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Brendan Sean Murphy is a man being torn apart by his inner demons. A midwestern seminary drop-out turned Army vet who fought in Afghanistan and Syria, he came home only to have his marriage brutally collapse and to be haunted by recurring nightmares. Struggling with survivor's guilt and PTSD he won't admit he has, he's trying to find a place in a world that's never quite felt like home.

### The Story

When the book starts, our protagonist is wasting away doing intelligence work in some D.C. office complex. He's been woken by his nightly jolting-awake nightmare of nearly dying in Afghanistan, gets out of bed despite the best efforts of his leaden depression and leaves his nearly empty apartment to head to a job where he struggles to be normal (hearing a co-worker talk about a baseball game, he affirms to himself, "I'm going to buy tickets. And this time, I will go").

A highly advanced alien race known as the Sabia have shown up five years prior, and the US (along with the rest of the world's) governments are desperate to make diplomatic inroads and curry favor with the secretive race while all but ignoring the increasingly violent political rift their presence is causing in civilian society.

Brendan, desperate to try to use his skills in tribal relations to get back out "in the field," is convinced he'll find greater purpose beyond the empty, broken bachelor's home life that's slowly killing him. When he risks his life to prevent a Sabian from being killed by a group of black bloc terrorists on a subway platform, he's transported to a low-orbiting Sabian ship, where their advanced medical technology and knowledge save his life and reconstruct his crippled limbs. With the Sabia now in his debt, the government decides to make him their official Intelligence liaison. However, he soon finds himself more at home among them than on Earth, even as they guard their own motives closely.

When a former friend he'd served with arises as the leader of an extremist militia bent on war with the Sabia, Murphy must walk a delicate line between two worlds in an effort to prevent full-scale war.

### The Characters

The cast in this book is huge. Within the first 100 pages (of 500 - it's a beefy read), Brendan has interacted with several co-workers and government officials and over a dozen named Sabian characters. Somehow, Abbott conveys just enough about most of the supporting cast to give them personality but not bog down the story's pace. He knows exactly who to put the spotlight on and for how long.

Aside from Brendan, we meet Paxton Wheeler, a high-ranking official with the Terran delegation with the Sabia, who is the first human Brendan meets after waking up in the Sabian sick bay. He's a government man first and foremost, asking about what Brendan said to his alien hosts before anything else ("I'm fine, by the way," Brendan would respond). It's in this character that I feel Abbott's experience as a combat veteran really fleshes out a grim, though subtle reality for many vets: finding themselves willing to put their lives on the line for a country they love while also existing as cogs within a massive, semi-dysfunctional bureaucracy. Paxton Wheeler embodies the worst of middle management; ambitious while lacking in valor, willing to further an agenda first, sacrifices of those beneath him be

damned. His naked devotion to the government's interests is what ultimately spur the first major fissures in Brendan's doubts about his loyalties.

Berina is a Sabian pilot who raced Brendan up to safety after his early heroics. She's unique among the notoriously stoic race in that she occasionally smiles and even makes attempts at a joke or two. She and Brendan hit it off (easier than with other Sabia, at least), and she even helps him out of a particularly dark period of depression after a crucial revelation about a quarter of the way through. Brendan, being desperately lonely, wants to trust her and open up, but she's evasive about her past. They're definitely fun together in the early going, and Abbott builds a wonderful friend-or-foe dynamic that keeps the reader guessing and emotionally invested when the two are interacting.

Esfir is the Sabian doctor who tended to Brendan's extensive wounds in the book's inciting incident. She sees her human patient as little more than a curiosity at first, but gradually warms to Brendan's strange customs (such as handshakes and Jell-o). The hard-won friendship presents her with her own inner turmoil, however, as she is naturally distrustful of the Terrans.

Lastly, Malcolm McAndrews is the second in command of the anti-Sabia human militia group called The Patriot Assembly and was at one time one of Brendan's closest friends during deployment. He's fallen on the opposite side of Brendan regarding the Sabia, seeing them as allied with the elites and therefore a danger to humanity.

The banter between Brendan and Malcolm, and Malcolm's men, is particularly good, and Abbott's military service does him well in making it come across as authentic. Despite the book's length, and the many people that play large and small roles in the story, no one feels quite like an NPC here. Everyone is given just the right amount of attention and detail as needed to keep everything moving at an interesting pace and establish the tone and mood for the cultures behind the different factions (the reserved Sabia, duplicitous, doublespeaking government officials, and militants whose attitudes range from raw and brash to weary but steadfast). It's clear that Abbott's seen and experienced a lot, and he brings it all in to serve up vivid characters.

### The World

The world is essentially modern day, just imagined with the current simmering political tensions ratcheted to extreme(?) conclusions. Which segues nicely into . . .

### The Politics

Despite the book's premise, Abbott manages to avoid the easy trap of injecting any ham-fisted messaging. While some can likely find some sort of sociopolitical parallels in virtually any aliens-coming-to-earth story, one can enjoy this for what it is. The government certainly doesn't seem noble or competent, but honestly, that's about as unifying a story element as there can be these days.

### Why Read It?

You're unlikely to find a sci-fi story that more accurately captures the pathos, the crushing isolation, the struggle for reintegration of the modern combat veteran than Abbott's debut novel. I'd mentioned earlier that Abbott made the most of his own personal experiences overseas in bringing his *Fallen's* world and characters to life. But in conversations I'd had with him prior to reading, I was struck by the feeling that this was also equal parts exorcism for himself and a small way of honoring those he served with; Brendan himself was an amalgam of a couple of friends.

He's watched as his own brothers in arms returned home from hell to find spouses gone (seventy percent of veterans who commit suicide are divorcees). Their own homes become prisons as they find themselves racked by debilitating anxiety and guilt. He relayed to me a story about seeing a veteran friend he knew was struggling at church, smiling from ear to ear because he'd finally gotten up the will to leave the house for the first time in over a week. These men go through hell and come home, often only to find the life they left in shambles, and even in their naked vulnerability display a bravery few of us could ever muster after tribulations we could never endure.

And despite everything I just said, they keep getting out of bed to face the front doors of their own apartments again. There is hope, because they are determined to keep that flame alive. Defeat is unacceptable. I can only speak for myself, but I believe this is what's really set Abbott apart from most military sci fi; his ability to write an authenticity in his characters that I've rarely seen, along with a well-layered thriller to boot. The Kindle edition is permanently .99 cents, so what are you waiting for?

**Empire Games by Charles Stross—  
Review by Tom Feller  
<http://N3F.org>**

Having seen several movies featuring the Multi-Verse lately, I was prepared for a multi-verse novel. It features three primary timelines, none of which are ours. In the first, the histories diverged before the birth of Christ. In fact, there is no Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. What it had were World Walkers, people who could traverse the multi-verses by means of their mental abilities. The second was like our timeline up until 2003, when downtown Washington, D.C. is nuked by a faction from the first time line. In retaliation, the new U.S. president Donald Rumsfeld nuked the first timeline back to the Stone Age. The survivors found refuge in a third timeline which diverged from ours around 1760 when France conquered England. The Royal Family relocated to North America, where they reigned until they were overthrown in 2003.

Rita Douglas is an underemployed actress in the second timeline when she is recruited by a division of the Department of Homeland Security headed by the mysterious Colonel Smith. She learns that she is the biological daughter of Miriam Beckstein, a world walker from the first timeline, who had a brief relationship with a native of Pakistan from the second time line while they were both attending medical school. After giving Rita up for adoption, she left for the third timeline where she married Erasmus Burgeson, another world walker, and became an important person in what is called the North American Commonwealth.

Rita's adopted family consisted of Cold War spies from East Germany who were left out in the cold when the Soviet Union collapsed. She has the gene for world walking, which is recessive. However, the spy agency has devised a medical procedure to make her a world walker and send her on a mission to the third timeline. If this sounds complicated, it's because it is. This novel is the first book in a trilogy and the seventh book in the author's Merchant Prince series, which finished sixth in the Hugo voting in that category this year.

Ezra's Ghosts by Darcy Tamayose  
Reviewed by Robert Runté  
<http://SFeditor.ca>

Darcy Tamayose is a Canadian author and artist of Japanese descent, so it comes as no surprise her new collection, *Ezra's Ghosts*, reads at times like a cross between Noh theatre, Canadian literature, and Garcia Marquez on a good day. Grounded in the concrete details of life in Ezra, Tamayose weaves a selection of ghost narratives through a universe of academics, poetry, art, urban prairie life, contemporary social issues, and murder. The book is an exploration of, well, pretty much everything.

Tamayose's style is contemplative, thoughtful, at times melancholy, but nevertheless manages a conversational tone that keeps the pages turning. The writing is poetic and multilayered, as befits the best literary work, but remains accessible and unpretentious. Tamayose's voice provides a unique perspective on prairie life and second-generation immigrant experience.

The first selection, *The Thesis*, works well as an introduction to the cultural and metaphysical milieu of the collection and--if the motif is ultimately a little familiar--Tamayose's style elevates it beyond the usual. I confess, in spite of a misspent youth immersed in *The Twilight Zone*, the story took me by surprise and had a real emotional punch.

But it's the second story, *Ghostfly*, that truly took away my breath. I loved every word and comma. I love the wordplay of the title--the ghost as "fly on the wall" and an allusion to fly-fishing. I loved the resigned, fatalistic pacing. I loved how the tiny, personal images slowly build up an intricate mosaic of family life and grief. There is a deep understanding here of the human psyche, academic culture, second generation experience, and femicide. And, unlike much literary fiction, a strong and satisfying narrative underlying and completing the structure. It's the sort of story that ought to be interest to any writer looking to improve their craft--and taught in high school Language Arts classes--because it is an exemplar of every element of fiction even as it exudes a distinctively Canadian take on each. Canadian magic realism at its best.

*The Ryukyuan* is the surreal entry in the collection. My no-spoilers policy prevents me from saying more about that aspect, but the story revolves around a reporter dispatched to interview a 130-year-old Ryukyuan immigrant. It's partly the story of the occupation of the Okinawa archipelago, partly about how Ryukyuan traditions (and by extension, all immigrants) contributed to the cultural and agricultural tapestry of Southern Alberta, but mostly about grief and persistence in dealing with one's ghosts.

*Redux* is pure SF, set in 2044, a world still in pandemic and rocked by random acts of terror. Our heroine has chosen to return to the Paris hotel that was significant for her and her late husband, an annual retreat since his passing she is now using to prep for her PhD comprehensive exams. As with the others, the story is about memory and persistence in the face of grief, and pieced together from the tiny everyday routines that create and bind our days. It's quite lovely.

Any one of these stories could have made their mark in a literary journal or speculative fiction magazine but they appear to be all original to this volume. Everybody knows original collections don't sell, so it is only exceptional work that is ever deemed worthy. The publisher was not wrong: this is a wonderful example of both the literary end of speculative fiction and the accessible end of literary fiction. Great stuff, highly recommended.

*Ezra's Ghosts* is published by NeWest Press.

*Ezra's Ghosts* has been shortlisted for the \$60,000 Atwood-Gibson Prize

The Galaxy, and the Ground Within by Becky Chambers  
Review by Perry Middlemiss

This 2021, the fourth and last book in the author's Wayfarers series, was a finalist for the 2022 Best Novel Hugo Award. Similar to the other novels in the series, this is a prime example of the subgenre known as "hopepunk"—a rather clumsy concoction that covers works that depict characters working towards positive change, common goals, and mutual respect. I am fine with that, as long as it doesn't leave out one of the major components of a decent novel: drama. Unfortunately, this one falls directly into that trap.

The planet of Gora is a lifeless ball of rock that just happens to sit near the intersection of five wormholes. In a widely inhabited galaxy, wormholes are vitally important for interstellar travel. Gora acts as a stop-off point for travelers as they await their next wormhole transport slot, and hence is populated with rest and recreation establishments, rather like our highway service centers. Here we have a number of non-human characters stopping off for a time when the planet's satellite network goes off-line due to a cascading series of collisions.

This novel deals with the time these characters spend on Gora, waiting for the satellite network to come back online. There are a few moments of tension, but not a lot. And there are some small amounts of drama, but not a lot. And all of the "alien" characters on the planet sound like minor variations on middle-class Americans. I have no idea how this novel made it onto the final Hugo ballot. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #25.)

Galen's Way by Richard Paolinelli  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Rescuing a kidnapped princess is new even for mercenary Galen Dwynd. It's not as though royalty regularly goes missing, after all. Yet he is still hired to rescue a princess somehow swept out from under her protectors' noses. To avoid political entanglements, her parents contact Galen on the sly to keep the matter quiet.

Galen has no real issue entering the fortress where the woman is being held. However, there is a slight snag in his information: there are four princesses being held hostage. Changing his plans, Galen keeps the princess he was hired to rescue aboard his ship rather than return her to her kingdom. Something is up, and there is only one way to deal with it: Galen's Way.

The story unrolls like a great adventure should. Initially hired to rescue one princess, when Galen finds no less than four royal heirs being held captive in stasis and subjected to an illegal device that allows their captor to enter their minds as he wishes, he saves them all. But he only returns three to their homes. Princess Rhiannon, whom he was originally hired to rescue, he decides to keep close. His ship's snarky AI, Cassandra, is quick to note the woman's good looks and suggest her human captain take up with her. Galen is nonplussed by the suggestion – or at least, he makes an effort to appear so as he decides on his next course of action.

From here the threats grow to a gigantic scale, putting the entirety of the Andromeda Galaxy in the crosshairs of a much, much bigger menace. Four kidnapped princesses are the hinges on which hangs a plot to start an oppressive regime – one which the conspirators do not want Galen, a mere mercenary, to upset. Unless he, Rhiannon, and Cassandra stop them in time, the last refuge of mankind may be extinguished forever.



New villains arise and those once thought friends, or the ultimate confidants, become deadly foes as the three engage in a race against time. In the process they will learn more about themselves – and one another – than they could possibly have anticipated.

## The Characters

Galen Dwyn is not your average mercenary. He is not a rogue with a heart of gold; rather, he is a paladin who has been forced to go rogue. Following a nasty experience during his training with the Bata'van, a renowned group of warriors and bodyguards, he decided he couldn't trust the institutions of the galaxy and so set out to walk his own path. Despite his violent profession and the requirement that he shoot, slice, or stab first, this knight walks in the dark and wears no armor. The light of his spirit, however, is blinding.

Princess Rhiannon has some characteristics in common with Star Wars' Princess Leia. On reflection, though, she hews more closely to the archetype embodied and developed in *Deja Thoris*. A decisive woman who knows her station, she stands on her breeding even when it puts her at a disadvantage with Galen in their verbal sparring matches. Her regal bearing is most apparent at the end, but she never forgets it during the narrative. When she has the chance to use it, watch out. She does not pull her punches.

Cassandra is hilarious, providing half the jokes, humor, and witty repartee throughout the entire story. Acting as Galen's Id in some ways, his mother hen in others, and his ship in all else, she has nothing against Rhiannon. Though she is not above telling the princess off if she believes the woman has mistreated her captain, the two become friends rather quickly, making them something of a team in how they protect and watch out for the hero.

## The World

The world is less Star Wars-lite than a number of space operas released following Disney and Lucas' destruction of that franchise. It has a great many parallels to Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda* and the *Halo* series without devolving into a thinly reimagined version of any of them. The world is at once lived in and new, with various aspects of the galaxy being revealed the longer one travels through it. By the end, a reader will wish he could spend more time within the universe just to see what else may be hiding in the far corners of the Milky Way's sister galaxy.

## The Politics

No politics besides those inherent to the story are present.

## Content Warning

There is a romantic interlude that is hinted at but never shown, and the captor of the princesses used the psychic device to take some liberties with them without touching their persons. Something similar happened to Galen in the Bata'van as well. All these things are mentioned or hinted at but never described in any detail and are easily passed over. The PG-13 rating is most apt in this case.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Star Wars, of course, but anyone who loves good space opera will enjoy this book. Those who wished for more consistency in Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda* will also love this story for playing similar themes straight, and anyone disappointed with the lackluster *Halo* TV series will find the novel

hits the spot. Firefly fans will also find this novel fun, as will Lord of the Rings readers. The scope of the story goes beyond the average for space opera by hinting at deeper themes and larger worlds beyond what we see on the page here.

Why read it?

When was the last time you read something fun that made you feel like you had been to the movies and wanted to go again? Galen's Way will give you all the hope of a summer blockbuster in the palm of your hand. Why not buy it?

**The Goblin Reservation by Clifford D. Simak**  
**Review by Perry Middlemiss**

This 1968 novel was a finalist for the 1969 Hugo Award for Best Novel. In the far-future, Earth has been transformed into a university planet where creatures from all over the galaxy come to learn and to teach. Travel between the galaxy's worlds is conducted by a form of matter transmission (think of an updated Way Station transport system). Academic Peter Maxwell arrives back on Earth after a long trip only to discover that everyone thinks he's dead—they attended his funeral.

Something seems to have malfunctioned in the matter transmission process causing a duplicate. As he attempts to investigate the causes of his "death," he is also trying to negotiate the purchase of the "Artifact," a monolith on display on Earth, that can be used to obtain vast knowledge from an alien race that survived the transition from the previous universe to this one. Also looking to make the purchase is an alien race called the Wheelers, which is really a hive mind comprising a mass of insects in a ball attached to two rotating wheels. In the background, the Time University is mounting a series of prestigious lectures from William Shakespeare himself, in an attempt to finally decide whether he did, or did not, write the plays.

This is a completely over-the-top sf novel featuring all of Simak's themes, as well as his love of inventive and faintly ridiculous situations, as well as goblins, a neanderthal named Alley-Oop, and a ghost. The whole thing seems completely absurd, but Simak is able to pull it off as only he could. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #26.)

**Jaws by Peter Benchley**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
<http://N3F.org>

Labor Day weekend, my wife, son, and I escaped the mild heat of west Los Angeles on Sunday by going to the movies. There's a Cinemark near our home and my office that I quite like—in part because of a burger joint within walking distance that makes for a great after-movie meal—so we went to a matinee of Jaws, which is available in re-release, and in 3D, no less.

The movie, as always, is excellent and worth seeing. Even though the film wasn't made for 3D, it was still fun seeing it in 3D, though we would have chosen a non-3D option had one been available.

After a quick bite at the nearby burger place, I embarked on a bit of Jaws-related reading over the course of the next 24 hours: the Mad parody in #180, the Cracked "Godfather Meets Jaws" spoof in #131, the Dotdash Meredith Life-branded Jaws bookazine currently on better newsstands everywhere, and Peter Benchley's 1974 novel that spawned the shark-attack film franchise. I read the book in—a 1980 Bantam edition—two sittings, before bed and upon waking.

Not only did the movie benefit from a couple of recent technological and media innovations at the time—newly air-conditioned movie theaters, many in malls, which helped usher in the age of the summer blockbuster; and the first major television ad campaign for a movie, with the studio buying blocks on all three major networks—the movie was based on an excellent book. In fact, Benchley's hardcover edition sparked a bidding war for the paperback rights, landing at Bantam for the equivalent of \$3 million.

While I'd suggest that the movie version of *Jaws* is not science fiction, after reading the novel, I'm tempted to contend that the book is sf. The book offers a lot that isn't included in the movie, including a subplot involving the police chief's wife and visiting ichthyologist in an affair and another in which the town's mayor is caught up in some mafia-funded real estate deals. Other key details differ between the book and movie: the number of citizens attacked by the shark, why media coverage occurs so quickly, and who among the main characters die—as well as how the shark itself dies.

But the primary differences that lead me to consider the novel sf—and the movie not so—are twofold. First of all, the ichthyologist likens the giant shark to the reportedly extinct megalodon. "You can't tell me that thing's a fish," he said. "It's more like one of those things they make movies about. You know, the monster from twenty million fathoms. ... [I]f there's something like this swimming around, what's to say megalodon isn't? ... The really terrific thing, the thing that blows your mind, is imagining—and it could be true—that there are great whites way down in the deep that are a hundred feet long. ... What's to say megalodon is really extinct?"

Secondly, there are a couple passages that speculate whether the shark is somehow intelligent, whether its actions are intentional beyond usual shark behavior. "You said something on the phone the other day about being smarter than fish," the police chief said. "You've never found a smart fish? ... That fish sure looked mean yesterday. Like he meant to be mean. Like he knew what he was doing."

The speculative elements are subtle—are suggestions—rather than narrative assertions or assumptions, but I think it's enough to warrant considering Benchley's *Jaws* as sf. We have a giant shark that might be a straight line to the world's biggest shark that swam the seas 20 million years ago. And we have a cruel, intentional shark that consciously targets boats and people. A shark so intelligent that it can sense someone waiting to harpoon it and choose to ram the boat to knock them down before taking bait in the water.

Benchley's novel is a damn good book that inspired a wonderful movie. If you've never read the book—regardless of whether you've seen the movie—seek it out. Let me know if you, too, think it merits being considered sf. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #31.)

**The Jigsaw Assassin by Catherine Asaro**  
**Review by Trevor Denning**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

## Summary

After a series of politically motivated murders leave the law enforcement of Selei City stymied, Major Bhaajan is called to investigate. If there's one thing the former military officer turned private eye hates it's politics but given certain commitments she can't refuse. Soon Bhaajan finds herself an unwilling pawn in a high stakes game and with a target on her back.

### The Story

While Major Bhaajan could have continued living in the opulent Selel City after retiring from the military, she chose to return the Undercity where she grew up and try to make it a better place. But when three prominent scientists are murdered, she's brought in to investigate. Unfortunately, her cover is blown almost immediately and soon her life is also in danger. Or is it? It certainly seems so when her apartment building is bombed. She and her EI, Max (a sort of virtual assistant), can't be sure if she's the target or just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To aid in her investigation she brings in Ruzik and Angel, two of her "Dust Knight" martial art students who know how to handle themselves in an Undercity brawl but are clueless in refined society. Bhaajan's search takes her to the outskirts of Selel City, to the offices of those who hold the most power, the labs of other scientists, and back to the site of the bombing. There's another mystery involving a potentially dangerous EI, leaving Bhaajan and Max wondering if they have two puzzles in one box, or if it's all part of a much bigger picture.

While the exposition and jargon can be difficult to sift through, Asaro weaves together a compelling mystery with humor and heart. It would be easy for *The Jigsaw Assassin* to be downer, but it's infused with enough optimism both in the characters' worldviews and the story arc to avoid becoming dour. When there's action, it's cinematic and extremely entertaining, which is what kept me coming back for more.

### The Characters

The story is told in first person by Bhaajan, a woman who was born into poverty, fought her way up the ranks of the military, and now moves between two worlds. She can function in high society or the Undercity, but will always face discrimination because of her roots. Life has left her jaded, yet she still works against all odds to bring her worlds together, and perhaps a better place.

Even though Max is an EI, he's as much a character akin to Harry Dresden's Bob the Skull. Because Bhaajan is enhanced with biometric and biochemical upgrades, Max is able to communicate with her telepathically and manage her systems. As the story goes on, it seems he may have a big role to play not just in Bhaajan's life, but in that of humanity.

Ruzik and Angel have never been outside of the Undercity, but don't hesitate to come when Bhaajan needs help. Bigger and rougher than the residents of Selel City, they stand out like gorillas at a ballet and barely speak in complete sentences (an Undercity shorthand dialect), which means everyone underestimates their intelligence. Ruzik accidentally finds some celebrity when he rescues a child, and Angel may have started, and ended, a barfight to defend her husband's honor.

### The World

This is an extremely complex world and part of a much larger series, which I have not read. So I hope fans will forgive me if I get anything wrong. Selel City is part of the Skolian Empire, a matriarchal society. For the most part women run the major operations, forcing their husbands to live in seclusion or indulge in artistic pursuits. Bhaajan's husband owns and operates a casino, but it seems they're a progressive(?) couple.

Selei City, where the majority of the book is set, in an alien paradise with beautiful parks and majestic skyscrapers. Asaro does an excellent job of detailing her world with descriptions of all the vegetation and insects, both natural and manufactured. Many people like Bhaajan have received physical augmentations, some subtle and some overt. For example, at one point she meets someone with cycle wheels instead of legs.

It's also a world populated by EIs that qualify for the Turing Test. In a previous novel, an ancient EI nearly brought down the entire empire and they're still dealing with the consequences. As the EIs continue to evolve, the world will only become more complicated.

## The Politics

So many politics. All the politics. The whole story revolves around politics. Thankfully, they're only the politics of Asaro's world and not our own. It's messy and complicated, but organic to the complex society she's imagined and don't seem designed to be analogous to our own.

## Content Warning

There's some language and sex jokes, but nothing terribly shocking.

## Who is it for?

This far into the series (The Jigsaw Assassin is the fourth book in the Major Bhaajan series, itself an offshoot of a massive assemblage of novels and short stories set in this world), it's first and foremost for the fans. But even as someone unfamiliar with Asaro's work, I enjoyed the plot, characters, and world. Anyone looking for science fiction with worldbuilding as vast as space and deeper than the core of Mars will find plenty to love here, even if it's their first encounter with the Skolian Empire.

## Why read it?

Read The Jigsaw Assassin for the characters and world. The plot is complex and the jargon is dense, but those are features and not bugs. It allows the story to be as immersive or escapist as the reader desires. Asaro excels at writing visceral, realistic action that plays better than that new Matrix movie. The story also serves as a good reminder that while technology can improve life, it never makes it any less complex. In fact, the opposite is usually the case.

**The Last Hunter by JN Chaney and Terry Mixon**

**Review by JR Handley**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Two centuries after the Confederation staved off an invasion by the robotic Locusts, Captain Jack Romanoff faces mandatory retirement from an ever-shrinking Navy. Actions speak louder than words. The Confederation doesn't think the Locusts are coming back.

But what if the politicians are wrong?

Snared in a scheme he doesn't fully understand or trust, Jack gets his promotion, but it comes with a catch. With a crew of rejects, he must restore the most powerful warship humanity has ever built, after

centuries of neglect and decay, before time runs out.

If he fails, humanity might not need to worry about history repeating itself ever again.

Unlike most of the military science fiction and space opera books that I love to read, this wasn't an action-packed novel. Instead, this book took more of a dramatic start. We see the beginning of a mystery and some political intrigue. It becomes very clear that this is the start of a bigger series, so I was willing to ride with it. There was a bit of a slow start, from an action perspective, but I really liked getting to know the main character more, so I felt like it worked. That said, once the plot took off it never really lagged. I wasn't able to read this book from start to finish in one sitting because of its length, but I wanted too. That feeling didn't change when I read the book again in preparation for this post.

Overall, the plot was pretty straightforward. We see a man whose career is in decline and on his way out, when he's given a second chance. Instead of being forced to retire, he's stationed on a ship full of sailors needing a second chance. The entire premise for this novel centers around a former battleship turned into a museum ship. His new command, the Delta Orionis, is in a state of terrible disrepair. His task is to bring this ship back to a state of readiness.

While this was a fun story, it wasn't action packed. There wasn't a lot of pew-pew space laser action that we expect from Terry Mixon, but it was still one of his signature adventures. In the end, we did get an intense battle scene to make everything worth it. What's even cooler is that, given how many more books there are in this universe, you know the payoff will be huge. I can't wait to read the subsequent novels to see how these plot points play out further down the line.

In summary, there was literally nothing in *The Last Hunter* that I couldn't buy. The military bureaucracy was everything I would expect, given my over eight years in the US Army and a lifetime growing up as a US Navy dependent. The plot for this novel worked, and it had everything you would want to keep you reading from chapter to chapter and book to book!

This novel was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. They described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how the world felt. This was done with perfection that only comes from seasoned writers and includes some solid editing. This is how it's done, and I hope to get that good someday. While I could visualize all of the worlds, I would still love it if the authors shared artists renderings from this immersive world! The world was just so awesome that I wanted to SEE it as the authors envisioned it. If it's only a tenth as cool as what I pictured in my head, it would be worth every penny. These guys balanced my desire for descriptive exposition and info dumping was perfectly executed. The spaceships that we meet in this book were excellently described, and you could easily envision yourself strolling their passageways.

Another huge plus for me was Terry Mixon and JN Chaney's descriptive use of language. This comes from Mixon being a relic from another age, using words reminiscent of the Golden Age of Science Fiction. They balanced the explanation of this new world with the need to move a story along and then kicked the excellence up a notch. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible and I enjoyed it. The author's description of their universe was evocative and made me an uber-fan of this series! The only slight drawback of how descriptive they were, it was a little bit distracting. Seriously, it made you wanna take a moment and explore every nook and cranny, but that's a sign of an amazingly built universe. This is such an awesome problem to have, that I almost feel like I'm being a pedantic jerk, but that's what you're here for! In summary, I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of the authors. The drama was intense, the action was gripping, and the story was fun. Terry Mixon and JN Chaney brought it, they were definitely their A game.



## Characters:

The main character in this novel is Captain Jack Romanoff of the Confederation Navy. He is a man at the cusp of retirement, forced out by the dreaded up-or-out promotion scheme. His inability to get promoted is partly because of whom his dad is, a former Grand Admiral who burnt a lot of bridges with his abrasive style. However, Jack Romanoff's career wasn't only hindered by his parentage. He also had a close call with a civilian space liner while he was a helms officer. Finally, it becomes very clear that Jack's unwillingness to buy his promotion was going to hurt his chances for success.

Overall, it was fun watching his arc grow over the course of the novel. We watch him become willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. I love a second chance story, and this is what the main characters' adventure was. I enjoyed hearing his thoughts as he figured out how the world really worked. The Confederation Navy and their governing political body was different than Jack thought it was. This character was extremely believable, if a little naïve, throughout this novel. He was well-rounded, so you'll get no complaints from me. He was a very sympathetic character, representing the common man, he was aspirational even. Everyone has adversity to overcome, which made him a relatable individual. Finally, I liked that, for once, Terry Mixon and JN Cheney described what he looks like. Heck, he even described the ridiculous nature of their anime inspired uniforms. I can't wait to read the rest of the series to see what happens with Jack.

## Worldbuilding:

This is the first book in The Last Hunter series, and I absolutely loved it. This novel had a very fleshed out world that was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. Seriously, everything was explained clearly. The universe had just enough mundane facets of life to feel grounded in reality. Some of the details seemed inconsequential, but those hooks just make me think that the larger universe will continue to grow and expand. I loved the way they handled inserting new tidbits about the larger universe and history in such a way that you didn't even notice. Okay, I noticed because I was looking for it, but their insertion of the world building was subtle. I loved reading about the military bureaucracy that is the Confederation Navy. We didn't get the entire back story of the Confederation or the Confederation Navy. However, we didn't need to know everything about the political intrigue going on.

I especially liked that they described the uniforms in such a ludicrously anime inspired fashion. This was a change for Mixon, who normally writes kick-ass bubblegum space opera and I love it. However, I liked seeing all of the details from this new universe. Everything he added to the tapestry of this overarching universe, illustrating what the possibilities were for a post-Earth culture could be. There was never anything they described that I couldn't envision, or that felt like it wasn't "real."

Overall, everything in this universe felt big enough that I could picture it. Heck, I wouldn't mind seeing more stories set in this world. I was picking up what they were laying down. There was nothing I couldn't buy. Seriously, nothing. I could envision myself there, in the Confederation. I'm not surprised, this is one place where Terry Mixon and JN Chaney always excel. These two have always built worlds that felt lived in, even when they've written books light on the details. What can I say, they nailed it with this book!

These two have upped the bar of excellence, adding more sensory input to the mix; sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. They didn't reinvent the wheel, building on the existing tropes of space opera and military science fiction. Instead, he brought it into the 21st Century! Overall, the world building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Mixon and Chaney created. Like most of the stories I read, this one didn't take itself too seri-

ously, which allowed you to focus on the fun, which is why I read in the first place. Well done, lads!

Narration:

I enjoyed this book exclusively in the audiobook format. It was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did good! This isn't a dig at Jeffrey Kafer, the narrator, as this was a story told by a singular point of view, so there just wasn't a call for that many accents. What was there was well done. Seriously, I'd listen to more books by this narrator, and I even hired him to work on one of my series. His audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about! He didn't commit the Cardinal Sin, which is my only real requirement; he didn't sound like a robot, he didn't bore me, and he didn't use accents that annoy the bajeesus out of me! Overall, I give him 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

Who is it for?

I really loved this book; it was a lot of fun to read. It is worth mentioning again, I've read this novel a few times and it never once felt like it was a waste of time. So, lets dive into what I liked. I really loved that this novel felt like a cousin to the other books Terry Mixon has written. Seriously, right down to his main character, a ship's captain, losing his former command to a broken spine. If there is a naval space god, they must surely hate Mixon for the hell he's wrought! I also detected hints of the trademark irreverence that is part of the JN Chaney brand. This book felt like the perfect blend of their styles, and I think the whole became so much greater than the sum of their parts.

One thing that I really liked about this novel was the use of a museum ship as the main setting. It gave this novel vibes that reminded me of the opening of the new version of Battlestar Galactica. In the opening of that television series, the main vessel started as a floating museum that was brought back to life because of an existential crisis. They did this in the movie Battleship as well, though that movie wasn't as highly rated. What can I say, I like the trope of the old being new again. The Last Hunter pulled it off, even going so far as to bringing uniforms that would make Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson blush. I know it was inspired by anime, but that touch added to the vibe of the floating historical relic. It spoke to the history nerd in me in a way that I really like. I imagine that at some point this trope will get old and the series will move past it, but for now it was a lot of fun.

Another part of this story that I loved was how Mixon-Chaney made use of the trope of an empire in decline. This was one of the main plot points, which added a layer of desperation to the struggle for the crew of the Delta Orionis. This novel opens up with the Confederation, and thus the Confederation Navy, fading away as corruption and inertia force the once might polity to shrink. The authors don't dwell on this, more using this as a bit of seasoning on the glorious steak that is The Last Hunter. I suspect that this trope will have echoes across the series, but I hope that they don't overdo this one.

Next, I felt like Commodore Jack Romanoff was the perfect viewpoint character. He was a lot of fun to see this world through. The man had just the right blend of morality seasoned with realism, allowing him to get the job done. This allowed him to keep the novel interesting and entertaining. I really loved seeing his interactions with his father, but it made me wonder if the authors had daddy issues. Wow, what a soup sandwich their dynamic was. But this isn't a dig at the novel, but a fun plot complication to add to an already rich universe.

Speaking of characters, one of the things that I really liked about this novel was the use of so many secondary characters. These people only added to the story, rather than distract from it. While we have one main point of view character, Commodore Romanoff, he can't be everywhere and see everything. To

fill that void, Chaney and Mixon gave us a supporting cast of characters from across the spectrum of jobs and personality types. They allow us to see the universe from a more holistic view. Normally, you might just shrug it off as the needs of the plot, but these authors went above and beyond to ensure that their secondary characters were believable and fleshed out. I could easily see any one of them getting their own stand-alone novels and not feeling like I was being cheated.

And given the genre of this book, how could I not cover the military culture of the universe? It was spot on, just what I'd expect from two veterans. This story was told by JN Chaney, a proud veteran of the US Air Force and Terry Mixon, who rode dinosaurs with George Washington in the US Army. Even cooler, Mixon went on to work with NASA and helped Buzz Lightyear fake the moon landing! Together, this dynamic duo created a compelling interstellar naval force, but again... the author spent some time working for NASA, and it shows. The place where this novel really shined was the characterizations, nobody wearing the uniform felt like cookie cutter clichés or parodies. The way these two portrayed how their characters handled the developments of this book was superbly done! There was never a moment where I thought... "that's not how I would act." I believe that the characters responded as expected to the situation they found themselves in.

While this novel wasn't grim dark, there was a level of gritty realism to it that I liked. It was one of the things that I enjoyed the most about this book. The authors considered the role of logistics and how it affects the battlespace. This isn't always a sexy thing to think about, but these two made it a cool part of the plot development. From the beginning, we see the character running out of supplies and having to creatively solve the issue. We even saw this as a central plot point that tested moral limits as the crew grappled with solving this issue. Further, he has the sailors of the Delta Orionis constantly on the look-out for their consumable military tech; missiles and bullets, etc. Then they end up with a lack of personnel for the massive vessel that is Hunter. No detail was forgotten or taken for granted in this book and I'm here for it! It cemented that little attention to detail, making me love this novel even more.

Another place where this novel shined was with the pacing. The political maneuverings were intense and believable. The characters responded as you'd expect in those circumstances. However, they didn't let it derail the plot. They kept the story moving along, constantly introducing new complications just when they'd come to some sort of resolution to the old one. I know that this sounds trite, but it really served to illustrate the skills these two authors brought to the table.

I really loved how compelling this novel was. It really made me want to fly my own Hunter Class spaceship. If I hide the ship from my woman, can I still be the captain? Let's be real, my fighting days are over, and any semblance of command authority left when I hung up my stripes. Sigh, think she will at least let me be the first officer? But hey, I could forget that while I read this book and pretend I was still my own man! I could be young and spry again, capable of chewing lead, spitting out bullets and walking through fire. Definitely gave me a case of the feels, and I found myself wanting to be a part of it all.

Finally, I really liked that the aliens in this series were still somewhat of a mystery. We know that they're out there, somewhere, building robots to conquer the galaxy in advance of their potential arrival. Well, we think we know this. But the mystery that is the Locust is part of the fun, we get to explore and learn about this threat right along with the main characters. We know they've got drones and motherships, but not much else. I sense a "yet" being added to that statement, I just can't foresee these two authors letting that cash cow of a plot bunny go free. I wouldn't want that as a reader, and I wouldn't do it as an author.

In conclusion

I loved this novel, and I would happily give it 5 out of 5 Grenades. I would comfortably suggest that someone use some of their hard-earned money on this novel, though it is available on Kindle Unlimited as well. This book has become a new favorite for me, right up there with Terry Mixon's Empire of Bones Series. If you're looking for your next hit of literary crack, you won't go wrong with this series or these two authors.

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out! You won't regret it! Well, unless it keeps you up all night and you're late to work... and then your boss fires you, because you became a book addict and a rabid Terry Mixon and JN Chaney fan. And then you track them down, climb into their window in your skivvies and they shoot you with grapeshot. Okay, the fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be warned, but enjoy the high!

Until next time, stay frosty and don't forget to keep your powder dry!

Legendborn by Tracy Deonn—  
Review by Tom Feller  
<http://N3F.org>

I have read several versions of the Arthurian legends and seen even more in the movies and on television, so any time I find an original take on the old stories, it gives me pleasure. This version is set in our time, and the premise is that descendants of King Arthur and his knights are still with us and are secretly protecting us from demons. They refer to themselves as "legendborn". The novel is set in and around the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Chapel Hill, where they hide in plain sight as a "secret" society called the Order of the Round Table and use a kind of magic called "aether". The main character is Bree Matthews, a sixteen-year-old African-American girl who has just lost her mother in a hit-and-run accident. She and her best friend Alice are accepted into a special program at UNC (the author's alma mater) for exceptional high school students. On her first night, Bree witnesses an attack by a demon, which brings her into contact with Selwyn Emrys Kane, a mage only slightly older than her, whom she later learns is a "Merlin". He attempts to wipe her memory of the incident, which is not only unsuccessful, but unlocks memories about her mother's death linking her to another "Merlin". At school, Bree is assigned a mentor one year ahead of her named Nick Davis, whom she later learns is not only a member of this secret society, but supposedly the heir of King Arthur himself. (The identity of the true heir is a big plot twist that is revealed late in the book.) At her request, he brings her into the society as a "page", so that she can learn the truth about her mother's death. It also turns out that Bree has magic of her own called "rootcraft" that she inherited from her mother. Both forms of magic use the same sources, but "aether" was developed in 5th Century Wales, while "root" was brought over from Africa by slaves. This is a very fast-paced novel, the first in a trilogy, that is hard to put down, and Nick, Selwyn, and Bree make for a very compelling love triangle. My only criticisms are that the plot depends heavily on coincidences and that there a lot of characters to keep track of.

Martians Abroad by Carrie Vaughn  
Review by Sam Lubell  
<http://N3F.org>

Martians Abroad by Carrie Vaughn is an interesting homage to Heinlein's Podkayne of Mars crossed with a Young Adult boarding school book. The result is YA science fiction novel with a few interesting characters, but a rather thin plot. I admit I spent much of the novel wondering if the links to Podkayne

were just a coincidence, as the plots and setting are completely different, until I reached the end which is too similar to be anything but intentional.

The viewpoint character, Polly Newton, and her genius brother Charles are sent by their mother to go to the very exclusive Galileo Academy on Earth. Polly, who wants to become a starship pilot, thinks that Earth is "old, grubby, crowded, archaic, backward, stifling", so regards this as a disaster.

Once on Earth, Polly is constantly getting into trouble for not following directions, trying to get on the bridge of the spaceship, ride a motorcycle, or sneak out of a field trip to see the city for herself (and touch a horse) rather than just view museum exhibits. The Earth students look down on the handful from off-world, who admittedly need time to adjust to Earth's gravity and know little about Earth history. There are some typical school story tropes -- the mean girls, dating issues, the handsome guy who invites Polly to dance only to embarrass her. Polly is constantly homesick and feels out of place (naturally, her brother takes to everything quickly and easily).

But when something goes wrong, a classmate gets kidnapped or an avalanche leaves another classmate clinging to a ledge, Polly's the one who immediately takes action. Strangely, this tendency becomes increasingly necessary as something goes wrong on every single one of the Academy's field trips. Even the Earth students grow suspicious.

For adult readers, much of the fun of the book is catching allusions to Podkayne of Mars which has its main character Podkayne Fries, Poddy to her friends, and her genius brother Clark, on a voyage to Earth (admittedly they never get there). Charles leaves notes for his sister, just as Clark does. And, as previously mentioned, the endings are very similar even though the two books get there in very different ways. Fortunately, *Martians Abroad* does not have the sexism that *Podkayne of Mars* displays. Still, it would be interesting to give a teenager both books and see which one they like better.

Carrie Vaughn is best known for her Kitty books, a contemporary fantasy series about a werewolf talk show host. She has also written a couple of superhero novels-- *After the Golden Age* and *Dreams of the Golden Age*--which might also qualify as Young Adult.

Essentially, *Martians Abroad* is a boarding school book set in the future. Both Polly and Charles are interesting characters and the book reads very quickly. The book would be a good fit for teenage girls looking for YA science fiction with strong female characters

**Mistborn Trilogy: The Final Empire, The Well of Ascension,  
and The Hero of Ages by Brandon Sanderson  
Review by Igor Koyfman**

This series of three books published by Tor in 2006-2008 should've been amazing: Solid world building and a tight plot with unbelievable twists. It was a page turner despite numerous problems. It really was.

Reading the Stormlight Archive series now, it's easy to see how Sanderson grew as a writer. The Mistborn trilogy should've been one book. Almost every point we learn from the story is repeated many times over, while relationships are mostly only sketched.

It's mostly "tell" instead of "show."

A feudal racially divided society with precious little magic found only among the superior race is a very interesting concept (because race is of course a construct that falls apart upon close examination).



The magic is fueled by certain metals ingested for the benefit of the magic user's temporary physical or mental boost. While superhuman, the magic users can't do anything on a scale, it only enhances their personal interactions. Mostly the ability to kill someone nearby. Or temporarily influence small groups toward doing something they want.

A crew of revolutionaries led by an arrogant blowhard plot to overthrow the system and free the serfs, but things are far from straightforward. The mind-boggling plot is the main feature of this series.

The biggest problem is the absolutely sterile relationship between two main magical characters, a street urchin named Vin and the scholarly nobleman Elend. I could really feel something only at one point, when Vin went on a murderous rampage. Otherwise, we're just supposed to accept the author's word that they care at all. In that sense, the second book, *The Final Empire*, was the best, showing Vin's inner turmoil, yet as far as action it was also the worst, very slow and lecturing.

The first book, *The Final Empire*, was the most developed, but it suffered from really stilted dialog. The writing reminded me of *Eragon*, like it was written by a teenager with some really good ideas but insufficient experience to put them on paper. Other than the quality of writing, which improved somewhat toward the end, it had a good plot and decent character development. We got to know the crew, pretty much all the main characters in the series. And no, not all of them survive until the end. It's not a safe series, and that's one of the good things about it. Yet I'm afraid the dialog never improved all that much.

The last book, *The Hero of Ages*, was a clever buildup to an emotional anticlimax. I was surprised by the twists but I didn't feel an emotional connection to the characters. Well, except for the villains; those were easy to hate. They're just so smug. Every chapter started with an infodump in its purest form, literally the author's notes about worldbuilding, which a better writer would've shown through the plot and character development.

Therefore, I'm torn. I appreciate all the cleverness, and yet that's only half the reason to read. I want great characters I can connect to and there was a scarcity of emotion here. Character motivations were explained in a detached way, and action scenes didn't save the day. The fights sounded all the same, with an unnecessary blow-by-blow recounting of each magic metal's properties, over and over again.

And there was another level of inconsistency. Considering that magic users are extremely powerful, I find it unbelievable that all the leaders in this world were men. I just don't see how a man with a sword can dominate a woman who, with a small mental effort, can pull the sword out of his hands, turn it around, and send it flying back at him. A society where women have a natural power just couldn't be so patriarchal.

Finally, the book is just too preachy, in the most annoying Christian sense. Sanderson can't just let the story flow, it has to relate to The Bible or something. One character spends the entire third book finding issues with various religions, rejecting all as too primitive and proselytizing one true religion.

And I seriously dislike the fictional universe, the Cosmere. All of Sanderson's books would've been much better without forcing them into his personal *Silmarillion*, with not-so-secret Easter eggs sticking out like splinters.



Non-Stop by Brian Aldiss  
Review by Heath Row  
<http://N3F.org>

Originally published in 1958, *Non-Stop* is Brian Aldiss's first novel. And it's a doozy, fresh out of the starting gate, brilliant from the very first page. But beware this review: Here there be spoilers. If you're tempted to stop reading this review: Read this book!

Set on a multi-level—more than 80 decks—spaceship, the novel considers what might happen if human society were to devolve on a generation ship. The original crew embarked on a journey that took seven generations to reach the planet Procyon. Something went awry on the return trip to Earth, which was expected to take another seven generations.

Instead, the ship has now been enroute for more than 20 generations, and the civilization and society onboard has fractured and devolved. There are multiple warring tribes of mostly wild humans eking out an existence among the "Ponics" that have overgrown the ship. There are the more civilized and organized Forwards that exist elsewhere. The two groups join as a group of near-savages—a handful of more intelligent wild men in search of the captain of the vessel once they realize it's a ship, not a world—align with the Forwards.

Together, they face a race of Giants, mysterious figures who only show up occasionally, and mutated animals—rats and rabbits, primarily—some of which exhibit extrasensory powers. The groups subscribe to a convoluted religion that emerged out of psychoanalysis and Freudianism—resulting in some interesting homilies and fragments of scripture. They discover unimaginable technology, and when they realize the actual state and location of the ship—and its inhabitants, it's quite a surprise.

I usually don't share so many spoilers in my reviews, and the book unfolds so the reader doesn't know any of the above until the appropriate time to reveal the information. You learn as the protagonist learns. But I've left enough unsaid that even if you read this whole review, you should still enjoy the book. I haven't read a ton of generation ship stories or novels, but this is by far the best—and it was written more than 60 years ago. As a first novel, it's a delight and a surprise, indicating what else Aldiss could do over time as he developed as a writer.

The edition I read was an ebook of the 2000 S.F. Masterworks printing, which incorporated later minor revisions by the author. In 2008, the novel retroactively received the British Science Fiction Association Award for best novel of 1958. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #34.)

On Basilisk Station by David Weber  
Review by Jim McCoy  
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

(Before I even get started: I am a huge fan of this writer and this series. I am, in fact, a member of The Royal Manticoran Navy, the fan club of all things set in the Honor Harrington universe. My recent re-read of this book was because I had joined the TRMN and gotten nostalgic. You may find yourself questioning my objectivity while writing this review. I assure that your suspicions are well founded. Then again, if it wasn't a good book, would I really be a fan?)

Once upon a time I worked at a Super K-Mart in Warren, Michigan. There I had a friend who WOULD NOT STOP telling me what an awesome author this David Weber guy was and how I ABSOLUTELY, POSITELY had to read his Honor Harrington books. Like, since I was a science fiction fan, I had no choice whatsoever. He pretty much redefined the phrase "overenthusiastic pain in the neck." The thing was we had zero authors that we read in common and I was skeptical. I did my best to ignore him.

Then one day I found myself at the mall (Oakland, if you're local) with my then-girlfriend (now ex-wife) and she decided to detour into a shoe store. Being me I gave the battlecry of all real men who refuse to be mistreated in such a way (Uhh... Honey? I think maybe I'll head over to the bookstore. If... That's okay?) And trudged off in search of a good time and aiming to misbehave.

I then checked over the work of my favorite authors at the time and found zero new books by them. I had narrowly avoided the hell of the shoe store in vain. I was going to die of boredom anyway. But then I remembered that I had to look at my friend the next time I went to work and figured I might as well pick up one of those Harrington novels. Only, uhh.. Which one was the first one again? I had no clue. I'm not too sure he had mentioned it.

So I walked up to one of the cashiers and asked her if she knew what the first book was. She got excited. "Oh, my dad and my brother both love those books. The first one is On Basilisk Station and it's right over here." She actually took me by the hand and led me to the book. That makes twice that a woman has done that. The other time was when I first found out that The Lord of the Rings existed. (I was the only geek in my house. These things happen.) So, yeah, I bought the book and took it home. That was a damn good decision.

On Basilisk Station is the kind of book Space Opera fans spend their entire lives looking for. It's that good. Our main character, Honor Harrington takes command of her first cruiser (she had commanded a destroyer "off screen" previously) and is as excited as all get-out. Things, however, don't go as planned initially and well...

Life gets interesting, in the sense of the ancient Chinese curse. This is Honor Harrington though. She could lay down and die but she doesn't. Seriously, reading Honor was good prep for my eventual divorce because I could use those books to remind myself that no matter how much life sucks it's possible to keep on keeping on. This is just the first lesson but it's a good one.

As things start going wrong, we not only get to see how Honor reacts to it, but we get to see how her subordinates react as well. Making a crew run right isn't always easy and it's harder when things start to suck. Honor gets that, Weber gets that and On Basilisk Station centers around those conflicts. Don't get me wrong. There is violence galore and ugly doesn't begin to describe some of it, but at the end of the day this is a book about people. To me, that's what separates a great work from a merely good one.

Listen, Star Trek in all its iterations (except possibly ST:DISC which I haven't watched because I don't have CBS All Access) contains a large amount of Social Justice, but it's not a Social Justice show. It's a show about people and the liberal parts of the agenda come through story and not sermonizing. The History Channel show Mail Call was awesome, and it was, in theory about questions regarding the military but it was really about R. Lee Ermey (RIP Gunny) and the people he was working with. Yes, SF in particular and especially Space Opera features cool widgets and big ships and lots of traveling, but dammit it's the people who make it fun. Weber gets that.

And, of course, not everyone is a hero. I can think of one particular character in *On Basilisk Station* that I would dearly love to strangle. Believe me when I say that there is no more deserving person. Fortunately, he's fictional and so I won't end up in jail, but that dude irritates me.

Of course a good story is more than just a conversation between two people and Weber gets that too. *On Basilisk Station* never stops moving. It starts with a promotion and a blow-up and finishes with a bang. There are no boring moments here. This thing never drags. It never lets up. It's freaking captivating. I sat down yesterday to read a couple chapters before I jumped in the shower and ended up reading over four hundred pages and finishing the book and oh, by the way, I knew how it ended. Thankfully, I'm a Lyft driver so I didn't get myself in trouble for starting late.

I have no complaints about *On Basilisk Station*. One that I have frequently heard, though, is that Honor is too good at too much, but I'm not sure that's the case. She's simply a quick-thinking woman who gets stuck in bad situations and has to find her way out somehow. What some see as competence, I see as refusal to fail. Feel free to disagree if you must, but I call 'em as I see 'em.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Energy Lances (even though they're non-canon now)

### Paladin's Grace by T. Kingfisher Review by Igor Koyfman

T. Kingfisher writes romance novels, except they are also outstanding high fantasy. They are set in the world of the White Rat, who is a god of social services and jurisprudence. The priests of the White Rat are basically lawyers and social workers.

The world is divided between kingdoms, city states, and other political entities that are constantly at competition if not outright war with each other. The wonder engines, magical machines left behind by the ancients, are mysterious and powerful artifacts. One of the city states learns to control a wonder engine and starts a war, and the resolution of that story involves the first two books, *Clockwork Boys* and *The Wonder Engine*. The White Rat only gets a passing mention there.

The third book, *Swordheart*, is set in the same world but is about a different kind of ancient magic. The Temple of the White Rat plays a prominent role in this story involving a legal fight over inheritance and a rare cursed sword.

*Paladin's Grace*, published by Argyll in 2020, happens a few years later, in the aftermath of the war. Among the multitude of gods, there is one called the Saint of Steel, the patron god of berserkers. When there was serious fighting to be done, or a demon needed to be exorcized from cattle, the Saint used to take over his paladins and direct them in the course of divine justice. Then, one day, the god died. The paladins went berserk but no longer under divine guidance. They had to be subdued, and when they came to, they lost all will to live. Who would take a bunch of brooding depressed potential berserkers? The Temple of the White Rat, of course.

This book is delicious, like eating your favorite dish and savoring every bite. It's set in one of the city states full of religious orders, paladins, spies, and dark magic. Stephen is a paladin of a dead god. Not ritually dead, but dead and gone. There is a huge emptiness inside him. All the paladins of the Saint are afraid of going berserk and committing mass murder, and that guides their cautious lives. Grace is a perfumer of great skill but without a license. She barely escapes the inquisition by running into Stephen

one day and begging him to hide her. As attraction between these older, experienced, flawed humans grows, so do their complications. The main plot revolves around the visit by a foreign king and attempts on his life, but there is another major plot about a serial killer in the city. The characters are really fleshed out, the world building is top notch, and the writing is amazing. It all just works, perfectly.

The next two books continue the theme of self-flagellating, frustrating paladins, who have to always ruin their relationships due to nagging self-doubt and displaced sense of honor. Paladin's Strength is a quest through several kingdoms that resolves the story of the serial killer, and Paladin's Hope returns to the wonder engines and digs deeper into the mystery of the Saint of Steel.

There is also a sequel to Swordheart expected, so there are two ongoing series set in the world of the White Rat. I will reiterate that they are all essentially romance novels with some fairly explicit content, yet set in a fantasy world, full of humor, high adventure and beautiful language.

**The Renegade Star Series by J. N. Chaney**  
**Review by JR Handley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

### Story

They say the Earth is just a myth. Something to tell your children when you put them to sleep, the lost home world of humanity. Everyone knows it isn't real, though. It can't be. But when Captain Jace Hughes encounters a nun with a mysterious piece of cargo and a bold secret, he soon discovers that everything he thought he knew about Earth is wrong. So very, very wrong.

Like most of the space opera and military fiction I love to read, this was an action-packed series. It had me hooked, and I didn't remember that I was supposed to be writing book reviews until the series was finished! The overarching arc was about a crew who were on the run from the government and were looking into the secrets of the universe. A sort of origin story for a post-Terra galaxy where Earth is a myth, something from the time of legend. Except, what if it was real?

The series had a Da Vinci Code vibe to it, set in space! This was all expertly done in a way that was easy to follow. It never really lagged for me; the adventure was non-stop but with enough lulls in the fun for the reader to catch their breath. I was able to suspend my disbelief and buy into the entirety of the premise, so I'd call that a win for JN Chaney. Overall, the premise was interesting, and the set-up was well executed. I couldn't ask for anything more; an excellent premise, perfect execution, and fantastic pacing! The series shined brighter than a nova, and the premise was everything you didn't know you always wanted.

This series had just enough visualization to get the job done, enough that you could imagine yourself in this world. Except if you wanted to know what the characters looked like. What he did describe, JN Chaney hit the entirety of the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells, and even how the world felt. Except, there wasn't enough for me. Again, I know that there's a trend where less is more for descriptions, and I hate it. For me, this is one place where I felt let down and why this series.

### Characters

This series of novels had four main characters, with so many secondary characters that I got dizzy from the constant breeze of them exiting stage right. But I really liked the secondary characters, so it was like a cool draft on a sweltering day. The main characters, however, were entertaining enough to make it

worth the hassle; Captain Jace Hughes, Abigail Prior, Lex and Sigmund "Ziggy" the AI for the Renegade Star. Like most novels with multiple POVs, each one served a unique purpose in the evolution of the plot. Each of these characters was well written, and you could feel enough depth to make them believable.

Captain Jace Hughes: He's a renegade pirate, operating in the Dead Lands who takes odd jobs that aren't strictly legal. He does have his standards, operating in a sort of grey area of the law in a lawless land. He was a likable enough man, though his constant slurping on hard candy in the audio format got a bit annoying. It felt overdone, though this was more to do with how the narrator developed his persona. After the 3rd book, it blended into the background. In all fairness, this could be my own personal tic. I really enjoyed watching his character grow from a loner rogue into the sort of man you'd want on your side in a pinch. He wasn't a perfect character, even in the last book, but he was believable! Overall, he's the kind of guy you'd drink a beer with. He was a well-rounded character who was sympathetic and believable, precisely what you'd expect from a beloved main character.

Abigail Prior: She's a secretive nun from an obscure religious order, The Church of the Homeland. She was a mix between a lovable maternal assassin and a devoted Zen monk, which made her a lot of fun to read. She was an easy woman to like, though I suspect that to be done by design. She served to balance out the rough edges of Jace, and she did it well. She was also mothered Lex, the albino girl with the strange tattoos. In the time before book one started, Abigail went on the mission into a secure Union military research facility, and even hearing about her exploits second hand, you know she's a badass. I dig that about her. Overall, I found her to be a lovable and believable character. She was well rounded with a fleshed-out back story that we learn as the series progresses.

Lex: She is an albino girl with strange tattoos and an even more unusual and mysterious past. We learn more about her as the series unfolds. Still, she was everything you'd expect in a character who's probably only ten years old. I don't remember if they said her exact age so that I could be off by a year or two either way. She was definitely more girl than woman. As the series progresses, we watch her grow up and learn more about her, but I can't say more without spoilers. Overall, she's easily one of my favorite characters and was well written.

Sigmund, aka "Ziggy": He's the AI for the Renegade Star, the ship that gave this series its name and where most of the action takes place. He's the sort of character who's full of sass, all piss, and vinegar... if it was dipped in a coat of droll British humor. I really liked reading about this character, he was seriously a lot of fun. Because he was an AI, there wasn't a lot of character growth, allowing him to serve as an anchor to keep you grounded among the other characters who go on a wild ride of growth and development.

## The World

This is one area where I have mixed feelings. I think that JN Chaney created a world that was a lot of fun, with hints at depth, but I was constantly frustrated because there was so much left unexplored. That said, his universe felt real, and it was so gripping that I dove in. This series had a consistent canon that made sense and sucked you in.

As an example, we always heard about the blaster that the main character, Jace Hughes, carried. However, we were never really told what it looked like. I know this is a modern trend, however, it is one I do not like. For all, I know his blaster looks like a banana and shot protoplasm out both ends. I realize that's ridiculous on its face, but I'm a details guy who likes hearing about all of the intricacies of the world. Obviously, you could do too much of this, but I really like it when those details are there.

On a positive note, I never felt like I was missing critical bits of information, though I do feel like this is a universe where there's room to expand and flush out the canon. I wanted more. More books, more characters, and more details. Over all, the world-building was done well, and I was sold on the way it happened. What was there felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe the author created. It was a fun ride, which is the goal of action/adventure authors! For me, this is one place where I felt let down and why this series was rated as a 4 instead of 5 grenade series.

#### Narration:

I've exclusively read this series as an audiobook. This series was narrated by Luke Daniel, which was a little strange for me because he'll always be the voice of The Ember Wars Series by Richard Fox. However, I quickly overcame that eerie feeling that you get when the universe cracks open, and your favorite star appears in the wrong sitcom. Once I dug into the series, I was able to forget Luke's past affiliations with other universes. This performance was equally as amazing as his others, Luke is a consummate professional. He's one of the "why hasn't he won more awards" kind of performer! The narration was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did good! His audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about. Well, except for the slurping sound of Jace sucking on the hard candies. It was a character tic in the main character, but it did get a little annoying. This could just be my idiosyncrasies; it might not bug you. Regardless, it was enough to be annoying, but not so much that I turned the book off. Most importantly, he didn't commit the Cardinal Sin, which is my only real requirement; he didn't sound like a robot, he didn't bore me, and he didn't use accents that annoy the bejeezus out of me! Overall, I give him 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

I loved this audiobook. Luke Daniels gave one of his trademarked top-notch performances. My only complaint in this arena was the way the main character socked on hard candy. However, this was more about the author's characterization and how it translated to audiobooks, but it was about Luke's performance. However, if especially noticeable in the morning and audiobook format. Despite that one minor complaint, this audiobook was a rollicking good adventure! Seriously, if you weren't already hooked on Luke, this book would get you there! This was one of the many areas where this series really shined for me.

#### Content Warning

This book contains action, cussing, and general badassery. Read at your own risk.

#### Who is it for?

Climb aboard The Renegade Star and assemble a crew, follow the clues, uncover the truth, and, most importantly, try to stay alive. Experience the sprawling galactic tale in The Renegade Star series. If you're a fan of Firefly, Battlestar Galactica, or Indiana Jones, you'll love this epic, space opera thrill ride.

#### Overall:

Okay, let's get into the weeds on this one! I've organized my overall assessment by putting the stuff I didn't like first so we can end on a high note. I also want to be clear that I really loved this series overall, it's why I plowed through the audiobooks so quickly that I had to write a series review instead of an individual one for each of the six novels that make up The Renegade Star Series.



Alright, let's rip off the band-aid and dive in. There were many parts that I wasn't thrilled with in this series. First, the lack of details about the world was disheartening. I'm a guy who prefers all of the details, and I wasn't given that in this series. This is a different type of book than I usually read, more pulp than anything, so some of that can generally be addressed by the fact that I'm not his ideal audience. However, I wouldn't be fair if I didn't mention that this was something I didn't particularly like.

Another issue with the books was the profanity. I'm aware that the books' description includes a warning about the crude language. That normally bothers me, however, when you're hooked on the fast-paced story, you want to listen every chance you get. I couldn't do that if my kids were around, so this is more of an annoyance than anything because I went in with eyes wide open. Again, it wasn't the profanity itself so much as the way that limited my ability to listen to the audiobooks. Luckily, this book is in the Kindle Unlimited program, and you can read it for free if you hit a patch where your rug rats won't give you room to breathe.

I chose this book because the covers and the premise sounded entertaining, and I wasn't disappointed. However, this book was very much a pulp novel and didn't give me a lot to sink my teeth into. As many of you know, I'm the kind of reader that wants all the details in the novels I read. Some of this is just my own oddities, but I really like the little descriptions of the world that flush it out for me. I don't just want to know that the character fired a blaster, I want the make and model. Again, some of this is just my preference, so this lack of detail was annoying, but not so much that I couldn't keep reading because I obviously blazed through the series.

Another minor announcement I had was the lack of proper naval terminology. The main character calls the bulkheads walls and calls the decks a floor. I grew up in a Navy town, so hearing vessels using proper terminology always catches my attention. However, these traditions could change in the future, so this is really just nitpicking for the sake of my review.

My one major complaint about the story, aside from like details, was the character's lack of reaction to killing. I've been in situations where you were required in someone else's life, thank you Iraq, and there is always an emotional response to the action. I did not feel like the main character, Jace Hughes, ever felt remorse for the people he killed. It was just the thing he did, and then he's callously shrugged it off. As a combat veteran, this bugs me, but I'm sure most readers would never notice this.

Alright, now let's talk about the happy things! One of the things that I liked about the series was the way characters grew as the story developed across the 16 novels. This is an area where the author grew as a creator, and it showed. I can't really say anything else about the specific category because that would give spoilers, but trust me, it's worth waiting for the big reveal later in the series.

What did shine was the amazing premise of this book series. This definitely hit on all of the tropes that I love about science fiction, but not in a way that felt derivative. He carried it out in a way that somehow became uniquely his own thing. I found shades of the short-lived *Firefly* television show and the anime *Outlaw Star* that inspired it. There was also a *Star Wars* meets *Indiana Jones* element to this series, which kept you glued to the edge of your seat, waiting to see what happens next. Oh, and some of the reviewers called the series a mash-up of *Andromeda* and *Battlestar Galactica*. I agreed with them, though I didn't see it at first. Once I read the review, the comparison was obvious!

If I haven't said it enough, I REALLY loved the basic premise of this series. The concept of a grand adventure, trying to solve the mysteries of the universe, struck the right chord for me. It was very much. The *Da Vinci Code* in space, which I really liked. The fact that it was written in first person made you

much more connected to the adventure, which I really appreciated. All of this combined, and you end up with a series of books that are a lot of fun to read. Seriously, it's pulpy popcorn comfort food. Except you won't regret eating it, because it's calorie-free.

One of the overarching themes of the series that I enjoyed was the classic story of good versus evil. This was your typical David versus Goliath story except you had blaster instead of slingshots. While the main character wasn't quite the everyman, he was close enough that you ended up rooting for him and cheering as the bad guys get taken down a peg or two. There's a Union officer whose face you want to smash in, but luckily Jace wants to do the same thing, and so you get a vicarious thrill of living for him. Isn't that why we read fiction in the first place?

Oh, and I really loved the way Chaney explained his science of faster than light travel (FTL). It had just the right amount of handwavium to keep me happy. Because of the structure of the story, he never felt let down by the lack of a more detailed explanation of how the science works. Instead, you have a character who doesn't know and so can't tell you. This is one of the beauties of the first-person narration done right!

Finally, I thoroughly enjoyed the more direct language that the author chose to use. It had a very Tom Clancy-esq vibe with simple words that avoided the tendency towards a pretentious use of big words, whether they were needed or not. It made it possible for Luke Daniels to give the stellar performance that he did with his narration, which I obviously loved. I know this style of writing isn't for everyone, but it was something that I thoroughly enjoyed.

I wish I could gush more about the series, but I can't think of ways to do this justice without giving spoilers. So... have I hinted that I enjoyed this universe yet? Good, I want it to be obvious! So, to wrap this bad boy up, I loved this series. Each one of these novels was at least 75,000 words long, about what you expect from the genre. Despite the length, each book felt like a quick read. If you didn't know how long each novel was, you could almost imagine them as short stories. This is because they were so engrossing that the reader loses track of time while they temporarily live in the story. The author definitely made me want more from this universe, and I'll definitely be reading the follow-on series that are already available.

## Conclusion

I was hooked from the first page/minute! JN Chaney wove the action into this fun space opera romp that made me lose track of time. Basically, he had me hooked from the beginning and kept it going throughout the whole series. These are books that I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. While I don't see myself diving more into the pulp side of the house, I don't regret swimming in this pool of awesomesauce! Buy these novels! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money! I give these books a 4 out of 5 grenades!

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out! You won't regret it!

**Rite of Passage by Alexei Panshin**  
**Review by Perry Middlemiss**

This 1968 novel won the 1969 Nebula Award for Best Novel and was a finalist for the 1969 Hugo Award. In the year 2198, Earth has been abandoned and humanity now exists on a number of colonized planets, and on a number of large spaceships, carved out of asteroids that travel the galaxy and act as the last bastion of human knowledge.

In order for young people on the spaceships to become fully accepted as adults, they each must spend 30 days alone on one of the colonized planets to complete their “rite of passage” otherwise known as the Trial. The narrator here is Mia Haverø, who tells the story of her experiences on ship leading up to the Trial, and her time in the Trial itself, in a flashback some five years after the event.

Although not marketed as such, this novel would now be placed in the Young Adult category. It is hard to understand how it won the Nebula Award. It is competent but nothing outstanding. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine *Perryscope* #26.)

**The Rosetta Mind by Claire McCague**  
**Reviewed by Robert Runté**  
<http://SFeditor.ca>

Before reviewing Book 2, allow me a paragraph or two about Book 1: *The Rosetta Man*. I managed to miss it entirely when it first came out, but was later fortunate to catch McCague giving a reading. I was so impressed, I bought and downloaded the novel within the first five minutes of her reading the opening.

*The Rosetta Man* is among the cleverest, most riveting first-contact adventures ever. The aliens are intriguingly alien, the hero is neurodiverse, and the cast of dozens are all wonderfully at odds with each other on how to respond to the alien’s arrival. McCague casually destroys first-contact clichés by having the aliens land in a park in Wellington, New Zealand, rather than on the White House lawn; our protagonist is an unassuming Canadian reluctantly caught up in events, rather than the typical American alpha-male winning his way to goals of his choosing; and there are no flying saucers, Gort-like robots, or drooling monsters. McCague’s real genius, however, is using the theatre of the absurd to create an edge-of-the-seat spy-thriller/end-of-days actioner. I cannot recommend *The Rosetta Man* strongly enough: more fun than any Marvel blockbuster.

Anyone who read *The Rosetta Man* probably had *The Rosetta Mind* on pre-order, because they need to find out what happens next. If you haven’t already read *The Rosetta Man*, though, you should probably hold off until you have. Some sequels can stand on their own, but in this instance, without Book 1, Book 2 would simply be . . . incomprehensible.

Not that McCague doesn’t attempt to ease the reader into the situation—nice try with the prologue—but there are way too many characters to sort out, and even if one could, knowing what happened previously isn’t remotely helpful. It’s not the knowing, but the believing that’s at issue. The only way a reader could accept where Book 2 starts is to have followed McCague’s meticulously taking the reader, step by logical step, through the sequence of events that leads, as if inevitably, to the ridiculous situation in which our hero now finds himself. The Governor General of Canada negotiating with a tree full of cuttlefish? A ghost in the living room? That’s the sort of nonsense up with which a discerning reader would not put.

Unless they read Book 1, in which case, yeah, of course, should have seen that coming.

Book 2, *The Rosetta Mind*, is in no way a disappointment—but it’s entirely different in structure and content from Book 1. There’s no running about in Book 2; everything takes place in the hero’s prairie home (albeit, now occupied by aliens in the upstairs cupboard). Instead, the two dozen characters from the first book, along with half a dozen new ones like the Governor General, stand around discussing science, philosophy, and options.

I can't decide if the science is cutting edge, scientific speculation, or if McCague is just making shit up. Take for example this exposition on the nature of diamonds used in the alien micro-fusion generators:

"Diamonds have exquisite properties," he said. "They have a near-magical role in quantum technology. They are used in magnetic sensors—the kind that can read the signal from a single neuron. Complete transparency across visible wavelengths. Extremely high thermal conductivity. Low thermal expansion. Extreme radiation hardness. High melting point which increases under pressure. Density that increases when it melts."

"And we use them for rings and pretty things," Troughton said.

"Because they are magical," Sanford answered.

Okay, is that true? Did we just learn something about diamonds? I mean, McCague is an actual materials engineering, nanotech, sustainable power source scientist—so, yes? But there are dozens of pages of this sort of exposition, at least some of which must be pure alien fantasy.

Weirdly, McCague's talking heads sequences all work, as do the equally complicated philosophical explorations of how the unique environments of different lifeforms leads to divergent understandings of the meaning, purpose, and ethics of life. Weirder still are the frequent telepathic dream sequences, which you would think would be hopelessly tedious, but really aren't.

And there's still the underlying tension over who should get access to the aliens and who must not, and does anyone really trust the Canadians to be fully transparent and not to hold some advantages back?

However absurd any of it gets, McCague makes every character, their motivations and actions, entirely believable. The Governor General isn't some off-the-shelf stereotype, she's exactly who we need for the next GG—a recognizable real person to any Canadian or ballet enthusiast. Our hero isn't some Hollywood leading man but more the cat lady from down the block. You've met all these people, and you completely get why they're doing what they're doing. You haven't met the aliens or the cuttlefish before, but it's good to be open to new things.

So, maybe don't read this more philosophical book before Book 1—but there is nothing stopping you from buying it now, so it's to hand when you finish *The Rosetta Man*.

### **She Who Became the Sun by Shelley Parker-Chan** **Review by Perry Middlemiss**

This 2021 fantasy novel was a finalist for the 2022 Best Novel Hugo Award. It seems an odd occurrence that this debut novel by Shelley Parker-Chan is the first Australian sf or fantasy novel to have appeared on the final ballot for a Best Novel Hugo Award. Of Australian authors such as George Turner, Lee Harding, Margo Lanagan, Greg Egan, Garth Nix, and K. J. Bishop—just to name a few—none of them have achieved the feat. So, in the history of the genre in this country, this is an important novel. If it was uninteresting or poorly written, then this might have made this review difficult to write. Fortunately, it is neither. It is part alternate history and part a queer re-telling of the rise of the Ming Dynasty that reigned over greater China between 1368 and 1644.

The novel starts in the year 1345 when China is ruled by the Mongul-led Yuan dynasty. The country has been severely impacted by a long-running drought and families in the countryside are starving. The Zhu family are struggling to survive, and even the prophecy of a fortune teller that the family's son,

Zhu Chongba, is destined for great things is not enough to stave off the death of the father and the son. The daughter, unnamed, is the only survivor. She decides that her only hope in life is to follow her father's plan for his son. That is, to dedicate herself to the local monastery.

But there is a problem: The monks only accept boys into their ranks. So the girl decides to take on her brother's identity and name; and her destiny and fate are set. The new monk, Zhu Chongba, is both intelligent and ambitious. She has to be to survive in such an environment. But she does more than survive, she thrives. Even when the Mongul army destroys the monastery and everyone in it, she still finds herself alive and with an even stronger resolve—now to take up arms against the rulers and restore China to a kingdom ruled by Chinese.

The novel is told from the point of view of three main characters: Zhu, whom we meet early and who is our central figure; Ouyang, once a slave and companion to the Mongul Emperor's son, who is now a castrated Chinese general fired with a lust for revenge against the Monguls; and Ma Xiuying, who will go on to be Zhu's wife and is one of the few people to know Zhu's secret. Zhu and Ouyang are the two main opposing forces of the book, driving each other into conflict and fueling each other's ambitions, with Ma as the tempering force for good in the middle.

The slow and steady fall of the Mongul dynasty is told through a series of battles—mostly off-stage—internal political maneuverings, and intense emotional relationships. The book is epic in scale and intimate by turns, allowing the reader to fully immerse themselves in the world that Parker-Chan has created.

On the face of this description, you might be wondering why this is even considered a fantasy novel. There isn't any magic system—though the author has noted that her publishers requested she add one—and the only discernible fantastical elements are the physical representation of the Mandate of Heaven—the divine right to rule—as a magical flame of different colors emanating from the chosen ones and the presence of ghosts, which only those with the Mandate can see.

That's enough. Any more and these elements would detrimentally affect the plot and story. But you can't have such fantastical elements within a novel without putting them to some use or effect. The Mandate flame makes an appearance and indicates a direction for the characters to follow; the ghosts will obviously be of much greater significance in the second entry in the series. At least, we can hope so.

I found this an engaging, fast-paced novel that is very well written indeed. I enjoyed it immensely. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #25.)

Somewhither by John C Wright  
Review by Declan Finn  
Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Everyone knows the phrase “down the rabbit hole.” It's an Alice in Wonderland reference, where the main character is in their normal, everyday life one moment, then in someplace utterly insane the next. Reality is utterly, totally, and completely different.

However, the rabbit hole wasn't good enough for John C. Wright's Somewhither. No.

Somewhither needed an inter-dimensional portal that opens up to an invading army, sucking our hero into a realm that makes Wonderland look positively friendly and harmless.

## The Story

Ilya Muromets is going to save the mad scientist's beautiful daughter. With his grandfather's sword girded on, his squirrel gun, and his father's crucifix, Ilya races to save the girl, and, incidentally, the world. This would be odd, but his father is often away on missionary work that involves silver bullets, sacred lances, and black helicopters.

One night, Professor Dreadful sends a warning to Ilya that his Many Worlds theory correct, but that his experiments have opened a door that should have remained closed, and his beautiful daughter, Penny, is in trouble.

I loved this book. It was so delightfully insane, and so marvelously put together. I enjoyed it from the first page. Especially as our hero narrates that this was all for a girl named Penny Dreadful.

.... Yes. He went there. It doesn't even stop there. If you folks think my writing is proof that I'm a smartass, you have got to read Somewhither. And this is just page one. Which includes the line "If you blame the damsel in distress, you are not the hero."

The opening chapters may be a little slow to people who are not nerds. But you're reading a book that's one-part scifi and one-part fantasy. If you are not nerdy enough to enjoy Wright's conversation about the how's and why's (and why not's) of branching timelines and alternate universes, why are you even reading this review?

But this is John C. Wright. He can probably describe paint drying in an entertaining fashion. Especially when he describes one incident with the supercollider as "let's just say over a dozen scientists, staff members, and visitors were electrocuted, microwaved, and Hiroshima'd."

I told you he could make anything entertaining.

And the lovely little dissertations along the way are charming, and so un-PC, it's delightful. There's a conversation on lovely damsels. Or getting two halves of the brain arguing with each other lest they gang up on the hero to stop him from heroics. (The note I made on points like this is "Remember when Peter David was funny? Pepperidge Farm remembers.")

After Ilya falls into another world, and the plot gets off to a running start, one of the running gags throughout the novel involves language. Let's just say that I think that if John C. Wright wrote Lord of the Rings, he would have sentence diagrammed elvish.

Once we get to meet the villains, they are delightfully evil pricks. In a world where astrology is an accurate science, and fate is everything, even some of the men running the evil empire are trapped. It strikes me very much like the Persian empire -- "freedom" wasn't even a word in the language. It's not in this language, either. Neither is "right and wrong." Funny that. They are so unambiguously evil, even the narrator points out

"On principle, I was not helping any group that called itself The Darkest Tower against places called the Great Golden City and Land of Light. That was a no-brainer. I mean, get serious. Suppose you were



from another world and came to ours circa 1940 and you saw an SS officer in his black uniform with the silver skulls on his collar, and he said he wanted to exterminate some folks called The Chosen People from some place called The Holy Land, who would you think the bad guy was?"

Despite how obviously evil the adversaries are, they are not shallow evil. There is a bit reminiscent of Sam and Frodo being shanghaied by orcs -- Ilya is given a tour of The Tower by a creature that even Richard Sharpe would have identified as a Sergeant just by his banter. In it, we get a perfect picture of a Screwtape bureaucracy where Ilya concludes that the empire "is all full of bureaucrats and lawyers? This place is hell."

Also, there is a lot of casual bits of humor scattered throughout. Such as the misattributions ("There is an old saying: if you want peace, prepare for war. I think it is in the Bible or something."). And the little shots scattered throughout this novel are so much fun to behold. There's the "Professor Dreadful" referred to in the blurb, who is a "Harvard trained symbologist" (to which Ilya's father replies, "Amazing what they give degrees in these days.") And the Templars are the good guys. (Dan Brown felt that one.) The bad guys of the piece are from The Dark Tower. And all of the evil sorcerers carry golden compasses (snicker). Some of the warnings of prophecy are right out of Lovecraft. When Ilya hears that someone is a ringbearer, he says, "You mean like at a wedding? Or do you mean like Sam Gamgee carrying Albrecht's ring when it got too heavy for Tom Covenant?"

Even the casual comments about other timelines are entertaining ("Dude, my planet is run by Prussians .... You need paperwork to get permission to go to the outhouse.")

Then there's the bit that compared Fantasy Island to The Tempest. I feel like Wright has a lot of stuff in his head and it's all stacked on top of each other.

And I swear the entire building of the final team is a reference to the X-Men, only interesting and without the angst.

### The Characters

There's even an entire conversation between Ilya and his father ... during which you realize that things aren't all that normal with this family ("Now Ilya, you've known that since you were twelve, when we taught you quantum mechanics." Huh?). The punchline of this conversation ends with one of the most awesome reveals that I've seen in a while, and more or less backhands Stephen Pinker into next Tuesday, casually and easily, in one paragraph.

By the end, our heroes are all very vivid. The team consists of an unkillable killing Machine, a wind manipulator called a "Cloud Walker," a ninja, a Norse Shadow meets Moon Knight, the monster that chased Bugs Bunny and Captain Nemo. And there's at least one reference to Lady Hawk.

Though I'm relatively certain that Wright was going for a D&D campaign given how often he comments on character classes.

### The World

Illya starts in our world, and then the multi-dimensional rabbit hole kicks in, and then we're off to the races. Not only has Wright decided to build one, he's built at least a dozen, but probably more than three dozen.

## The Politics

None. Seriously, none. You'd need to do a lot of mental yoga to twist yourself into being pissy over this book.

## Content Warning

There is a large section where it feels like the book drifts into torture porn. Our hero tries multiple escape attempts and fails horribly. If I didn't know better, I would swear that Wright was a fan of Hellraiser. I recommend skimming those sections.

## Why Read It?

If I were to sum up this book in one phrase, it would be "Anime Narnia." Thus, it would have a ton more action, epic fantasy, and make most of the golden era pulps look slow. Yes, there is a slow part here, but that's mostly a horror element.

Honestly, you should be reading this book already.

## The Space Merchants by Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth

Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

This 1953 novel published by Ballantine was serialized in *Galaxy Science Fiction* between June and August 1952 as "Gravy Planet." It's an absolutely wonderful take on advertising and marketing—written by the former journalist Kornbluth and former advertising professional Pohl—and predates Vance Packard's 1957 nonfiction book *The Hidden Persuaders*, one of the earlier exposes of the motivational research that informs modern marketing.

The book resonates with the more recent humorous novels by Max Barry, including *Syrup* and *Lexicon*, as well as William Gibson's *Blue Ant* books—*Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country*, and *Zero History*—which focus on a near-future marketing agency. But the novel's inclusion of a planned rocket mission to Venus squarely places this in the book's own era. This is old-wave sf that addresses the psychology and sociology behind advertising, marketing, and big business—without losing the trappings of the golden age of sf.

India has become a single manufacturing complex. Government representatives back branded, corporate interests. Subliminal advertising is restricted. Cigarettes are designed for and marketed to children. Companies openly feud with one another. Entertainment media is hypnotic. Regenerated protein is sold as a foodstuff. Southern California was destabilized by H-bomb tests. A little person hired as an astronaut to cut down on the resources needed for spaceflight becomes a celebrity. An underground network of radical political cells—the Consies—fights against the prevailing societal trends. And Schocken Associates—employer of the novel's protagonist—has won the account to market the human migration to settle Venus.

The first part of the book is largely a near-future story of business intrigue, and then the protagonist is press ganged—which makes the novel take a turn to one of mistaken identity, radical political intrigue, and eventually a return to corporate intrigue. The main character changes quite a bit over the course of the book, and the ending is quite satisfying.

It intrigues me that this was published before *The Hidden Persuaders*, and I'm curious whether Gibson has read it. Highly recommended; it's even better than *Alternating Currents*, which was a darn fine book. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #32.)

**Stolen Skies by Tim Powers**

**Review by Sam Lubell**

<http://N3F.org>

Fantasy writer Tim Powers has written time-travelling English professors, pirates, vampires, ghosts, gamblers, and spies. Yet, somehow, he has never written a traditional trilogy (the closest he came is the Fault Line books when he wrote *Earthquake Weather* as a sequel to two previously unrelated books—*Last Call* and *Expiration Date*). Now, with *Stolen Skies*, he has three books following the same characters, a trilogy by any definition, with some of the events in this novel resulting from the adventures in *Alternate Routes* and *Forced Perspectives*.

While Powers does have the reputation of writing strange (but wonderful) secret histories, *Stolen Skies* is as close as he gets to a conventional SF/fantasy novel (possibly even more so than in the previous volumes of this series). It seems only slightly stranger than an episode of the X-Files. This comparison is especially apt since this is Powers' UFO book. But it is a fantasy take on UFO ideas.

*Stolen Skies* begins with Ingrid Castine, who now works for the Office of Naval Intelligence, visiting a secret office in the Pentagon. Castine has spent the last few months working with a team that fakes crop circles and discredits genuine ones. At the most recent crop circle site she uses her echo-vision (acquired in a previous book) to see giant hands and a vaguely humanoid figure. Now, the Pentagon assigns her to help agents identify Sebastian Vickery, with whom she has had adventures in previous books. Vickery has become a UFO chaser. Castine and Agent Rayette Yoneda go to a site in Los Angeles that has a faked flying saucer, but instead of identifying Vickery, Castine warns him to run. That is when real UFOs appear, silver globes that dart across the sky. Castine joins up with Vickery to find out the truth behind these objects, while Yoneda and a former agent of the Soviet Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) give chase, as does Navy Intelligence.

Most of the book is devoted to Castine, Vickery, and friends' efforts to find out what is going on with the UFOs, and their connection to the supernatural, while Navy Intelligence uses both technological and magical methods for tracking them. Meanwhile, Yoneda has to choose a side (as well as whether to turn in the ex-GRU agent that is helping her and who also has echo-vision powers). Gradually Castine and Vickery find out that the creatures from beyond pose a threat to the Earth and it is up to them to save the world again.

Obviously the third book in a trilogy (or possibly a continuing series) is not the place for new readers to start, although Powers does provide occasional references to their past adventures to remind readers who read the previous books a while ago. I do think the publisher, Baen, should have put on the cover that this is book three in a series (only a careful reader will spot this mention in the list of books by Tim Powers). As with the previous volumes in the series, *Stolen Skies* features wonderful descriptions of Southern California, where Powers grew up and still lives. While *Stolen Skies* does resolve everything opened up in this novel, there is certainly room for more adventures of Vickery and Castine.

I thoroughly recommend any and everything by Tim Powers. Still, I think this novel, while very good, falls short of his best books. If you have never read Powers, I suggest starting with *The Anubis Gates* (one of my all-time favorite novels) and read *On Stranger Tide*, *The Stress of Her Regard*, the *Drawing*

of the Dark, and the Fault Line books (Last Call, Expiration Date, and Earthquake Weather). After these you can read the Vickery and Castine Series followed by everything else he has written. Even novels that are not Powers' best are still excellent by the standards of most other writers.

**Swordheart by T. Kingfisher, aka Ursula Vernon**

**Review by Tom Feller**

<http://N3F.org>

In the author's afterword, she mentions that she got the idea for this novel when she announced to her husband that she was tired of Michael Moorcock's Elric. It reminded me that there was a day when I too got fed up with Elric. I just moved on to another author, but she was inspired to write her own novel about a magical sword. It is the first book of a trilogy and the third book of her World of the White Rat series, which finished second in the Best Series category this year in the Hugos.

It begins when a 36 year old childless widow named Halla learns that she is the sole beneficiary of her late Great Uncle (by marriage) Silas's estate because she had been his faithful housekeeper for the last decade. Relatives figuratively come out of the woodwork, lock her up, and make plans for her to marry her late husband's cousin Alver. She finds the situation so unbearable that she considers suicide. The bed room in which she is imprisoned has a sheathed sword mounted above the fireplace, so she takes it down with the intention of using it on herself. However, when she unsheathes it, a warrior named Sarkis appears, and he informs her that he is her servant and bodyguard. With his help, they escape and have a series of adventures before she is able to claim her inheritance. They fall in love, of course. Sarkis had been trapped in the sword by a sorceress for reasons not revealed until almost the end, and they eventually learn that this happened 450 years previously. Since then he has been passed down from owner to owner and taken out only when needed. Uncle Silas, a collector of curiosities, had acquired the sword at some point without learning its true significance.

My favorite character was Zale, a lawyer and priest of the White Rat cult. He is moral, witty, and highly curious about Sarkis and his capabilities. His experiments with Sarkis contain some of the funniest scenes in the book. There is also Bindle, a member of an intelligent badger-like species called gnoles, who drives an ox-cart. He is disdainful of humans on general principle and gets in some good lines. This romantic fantasy is very funny and quite a good page-turner.

**This Broken World by Charles E Gannon**

**Review by Sam Lubell**

<http://N3F.org>

There is a germ of a fascinating novel in This Broken World that only a science fiction author could have written. It's too bad the interesting bits are smothered in what feels like Dungeons and Dragon action scenes (albeit with different character races).

The book's idealistic (and sometime naïve) hero, Druadaen, thinks more like a science fiction character than a fantasy character, questioning the truths of his fantasy aspects of his world. Why was he rejected by all the gods, even the god of mundane justice? How do the Bent, humanlike invaders, continually lose yet rebuild their population so quickly to invade again every decade? How are there fossils in ground that the sages say is only 10 thousand years old? At times the book can get quite philosophical; at one point Druadaen considers and rejects the idea that this is the will of the gods, writing that "peace among the gods and balance in the world depend upon their universal accord to limit the physical exercise of their power."

As a young boy, Druadaen of the Consentium of Dunarra is trained by his parents, who are secretly spies, to answer real-world riddles. He is very observant and can draw correct conclusions from slight evidence. When his mother dies and his father injured, stuck between the living world and the dead one, Dunarra begins serving the Archive. But despite high scores, he cannot achieve his childhood dream of being appointed to the Legion. Instead, he becomes a Courier and later Outrider, still working for the Archive. All of this is essentially backstory, lasting 80 pages, before he goes on a mission to study the Bent, marauding raiders (the book has maps but needs a glossary).

After a tavern brawl, he joins forces with a band of soldiers of fortune/adventurers people of different races and abilities. The band ends up in a cavern system (the author avoids the term dungeons although dragons are named) that is the base of a Bent shaman. There they fight monsters. Gradually, through overheard conversations and prophetic dreams, Druadaen discovers that there is more to his research than his own curiosity.

As the first book in a series, it raises more questions than it answers. Druadaen is obviously more important than he knows. There must be a reason why all the gods rejected him and why important people keep having conversations about him, but this first volume does not answer the issues it raises. This leaves much room for subsequent books to start answering the questions.

Readers who enjoy both science fiction and fantasy will like this mix of scientific attitudes in a fantasy setting. I suspect many fantasy readers will find too much questioning of standard fantasy tropes here. And some readers may find much of the book too slow in spots while other readers may find the reverse, that the action scenes slow down the more philosophical plot. In trying to please both types of readers, Gannon risks producing a hybrid that fails to satisfy either. Still, fans of Gannon's SF may enjoy this book even if they do not normally like fantasy.

The book ends with a major upsetting of Druadaen's status quo and nearly all questions still unanswered. The publisher is calling it a series rather than a trilogy so there is no indication as to how many volumes will appear before we get the full story.

# Literary Criticism

**Dangerous Visions and New Worlds: Radical Science Fiction, 1950 to 1985**

**edited by Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre—**

**Review by Tom Feller**

<http://N3F.org>

The New Wave led by Harlan Ellison and Michael Moorcock changed science fiction back in the Sixties, at least according to this well illustrated critical study consisting of 24 essays. As you would expect, there is a great deal of space devoted to the Dangerous Visions anthologies and New Worlds magazine. The authors consider the “dueling” advertisements in the June 1968 issue of Galaxy that featured lists of science fiction writers supporting and opposing the Vietnam War to be a turning point in the history of science fiction. The subjects of the essays included Judith Merrill, John Wyndham, R.A. Lafferty, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, Ira Levin, J.G. Ballard, Barry Malzberg, Philip K. Dick, James Triptree, Jr., and others. My favorite was an essay contrasting and comparing Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Other subjects included

authors and novels I had never heard of, so there was much that was new to me. Star Trek and Doctor Who are even mentioned. One oversight is that an essay on young adult fiction mentions Andre Norton but does not consider Robert Heinlein. Otherwise, it is a solid contribution to the history of science fiction.

## The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein

by Farah Mendlesohn

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

It may surprise a few of my readers to learn that I don't place much credence in literary criticism, although I have written a piece of lit-crit myself. Critics have a tendency, in my view, to miss the forest for the trees, to indulge in 'presentism' and view the author through a very modern-day lens. This can be infuriating, at times; it is difficult to understand certain works of prose – Romeo and Juliet, for example – without some understanding of the realities of life in Shakespeare's time. And critics also have the habit of over-thinking matters, declaring that the author's decision tell us that the curtains were blue was a reflection of deep-seated depression when, in fact, the author meant to tell us that the curtains were blue!

Farah Mendlesohn, thankfully, has managed to avoid most of those errors.

By any reasonable standard, Robert A. Heinlein has had a massive impact on the science-fiction field, but his works have rarely been given any substantial analysis. Indeed, most modern-day critics have judged Heinlein by our standards and declared him to be sexist, racist, bigoted, etc. Others, in the meantime, have been completely uncritical of Heinlein and his works. He was one of, perhaps the, founding father of our genre and attacking him (particularly as the wokesolds try to drag his name through the mud), feels like treason.

After a brief assessment of Heinlein's life and career, Mendlesohn starts to assess the themes running through Heinlein's works. Heinlein was very focused on the family, but the family one chooses rather than the biological family one has. This spans a range between the happy – and very 50s-typical – Stone Family to the family Lazarus Long built for himself towards the end of Heinlein's career. As Heinlein grew older, he grew more cynical; the Stones are an ideal family, in many ways, but the Farnham Family is an utter disgrace. Curiously, although he is often branded an individualist, Heinlein talks often about the need for social support structures – familial, rather than governmental. Heinlein's heroes are never true loners. They have support from their families and friends.

Mendlesohn is quite adept at recognising the concealed racial markers encoded into Heinlein's text (she spotted several I missed during my own overview), although Heinlein was often quite limited in what he could come out and say. This is a point that Mendlesohn doesn't discuss openly – it is quite possible that Heinlein's early books would have been rejected, outright, if he'd features openly black heroes and black men in positions of power. But he gave himself enough room to deny it, if necessary. One may argue that this was contemptible, but it was a fact of life. Later, Heinlein made it clear that he had created a series of multiracial worlds.

She does, however, point out that most of Heinlein's coloured heroes were still, culturally speaking, Americans. Heinlein's heroes might have been multiracial, but not multicultural. One might accuse Heinlein of a lack of cultural diversity here, particularly in the juveniles, but it should be noted that different cultures are not always better, and it can be hard to empathise with someone from a culture so different to our own that their actions made no sense to us or come across as outright evil. I would not



like someone who married a child-bride, for example, and I think most people would feel the same way. Heinlein's early heroes are Americans because Heinlein saw the American ethos as the best in the world.

Mendlesohn also raises a number of interesting points regarding Heinlein's female characters, both lead characters (Podkayne and Maureen Smith) and secondary characters (Betsy of *The Star Beast*, *Wyoming of Moon*). Some of them – Maureen and Betsy – start their careers as second fiddles, held back – directly or indirectly – by social conventions. They grow and develop as their stories develop – Mendlesohn points out that Maureen was a daughter, then a wife and mother and finally an independent woman ... Maureen couldn't go back to motherhood, when her estranged children re-entered her life. She had outgrown the parental urge. Podkayne, by contrast, was the victim of failed parenting. Her parents were unable to give her the tools she needed for adulthood; nor, for that matter, was she surrounded by women who would aid her. (Duke Farnham, too, was a similar victim.) Indeed, Mendlesohn makes it clear that women within the novels played a major role in restricting other women.

In some ways, however, Mendlesohn is guilty of 'interrogating the text from the wrong perspective'. Heinlein's juveniles were written, first and foremost, for teenage boys – and teenage boys, by and large, are not interested in feminine issues. Heinlein glossed over them because he knew his audience would find it a turn-off. Successful female heroes – women, written by women – who appeal to men do it, in a sense, by turning away from traditional femininity. They are either surrounded by men (Hermione Granger) or exist in male-shaped universes (Paksenarrion). They are rarely involved with female social groups – the only real exception, as far as I can tell, is Mildred Hubble. But her books are written in a manner that allows boys to pretend that she isn't classically feminine. Heinlein did not set out to be all things to all readers – a good thing too, as it is impossible.

This explains, I think, some of the weaker moments in his earlier juveniles. The main character of *Red Planet* shows signs of sexism, as Mendlesohn points out, but his sentiments would not be out of place for a teenage boy (particularly of Heinlein's youth). Heinlein clearly evolved, as similar sentiments expressed within *Tunnel in the Sky* lead to an embarrassing case of foot-in-mouth syndrome. Indeed, Heinlein would intentionally start writing his juveniles for girls as well as boys, but he kept boys as the core audience – a wise move, as girls will often read boy-books but not vice versa.

This has other effects on his writing. Mendlesohn points to problematic moments within the text – the failure of a father to admit, for example, that his daughter is more than just his daughter – but this is caused by the male mindset. Maureen argues, at one point, that men assume that a woman is subordinate until she proves otherwise. It would be more accurate to say that people (men as well as women) are pigeonholed very quickly and, once pigeonholed, have the greatest difficulty in climbing out of the pigeonhole. The male mindset leads to the same problems as female intuition; when it's right, it cannot explain why it is right, when it's wrong, it finds it hard to truly believe it's wrong. Heinlein depicted this process quite accurately – and, in other books, argued that the only true way to counter it is to give the wrong person room to retreat. This does, of course, require a sensitivity that few people are encouraged to develop.

Her comments on racism within Heinlein's works, including *Sixth Column* and Farnham's *Freehold*, are interesting. Heinlein did not depict the Pan-Asians of *Sixth Column* very kindly, it is true, but the atrocities they committed are very pitiful shadows of the atrocities committed by Imperial Japan. To challenge Heinlein on this requires a certain willingness to ignore real-life atrocities (by 1941, it was clear that the Japanese were not being 'decent' in China) and Mendlesohn, to her credit, largely avoids it. She does point out that the 'killing rays' of the Sixth Column kill Asian-Americans as well as Pan-

Asians, but this is an unfortunate – and logical – effect. The ray could not tell the difference between two different groups of Asians.

Mendlesohn also raises a number of points concerning Farnham's *Freehold* – and concludes that the book is racist. This is a commonly-held belief, but it isn't one I share. Mendlesohn suggests that Farnham's *Freehold* is an 'if this goes on ...' book; I see it, instead, as a 'flipping' book. Hugh Farnham and his family – a deeply-flawed group of people, as becomes clear on the second read – start in a position of 'white supremacy.' They then go through a short period of 'equality,' followed by 'black supremacy' and ending with the 'aftermath.' In doing so, they are shown – time and time again – what it is like to be on the opposite end of the scale. The book pulls no punches – every time Hugh starts to think that maybe life as a slave won't be so bad, it pulls a rejoinder of 'OH YES IT WILL!'

There is room for an entire essay here – In Defence of Farnham's *Freehold*, perhaps – so I'll content myself with a handful of points. Heinlein, throughout his work, identified two different kinds of slave-owner – the thug, who treats his slaves as mere possessions, and the paternalist who tells himself that slavery is for the slave's own good. When Farnham's *Freehold* opens, it becomes clear that Hugh is a paternalist-type, while Duke – his son – is a thug. Their roles are so embedded within their personalities that neither of them really adapts to the period of equality. Worse, when they enter the period of black supremacy, they find themselves at the mercy of another paternalist-thug duo. They are to be denied everything, from freedom itself to the slight comfort of getting away with a little defiance. They may even be eaten alive – the slaveholders of Dixie did not practice cannibalism, as far as I know, but the slaves were certainly metaphorically cannibalised. They were certainly denied any hope for a better future. By the time the book comes to an end, Hugh has come to realise – perhaps – just what it is like to have a taste of his own medicine. He had all the answers ... he could argue and browbeat his son into submission ... and so could his 'master.'

Farnham's *Freehold* raised points that needed to be raised. And if it made people a little uncomfortable, that might not be a bad thing. Mendlesohn assesses that it was an overall failure, but I disagree. It came as close as it could for a book of its time.

Mendlesohn's assessment of Heinlein's 'male' and 'female' selves is interesting and well worth a read, although it may be pushing things a little too far. She notes that many of Heinlein's main characters are less interesting than their supporting characters, although – again – this isn't always a bad thing. Max Jones and John Thomas are bland, compared to Sam and Betsy, but that doesn't mean they're not heroes. Indeed, their simplicity may be part of the lesson. Max surpasses Sam and comes to safe harbour, at least in part, because he's honest enough to admit to the deception they've pulled; John Thomas defends a friend because it's the right thing to do, while Betsy, who over-thinks everything, makes things more complicated (and, at worst, worse). There is little to quibble with here.

Her assessment of the underlying social structures Heinlein depicts is quite accurate – and, unlike some others, she refrains from blaming Heinlein for depicting them. Poddy's lack of support from other women has already been noted – Maureen's financial dependency on her husband, in addition, was quite serious in a world where men held the purse strings. (It's really quite terrifying how something 'normal' can be weaponised if things go sour.) She also assesses the interaction between the public' and 'private' lives of his characters, noting how they interact (and how things can go wrong.) She does, however, overlook a handful of contextual points – she notes that Lazarus treats Estrellita as property, denying her agency, but one can reasonably argue that this was for Estrellita's (and Joe's) own good. He regards them both as kids in adult bodies – a dangerous combination. Of course, this is also the argument that slaveholders made (which Mendlesohn notes) and, even though it is reasonably justified in this case, it does leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Overall, it is difficult to assess this book.

Mendlesohn makes a number of very good points, although some are influenced by modern-day thinking and perceptions that Heinlein would have found very alien. She demonstrates that Heinlein seemed to have grown and evolved as he grew more confident, ranging from seemingly trite adventures to pieces of literary merit. This may have been due to the influence of his second wife, who was a screenwriter and editor. She also makes it clear that Heinlein was very 'woke' for his era – he detested slavery, regarded rape as a great evil, created coloured and female characters in an era when no one would have batted an eyelid if he hadn't. And she raises some interesting points about Heinlein's relationship with guns, although I don't agree with all of her conclusions. Heinlein did not fetishise guns, unlike some modern authors; he seems to have regarded them as tools, something to be used if necessary. It's a valid point.

It's assessment of how Heinlein was influenced – and later, uninfluenced – by his life is also very good. Mendlesohn draws lines between his naval service and his wartime work and shows how it might have influenced his writing – Heinlein put female characters forward, at least in part, because he worked closely with women during the war. (He wasn't blind, either, to the issues raised by women entering a formerly masculine sphere.) The influence of both his second and third wives on his career are also discussed, raising the issue of just how many of his issues Heinlein was working out on paper. She also notes that, in his later years, Heinlein lost (at least some) touch with the world around him. It is hard to know how seriously to take this, but it is an interesting point.

The book also reads very well. It is an academic text, rather than a novel, but it avoids many of the boredom-inducing pitfalls common to textbooks. I enjoyed reading it and never felt the urge to skip pages or chapters.

The book also has weaknesses. It does not focus on each of the books, separately; it is easy to see how Heinlein evolved, but harder to place his words in context. In this, it is very like Heinlein in Dimension (free, online); it runs the risk of assuming that his characters speak for him, rather than accepting that Heinlein preferred to show us their weaknesses rather than beat us over the head with them. (That's part of the reason I feel that Farnham's Freehold rewards a second read, once the reader knows where the story ends and can follow the themes running through the story.) It also notes Heinlein's weaknesses – the moments we would call 'problematic' – without always acknowledging that many of them would not have seemed problematic to Heinlein. He would have snorted, I think, at the idea that disguising Wyoh would be seen as 'minstrelsy' (or Blackface, a comparison Mendlesohn doesn't draw, but one that occurred to me).

Heinlein was not fond of critics, not entirely without reason. Even in his day, a good critic could be a wonder – and a bad one a nightmare. But I think he might have liked this book – and, as Heinlein remains popular, we should ask ourselves why. You may not agree with everything in this book, but it will make you think. Mendlesohn treats Heinlein as what he was, a man. Not an angel, or a demon, but a man. An influential man, but a man nonetheless.

## Steve Diamond: A Love for Horror Interview by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Many readers of UpstreamReviews will know Steve Diamond from his dark fantasy collab SERVANTS OF WAR, where he joined his horror powers with Larry Correia's action powers in a smash-em-up trench warfare epic.

He's also the co-host of The WriterDojo, a podcast and writing community that teaches some of the practical angles of both the craft and the business of writing.

I recently got to swap emails with Steve and pitch him a few questions about his work and his tastes in the horror genre. He's so committed to it that he literally owns the HORROR custom license plate in his home state.

Check out the interview below, and make sure you hit the links at the bottom so you can follow him on Twitter and read his other books from Amazon.

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UR: Okay Steve, first things first... WhErE dO yOu gEt yOuR iDeAs nah haha, kidding. You're a big horror guy, we've all picked up on that. Other than this Steve Diamond character, who's a horror author that you wish more people would read?

SD: Ha! I am, indeed, a pretty big fan of the genre! In fact, I think there's now a drinking game relating to my mentioning it on the WriterDojo podcast. For me, it comes down to a couple authors. I love Robert McCammon, and I wish more people would read him. He embodies the idea of "hope amidst horror" so-to-speak. And he can actually write endings! If you have to pick a starting place for him, I'd say either SPEAKS THE NIGHTBIRD, or THE WOLF'S HOUR.

Additionally, I want more people to read NECROSCOPE by Brian Lumley. It was one of the main inspirations for my novel RESIDUE, and it has some awesome Lovecraftian inspirations.

UR: Us audiobook fans are looking forward to the re-release of RESIDUE, since we missed it the first time around. Have you been able to find a new narrator yet? And if you could fantasy-cast a narrator, who might you pick?

SD: Man, this is difficult. The trouble with audiobooks is finding a reader who fits with the book. No matter how great your story is, if the read doesn't fit (or is just plain bad), people won't like the book. I think that was the issue with the original audio release - the narrator didn't fit. The challenge for me comes from a couple different angles. First, the cost. These sorts of things are expensive. Now, I'm perfectly willing to pay for an awesome reader, but I've got to make sure it makes sense on a financial level for all parties involved.

The second difficulty is finding the right fit. Oddly enough, I'd love Zachary Levi to do the narration. His character in Chuck was one of the main inspirations for Jack Bishop in the novel, and I think his voice would fit perfectly. Now is this realistic? Nah. And while I'd love Bronson Pinchot (that man can do no wrong in the narration game), I think the main key is finding someone who you can imagine as appropriate for two teenagers.

My third option, though I shudder to think how much work it would be, is to narrate it myself. Because of the WriterDojo podcast, I've been gaining confidence behind the mic week after week. I dunno though, would the listeners cut me a little slack since it's "read by the author"?

Regardless, if people have any referrals, I'm all ears!

UR: You've been granted a budget and a stretch of landscape to build your own Mount Rushmore of horror flicks. Which four are you carving up for the world to see?

SD: Alien, The Thing, Rear Window (or I'd cheat and just put Hitchcock on the mountain!), and The X-Files. My fifth honorable mention would be Seven.

I'm not actually a huge fan of the slasher flavor of horror. I'm much more into the suspense aspects of the horror genre, or monster movie romps. I love most movies by Hitchcock, and stuff that fits that mold - like Get Out. Otherwise, I love monster films like Antlers, Jeepers Creepers, Cloverfield, etc. I really love the direction horror series have gone on streaming lately with Stranger Things, Archive 81, and especially Midnight Mass.

I personally think SERVANTS OF WAR would make for an awesome TV series. You can't tell me it wouldn't be a killer fantasy-horror show!

UR: Fingers crossed, we here at Upstream are hoping that SERVANTS OF WAR performs well enough for a Steve Diamond solo outing at Baen. I assume you've pitched something to them--are you able to share that with us?

UR: The reviews for SERVANTS OF WAR have been amazing! I'm so grateful to all the folks who have picked it up and have given Larry Correia and I positive reviews and vibes. I'm really looking forward to writing more in that world.

But as for myself, the project that Baen has heard of right now is called ON THE DEVIL'S SIDE. Basically, it's supernatural Bosch where the main character is a werewolf. I finished off a short story called A Devil's Bargain as my first dip into the pool for this world. The short story will come out next year, I think, in a Baen anthology called DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS. I love detective fiction and cop dramas - my dad was a career cop. So I've been dying to write something in this vein for quite a while. So a supernatural cop drama feel like a no-brainer for me, right? Hopefully, after I write the book, Baen will feel that it is up to their standards and pick it up! I'd love for it to be an ongoing series.

UR: As a follow-up to that, I assume you've got something cooking up in your imagination right now. What's the next big project for you, the next big idea you want to tackle?

Oh geez. I have an absurd number of ideas. Now, if Baen comes back to Larry and I and says, "Hey, give us sequels to SERVANTS OF WAR!"... well, let's just say they won't have to twist my arm in the slightest. The tentative title for the sequel would be INSTRUMENTS OF VIOLENCE. I want to write it bad.

Beyond that, it's a toss-up between werewolf cop mentioned above, and a science fiction idea I've been toying with for a while. While I was at a convention in Dallas, TX just a little bit ago, Toni Weisskopf said something in passing that connected a bunch of dots in my head. I think writing a science fiction

series with big stompy robots - and with my horror sensibilities added in - could be a ton of fun! I'm actually outlining the series right now.

And between ALLLLLLLLLLL those things, I still have quite a few short stories I need to get done for various outlets. A little horror here, some Sword & Sorcery there, and even a little cyberpunk thrown in for good measure. Plus, there are a lot of people that want to see one of my joke ideas become a reality: Sparkle Murder Princess.

So many ideas, so little time!

There you have it! Grab a copy of SERVANTS OF WAR if you haven't already. Let's get Steve boosted in the Baen ranks so we can get a look at that Werewolf Cop story on the shelves!

Thank you for reading.

# Prose Bono

Never Say You Can't Survive by Charlie Jane Anders—  
Review by Tom Feller  
<http://N3F.org>

I found the title to be misleading, because this work is a writer's guide that I personally did not find to be useful. The most interesting parts were autobiographical bits. For instance, the author had a unique learning disability that prevented her from writing with a pencil. She was always able to read beyond her grade level, but her written work was sub-standard. Eventually, she found a teacher who was able to correct this deficiency. Also, the author is a transgender woman and there are a few passages about her transition.

How to Anthology: Part 2  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Much has changed since last I sat at my keyboard to write the first part of this mini-series on editing and publishing anthologies as an Indie. The convention weekend was fantastic, for many reasons. One? I leveled up as a publisher. I now have someone I'm working with to administer the anthologies. So unlike my assertion last time, that I was one more and done? I'll be doing three or four a year, as long as she's willing to wrangle cat... er, authors for me. Secondly? I had someone sit down with me and pitch a couple of projects he'd like me to publish for him. One of those I accepted, since this was quite literally five minutes after I'd taken on the help offered me.

Last time, I covered things like the call, the story acceptance (or rejection) process, and stopped short of the final push to publication. It may have seemed like what I've outlined so far is a lot of work, but I assure you, the last 20% of the process will take up 80% of your time. Which is where having help will free me to do other things, like write.



Once you have the stories chosen, it's time to send out contracts. You'll have to consider here how you want them returned to you, and in what timeline. Trust me when I say you don't want to be the day before publication and chasing down that last author for a confirmation of inclusion (are they even still alive?!). You'll probably get questions and possibly even negotiations on the contracts. I'd say to consider and be reasonable about this, but I wouldn't want to work with someone who had repeated or extensive changes to the contract without very good reasons for them. Again, what I said in the last post: keep it simple. Have a clear reversion clause. Don't keep the story exclusive for an extended period of time.

Now, or somewhere in here, you need to do the formatting. This is a bit of a pain in the patootie, usually. I've discovered that Vellum does a marvelous job, but two things; it's not a cheap program, and you have to feed it a fairly clean document to begin with, or you risk having to chase down code gremlins. If you're just starting and working on a shoestring budget, you can format in Word. I do not recommend using any of the free word processing programs (ie. Open Office or Libre Office). I know of people who use Jutoh, I have no experience with it. I've used Word, and now Vellum. Vellum was worth the entry cost for me, as a publisher of my own and (now!) others' books, but it involved buying the software and a dedicated computer, so it's very definitely not for you unless you're in the business. The complication in formatting is going to come from the varied stories. You can tell writers to follow standard manuscript format, but half the time they won't. You could reject based solely on that, but frankly until you're having a huge number of submissions you likely can't afford to be that picky, even if you weren't shoving off great stories just to save you some work. What you'll likely have to do with the oddballs is to strip all the formatting, then reset in your preferred formatting. The pain comes in italics and any odd formatting the author wanted in there. Either you make an editorial decision that 'no odd formatting!' or you hand-add the italics back in. Or both.

You also have to choose if you'd like to have author bios after every story. Some do, some don't. I didn't include them in the hunting anthology, as the bios (even at 50-100 words) would have been proportionally large next to the shortest stories. However, if the main thrust of your anthology is to cross-pollinate between fan bases, you want to make it easy for new fans to find the author of this great short story they just read. So at a minimum, you'll want a way for that to happen. Live links are not a good idea, due to the constraints of different ebook stores. Best to go with website addresses or if they don't yet have that, a non-live link to social media or author page. Bare minimum, name of other books they have out there.

Once you have the manuscript set up, I like to send out a pdf version to the authors, for them to review their story (this is post any major editorial changes you may have already worked with them on). You'll likely have some enthusiasts who want to proof the whole book, but the point is for everyone to give it one last eyeball before it goes to publish. This includes any issues with the copyright page, where you should have every story listed with its author as the copyright belongs to them. You've only got temporary custody of it, as it were. I also like to include a colophon with the other books authors in the anthology have available. I will do this even if the information was already available in the post-story bios.

Finally, as the editor, you will want to write at least a brief introductory bit about the anthology. For some, it need not be long. For others, it will set the scene and purpose, as with my essay to begin *Can't Go Home on PTSD* and the impact it has on all of us. You may also want to write a post-script. I did this with the PTSD anthology in order to offer up help and resources beyond the fiction in that book, but it was a special case.

Now! You will get all of this formatted (and that's probably a whole tutorial of its own, I'm afraid) and get it uploaded. Pubshare has another layer to add as well. Every author will need to make a PubShare account (it's free) and most importantly set up their royalty payment preferences because if they miss that second part, they won't get paid. Not having authors get paid violates my prime directive with anthologies. You, the editor/publisher, will set up the book project in PubShare, invite all your authors, and then have to make sure they accept the project. You won't be able to publish until all of them are green-lit and you can lock the percentages in place for their shares of the royalties.

In addition to the formatting for the interior, you'll need to have an ebook cover, and a print flat. You can also set up for hardback, but this isn't something I've tried yet. I use Amazon for the POD, and I don't like their hardback for fiction. For children's books, or perhaps my cookbook next year, I'll try it. You can have hardbacks with actual dustcovers done through other sources, again, I haven't tried them myself. For covers, I've written many times here about setting one up. If you choose to have one done, you'll want to be very aware that the cover will make or break the anthology. A bad cover can and will sink it. I've seen it happen. I've had stories in anthologies where it happened. On the other hand, there's no reason to spend \$800- \$1000 on a cover. You don't need to spend that much. There are cover designers out there putting some lovely stuff out for a couple hundred dollars, or you can do it yourself if, and only if, you've been covering your own work and it's been selling well.

Which brings me to the publisher's share. If you are using PubShare, you won't be able to say 'I'll only pay out royalties after my costs are met.' Frankly, this makes me as an author more confident in a project. I know the anthologist is as invested in the book as I am. As an anthologist, I know very well how much time and money I've sunk into that book before it comes out. I'm highly unlikely to ever see that fully recovered. I know what I charge for cover art & design, what my time spent wrestling with formatting is worth, and now I have an admin who also needs to get paid. I'm in a position where I think that investment in an anthology is worthwhile. I'm feeding the authors around me, and I'm uniquely situated to where I can afford to give them a boost. Eventually? The favor may be returned.

Frankly, just working on fun projects is a reward all its own, and the PTSD anthologies are not about an income, but possibly helping someone stay alive. However, you need to understand this before you start on anthologies. They may bring in a trickle of income, each volume, and when you have enough volumes that can be significant. I really do believe there is a market for short fiction. Heck, for short non-fiction there's a market, the hunting anthology is showing me that. But it is a slow, long process. Anthologies will not make you rich. They will supplement your other work, not supplant it.

Marketing anthologies is both easy, and hard. If you've got, say, ten authors in an anthology, ranging from rank newbie with their first story in it (and I'm going to say here that this is a thrill for me as anthologist, to get to bring out a first story. So much fun) to the seasoned author with a broad fanbase, then in theory all of them will be promoting it alongside you. You can make this easier for them by giving them easily shareable promo materials in the shape of web-graphics, starting a couple of weeks before the book is out. Even just sharing the book cover is a good way to build some anticipation. You don't want to start too early, but you don't want to wait until release day, either. The hard part comes in with the long tail. After the initial buzz, which dies down in a few weeks, you can't just forget about it and wander off to other projects. You'll want to share, and remind your authors to as well, the promos every month at least.

I feel like this is already too long, and I'm probably missing stuff! So, ask questions in the comments and I'll do my best to answer them. See you there!

Amazon Tightens Return Policy on Kindle Books  
by Michael Gallagher  
Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Mounting pressure from writers and industry groups spurred a major change in the wake of a viral Tik Tok challenge that was hurting authors.

A change planned to take place by the end of the year will drastically tighten the current return policy for Kindle ebooks, which currently allows a reader to return a book within seven days of the purchase date. Before 2022 is out however, a user will only be able to make an automatic return so long as they have completed no more than 10% of the book, as reported recently by The Author's Guild. The change came after months of outside pressure from both industry groups and a chorus of protest from authors on social media about a suspicious and widespread rise in returns. In fact, some authors, like Lisa Kessler, were seeing patterns in their sales such that one book of a series would get purchased, only to have it be returned, then the next book get purchased, only to see it returned, and so on. What spurred this terrible consumer behavior? Tik Tok, naturally.

Back in March, a hashtag #ReadandReturnChallenge was trending on the CCP data collection app, where an online scene of readers known as "BookTok" would discuss how purchasers could abuse the platforms' return policy: simply buy a book, read it within the week, and return it. By May authors were seeing huge spikes in returns, some in the hundreds, as Kessler relayed to Buzzfeed back in June of this year. Huge losses in royalties for the authors followed. This was particularly frustrating given that other forms of entertainment media offered by Amazon like movies or music don't offer returns once the purchase is made.

While some have attempted to defend this practice as a legitimate option of consumers choosing to exercise their right to act within mutually accepted conditions, it's fairly obvious that many if not most of these were not legitimate returns. If you didn't care for the book, that's one thing. When you're completing a book, then moving on to the next in a series or purchasing another title by the same author only to do the same thing over again, it's bald-faced theft. The move is another welcome change towards a pro-creator direction, after Audible in 2020 similarly revised its ludicrous policy that deducted royalties from authors for any title returned within a year (post-revision, creators got to keep anything not returned after seven days). Let's hope Amazon continues to be open to author feedback in the future.

Conversation vs. Text  
by A. C. Cargill  
<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/>

Conversation in fiction is something we writers have to handle differently in several ways than the fiction text itself.

### Grammar

Grammar in conversation is looser and should fit the character. Ending sentences with a preposition, for example, is fine in conversation. In text, however, such faux pas should be avoided.

### Example:

"So this fellow is someone important, then," Gerard mused. "Someone Hardin needs to tread cautiously with. Probably someone you studied under..." (from Chaos prologue by Tony Andarian)

If the highlighted portion above were text instead of part of conversation, it would be written like this:

This is someone with whom Hardin needs to tread cautiously.

Of course, this is a general rule. The overall tone of your novel, short story, etc., will determine how precise you want to be. And sometimes being grammatically correct can be quite awkward.

## Sentences

Another instance where conversation differs from your fiction text is sentences. People rarely speak in full sentences. We use phrases and sometimes a word or two. See the above example.

We also use contractions a lot, unless we speak English as a second language (most people who learn English often say “you are” instead of “you’re”). I found that reading through my characters’ conversation out loud helps me get the feel of it to see if it flows and sounds natural. I add in contractions whenever practical.

Text can, of course, contain sentence fragments, but this is usually done for emphasis or to set a certain tone.

## Dialect

Of course, dialect in conversation can be a key part of your storytelling. A great example is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

### Example:

“Right is right, and wrong is wrong, and a body ain’t got no business doing wrong when he ain’t ignorant and knows better.”

Text, however, should not as a general rule contain dialect elements. If the above was not part of conversational text, it would be written like this:

Right is right, and wrong is wrong. People have no business doing wrong when they have full knowledge of right.

Of course, that would hardly fit with the tone of the novel.

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

Please check out my novels. And thanks for reading.

## Blood and Thunder by Mark Finn A warts and all look at Robert E. Howard, his life and literary legacy Review by Trevor Denning

### Summary

While just about everyone knows the name of the barbarian Conan, few know the name of his maker. And by Crom, Mark Finn will make that right. With his book, *Blood & Thunder: The Life & Art of Robert E. Howard* (now in its second edition), Finn set out to write the definitive biography of the larger than life Texan. What he gives us is a deep understanding of an American literary icon.

### The Story

This is a little different from what we usually cover at Upstream Reviews in that Finn's book is nonfiction. Many of things said about Howard since his untimely death are fictional at best, hearsay and outright lies at worst. Not a hagiography, Finn gives us the tragic story of Howard as he was, flaws and all. From his early education in spinning yarns, always feeling out of place in his hometown of Cross Plains, and the letters he wrote to his friends and lover, the truth emerges. Finn does an excellent job of helping us understand all the man and all his complexities.

While it's Howard's story, it's also the story of small-town Texas. The American west has always been a crucible of sorts, and Howard's experience growing up there was no different. The child was refined into a man through his difficult environment, and from his experiences he made legends. By placing the colorful boxer/pulp writer/humorist/son in the context of his time, family history, and the oral tradition of the early 20th century, we get a clearer picture of the fragile human being Howard actually was.

After Howard's death his writing took on a life of its own. That could probably make for a second book, but Finn condenses it down to a single chapter which lays out the various legal twists and turns. Though much of the information will be familiar to fans, Finn does an excellent job of untangling it for the uninitiated.

### The Characters

Aside from Robert himself, we also learn much about his father, Isaac, and mother, Hester.

Howard's father was a doctor who dragged his family around the state, chasing the oil boom and the money that came with it. Dr. Howard never understood his son, nor was he a good family man, often leaving his sick wife and lonely son for extended periods of time. Young Robert was devoted to his mother, a devotion which kept his grand ambitions bottled up until they finally, tragically, exploded with a self-inflicted bullet days before her death.

Howard had a few close friends who shaped his life, and a prodigious correspondence with H.P. Lovecraft, who gets his own chapter. And of course, no biography of him could be complete without another chapter devoted to his difficult romance with Novalyne Price.

### The World

Texas during the oil boom was a strange place. Civilized society was still taking shape out of the wild west, and Howard struggled perhaps more than anyone to find his footing.

## The Politics

No politics to speak of, aside from Howard's apparent preference for individualism, if not anarchy, over organized government.

## Content Warning

Finn confronts Howard's racism head-on, which always makes even his most devoted fans uncomfortable. There's also his relationship with his mother (not as indecent as it's often made out to be) and suicide to address.

## Who is it for?

First and foremost, it's for fans of Robert E. Howard who want to go beyond Conan the Barbarian. But it's also for anyone who appreciates the American storytelling tradition and Texas history.

## Why read it?

Finn's biography is effortlessly readable, entertaining, and informative. He accomplishes his goal of painting a clear picture of his subject with honesty and pathos.