

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

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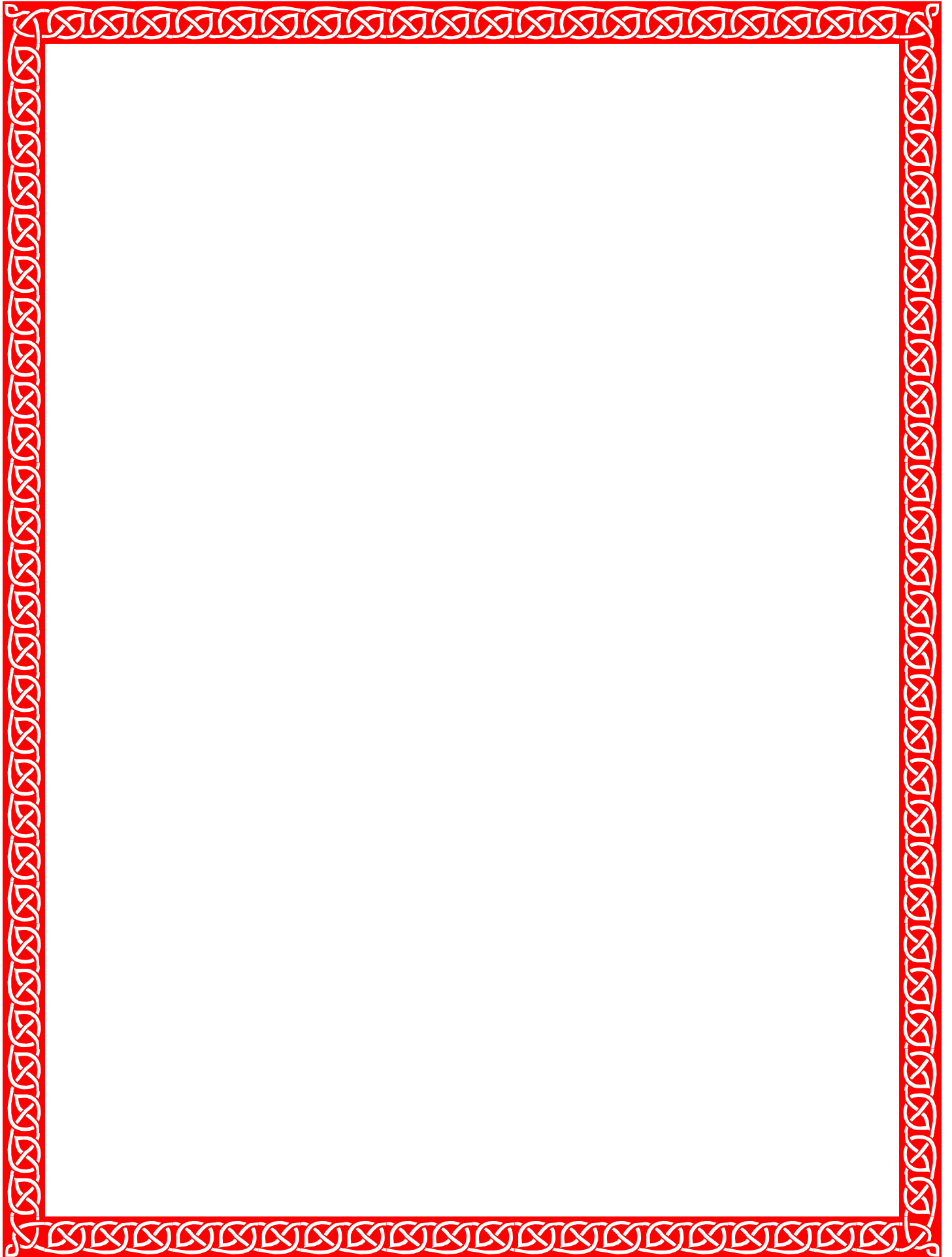
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We're back!

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

Artificial Condition by Martha Wells
Review by Bob Jennings

There is an old axiom about the movie business, a very often true axiom, that SAS—Sequels Always Suck. That can be equally true of science fiction series, in which the second book in the sequence is often the weakest link in the chain. In this particular case, I view “Artificial Condition” not so much as a sequel as being just the next adventure in an ongoing series, issue #2 of a comic book, as it were, except that this is issue #2 of an ongoing series of prose novelettes and novellas about the cyborg protagonist who refers to herself as Murderbot, a SecurityBot who has achieved sentient intelligence and independence by hacking into her programming and changing things to suit herself.

This story finds Murderbot traveling out to the far edges of the galaxy, to a distant mining planet in search of her past. She remembers being a security bot at camp RaviHyal on this asteroid where she went berserk and killed ninety+ human miners. But she doesn’t remember any of the other details, especially why she went berserk, or what happened afterwards. She wants to know, so she has shed her armor and pretends to be an augmented human, which proves to be much more difficult than she imagined.

She is assisted by ART, a research exploration and cargo starship owned by a university. ART is the cyborg brain in control of the ship, and altho Ms Wells does not say so specifically, it is obvious to the reader that this cyborg/space ship union also has sentient existence, altho it is clearly devoted to the University, its crew and its normal human residents. The concept that Murderbot might be contemplating harming humans is very disturbing to ART. Murderbot has hitched a ride on the ship by offering to share her vast downloaded library of adventure/soap-opera human serials that she is personally addicted to with the cuborg-starship.

In order to get the necessary clearance papers to land on the planet to check out her obscured history, she accepts a personal security job with three young researches who have independently developed ground breaking new information. Their ruthless lady employer has confiscated the data, and plans to kill off the developers and claim it for herself. The young people naively believe they can negotiate or buy back their research material, but Murderbot knows better. The adventure unfolds with action galore, murder plots, double-crosses, treachery, and adaptations shifts with unexpected aid from ACT who has become both fascinated and increasingly apprehensive about Murderbot’s determination to investigate the mining disaster despite the obvious and clearly escalating threats being directed toward her.

She discovers the ruins of her past rogue status, and learns that malware was deliberately installed to destroy the camp and its human inhabitants, but a team of sexbots managed to partially thwart the attack. However there are still plenty of questions unanswered.

This is a good story, fast moving, with lots of interesting people. It’s not as innovative or plot heavy as the first story in the series, but Ms Wells manages to come up with new revelations about Murderbot’s personality as well as how her universe operates. Additional plot details show just how dangerous her former owners and the human world regard a rogue or even a slightly errant SecurityBot. A multi-system all-points alert about her, with full description and a hefty reward is more than enuf to motivate her to move on as soon as her job here is completed.

This was an enjoyable, fast moving science fiction adventure with little preaching or moralizing involved in the story plot, big plusses in my opinion. I already have the next book in the series on order from the library.

Attack Surface by Cory Doctorow Review by Bob Jennings

Attack Surface is the third of Cory Doctorow's series about ubiquitous government intrusion that began with Little Brother. In this one, he drills deeply into privacy and surveillance using Marcus's frenemy, Masha, the DHS hacker from Little Brother and Homeland as our point-of-view character. He barely avoids getting bogged down in history and technology lessons — a mistake Neal Stephenson made in The System of the World — but covers both a lot of technical ground and some serious character growth and plot development. Not the best of this series, but also worth the read for the background information.

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

Every so often a sequel comes along that is as good as the original. It's not often, but it does happen. I mean, The Empire Strikes Back was every bit as good as Star Wars, right? (Hey you, stop smirking. You know I'm right. ESB was the best Star Wars movie.) Now, I will grant you that it doesn't always happen that way. But sometimes, every great once in awhile, a blue moon appears and brings with it a worthy sequel. I don't know if it specifically takes an act of divine intervention, or if it just feels like it does. I mention this for a very specific reason:

Fans of Jimbo's will remember when I reviewed Son of Cayn awhile back and I was ecstatic about it. Well, I'm happy to say that Stormy McDonald, Alan Isom and Jason McDonald have done it again. Their latest is City of Cayn and it's pretty amazeballs. I just finished it on Wednesday and I already can't wait for the next one. Of course, this one just came out today and, by my own personal code of ethics, I'm required to wait at least a week before bugging them. Get ready guys. I'll find a way! Something annoying your way comes. I'm just not sure what it is yet. Before all and sundry I make this vow: I will pester you for the next one. And it's very obviously coming because you set it up beautifully.

The cool part is that the authors are part of the Chris Kennedy Publishing Kindle Unlimited Writing Factory. I'm pretty sure they're writing right now. They need to

Something we didn't see enough of in the first book was magic, but it abounds this time around. Mages in the City of Cayn universe are apparently pretty badass. At one point a character who shall remain nameless pulls off a massive illusion that had me sitting there in awe. I've seen very few works where a single mage could have pulled something that big off. At another point that same character is called out for not being an archmage. Bro, if this is what a neophyte looks like, I don't wanna have to face the master. That was some straight up ass-kickery. He does other really impressive stuff too, but that was what got me the most.

I have to say, I'd love to see this one turned into a movie too. It would be a special effects extravaganza. I'm thinking of two specific scenes that would light up a screen and make me want to dance. I seriously need to see what a Hollywood pyrotechnics crew could do with some of this. It sounds soooooo impressive. I think it could live up to the way I pictured it.

Oh, and I suppose, since I'm talking about a book, I should mention the plot. I don't do spoilers so I can't say much, but damn. This is epic fantasy the way you're supposed to do epic fantasy. Good guys, bad guys and the whole world (well... maybe) in the balance and only our plucky group of heroes can save the whole world for dying... We hope. They have to figure out how first though and right now, it's not looking too good. We're all sweating and rooting for them. And, at the end of the day, that's what I love about the genre. This isn't a story about variable morals and "everything is gray." This is "someone is trying to kill all of us and we have to stop them."

I can't help sitting back and remembering a scene from *The Godfather III* though. (Yes, I liked it.) At one point, Michael Corleone (played masterfully by Al Pacino) sits back and says "Our true enemy has not yet revealed himself." There is a mastermind behind what's going on. I know it. I have a feeling I know at least one being that he/she/it is working with. I'm just not sure who they are. I'm sure time, and the next book, will tell but I'm straining to figure this out. If it's the obvious choice it'll be cool. If it's someone new to the stage it'll be cooler. I guess I'll just have to wait to find out which it is.

As mentioned before, *City of Cayn* is a sequel and I highly recommend reading *Son of Cayn* first. There is a lot going on in this book and a look back at where it started is necessary to knowing who all of these people are and how they relate to each other. It gets awfully complicated, especially for a cast this small. The relations between the characters, and their complications, are a big part of what makes *City of Cayn* fun, so you really do need to know your stuff.

Of course, there are new characters added too. The authors decided to spice this one up with some additions that just work. One of my favorite characters in the book was not featured in the first book and she's a total badass. She goes through a lot and I feel bad for her at times, but if she wanted an easy life she shouldn't have been in a novel.

As a matter of fact, that's something that really works in *City of Cayn*. The benefits of success are sky high. The penalty for failing is unthinkable. The route to victory is not a straight one. It's quite frankly a mess. There is no super-successful, gets it right every time person here. The one person I thought might turn into that guy is worse off than almost anyone else. This is a highly detailed, well planned-out story and the authors have pulled it off wonderfully.

Really my only problem with the book is that the sequel isn't here yet. I'm dying to find out how all of this ends. I want to find out if the bad guy is who I think he is. I want to see if somebody slaps that bitch. (She deserves it.) I want to know if the world gets saved. I want to know... when the next book is coming. But trust me, I won't bother the authors for at least a week.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Bars of Soap

Hard Luck Hank: Screw the Galaxy by Steven Campbell

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Story

Set in a distant future that smells like equal parts *Trek* and *Wars*, the *Hard Luck Hank* universe gives us a smattering of new proper nouns—like the space station *Bellvaile*, the *Colmarian Confederation*, and an *Ontankian pistol* just to name a few. It's accessible, and the repetition of these new terms helps you to understand who or what they are.

But unlike the big galaxies of yesteryear, our hero Hank is no Kirk or Skywalker; he's a criminal negotiator on a distant space station populated almost exclusively by gangs of criminals. He's good at what he does thanks to his mutation, which makes him virtually indestructible, a trait many people have tested.

In the debut installment *SCREW THE GALAXY*, our hero Hank takes on a new client—one with plenty of beauty, money, and power, things he's short on—and very quickly finds himself at the epicenter of a conflict WAY above his pay grade. Soon eldritch gods are knocking on the space station's front door and asking to speak with Hank and his client.

Comfortable being a gun-toting tough guy, Hank suddenly finds himself having to grow in his role as a negotiator, and face challenges far outside of his skillset.

This is just the first in an ongoing series of episodic Hank adventures, each one more inventive and ridiculous as the last.

Characters

Hank and his cohorts would very comfortably be at home in the pages of a comic book. He's huge and strong and indestructible, while his law enforcement counterpart Garm is feminine and cunning. Together they take on colorful gang bosses, guys who run restaurants as money-laundering fronts for their spicier business ventures, and they work with a colorful roster of allies throughout the city.

Narrator Liam Own does an excellent job of giving a personality to each of the characters with unique voice cues for them. It makes it easy to keep track of them all.

World

Time? Unknown, but it's the future. Place? Unknown, but it's out in space. Alien races abound, from the organic to the mechanical, and everything in between. You've got clean-and-polished navies, you've got rough-and-tumble thugs, you've got smugglers and mercenaries. You've got leftovers from ancient alien supercomputers that still amble around and cause trouble. It's ripe for exploration and discovery on the reader's part, and that's got a lot to do with how Campbell keeps exploring new corners of the galaxy.

Politics

None. It's removed from our world and time, and doesn't mess around with that.

Content

You get some mid-PG-13, but nothing too heavy or graphic.

Who's it for

Well, ever since *Star Wars* committed to being trash, everyone in the indie novel scene has rushed to fill the vacuum, and *Hard Luck Hank* is a competent contender in this realm. So if you like old space operas with a hint of modern humor and bathos, this series is for you.

Why read it?

When I first found this book and told my wife the title, she thought it was something I was writing, not a book that already existed from someone else. It's wacky, but it's surprisingly thoughtful and takes itself seriously enough to be more than surface-level entertainment. It reminds the reader of how shocked they were when they noticed Pacific Rim had a plot.

Plus the ever-evolving developments in Hank's backstory across the following volumes shows that Campbell is committed to his character in the long-term, just as much as he's committed to the comedy of it all.

The Icarus Plot by Timothy Zahn
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Trailblazing doesn't pay as well as bounty hunting, but at least you are less likely to get shot on the job. Former bounty hunters Gregory Roarke and Selene find it preferable for this reason – even if it leaves them borderline broke most of the time.

When the two are approached with an offer they can't refuse, however, it's not the money that makes Roarke accept the proposition. It's the promise of payback on the person who nearly killed his partner.

The story

Working at Caleb's Drinkhouse on Xathru to make ends meet, Gregory Roarke is fired after a minor altercation with some customers. He heads back to his ship, the Ruth, and his Kadolian partner Selene. Roarke doesn't even get inside before a man who followed him from the Drinkhouse asks to speak with him.

Introducing himself as Geri, the man explains he needs a system of planets checked to see if it can be colonized. Geri claims to be working for an up-and-coming company but given how much money he has and the way he carries himself, Roarke suspects there's more to the story. However, he and Selene can't afford to say no.

Once in space, Geri reveals his real agenda: He doesn't need Trailblazers, but bounty hunters. With Selene's and Roarke's skills confirmed, he and his employer want them to hunt down a human woman named Tera C. She worked on something called the Icarus Project, and Geri and his people want the Project for themselves. Tera will lead them to it.

Roarke is torn. On the one hand, going into bounty hunting carries risk he hoped to avoid as a Trailblazer, to say nothing of the or else Geri and his associates employ to hold him to this bargain. He and Selene pursued a bounty on a different member of the Icarus Project six years ago, a man named Jordan McKell. When they cornered him, the man blasted Roarke's arm off and nearly killed Selene. This is the reason why, although he's not happy to be forced into the job, part of Roarke wants it. He wants to kill the man who nearly killed Selene.

But things are seldom what they seem, and soon, both Roarke and Selene are up to their necks in a confusing race to an unknown destination. Just what is Project Icarus? Why does everyone seem to want it – or to hide it? What is so valuable that people would be willing to kill to get it?

Most importantly, how are they going to get out of this mess alive?

The characters

Roarke is a practical man with a wry sense of humor. Quoting his father's words of wisdom regularly throughout the story, one has to wonder if he does it to keep himself calm as much as to keep himself focused. Despite his best attempts to present himself as a devil-may-care nobody, Roarke clearly isn't cut out for a life on the shady margins of society. His sense of right and wrong is too strong for him to take the easy way out, even when doing so would save him and Selene an entire universe of trouble.

Selene is even less able to hide behind a façade of unconcern when dealing with shady characters to survive on the fringes. A stoic counterbalance to Roarke, she plays his conscience without realizing that his works just fine, and he's only trying to quiet it to protect her. Calm, cool, and collected, Selene offsets Roarke's abrasive humor and keeps him on an even keel, so much so that even when she isn't in the heart of the action her presence is still felt by both Roarke and the reader.

The world

Imagine *Firefly* crossed with *Leverage*, and you will have a good idea of the world in *The Icarus Plot*. Companies vie with one another to be the first to develop a stardrive that will allow one or more species' economic and military dominance over the known (and, possibly, unknown) galaxy. At the same time, organized crime and petty criminals steal from and backstab one another in an effort to remain on top. It is a world in flux, a galaxy where one can make a quick buck and still end up dead if one isn't careful.

The politics

No politics – at least, none from the real world.

Content warning

The Icarus Plot earns the equivalent of a PG-13 rating. This a good book for all ages.

Who is it for?

Those who loved *Firefly* and *Leverage* will enjoy *The Icarus Project*, both for the characters and the plots within plots. Half the fun is trying, along with Roarke and Selene, to puzzle out just what is going on. At the same time, the interplay among the characters as the tale progresses will give readers looking for a new hero to cheer on exactly what they want. There are no shades of gray in the protagonists' morality, only confusion as to who is on which side of the conflict between good and evil. Anyone looking for a solid tale of heroism will enjoy this adventure immensely.

Why read it?

It is Timothy Zahn at his best and most wily. What reason does one need besides that?

Jekyll & Hyde Inc. by Simon R. Green

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A London cop with a reputation for being something of a Boy Scout, Daniel Carter is horribly injured during an off-the-books raid. The rest of his team is dead... until one of the men shows up at his flat decidedly undead and smelling like it. He tells Daniel how the world really works and gives him the address for Jekyll & Hyde Inc., along with the opportunity to take his revenge.

But in order to beat the monsters, Daniel must become one himself.

The Story

It's modern-day London, and a small group of off-duty plainclothesmen have gathered in a lousy coffee shop. They're given an assignment: to raid an unlicensed surgery in a bookstore's basement. If it goes well, it could mean promotions for everyone. If everything goes to hell, their higher-ups never knew anything about it. What the team finds, however, is hell on earth. Members of the Frankenstein Clan work in that basement, harvesting organs from unwilling, and not unconscious, human donors. Things go downhill (yes, downhill from hell. Shut up) after that and Daniel is left for dead.

Sometime later, his body broken beyond repair, Daniel hears a knock at his door. It's his teammate, Paul, who asks to be invited in. No surprise, since he's now a vampire. He explains that at all the nightmare monsters from history are centered in London, and if Daniel wants to join the fight, he needs to contact Jekyll & Hyde Inc. Incorporating is always important, so that your personal assets are safe if you get sued. But who sues Mr. Edward "Frickin'" Hyde? Just imagine the Glassdoor reviews.

Anyway, Daniel is introduced to the Mr. Hyde and takes his potion. Now Daniel Hyde, he meets the sexy Tina Hyde (with whom he does the monster mash in every sense, and if you think that sounds mildly incestuous, don't think about it), and they're tasked with wiping out all the monster clans: Frankensteins, Vampires, Mummies, and Werewolves. Lucky for them (and us), everyone has annual gatherings around the same time.

While some authors might have given each clan its own novel, Simon R. Green makes sure this one moves at lightning speed. Its action set pieces are stitched together like Frankenstein's monster with the thinnest narrative thread. When the violence necessarily pauses and Green goes for the heartstrings, things unravel faster than a mummy in a hurricane. Yet it's an essential part of the rhythm of story, and he always ties everything back together.

Through it all, I found reading and listening (the narrator of the audiobook sounds like Michael Caine) strangely addicting. It's superficial in the extreme, sure, but never dull. The premise promises unhinged mayhem, and it delivers. Boy does it deliver.

The Characters

Daniel Carter/Hyde was a goody-goody cop with a shattered body. Now he's a monster who hunts and kills monsters with abandon. He still clings to his moral principles, for now. But when you're a near indestructible, possibly immortal, with insatiable appetites, that's easier said than done.

You can take the girl out of the party, but you can't take the party out of the girl. Tina Hyde was a London socialite with more issues than a comic book museum and all the STDs to prove it. When offered

Dr. Jekyll's potion she didn't hesitate because she had nothing to lose. Not much changed, except now her idea of partying involves pizza and gratuitous violence.

Edward Hyde is still alive and, well, he's alive. Cunning and insane, he may be the most dangerous monster of all. With a lifetime to plot and plan, everyone knows his ulterior motives have ulterior motives.

The World

"These days, the Frankenstein Clan deals in illegal surgeries. The Vampire Clan deals in all forms of seduction. The Clan of Mummies deals in drugs. The werewolves supply muscle and enforcement, for when the Clans don't want to do it themselves. All the shit work, basically. And the ghouls make sure the bodies are never found. Because they'll eat anything."

The Politics

I didn't even think about politics. This is all about sex and violence.

Content Warning

Did I mention the sex and violence? Furniture is smashed, clothes are shredded, lots of adult language. And that's just the sex. The violence is much more graphic. There's also some unnecessary animal cruelty and casual cannibalism that I really could have done without.

Who is it for?

If you're craving a monster mashup and don't have time to sit and watch that Hugh Jackman movie again, this has your name on it. It's for anyone who wants anti-heroes doing anti-heroics with a James Bond quip at the ready.

Why read it?

Because not every horror story needs to be an introspective meditation on man's capacity for evil. Not every monster deserves our empathy. Sometimes it's more fun to sit back and let the creatures sort things out in the most gruesome ways imaginable. Green proves it can fun indeed. Why this particular story? Because it's always Halloween somewhere.

The Last Christmas Gift: A Heartwarming Holiday Tale of the Living Dead by Nathan Shumate

Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The Story

Malcolm's dad died in Vietnam, so Malcolm is toughing things out in his formative adolescent years. One big constant is his Grandpap, who helped to raise him, but he died a little while ago. They just had the funeral. His body's still in the casket in the parlor in front of their house.

Kinda creepy if you think about it, and it gets worse when you realize Malcolm lives across the street from a graveyard. Christmas Eve rolls around, Malcolm really wishes his dad or Grandpap were

around, and he's trying to take his mind off things.

Then Malcolm executes the time-honored trope of "Earnest Protagonist Effs Around With Something He Doesn't Understand," one thing leads to another, and boom, Grandpap's corpse comes back to life in the parlor!

Yay! Right?

Oh. Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no. The thing Malcom did? It hit the graveyard too. Lots of undead are roaming the street now, and Grandpap's awake, and Malcolm had to tell him what he did, and they have to see if they can fix it before the night's out...

Let me just say that I don't actually like reading eBooks. I've finished maybe five total, ever. This was one of them, and it's so much fun. I liked the guts it took to pick up the Walking Dead and send them on parade down 34th Street, to treat it seriously enough to give it good prose, and to tell a positive male role model story the entire way.

The Characters

Malcolm and Grandpap get the lion's share of the screentime, this is very much a story about a kid and his grandfather, transferring life lessons across generations, as grandfathers are known to do.

Malcolm is the kid you probably were, and Grandpap is the mentor you probably needed.

The World

America, right around Vietnam. Familiar, semi-recent, and relatable.

The Politics

None.

The Content

Spooky/paranormal, nothing else objectionable.

Who's it for?

Anyone who likes a little bit of Christmas Cozy sprinkled in their horror, or vice versa. If you like both genres, then this is a great car-crash.

Why read it?

Because it's the most wonderful time of the year, bro. It's good heartfelt fun that doesn't overstay its welcome. Go read it.

Mammon: Messiah by Robert Kroese

Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Mammon: Messiah continues where Titan left off: after the U.S. government banked its future on the capture of an asteroid full of rare and valuable minerals, its project is sabotaged, and the world goes into a full-on panic. When it becomes clear that the asteroid is headed for Earth, a team of engineers and scientists have to take the capture mission on by themselves.

The story

The story of Messiah takes a turn from that of Titan, shifting focus to the social, economic and political dynamics of a financial catastrophe and the resulting collapse of the US led world order. This book is less Heinlein and more Tom Clancy, exploring the conflicts erupting from the collapse of the dollar and the responses of various political actors vying for power while ordinary people fight to survive.

Kroese skillfully sets up the dominos of the story so that one event logically follows from the other, making the absolute craziness of the LAPD carving out its own fiefdom outside the jurisdiction of the federal government and a group of engineers running a private space program in the Libyan desert teaming up with jihadis to try to save the world actually believable.

The characters

Messiah follows the same protagonists of Titan as they struggle against the incompetency and sometimes outright antagonism of the world governments. What is great about Messiah is watching the characters rise to the challenge of the various disasters that surround them. Kade Kapur, who cooked up the very idea to capture the asteroid Mammon, now has to struggle with the guilt that he might have set things in motion to end life on Earth as we know it. Valerie Munoz started as a housewife in a bad marriage in Titan and grows to become a key part of the project to save the world.

I specifically want to highlight the character of Rick Sutherland, Valerie's husband: the guy is an absolute scumbag cop, and also one of the more competent and driven characters in the series. He is hardly sympathetic and his inclusion as a POV character seems out of place at first, but it soon becomes clear that he is key to important events in the plot. More than that, he is an example of what one might call "toxic masculinity" that doesn't feel like a feminist caricature - his attitude is informed by his experiences, and he acts with a cold rationality that is understandable, if ignoble. Rick is clearly being set up as a substantial obstacle for Valerie to overcome, if not a major villain, and he certainly fits the role.

The world

The world of Titan - our world, if we're not careful - continues to fall apart in Messiah. Kroese is meticulous about providing the details that make the world and even the most unbelievable events that take place in it inevitable.

As an example, Messiah leads the reader down the path from hyperinflation to the breakdown of law enforcement all the way to the LAPD becoming a gang of warlords governing the City of Angels as an autonomous zone outside of US jurisdiction, making the process feel like a perfectly natural response to the events of the novel.

The politics

Cryptocurrencies take center stage as the U.S. dollar fails, so if for some reason you are irrationally hostile to the idea that these currencies could act in place of fiat money, you might want to avoid this one.

Content warning

There is plenty of violence in Messiah and some depictions of prostitution but nothing graphic for either. Profanity is frequently used throughout the novel.

Who is it for?

Messiah is for anyone who loves a world-spanning political thriller during the collapse of the American hegemony, with a little futuristic science fiction thrown in.

Why read it?

Read Messiah for the well-researched and detailed look at a world-wide economic collapse overshadowed by the possibility of a world-ending asteroid strike.

The Murder of Mary Russell and Riviera Gold, Both by Laurie R. King Review by Bob Jennings

Fair Warning — anyone who has not already read these two books and is planning to do so in the future should skip the rest of this review, because I will be revealing significant plot details about both these volumes.

On the recommendation of several SFPAn I decided to try a couple of books by Laurie R. King, which feature as the protagonist Mary Russell. Mary Russell is the wife of Sherlock Holmes, wedded after he officially retired from sleuthing and moved to Sussex to pursue his beekeeping hobby. These are two books in an ongoing series of soap operas with detective stories tacked onto or sometimes embedded into the ongoing plot structure. As such the background stories, the soap opera elements and the character studies of assorted people are always more important than the actual mystery/detecting parts of each novel.

I am a firm believer that when reading a book the reader should Buy The Bit; namely, that the reader needs to allow the author to establish whatever framing premise is necessary to establish the setup and the background to the tale, and then move along allowing the writer to develop a plot within that premise.

That said, I had problems accepting the setup that Mary Russell, who just turned age twenty-five as of these books, set in the mid 1920s, is wedded to Sherlock Holmes, who according to the author is in his late sixties at this point in his life. Yes, occasionally April and late November style love affairs have happened, but they are very rare, and usually involve things like large sums of money waiting to be inherited, or a political arrangement that cements treaties and the military obligations of sovereign nations. In real life vast differences in ages in a marriage do not last very long, usually barely long enough for the novelty to wear off.

It was even more difficult to accept the idea that Sherlock Holmes, a character whose entire modus operandi has been that of a detached, directed and bullet point intellectual who never had the slightest romantic or sexual interest in a member of the opposite sex should decide to enter into this unusual marriage.

So, it was a pretty big speed bump of a background setup that I had to accept before I could get into the story and check out the actual mystery plots. In addition, considerably liberties have been taken with both the character of Sherlock Holmes and all those who have been associated with him in the original Canonical Tales as written by Arthur Conan Doyle.

Ms. King is a very good writer who excels at providing background material on the people she is discussing. In both these novels the person primarily being discussed, both the McGuffin and the indirect protagonist of the adventures is Clara Hudson, Sherlock Holmes' old landlady from 22-B Baker Street who has, according to this brace of novels, moved to Sussex with Holmes to keep house for him in his not very strict retirement from the world of battling crime.

According to these two novels and others, Ms Hudson is a lady with a background, specifically, a troubled childhood and history of continual involvement in criminal activities starting with pick-pocketing, then moving up to swindles with the aid of her semi-drunken father. Determined to make a success of herself, young Clarissia Hudson molds herself into a young debutante in the late Victorian London social whirl, seeking good marks for swindles as well as a suitable husband.

Things go wrong when her father is unable to adapt to the social caste structure, and then things really go off the rails when she falls in love with a man, a minor Lord who knocks her up and then disappears. Inset in both these stories is the plot situation provided by Conan Doyle's original Sherlock Holmes short story, "The Adventure of the Gloria Scott", and the premise is that maybe, just maybe, the secret of the two and a half million pounds convicted felon Jack Prendergast stole was not lost when the ship Gloria Scott, transporting him and 30 other convicted felons to Australia, blew up and sank to the bottom of the sea.

"The Murder of Mary Russell" is primarily a novel devoted to the life history of Clara Hudson and how she came to be aligned with Sherlock Holmes. Tacked onto the ongoing story of her troubled life is the mystery of where Mary Russell has disappeared to and whether she has actually been murdered (no, obviously she wasn't). There are encounters with Mrs. Hudson's grown son, surrendered as a baby to a sister in Australia. Then she later encounters her father again. He is determined to browbeat her and to blackmail former associates to somehow escape the clutches of the Bishop, the leader of a gang of criminals who holds the underworld in terror and to whom both James Hudson and young Clarissa owe a great deal of money.

The conclusion of this novel involves Clarissa Hudson confronting the ghosts of her past, which results in another death and the decision to leave England forever. A major plot incongruity in this setup is that if James Hudson, her ner' do well semi-drunken father, had actually held the key to the vanished fortune, he would have certainly made use of it well before the bulk of the story took place. Instead, this information is revealed near the very end of the novel, and it's a plot glitch that I pretty much found impossible to accept.

Despite several intervening novels, "Riviera Gold" takes up directly after the end of this story. Mary is vacationing around Monte Carlo, a favorite leisure haunt of Mrs. Hudson over the years. It turns out that in addition to her past criminal activities as a confidence woman in the area, Clarissa Hudson she also has society friends there who want to shelter and help her, which is good because she is about to be

accused of a murder.

This is much more a detective story and much less a soap opera, but the soap opera backdrop still plays a significant part of the novel, which sprawls over the French vacation playgrounds, and only involves Sherlock Holmes near the end of the adventure. Mary Russell has to figure out what is going on, and why interwoven and seemingly inconsistent events that somehow don't match might actually lead to significant criminal activity which results in three separate murders, plus other related killings that clearly have been committed in the past. Suffice to say that the title bears a particular significance for the criminal focus of the adventure.

I found both of these books to be very readable, and the character studies plus the soap opera elements to be well constructed. The actual detecting parts of the stories not so much. Of the two, "Riviera Gold" is clearly the strongest of the books plot wise, but both are so intertwined that it is impossible to consider one without the other.

Ms King is an excellent writer when dealing with people and places. She is on less firm ground when dealing with action and the details of uncovering who did what and why, but, let me say, her efforts are certainly stronger in this area than a fair number of other authors whose crime capers I have read over the past few years.

I am not sure I will continue with this series. If anyone has not read these novels, I would suggest you start the entire 20 book series from volume one, because the ongoing soap opera elements are essential to the plots. Do not jump into the middle of the stories as I did with these two novels. I found both books entertaining and reasonably fast moving, but I am not sure I want to invest more of my reading time in this unusual character mash-up.

Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Last year, we reviewed Daniel Humphreys' Fade. It was a fun variant of everything you love about Harry Dresden. Magic used in inventive ways. Much snark. Solid fight scenes. If you didn't read it, check it out.

And now, we have the sequel, Night's Black Agents. It came out last year. Though I genuinely waited for book three to be near completion before I reviewed it.

Why? We'll get to that.

The Story

In Fade, Paxton Locke got worked over by a disciple of his mother, a wicked witch from academia. He foiled her evil plans ... but then Mommy Dearest escaped from jail.

But evil never sleeps. Paxton must head to Arizona to help an old police friend with a supernatural murder problem.

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

Bureau — only with a different mission.

Our main plot follows Paxton hot on the trail of a magical murderer. The book opens only a week after the end of Fade. (Even Harry Dresden gets more time to rest.) And it begins with “I was halfway through a stack of pancakes when the dead guy walked in the door.” Probably the best opening line since “The building was on fire, but it wasn’t my fault.”

(Yes, I hate to open with comparing it to a line from The Dresden Files, but really, it’s one of the few works I can compare it to. One of the lines in the novel is literally “With the exception of magic, the only real talent I had was taking a beating.” — Tell me that doesn't sound like Jim Butcher.)

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

And this is just the opening.

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

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

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

Of course, Dan has great lines to put a backspin on tropes. As Paxton describes his world: “Sheer moments of terror followed by hours of law enforcement shouting.” And there are a bunch of ... re-purposed lines from classic Star Wars (as opposed to EU novel Star Wars, because as we all know, there were no other films). And all of the one-liners are fun: “an orphaned teenager with sudden-onset wizard syndrome was a fertile field for the corrupting possibility of power,” or even the casual “Buddy, you’re about the ninth worst thing I’ve seen this week.”

Mother turns into a little bit of a Final Fantasy villain, but it makes more sense in book 3.

Not to mention that the Mother subplot is put to great effect when the villain of the week is enough to make her nervous.

And the feds hunting Mother actually serves to tie the main arc plot very neatly back to the primary plot for the individual novel.

Overall, it's a great balance of series arc and book plot.

(If the author is reading this review, I just got to this exchange “So, what, you think this is the end of the world?” “Maybe. Dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria. Fire and brimstone.” Ahem.... smartass).

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

takes the time and effort to MAKE MAGIC MAKE SENSE. (I'm not naming names, JKR)

Now here comes the boom.

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

Imagine the first time you ever saw *The Empire Strikes Back*. Now imagine if it stopped with Luke dangling in mid-air in Cloud city, Han is still frozen in carbonite, and the last we saw of the Millennium Falcon, it was being chased by TIE-fighters into the clouds.

That's what the end of this book felt like. My last note on the book is two words, and they are often favored by Samuel L. Jackson.

Don't worry. Book three is around the corner. It's coming out the last weekend in June. So if you haven't read *Night's Black Agents* yet, you needn't worry, you won't have to wait a year for the awesome conclusion.

The World

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

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

Characters

This is a well-balanced book. Despite the first-person narration, Paxton Locke does not suck all of the air out the room, nor does he eat up all the screen time. His sidekick, Cassie, is a quick study and gives Paxton someone to talk with and gives us varying perspectives to the same problem.

As for Paxton's men in black, "Valentine" is the one that sticks out the most, but Elliot and George are also colorful characters. Humphreys does not tell us a lot about their backgrounds, but that's because he wants to set up for a twist at the end... I hate to break it to Dan, but his twist does not top the cliffhanger he set up.

Politics

None, really. Sure, heroic federal agents is a fantasy, but not really political.

Content Warning

Paxton Locke is fighting the occult and the demonic, of course there's a content warning. But honestly, it's still PG-13.

Who is this for?

Anyone who is a fan of Jim Butcher, Larry Correia, or just good, action-filled urban fantasy, will enjoy this.

Why Read It?

You read this book because it's awesome, fun, and highly entertaining.

Luckily, books 3-5 are already out, so the cliffhanger won't make you tear your hair out. But you might want to buy book 3 while you're buying book 2, just to be on the safe side.

The Old Man and the Void by Karina Fabian

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What happens when you have an aging prospector on a dry streak searching for relics in the accretion disk of a black hole? A lot of crazy things. Time in the accretion disk moves slower than outside it, and even the most experienced prospector can get in over his head.

Dex Hollister, experienced relic hunter, is about to find himself in over his head – and in the adventure of a lifetime.

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The story

The story opens with Dex Hollister dreaming of his deceased wife, Scarlet. Raised on a wildlife preserve, Dex spends the dream scaling a mountain with his bride-to-be to show her the alien animals he loves, hoping her reaction will prove that she is “the one” for him once and for all. They reach the creatures’ nest, whereupon Scarlet’s mouth drops open wide in wonder...

...and his ship’s AI, Santiago, wakes Dex up to remind him they have work to do today.

Fishing in and around the accretion disk of a black hole has certain effects. Not only does it wreak havoc with gravity, making “diving” into the black hole in a ship dangerous, it causes several diseases and disorders in the human body. One such affliction led to Scarlet’s death, and Dex himself is suffering from Disk Activated Memory Disorder. This disorder means that he loses track of where and when he is, as well as who is and is not with him. He essentially has space-and-time-inflicted dementia. Although there are ways to ameliorate and/or slow it down, there is no cure. The disorder will kill him, sooner or later.

But today is a big day for Dex and Santiago. They are pursuing their biggest prize in the disk yet – an intact alien battleship.

At some point in the past, the black hole was the site of a battle between two extinct alien races. The languages of each race are nearly incomprehensible to humanity, so hunting and retrieving relics caught in the accretion disk is big business. Despite the risks, the rewards in terms of technology, money, and notoriety are unparalleled.

Dex is in the job primarily to contribute to human knowledge, as anything salvageable pulled from the black hole can be studied and reverse-engineered by humanity – with a fair bit of time and effort. A

large number of Santiago's modifications, which allow the ship to dip further into the black hole's disk than other vessels, came from alien tech Dex and Scarlet caught and had reverse-engineered by her family. That's why they were so successful over the years.

Now alone and dying, Dex intends for this ship to be his "big score," the prize that will allow him to go to the afterlife with pride when death finally comes for him. But the alien ship has ideas of its own: when Dex and Santiago manage to snag it, the battleship opens up the throttle, dragging them further into the black hole than they have ever gone before. The simple retrieval turns into a battle for survival against the alien ship, the black hole, and the Disk Activated Memory Disorder. Dex must race against time to get himself, his ship, and their prize out of this disaster in one piece – or face a long, slow death in the event horizon!

The characters

Dex is stubborn, proud, and strong. It is very easy to cheer for him on his adventure as he refuses to give up and let death take him. His age, though, means that a reader will wince a time or two at some of the near misses he has that are far too close for comfort. For an elderly gentleman with a variation on dementia, Dex makes sure it doesn't hold him back or slow him down. He is a man on a mission, and he intends to see it through – no matter what gets in his way.

Santiago's personality is a wonderful combination of Andromeda's Romy and Tony Stark's AI, JARVIS. It takes work to make an artificial intelligence endearing, but Fabian accomplishes this and makes it look easy. Part mother hen, part apprentice, and all loyal friend, the times during the narrative when Santiago is knocked out of commission are nerve-wracking. One wrong circuit blows and he's dead, leaving Dex alone and without help. Thankfully, Santiago is as stubborn as his captain. He refuses to go into the long good night quietly, too.

The world

The world of *The Old Man and the Void* blends the best of Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda* with Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, *Star Trek*, and *Stargate SG-1*. The temporal threats that Dex and Santiago must navigate could have come out of any of the three major sci-fi franchises. Meanwhile, the gritty, lived-in reality of *Firefly* finds a new expression in what is essentially an Old West prospector's game in space. In particular, the technology in the story has the practical mindset of *Firefly* meshed with the more operative themes of *Andromeda*, making the world wondrous at the same time one has to laugh at the idea of how people would adapt fantastic technologies for "simple" devices like eyeglasses.

The politics

None at all. The book is completely politics free.

Content warning

The book is a PG-13 novel. There is no gore, no sex, and no violence that would give anyone nightmares. It is a pleasant read that will entrance audiences of all ages.

Who is it for?

Fans of the aforementioned *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda*, and *Firefly*. Anyone who likes a good time travel story or wants to see the tropes played with in new, fascinating ways will also enjoy it. Those who like the puzzle of trying to figure out a centuries'-old culture with mysterious gods and myths will like it, too. And, of course, anyone who liked *The Old Man and the Sea* will enjoy

the transliteration of the story from Earth's Ocean to the depths of space.

Why read it?

It is a good book that retells a good story in a new setting. Who doesn't want to see a classic reimaged in a way that might make it even more interesting?

The Shaman of Karres by Eric Flint and Dave Freer
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Changes are coming to the galaxy. War is brewing between two worlds, a warrior of Na'kalauf needs psychological healing, and Captain Pausert just wants a vacation. To say nothing of finding time to wrap his mind around the fact that he will be marrying the Karres witch Goth soon.

But most of all, the Leewit is growing up. And she's not happy about it.

The story

Watching the Leewit fuming in annoyance from his Great-Uncle Threbus' front porch, Captain Pausert questions his great-uncle to try to learn what the Witches of Karres have in store for him now. Threbus explains that Pausert, the Leewit, Vezzarn, and the Leewit's Na'kalauf bodyguard Ta'zara will be heading to the water world of Na'kalauf. Although the Leewit has healed him physically from the effects of the battle with the Megair Cannibals, there is still some work to be done in regard to Ta'zara's mind.

More to the point, the war brewing between Iradalia and Karoda has to be stopped. Karoda is a slaver world, and Iradalia hates slavery. Both planets share not only the same solar system but the same orbit, though they are drifting away from each other as the centuries progress. But in the manner of squabbling twins, their governments continuously jockey for position, and their present argument threatens to boil over in a truly dangerous way. If their battle of wills explodes into war, the galaxy will pay in blood if the victors aren't prevented from accomplishing their goals.

Listening to his uncle, Pausert notes that there is someone Threbus is not counting as part of his crew – a very vital someone. Goth is not among the people Threbus says will be traveling to Iradalia and Karoda with him.

After excusing himself, Pausert finds Goth brooding in the forest. She confirms she has a separate mission taking her elsewhere and that she will not be heading to Iradalia and Karoda with him. To work out her frustrations, she goes hunting, so Pausert goes back to his ship – and discovers a mysterious cargo being loaded aboard to help him and his crew with their mission. Why doesn't anyone tell him anything?

Before long, Pausert and the others find themselves neck-deep in emergencies, mysteries, and confusion. Meanwhile, Goth pursues her own mission solo: to find and rescue Pausert's mother. Their separate assignments soon intertwine in ways they could never have anticipated, but will it be enough to prevent a war that will see a world of religious fanatics take over the galaxy?

The characters

Captain Pausert is a charming grump trying his best to roll with the unexpected punches both the gal-

axy and the Witches throw at him. For all his grumbling, though, he meets the challenges that face him with more aplomb and strength than he seems to believe he possesses. A man with rock-steady loyalties, one has to appreciate the down-to-earth attitude he brings to the scenes wherein he appears. Even when he's rattled, this captain holds his ground with determination firm enough to surprise enemies and allies alike.

Goth is fun to follow for her competency as she navigates her way through her own solo adventure. Confident and capable, she gets herself out of more than a few scrapes on her own without coming across as a Mary Sue, in no small part because she knows she is not perfect. When she actually needs help, she goes to get it, without worrying about her pride or status as a "hot witch" at all.

The Leewit is the star of the show. Short-tempered and unhappy that she must "be responsible," her childish habits are balanced well by her healer's skills and determination to take care of her patients. None of which prevents her from giving the bad guys what-for; after all, a person who can heal can turn those same skills to causing discomfort, pain, and even death if the need arises. When the Leewit decides she has had enough, she really makes her displeasure known!

The world

The galaxy is alive and vibrant with everyday mundanities at the same time hints of a strange past abound within the narrative. Ancient ruins sit side-by-side with a modern slave trade, while smugglers and police find themselves in agreement that corrupt conglomerates are bad business for everyone. In the midst of all this, hidden from regular sight, Karres monitors events and decides where to intervene to keep themselves – and humanity – as safe as possible.

The politics

None. This is a very politics-free book.

Content warning

A PG-13 rating for the implications of certain forms of slavery is about all this book earns, as it is very accessible to any age. There is mention of cannibalism, but it is quick and does not go into detail.

Who is it for?

Fans of space opera looking for a new universe to explore will want to grab this book, while readers who enjoy paranormal powers and mysteries will find klatha skills intriguing. Anyone who has already been following the Witches of Karres will consider this book a must-read, of course, and those who want a pleasant escape from the everyday grind will find this novel satisfies that desire and then some. Furthermore, anyone who wants competent male leads who aren't overshadowed by their equally competent female co-stars will love the dynamics in this book, as Captain Pausert relies on his girls' strengths at the same time they rely on his. No matter how one looks at it, *The Shaman of Karres* has something for everyone!

Why read it?

It's a good book that takes a reader far, far away from the present. Who doesn't want a relaxing vacation to another universe this Christmas season?

The Spare Man by Mary Robinette Kowal
Review by Bob Jennings

I watched The Thin Man preparatory to reading Mary Robinette Kowal's Nick and Nora in Spaaace, The Spare Man. It is a lovely locked room mystery on board a Mars-bound spaceship. Heiress and inventor Tesla Crane, her retired detective husband, and her dog Asta Gimlet are on their honeymoon when someone is murdered on the ship, and her husband is arrested for it. Each chapter is named after a drink, complete with recipe. (I'm particularly fond of the contrast between an early chapter with a three-to-one martini recipe and a later one with an infinity-to-whisper martini recipe.) Of course, the case is solved with banter (though not nearly as good as Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich provided for William Powell and Myrna Loy) and cocktails. And, finally, our newlyweds are able to resume their canoodling.

Unforgettable by Eric James Stone
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Prolific short story writer Stone gives us an American James Bond with real-world tech and an uncontrolled ability to slip between the quantum layers of human memory.

In 2016, a popular Mountain West short-story author landed a contract for a full-length novel with the estimable Baen Books; his name is Eric James Stone, and if you haven't heard of him, you're leaving some fun on the table. He's perhaps best known for That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made and Tabloid Reporter To The Stars. I heartily recommend that second one, as it's both a poignant commentary on man's hubris and a laugh-out-loud gut punch that you won't see coming.

Today though, we're talking about his Baen debut, Unforgettable.

Story

Right out the gate, you get a little bit of backstory on the main character. It's necessary, because he's got a complicated condition and you, the reader, need to understand what it means for him. This is perhaps the only excusable example I've seen of "starting out by looking in the mirror."

Nat Morgan is a quantum accident. He doesn't know why or how, only that his condition is hard-wired into him: once he's been out of your sight for a minute or two, you completely forget you knew him. His name, his face, any interactions you had together, all of it, just gone.

This was troubling for his mother, who forgot she had a baby when she went to the hospital. She kept forgetting she had an infant in the crib next to her room. Kept wondering why she woke up to a crying child. She started writing it all down in journals so she could remind herself day after day after day, because the simple act of going to sleep made her forget about her son.

She managed for a while, as only a loving parent could, until one day her house burned down and all the journals went with it, and Nat was utterly screwed. He had to say goodbye at a very early age because he couldn't convince his mother that he was her son.

So he lived a day-to-day existence, surviving by taking what he needed when he needed it, because nobody was ever going to come looking for him. Eventually he realized this would make him the perfect

secret agent, so he walked into the CIA headquarters, demonstrated his ability to the brass, and got hired on as a spy.

It's kind of funny when Nat is out on a mission for the Agency, and he has to call in to his handler, and the first words out of his mouth are "Hey, open your bottom right drawer and read that file that explains who I am, it's all in your handwriting." Stone does an AWESOME job of managing the mechanics of the character without dumping a thousand words onto the page every time.

(Unlike your reviewer here...)

Anyway, if that's not a cool enough setup, things go sideways when Nat is on a mission and ends up briefly handcuffed to a hot Russian spy (because hell yeah) named Yelena. While they're farting around in a lab looking for something to cut the cuffs off, something happens to them, and Yelena becomes the one person in the world who doesn't lose her memories of Nat.

Imagine the implications...

Suddenly their fates are tied together in a way Nat has never had to experience, and they team up to rescue a scientist whose work may very well be the key to controlling the future of mankind.

Get ready for a very entertaining ride.

Characters

Nat and Yelena play off of each other very well. Nat might be James Bond as far as his credentials go, but he's not a tux-and-specialty-drink kind of spy; he's a little bit more Jason Bourne, without the Special Forces training.

Yelena is more of the entrenched bureaucracy cog, though not as forgettable as Nat, so their natural strengths and weaknesses fit for the job at hand. Stone writes believable human beings, doing and saying believable things.

World

Our world, five or ten minutes into the future. Similar geopolitics, and Stone stresses in an author's note that the technology he writes into the story all exists IRL.

Politics

None of the crap you'd see on Twitter. Typical international stuff, America is the good guy, Russia is the bad guy, go grab this Iranian dude, etc.

Content

100% clean. No sex and I remember thinking by the end of it that Stone didn't drop a single curse word in it.

Who's it for

If you like spy-capers and "95/5 science-fiction," pick this one up and see how it treats you.

Why read it?

Stone gives us a throwback to the “what-if” sci-fi that Philip K. Dick used to throw at you, where you’re in the head of a protagonist dealing with this one incredibly weird thing that makes his entire life different from ours. And he does it at the speed of an Ian Fleming novel. UNFORGETTABLE is a well-executed overlap of two skillsets that deserves a little more appreciation.

The War Against the Rull by A.E. Van Vogt
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The Rull: a species so alien that their minds are shrouded from human understanding. Shapeshifters who hide their true insectoid forms, they infiltrate humanity’s empire and begin a century’s long war.

Faced with this threat, humanity seeks allies among other races in the galaxy, most of whom are extremely xenophobic or too proud to ally with the bipeds from Earth. In the midst of this crisis, Trevor Jamieson sets out to find a way to defeat the Rull. He does not seek superior firepower or technology, but by a more subtle means: making friends with the other lifeforms in the galaxy, who are threatened with the same extinction as mankind!

The Story

Originally, The War Against the Rull was not a novel. It was five short stories that A.E. van Vogt sewed together into one story, and he did so seamlessly. After the first two adventures it is hard to say just where each separate story began and where it ended, as the events move much faster and blur together due to the time crunch.

The book starts with a bang as Jamieson abandons a lifeboat – a small, shuttlecraft-style ship – over Eristan II. He is not alone, however; a massive alien creature with three eyes and six legs is also aboard the boat. Known as an ezwal, this creature is native to a world called Carson’s Planet, and his species has made man’s attempt to settle on and establish an anti-Rull base there difficult in the extreme. Whenever man and ezwal meet, a battle follows, and one or both end up dead. This has led the human residents of Carson to despise the ezwals as beasts that should be eradicated.

Jamieson has a couple of problems with that, the most vital being that the ezwals aren’t animals. They’re sapient beings that happen to be ferociously certain of their superiority to humans, whom they see not only as intruders in their territory, but lower life forms. Most important to the Human/Rull conflict, though, the ezwals are telepathic. They can project their thoughts to others as well as read the minds of sapients around the galaxy – which means they can spot Rull imposters without even trying.

Having kept this secret since mankind landed on the planet, though, the ezwals are loath to let humanity know they are not mindless creatures. They want humanity gone, and since Jamieson is the only human to suspect they aren’t what they appear to be, he is a threat.

The best way to deal with a threat is to eliminate it, and the ezwal thinks he is in a perfect position to do just that!

The Characters

Trevor Jamieson is the only constant character in the narrative. For utter determination and an unwill-

ingness to die, he might well be a precursor of Captain James T. Kirk. He simply lacks the ship and four hundred Starfleet personnel to back him on his dangerous escapades. The man does not quit, not even when all hope is apparently lost, and his only allies want to kill him.

A survivalist who is determined to win the Rull/Human conflict, he can be ruthless but never to the point that he makes moral compromises. He fights to save not only his own life or the lives of his people, but of the aliens he attempts so desperately to befriend. It is a strange way of making friends, yet it makes an impression, since Jamieson's courage and resolve sway more than a few sapient to the recognition that humans do not have to be their enemy.

Because a human who insists on surviving will always, always prove to be their worst nightmare.

The World

The book takes a reader to many worlds, all of which are sketched out in just enough detail that one can wonder at the new planet or shiver at the horror of trying to survive in such a place. While some of the tactics and techniques fighting the Rull necessitate are a little off-putting, given the Cold War-esque conflict, it makes a sad kind of sense. Each planet or society adds a new dimension to the Rull/Human struggle and, though they change as the adventures progress, they never leave a reader's mind entirely.

The Politics

No politics that are not pertinent to the story are in this book. Despite the Cold War-style overtones, the focus is entirely on winning a potentially unwinnable war with a species entirely inimical to human life. The adventures happen too quickly to leave room for politics, as the characters' survival is on the line. Politics would just slow the action down.

Content Warning

There are no overt gore or gruesome images, though there is mention of human experimentation/torture toward the end of the story. The book is definitely for teens and up, but it can be read by any astute youngster who happens upon it without fear.

Who is it for?

Sci-fi lovers who want a new adventure that is upbeat and hopeful. While these stories come from the 1940s and 1950s, they have a perennial appeal in how they tackle the notion of human space travel and first contact. Anyone who wishes Star Trek had focused as much or more on communication as action will find this book fascinating, and those who love original adventure or pulp serials will enjoy it as well. Enthusiasts searching for action in their fiction will also be entertained by this collection of tales.

Why read it?

The War Against the Rull is good, clean fun. That is in rare supply these days. Why not grab it while it is available?

Non-Fiction

Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother
& Other Botanical Atrocities by Amy Stewart
Review by Bob Jennings

Ms. Stewart is the author of those Kopp Sisters books that certain members of this club enjoy. However it turns out that Ms. Stewart's real expertise is in the field of biology and botany. She has written a string of books about plants and animals, including this one, which I found to be a quick and fascinating read.

People who think nature is a benevolent friendly wonderland would be well advised to read this volume right away. Nature is not your friend, and it has plenty of living things, plants, as well as animals that are dangerous to human beings. The book has a long list of plants that can cause death, sickness, misery, paralysis, insanity and long lasting excruciating pain, all presented in alphabetical order, with information, anecdotes, illustrations, histories, current status and related plant relatives.

Of particular interest are plants that can and do routinely kill or grievously sicken family pets, particularly cats. Ornament indoor plants are especially dangerous for humans and animals. I highly recommend this book. It is a rapid read, with loads of information and illos presented in a very entertaining fashion.

Literary Criticism

Reflections on Post-Apocalyptic Fiction by Jim McCoy
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I just got done watching *The Day After* (directed by Nicolas Meyer for the ABC Television Network, 1983) and it got me thinking. I have watched, read and loved a ton of post-apocalyptic fiction. Today was my first time watching *The Day After*, but I grew up on the *Mad Max* movies. *The Hunger Games* is, of course, set in Panem after a nuclear exchange. The latter two series in the *Robotech* universe take place in a world that has been savaged by aliens. I could go on forever. Science Fiction fans love post-apocalyptic settings. It's just what we do.

I guess the difference between *The Day After* and the vast majority of other Post-Apocalyptic settings is that it shows the actual apocalypse and the time before it on a level I've only ever seen exceeded by *Jericho*. At the beginning of *The Day After* life as normal is taking place. There is a wedding coming. People are registering for classes. If it weren't for the constant chatter about worsening tensions between the US and USSR from TVs and radios in the background, they couldn't have made things more average if they tried. Actually, I'd be willing to bet that they DID try and this was the best they could do. They did a damn good job of it too.

So in a lot of ways, *The Day After* is one of the few post-apocalyptic thrillers that truly shows the cost of the apocalypse itself. The cost of the apocalypse is not just measured in the mess made of a ruined city. The cost is measured in real human beings, shattered families and ruined lives. It is measured in

the attempts to come back from the horror of an honest to God nuclear exchange. It's something we've never had to witness on the scale envisioned in the movie and thank God for that, but it is truly terrifying.

I grew up during the time when *The Day After* was made. I turned seven in 1983. I remember checking books out of the library about military everything. I remember reading about the USS *Enterprise* (The aircraft carrier CVN-65, not the *Galaxy Class* NCC-1701) and the nuclear arsenal it carried. I remember watching the news with my dad and my grandpa hearing about some guy named Khadaffi and some bombs that went off in Libya. I was way too precocious, and I was reading things I had no business reading at that age. I didn't realize that at the time (what seven-year-old really understands how young they are?) but I should have waited until I got older. Lesson learned, I guess. I took my daughters to see *Wonder Woman* and my twelve-year-old thought that poison gas was fake, so I didn't push her as fast as I pushed myself, right?

What I've never understood though, is why we (I?) like it. I mean, it's exciting and suspenseful. If you don't know what's out there, you don't know what the threats are. If you don't know what the threats are, they could be anything. If you're surrounded by threats, survival becomes a problem. All stories need a problem. Just ask your high school literature teacher. (*Mrs. Maloney* are you out there?). But why this setting and this problem. What's fun about a setting where ninety-plus percent of the human race is dead?

That's the interesting part for me. I've heard people with doctoral degrees in psychology claim that it's because people wonder about their own death and wonder what the world would be like without them. With all respect due to the people who know what they're talking about, I don't think they know what they're talking about. I seriously think that whoever came up with that thesis never bothered to have a conversation with a real fan of post-apocalyptic fiction. Think about it.

Every fan of the PA game that I've come across thinks that they're Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead*. We, at heart, are all *The Chosen One*, who will survive the crisis and restore order to the world. When the world falls, we'll be the finest scrounger. When we set up the camp, we'll be the one who leads the defense of it. When the first new crops are grown, we'll be the person who found the seeds. When civilization is re-established, we'll be the person leading it. Us. The nerds. The real science fiction fans who grew up reading about/watching this stuff. I mean, I'm even working on a *Mafia/PA* mashup. My main character is *THE MAN*... Or he will be if this freaking mob boss quits telling him what to do.

Anyway...

I think the fact of the matter is that the attraction of post-apocalyptic fiction is really a desire to be in charge. We want to run things our way and it's never going to happen that way. Even most presidents don't make the difference they thought they would. We all know that the world would be better off if we could just get rid of the corruption and fix the system. The real problem is that the system is so broken that it can't be fixed. It has to be disposed of and the only way to get rid of it is a nuclear war, or a zombie apocalypse, or an alien invasion, a terrible disease....

You know, whatever caused the thing. It really depends on the writer, but at the end of the day something wiped out everything that came before and this time we're going to start over and get it right. This time, there won't be any corrupt politicians because if they try that bullshit, we'll just feed them to a zombie...

Yeah.

The average post-apocalyptic fiction fan has a heroic fantasy. We're going to save the world. We don't necessarily count the cost because it's just a fantasy, right? I mean, I spent how many hours playing Everquest and slaughtering the orcs in Crushbone? The people in the fantasy don't exist. Except...

Except, I wonder.

Every power mad dictator in the history of history has had a vision of a world (or nation) that he ran himself and how it would be "for the people." They all thought that they would be the one to save the world. Lenin thought he would feed all of the people instead of starving them. Mao thought his Great Leap Forward would put the Chinese economy on par with the economies of industrialized world instead of killing tens of millions. Pol Pot thought that moving backward was best for the people and created his own apocalypse by killing half of its inhabitants in order to murder the educated and save Cambodia. Yes, even Hitler thought that slaughtering millions would prevent them from breeding and result in the eventual evolution of a Master Race that would then improve the world. Every one of them thought they were working for the betterment of the human race (in Hitler's case he had a narrower view of what constituted a human than I do) and they were all wrong. Every last one of them was a disgusting excuse for a human being. None of them should be remember positively by anyone.

And those were the closest we've come to an actual apocalypse, especially with Hitler and Pot. (Hitler killed more people. Pot killed a larger percentage of the population of the territory he controlled. I'll leave it to the reader to decide which is worse.)

So, nerd friends, I guess my point is this: Be careful what you wish for. The cost is too high, and the outcome is probably not going to be what you desire. Even if you get what you want it probably won't turn out the way you want. But, as long as we're keeping it to people who don't actually exist, I guess we're okay. Just don't let the zombies eat T-dog. I know, too late, but I miss that guy.

Prose Bono

The Bite of Reality
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I haven't been writing much recently, which is a result of my head being in too many directions at once to focus on a story. What I've been doing, in hopes that it will jog my muse into action, is reading. This can go one of two ways: I'll be inspired by really good writing, or my muse will spitefully say 'I can do better' when I run into the bad.

What I'm not sure it will do, is the mediocre. I was reading a series – two, actually, by the same author – which I won't name as I'm not going to be kind to them. It's not an author I know or who knows me, so breathe! Both of them shared the same problem. As a matter of fact, I started reading the second series to see if it had the same issues as the first. Don't get me wrong – I finished both series, a total of eight books (Indie novels, so shortish) – the author will get paid. They weren't badly written, technical-sound, just... the premises were fantastic. The delivery was sheer wish fulfillment.

There was no real tension or conflict in either series. Sure, there were contrived moments where I could

tell the author intended the reader to feel some alarm for the characters. There was even a plot point where I wondered if a secondary character (and a child) would be sidelined to the main characters plans and goals (this did not happen). Overall, though, everything the MC wanted, the MC got. One of the series involves the MC giving up her freedom, which set my teeth on edge. I don't know if it's just me, having been in a position where I had no autonomy, but the MC shrugging and going along with it almost had me walling the book (gently, as I was reading on my phone). In both series, the MC is given almost unimaginable power that will grant them everything they could possibly desire, and there's no consequence to it. Not really. Some unpleasant jealousies, but never any real danger.

I was talking to a couple of friends when I finished the second set of books, about my irritation with them. One of them, who may be the best judge of character I've ever met, pointed out that it's likely the author has never had to deal with real hardship in their life. It's difficult to write a try fail sequence that has real weight until you know what that feels like. Or at least have sufficient imagination to model it in your characters. I'm not actually saying you need to have an awful life to write conflict. You definitely do not. But you must realize that life isn't about getting everything you want, without a few scars along the way (both mental and physical).

The other problem that played into this feeling of wish-fulfillment is pacing. Since the books were short, there was little time to spend on developing the plot points. Which meant that there was more telling than showing, especially when it came to character development and (sigh) romance. Characters trusted one another far too easily and quickly. Alliances formed that felt all too convenient to the author, without any real foundation built for them. It was all too easy.

Which likely means my muse is going to be a cast-iron b^%\$ to the next story I dive into... I apologize to my characters in advance!

I read for escapism, so I don't mind unreal books. I really love a good happy ending. I resent when that is given too cheaply to the characters. You know what's a really good book with a happy ending? Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*. It's not an easy book to read, it's based solidly in very real war, pain, and tragedy. But the ending is... wonderful. Hopeful. Makes me hug the idea of it to my heart where it can warm me and give me courage to keep on.

Thoughts on Writing

By A. C. Cargill

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

We writers are, if nothing else, true individuals, and in my view, it is the main reason for us writing, but that can be a challenge. Sometimes I sit and think, "What the hell am I going to write?" And then I get a little idea and start typing. And then suddenly the words are flowing out, and before I know it a whole chapter is written.

Some "experts" say to follow this formula or that, but you must write first and foremost for yourself. I certainly do. So much of me is in my writing. Not only do my various characters have this trait or that trait of mine, but they are also infused with my philosophy and my view of life in general. This trait is shared by many writers and is partly why I read books – to experience the mind of the author.

We live in an age of conformity, which is actually nothing new. Too many people think that if people conform to some set standard, we will all get along better. Where the arts are concerned, though, we must all follow our inner instincts. My novels may not adhere to a formula or standard, but they were never meant to. In fact, they purposely don't, nor should yours. For example, as I turn to the querying

process, seeking to catch the eye of a publisher, I know they will tell me that my novel has to start out with an attention-getting bang. Sorry, it starts as it needs to start, or so my beta readers have told me. And it keeps the voice truly my own.

Your thoughts welcome.

Please check out my novels. And thanks for reading.