

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
January 2023

FICTION

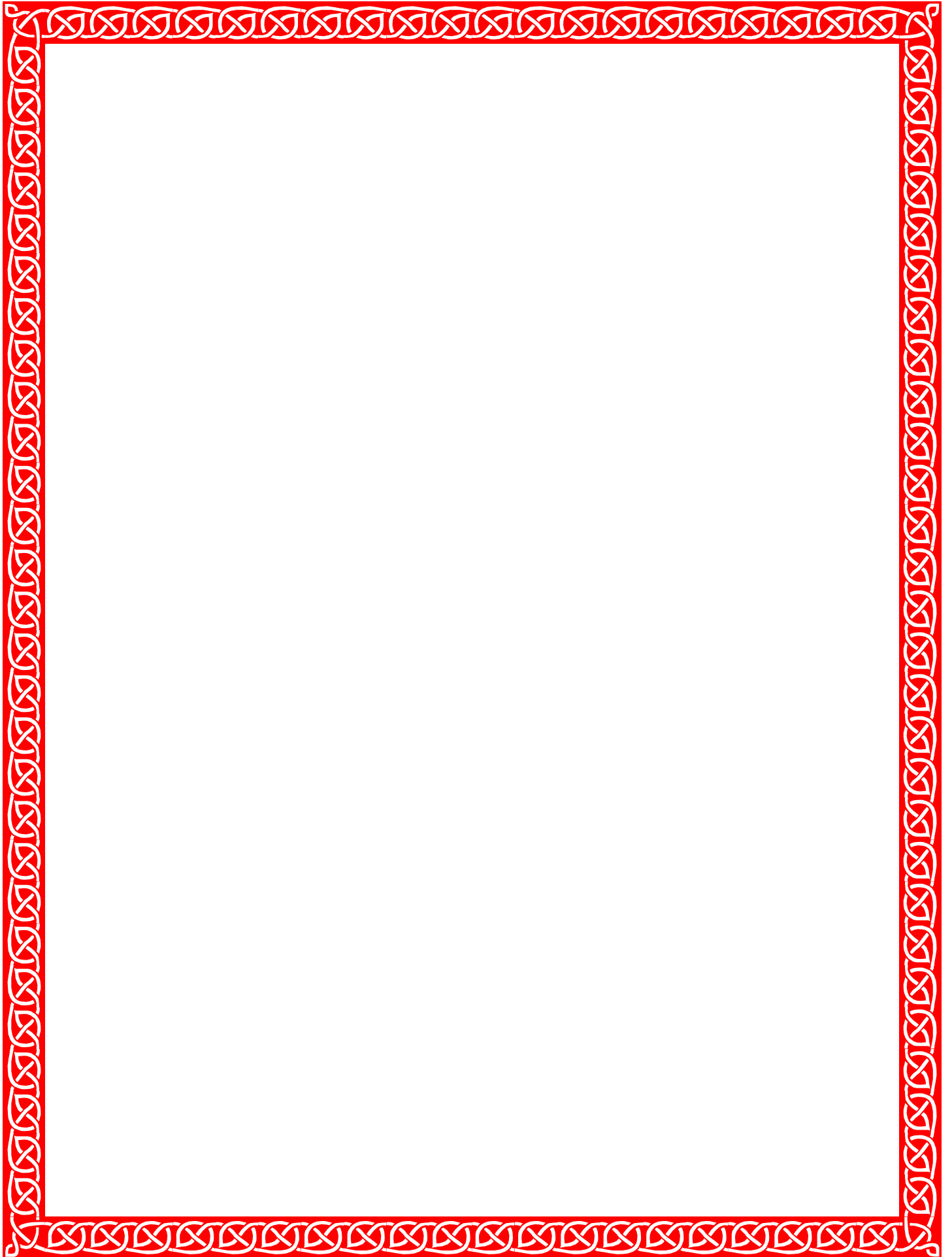
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Editorial

We have new writers to replace some of the old writers who have gone on their way, stopped writing, or whatever. Our current list of writers, and where they may be found, follows below.

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



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Fiction

Can't Go Home Again

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When those who come home, don't.

Those who serve always come back changed, and reconnecting with loved ones can be difficult – like trying to find a way past a glass wall. The Christmas season can exacerbate the feeling and make matters more trying. What if the Spirit of the Season lent a helping hand?

The story

Each of the tales in this collection focuses on veterans coming home as Christmas Day approaches. Many of the stories are science fiction or fantasy oriented, but not all of them are. Nor are the resolutions to these tales easy or sanguine.

Follow a group of lycanthropic SEALs as they wait for a High Value Target to arrive in William Lehman's Christmas in the Mountains. Then prepare yourself for a female sniper's story of fighting zombies in Soccer Mom, by Cedar Sanderson. D Lawdog's Memories, Like Dust follows a first responder arriving at a crash scene that leaves him and a family devastated and searching for a ray of hope in the Christmas season.

The Way the World Ends is a space opera by Fiona Grey. What happens when the men at the sharp end have only duty to drive them forward? When their government leaves them – along with the colonists they were supposed to defend – to die on a world with inhospitable native inhabitants? Denton Salle's The Weight of the Past follows a veteran who lost his first love on the battlefield and now struggles not to lose his pregnant wife. Meanwhile, JL Curtis' Home For Christmas emphasizes that there's more than one way to ameliorate the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress.

Christopher DiNote's Tracking Santa brings St. Nicholas to help a veteran in need, so he can be there for his wife and daughter. Nothing is worse for a pilot than to be permanently grounded, so Santa comes to see the family in need of a Christmas gift that can't be found under the tree. Empty Chair remembers those who have fallen and will not be coming home when no one else will countenance the memory, and Homeless No More brings the Fae themselves to see what may be done for those who struggle with demons no one else can see.

Every story has something to offer, but these are some of the stand outs in the lineup. Can't Go Home For Christmas is not your average feel-good anthology of cookie-cutter Christmas tales. It looks at the darkness of the trenches, at the losses and the grinning demons...and then it reaches for the toolkit that will light the lamps to keep these beasts at bay.

The characters

The characters are all excellent. The heroes and heroines have different degrees of post-traumatic stress and what works for one may not help the other. That's the beauty of having multiple stories on the

same theme with different leads; every character is an individual, which means his or her method of healing is as well.

The world

Each world is varied: some are like enough to ours to be no different, others are in fantasy or science fiction settings. But even with the emphasis on character, there is enough description for each setting to be vibrant and memorable in its own way. A reader will not have difficulty remembering them once he finishes the successive tales.

The politics

Politics only intrude into the stories insofar as they affect the characters in their separate situations. Otherwise, the anthology is completely apolitical.

Content warning

This book contains cursing, swearing, and descriptions of combat that may be upsetting for younger readers. Beyond this, there is nothing objectionable in the book at all.

Who is it for?

Veterans – particularly those who have post-traumatic stress. The intention of the authors is to provide bibliotherapy for veterans and their families. Bibliotherapy is a tool that primarily relies on fiction to achieve its goals, and the authors' aim for *Can't Go Home Again* is to “model a path for hope and healing.” The positive reviews on Amazon attest that the model works, and veterans who have read it have recommended it there.

Why read it?

It's a good collection of Christmas-themed stories written by authors – several of whom are veterans – for veterans. If a reader wants insight into Post-Traumatic Stress, is related to a veteran, or knows one who might benefit from the book, then this is a must-purchase and a must-read. Post-traumatic stress isn't the end of the road...

...and though it isn't easy, it is possible to go home again – just in time for Christmas.

The Christmas Spirit by Lou Aguilar

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It's not Christmas until someone falls off something. George Bailey falls in the river, or Hans Gruber falls off Nakatomi Plaza

This year Lindsay Lohan falls off a mountain in a festive *Overboard* pastiche, and in *The Christmas Spirit*, Caroline York falls off a ship. And in love.

But when she goes in search of her savior, she finds that he may be a supernatural specter.

Fortunately, there's nothing of gravy nor the grave to this ghost.

The Story

Our tale opens on a ship just off the New England coast. Caroline York and her fiancé Peter are at the company Christmas party put on her tight-fisted editor, drinking champagne with the other writers from their trendy magazine. Not feeling very festive, and a little tipsy, Caroline decides to take a bottle of bubbly up to the crew. On her way back, a whale causes a swell that knocks Caroline overboard and into the icy drink.

But before you can say hypothermia, a sailboat with golden sails sweeps in and the ruggedly handsome Tate fishes her out. He takes her back to his lighthouse apartment and chastely revives her. They talk. She takes the bed and he sleeps on the couch (or does he— sleep, that is?). The next morning, he's nowhere to be found, and the Coast Guard finds Caroline alive, well, and very confused. This lighthouse has been automated for years.

In her search to track down Tate, Caroline finds that she's not the only person to be rescued by this guy and no one knows anything about him. What is going on? She persuades her boss to make this a research project for a potential article, but Peter isn't pleased about Caroline's interest in another man, real, a hallucination, or dead. He hires a private eye to follow her (because that's not stalkery at all), and Caroline realizes she's willing to risk everything rescue her rescuer from a curse.

Now, I know I'm not the target audience for a Hallmark Christmas movie in prose. But there's a long tradition of telling ghost stories at this time of year, and there's not a stake of holly through my heart. Yet. Author Lou Aguilar brings warmth to the bleak midwinter, penning the classic Christmas movie that old Hollywood never made. Though set in present day, its sentiments are firmly in the 1940s and at this time of year aren't we all a little sentimental?

The Characters

Caroline York doesn't really love her job or her fiancé. But she's got determination and drive. We're drawn to her and sympathize both with her feeling trapped and her desire to show gratitude regardless.

Peter Fleming is a lawyer, and with a name and career like that how can he not be despicable?

Full of good rum, information, and wisdom, Captain Fowler knows all about Tate's secret and serves as Caroline's guide.

And of course there's Tate, whose time is running out if he's going to return to the land of the living.

The World

It's a Christmas movie in paperback, without the budget restrictions of a greeting card cable channel. Caroline moves from high society, to the stormy seas, and back again. Meanwhile, Tate faces an other-worldly judge, and the naughty/nice scales have eternal consequences.

The Politics

Except for a few swipes at woke culture, there's less of a political agenda here than a Dickens novel.

Content Warning

Things get a little spicy when Tate undresses Caroline and tries to rub some warmth into her limbs. But it stops there. If you want anything hotter, you're better off putting cayenne in your cocoa.

Who is it for?

Well, I suppose it's for anyone who wants a tasteful supernatural Christmas romance ala *The Flying Dutchman*. If you wish they still made movies like they used to, you'll find some satisfaction here.

Why read it?

Because Christmas calls for magic.

The Dabare Snake Launcher by Joelle Presby

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The first entry in a new Afrofuturistic series

When a wealthy West African family, the Sadous, snag the contract to build Earth's first space elevator, everyone wants a piece of the action. All the major players in financing and construction, geology and real estate, are simultaneously playing nice and stabbing each other in the back, even as corporate espionage threatens to topple construction before it even gets off the ground.

Ultimately, the success of the space elevator becomes the responsibility of the youngest Sadous, Pascaline and Maurie.

One wants to have her own career, and the other finds herself plagued (or is it possessed?) by a water goddess.

The Story

Right now the only thing we lack to build a space elevator is to make carbon fiber supports long enough to support one. Mount Kilimanjaro is the ideal location, with enough nearby mountains and dormant volcanos to serve as launch sites for support shuttles. In *The Dabare Snake Launcher* Joelle Presby imagines a near future where that final piece is finally available.

Tchami "Chummy" Fabrice manages to arrange a deal to get his family the support site development contract and places his nieces, Maurie and Pascaline, in charge. If his nepotism is uncovered, he loses everything. If his nieces fail to deliver, the same. Maurie receives news of her new assignment while recovering from a severe fever in a bush hospital. A side effect of her illness and medication is hallucinating spectral snakes and the water goddess, Mami-Wata. Well, it's probably just a side effect and her imagination. Probably. Maybe.

Pascaline, despite her lack of formal education, is an engineering prodigy. She wants as little to do with her family as possible, though, and is less than thrilled to learn that acquiring the mountain land to build the launcher requires her to marry Adamou, whose family has resided on the mountain volcano for generations. More than that, he's also a geologist with a spiritual connection to the place. He actually finds

the abrasive Pascaline charming and has no objections to marrying her. Actually, irritating her amuses him.

Meanwhile, all the investors of the various corporations and their minions are doing their best to use the project to acquire status. Some only want money. Some just want power. Outside companies want to steal secrets to get leverage. And the gods only know what they want. It's left up to the reader to decide if the gods even exist. The story places greater emphasis on the social engineering that needs to happen for a large-scale project than the technical engineering, which isn't a slight against the implementation of Presby's clearly meticulous research. Ambitious projects draw ambitious people, perfect for human stories.

The Characters

The Dabare Snake Launcher has a cast to rival a cable soap opera. Trying to mention all the point of view characters would be unwieldy, as they're all distinct, endearing, or despicable in turn. But a few players are the clear stars.

Tchami "Chummy" Fabrice is the wheeler-dealer distant gay "uncle" at the center of the growing cluster-you-know-what. Just clever enough to succeed, and foolish enough to be dangerous, he and his assistants pull all the strings.

Cousins Pascaline and Maurie are far removed from the corporate world in which their uncle thrives. Engineering and logistic prodigies, they're motivated by obligation to their family. Pascaline may even have to marry Prince Adamou to secure the land, when she'd rather be free to pursue a solo career. While she lays the groundwork, Maurie struggles to keep the supplies moving. The fact that Pascaline is a procrastinator and Maurie is recovering from an illness that has her hallucinating giant snakes only complicates an insurmountably difficult situation.

Adamou seems to like his family and accepts his role in it. He loves the mountain and using his charm to get what he wants from people, while maintaining an edge appropriate to a tribal chief.

The World

It's Afrofuturism without being Wakanda. The world is run by both tribal alliances and self-driving cars, with a hint of mysticism. But these are just bits of texture in story that is centered in the world of megacorporations and muddy job sites. Greedy, ambitious people and those who work for them will likely forever and always find themselves in the same places and situations, regardless of the available technology. The only reason it's sci-fi is because the technology of the world is just advanced enough to make the idea of a space elevator plausible.

The Politics

The only politics are family and corporate. It's actually surprising that the entire focus is on private industry with no geopolitical angle at all.

Content Warning

A couple of F-bombs and Pascaline accuses Adamou of checking out her boobs (he totally was, too) is about the extent of it. In a cutthroat world like this no one actually bleeds.

Who is it for?

This would make a great HBO series, so anyone who likes intellectual prestige television with huge casts and where boardrooms are battlefields will love it. If you've ever wanted to see into the world and minds of those tasked with "making things happen," this is for you.

Why read it?

The Dabare Snake Launcher is a nuanced, realistic portrayal of what it would take to build an elevator to space and the strong personalities those who would try. It's impressive in its realism and complexity, well-crafted, and interesting.

Death Cloud by RJ Batla

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I hope to one day meet RJ Batla, like maybe at a con or something. On that day, I will initiate a three-step process:

- 1.) Shake his hand and congratulate him on his awesome books.
- 2.) Offer to buy him a drink sometime.
- 3.) Give him a dirty look and a lecture about keeping people up all night when they have to pick their kids up the next day and take them to celebrate Christmas with their extended family. 'Taint fair

Seriously guys, be careful with Batla's newest, Death Cloud. It causes this weird disease where you can't take your eyes off the page and sleeping becomes something that other people do. I couldn't put this thing down. That can be a problem if you've got some weird real world stuff going on like, oh, I dunno work or family or school or something. It's worth it. Just plan a vacation or send the kids to Grandma's house or something. I mean, who doesn't need some time off?

Death Cloud is a mix between Steampunk, Fantasy, Superhero Fiction and a fight movie (ala Bloodsport) or a fighting game (similar to like a Mortal Kombat or Soul Blade) although the Steampunk elements are a lot less pronounced than in the first book. It's a really entertaining mix. Given the fact that the supers in the book have levels to their powers, I kind of wonder if maybe Batla hasn't done a bit of pen and paper RPGing as well. This one sets up and moves.

Those of you who have read the first book will remember that it revolved around the trials and travails of one Jayton Baird and his training and journey to compete in a tournament. Well, now he's there and the fights are intense. Watching Jayton try to navigate these fights and plan for his enemies and their abilities is fascinating. Remember when you were a kid and you'd sit across the lunch table at school and argue over who would win in a fight between Green Lantern and Superman? (hint: Green Lantern. Kryptonite is green.) This book is like a series of those fights, except that most of the heroes in Death Cloud have more powers than your average comic book superhero.

And it gets better too, because not only is there a tournament going on, there is a war going on too. This is not Marvel's Civil War either. It's a war fought the way real wars are fought: As a battle royal, two sides against each other and piles of bodies. It's entertaining but it's a little crazy. I mean, how many different powers can hit all at the same time? What kind of carnage could that cause? And what does war look like on a world where people's most potent weapons aren't the ones in their hands, they're the

powers locked inside their bodies? It's an interesting look at something I hadn't really considered before, at least with these kinds of powers.

The characters in the book are pretty amazeballs. Jayton's team is composed of some totally awesome people on it. They're focused on their twin missions of winning the war and helping Jayton win the tournament, but they have a lot of other things going on besides. There are romances brewing and personal issues abound. I actually had pegged one of them as a bad guy, but it turns out I was wrong. It looks like they really were who they claimed to be and I'm just a suspicious asshole. Who knew? (Huh? Whaddaya mean everybody?)

There is a cast of villains here as well. Batla did a really good job of making the villains in Death Cloud believable. Most of them want riches and power but how is that different than what ordinary people want? (If you disagree think about it this way: You may be comfortable financially or you may not, but you probably want a nicer car or a bigger house. You may claim you don't want power, but there's probably something you'd like to change in society. It takes power to do that.) They're willing to take things further than a lot of us probably would, but those people exist in the real world as well. Gang bangers, Mafia members, politicians, etc. are all willing to go to extreme lengths to get what they want. I like villains that make sense. I like villains who do what they do for a reason. Batla did this right.

Our main villain, once again, is the evil Malstrak. He's crazy and wants to run everything. Okay, so that's an archetype from history, but it works. He's got followers and an agenda. He's not going to lose no matter what happens, just ask him. All of Death Cloud is focused on the defeat of this one individual. He's a batshit insane wannabe dictator with an attitude problem. He's the kind of guy I can love to hate. He's perfect.

Our hero, Jayton Baird is believable because he is flawed. He has the same power that makes Malstrak such a complete nutcase (nope, not a spoiler. It was revealed in like the first ten pages of Fire Eyes Awakened, the first book.) and he struggles to overcome it. How he deals with it makes for an interesting subplot. I'm waiting to see where this goes in the next book, because there is something building here and I can't tell what. I'm waiting for the big reveal. Something big is going to happen because of this power I can't wait to find out what it is. He also finds himself dealing with a major recurring distraction throughout the story. I kept waiting for the distraction to kill him.

Per Batla's mailing list emails, Death Cloud is the second in a four-book series. I'm waiting (im) patiently for the next two. The book obviously sets up a sequel and it promises to be a good one. Keep your eyes peeled, because I'm sure I'll be reviewing it here.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Epic Battles

Dignity by Ken Layne
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

You may be familiar with Ken Layne's work through his wonderful magazine / field guide Desert Oracle, and its audio companion Desert Oracle Radio. Dignity acquaints us with yet another side of Layne's work in this beautiful epistolary novel about going back to nature in a world increasingly collapsing due to greed and lack of ethics. A story of hope and strife that leaves one hoping Ken Layne has more novels on the way. Dignity is a utopian/dystopian novel by Ken Layne currently available from Desert Oracle Books. <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9780983559825>

Told through a series of letters, Dignity tells the story of a group of friends that take on the horrors of society by leaving it behind in search of a more natural way of life. They don't plan a revolution but rather fall into one through life style changes. Several times they are infiltrated and the powers that be fight back as they feel threatened by the throwing off of an outdated and failing system.

Dignity is one of the best books I've read in a long time, and I dare say that it is a masterpiece. Layne masterfully builds characters that are for the most part only present off of the page, and at the same time showing us a landscape that may be familiar but shines with a new beauty through the intense yet simple language of the book. One could almost look at this book as a manual on how to live in harmony with the natural world and one's fellow human beings.

The adversity that the people in the book face, while they have done nothing but try to take care of themselves and neighbors, is strikingly accurate and exposes how fragile yet paranoid the systems that claims to uphold our society truly are. This book is a quiet and peaceful protest against everything we know to be wrong but have come to accept and take for granted. Overall, a beautiful story with loveable characters and a blueprint for what is possible as we face environmental and societal break down.

Empire of Silence by Christopher Ruocchio

Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

Are you looking for a great new voice in space opera and science fiction in general? Look no further, when it comes to epic space opera Christopher Ruocchio is a master of the craft and bound to become one of the classics of our time. This book will leave you hungry for more, and fortunately for us there are five more books already finished in the series, with more to come. If you like stories on a grand scale that don't skimp on the entertainment or beautiful prose, then Empire of Silence is the book you've been looking for.

Empire of Silence is Book One of the Sun Eater series by Christopher Ruocchio,

Hadrian is a young noble whose life is about to be turned upside-down. He believes that he is being primed to take over his father's position in the monarchy but dreams of being a scholar traveling the cosmos. His beliefs and dreams are torn out from under him, and he is thrust into a life of adventure, complete with alien races, foreign cultures, duels, and all the trappings of royalty. Can he balance these forces in his life and still find a way to travel the stars?

It's hard to believe that this is Christopher Ruocchio's debut novel, for he displays all of the talents of a seasoned author. The story is engaging and fast paced, coupled with beautiful writing style. For a book that is 700 pages long I tore through it and did not want to stop reading. A book of this scope usually has a few lulls and boring parts, but Empire of Silence remained entertaining and thought provoking the whole way through. Ruocchio's world-building and characterization are on point. All of the main characters are fully developed, with believable motivations and actions, unlike many space operas I have read in the past. Ruocchio's work has been compared to Iain M. Banks and Frank Herbert, the latter being a worthy comparison, however I find his work to be much superior to that of Banks. Normally I stay away from series, but this book was so good that I will definitely be reading all six books.

Book Link: <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9780756413019>

Ghost Dreams by Mathew Hughes

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

I have over a dozen books sitting on my TBR (To Be Reviewed) shelf, but when Ghost Dreams showed up, I dropped everything. Hughes is my favourite living author and a national treasure. He is best known for his twenty or so SF&F novels but has also won awards for his mysteries, and his *What the Wind Brings* (previously reviewed in the ORB, March 2021) is a masterpiece of historical fiction. With Ghost Dreams, Hughes crosses mystery with the supernatural to produce a thriller of gangsters, mercenaries, burglars and ghosts.

The premise is simple: A professional burglar learns of a long-abandoned mansion filled with now potentially valuable antiques and paintings. Unfortunately, the house was abandoned because it was haunted, and the vengeful ghost attaches itself to our hero. Caught up in trying to solve the ghost's 50-year-old mystery drags our mild-mannered burglar and his autistic daughter into a series of dangerously escalating encounters with stone-cold killers.

The mystery twists and turns and kept me guessing until the end. I can usually spot where an author has tucked in some inconspicuous detail that will later turn out to be the crucial clue, but Hughes is clever than most. The burglar's underworld contacts and insider knowledge, and the daughter's computer skills create a uniquely qualified detective team to go after the ghost's cold case.

Hughes himself grew up in a family of petty criminals (his Patreon account includes captivating excerpts detailing his childhood from his upcoming autobiography) so his depiction of the criminal underworld is both detailed and compelling. Particularly fascinating is the distinction between the commercial thieves and fences (who view themselves as merely individuals contributing to the insurance industry) and the much darker world of mobsters and the criminally wealthy.

I do not know if Hughes has similarly in-depth familiarity with autism, but I greatly appreciate his realistic, non-stereotypical depiction of the daughter's autism, her preference for computers over people, and the evolution of the father/daughter relationship. I also quite like how Hughes goes about developing both the ghost and its relationship with our heroes.

The result is a fast-moving thriller of a father and daughter looking forward to his quiet retirement but instead getting caught up in events beyond their control. They can only react moment to moment, as ghosts and gangsters turn their lives upside down. A great, fast read.

Oh, and don't let the Hughes name under 'publisher' on Amazon.ca discourage you: This is a first-rate book from a top traditional publisher. Ghost Dreams is published in the UK by the prestigious press, PS Publishing. PS is currently in a dispute with Amazon, but graciously allowed Hughes to self-publish the e-book in North America to match their UK release date, the PS hard and soft cover editions to come out later. If you have issues with Amazon, the ebook is also on Kobo and other usual ebook outlets.

The Hollow Boys by Douglas Smith

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

Fans of superhero comics will enjoy Smith's Dream Rider Saga, but *The Hollow Boys* should also appeal to the general fantasy reader. Indeed, elements reminded me strongly of Gaiman's *Neverwhere*.

The story revolves around an eccentric millionaire orphan who pens the Dream Rider comic by day and fights crime by night through his ability to track and enter other people's dreams. When street kids start disappearing, he seeks them through their dreams, confronting rat-like monsters, a giant snake, a witch and her bogymen servants, and ultimately, a supervillain.

I confess it took me a while to figure out that I was reading a superhero comic. You know how when you're reading a really good novel, you stop seeing the words on the page and instead see the scene unfold in front of you? I was having trouble getting off the page and into the scene the first few pages of *The Hollow Boys*, when suddenly, I realized that instead of the scene itself, I was mentally picturing the black and white panels of a page in a graphic novel.

That was an odd experience, and a first for me, but once I realized this was actually a graphic novel—sans graphics—the story trundled along surprisingly well. Initially annoyed (as one is with all superhero comics) by the hyperbole of our hero being not just rich, but the richest person in the city; not just in personal danger but fighting to save the world; and so on; all was forgiven once I understood these were appropriate superhero genre tropes. Similarly, I found some of the repartee a bit forced at first, but placed inside a graphic novel's speech bubble, it was fine. Once one goes with the flow, the story of *The Hollow Boys* is inventive, engaging, and boundless fun.

Teen zombies, Buddhist monks, SWAT teams, Raiders-of-the-Lost-Ark-style warehouses, corporate raiders, a (nonflying) magic carpet, and astral travel—what more could someone wish for? Smith manages to throw all these disparate elements at the story to form a truly cohesive universe in which to set his tale. The underlying--and unresolved--mystery of the missing parents works well. There are some nice character arcs, a charming YA romance subplot, and even though the epilogue makes it clear there's more to come, the ending of this episode is entirely satisfying.

I enjoyed *The Hollow Boys* a great deal, turning pages long after I should have been abed. Smith has produced the best Canadian superhero adventure since James Alan Gardner's *Dark vs. Spark* novels. I trust we'll see much more of the Dream Rider Saga . . . and I can't wait for the movies.

The Institute by Stephen King

Review by Jon D. Swartz

By my reckoning, Stephen King is now 75 years old. Still, he doesn't seem to be slowing down – at least when it comes to his writing. I've enjoyed the books he wrote in his 60s and 70s as much as the ones he wrote when he was younger. *The Institute*, published in 2019, is no exception.

The plot of *The Institute* centers around a 12-year-old genius, Luke Ellis. When his parents are murdered, Luke is kidnapped and taken to the Institute, a facility that houses abducted children who have superpowers, such as telepathy and telekinesis. The children are studied and then used by the government for clandestine geo-political purposes, including murder.

The book is also a grim warning of just how far someone can go in their quest for revenge. The villain – Arrah’s mother is the first villain of the book, although she’s not the last – is ready to tear down just about everything, including her daughters, to take her revenge. Perhaps she has reason, Arrah thinks as much. It doesn’t excuse everything she does and Arrah makes no bones about it. What seems, at first, to be a simple story becomes something greater along the way.

At the same time, however, there are two weaknesses. The background is stunning, but it is often obscure. It’s hard to keep track of who’s who, what’s what and a lot of other details you need to follow in order to read the book. Like most ‘diverse’ books, we don’t have an instinctive understanding of the setting and need more explaining; the book could have benefited from a detailed outline of the setting, perhaps as an appendix where it wouldn’t have impeded the storytelling.

A more serious problem is that the story seems to swing around a lot, as if the author wasn’t sure where she intended to go before settling on a course. Things change, oddly; it starts with Arrah making a bargain for power, then finding herself battling her mother and an entity who may be the worst. Questioning everything you’re told is a theme in the book. Really, I expected it to stick with Arrah making the bargain, discovering the downsides, probably being kicked out for it and, finally, coming back in glory. There’s probably a story there, if someone wants to do it.

Overall, Kingdom of Souls reminds me of Children of Blood and Bone, although the storylines are very different. In some ways, the setting is better. In others, it’s a little too different. In both cases, however, the stories are YA; suitable for teenagers, less suitable for older and younger readers.

A Long Time Until Now, by Michael Z Williamson
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

I found this book from a thread in the Galaxy’s Edge Fan Club. It was a time travel novel with an awesome cover, so I had to buy it.

Since I bought A Long Time Until Now book at Trad Pub prices, I read it! So here we are with another review from me! I listened to this one as an audiobook, without reading the eBook. So, without further ado, let’s get on with this review. Let’s do it!

The Story

A military unit is thrust back into Paleolithic times with only their guns and portable hardware. Ten soldiers on convoy in Afghanistan suddenly find themselves lost in time and in Earth’s Paleolithic Asia with no idea how they arrived or how to get back. The shock is severe.

They discover groups of the similarly displaced: Imperial Romans, Neolithic Europeans, and a small cadre of East Indian peasants. Despite their technological advantage, there are only ten with no known way home. Two more time-travelers arrive from a future far beyond the present. These time travelers may have the means to get back, but they aren’t giving it up. In fact, they may have a treacherous agenda of their own, one that may very well lead to the death of the displaced in a harsh and dangerous era.

Unlike most military science fiction I love to read, this wasn’t an action-packed novel. It wasn’t my usual action adventure story; it was a slow burn to an extremely satisfying conclusion. I wasn’t able to read this book from start to finish in one sitting because of its length, but I wanted to. I felt like I was

Extensive mental and physical testing takes place in what is called the Front Half; after testing, the children are moved one-by-one to the Back Half. No child ever comes back from the Back Half.

Another main character in the book is a former cop, Tim Jamieson. The novel opens with Jamieson, who arrives in a small South Carolina town and takes a job as a “night knocker”, a person who goes about at night checking that doors are locked, with the police department. He tells others that he takes the job because his grandfather had been a night knocker. Tim becomes an essential part of the novel’s plot when he and Luke meet later in the story.

Other main characters include Maureen Alvorson, an Institute cleaning woman (who becomes Luke’s friend after he helps her with her money problems); Avery Dixon, a gifted telepath who aids Luke in his escape plans; Trevor Stackhouse, the head of security at the Institute; Julia Sigsby, the Institute’s boss; and Orphan Annie, a street person who believes in aliens but is good with a gun.

The climax of the story occurs when, with the aid of Luke, the children held in the Institute are able to communicate with -- and combine their talents -- with other children held in similar Institutes all over the world.

Reviews of this novel were, for the most part, positive; some readers were turned off, however, by King’s references to Donald Trump and his administration.

It has been reported that The Institute is being adapted for a future television mini-series. The edition I read has 555 pages, and will take some major adapting, even for a TV mini-series.

Kingdom of Souls by Rena Barron Review by Christopher Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Kingdom of Souls is one of those books that is quite difficult to review.

It was actually mentioned to me by someone who read The Zero Blessing, with a suggestion that Rena Barron copied my work. That isn’t true. Save for skin colour and (apparent) powerlessness, Caitlyn and Arrah – the heroine of Kingdom of Souls – have very little in common. They come from different worlds, have different backgrounds, different magics ... in short, they’re not the same.

Kingdom of Souls is set in a very African setting, with elements drawn from all over north and west Africa. The heroine comes from a line of witch doctors, powerful magic users. But she fails at magic, fails to call upon the ancestors and can’t even cast the simplest spell. Her mother, who is terribly abusive, is incredibly disappointed in her. Many of her peers openly mock her. However, when children in the kingdom begin to disappear, Arrah undergoes the dangerous and scorned process of selling years of her life for magic. This leads her to discover the sinister truth behind the missing children, a deadly plot for revenge and – ultimately – that she is all that stands between her world and utter destruction.

There’s a lot I liked about the book. Arrah does not give up, even when the odds are stacked against her. She has no qualms about fighting bullies, even bullies with magic; later, when forced into semi-servitude, she finds loopholes that allow her to fight back and eventually break free. She has friends and a warm relationship with a boy who is practically her boyfriend, although this is strained – later on – when he’s tricked into having sex with the villain. Arrah is willing to take the ultimate risk, even to cut herself off from her community, to safeguard those she loves.

sucked into the pages of this book, which is just how I like it! The action that was there was enjoyable, furthered the plot and left you having a lot of fun. I wanted more detail from those firefights, since there were so few of them, but what was there was good. I also wanted more from the Roman legionnaires, they were the cool factor from the cover that sucked me in. Seriously, the cover scene was what sold me on this story, but the Romans don't show up for the first half of the book. One thing that might make this book hard to follow for non-veterans was the overuse of military jargon and acronyms. I understood them, but they even annoyed me. Otherwise, there was nothing about this plot that I couldn't buy into.

Okay, let's get into the weeds on this one! I'm a huge Alt History fan, so obviously the time travel aspect was a hit with me. It was my jam, and I had the bread ready and waiting. Because of that, the novel's cover spoke to me. I really loved it; that image is why I bought the book. However, when I finish the story Michael Z Williamson told and realized that the scene from the cover wasn't included, I was pissed. Further, there was a missed opportunity with those Latin time travelers on the book cover. The Roman Legion is where modern militaries trace their roots back too, so the side-by-side comparison could've strengthened this adventure saga. They could've done so much more with the Romans and taken this book to the next level.

Speaking of time travel novels, this one was one of the most plausible ones in this category that I've ever read. The way they entered the time anomaly and everything that happened as a result of this felt grounded in some reality, no matter how implausible. The author ingeniously created a theme of man versus nature survival. The way in which this was carried out kept my attention for all 22 hours of the audiobook. I loved seeing how various skills were used to allow the soldiers to survive and thrive in the Neolithic era.

However, this brings me to my major complaint. The soldiers that were on the two vehicles were almost too perfect for this mission. Soldiers are generally smart people, and I certainly served with some extremely well-educated individuals. Unfortunately, where the author lost me was in how useful everyone's skills were. The odds of having just the right skill set for this novel to work always struck me as farcical. That said, I know that this was as much a plot device to allow the story to work as anything else. As such, I was able to bite my tongue and drive on to see what else was in store for these stranded soldiers.

There was a lot about this story that I really loved. Part of what made me love this story was the world building and descriptions. The author did a bang-up job here, which I detailed above but it's worth repeating. I could imagine myself inside his story, fighting the Urushu primitives and fending off the woolly rhinos. This was the saving grace for this story and what I want more of from the sequel that the author is currently writing. Assuming I can afford the TradPub prices in this tight economy. But seriously, the world building was worth the price of admission into the Afghanistan pre-history!

One part of the story that I initially didn't like was how preachy the religious aspect felt. However, I grew to appreciate what the author was doing. It was very obviously pro-pagan and antagonistic to Christianity, but there were scenes at the end that brought it all together in a way that I appreciated. Further, as the story developed, we begin to see this evolve into a more nuanced approach. If this type of angle bugs you, I promise it's worth hanging in for the big reveal.

I know this review sounds a little negative, but I really did love the novel. I liked it enough that I'm trying to thoroughly and critically analyze it, partly so I can learn from what I didn't enjoy. Just so my review doesn't come off wrong, let's focus on more about what I did enjoy. One place that the author got

right, and it fit with what we know of human nature, was how all of the groups interacted. The plausibility and authenticity of these interactions shown is bright as the North Star. While there wasn't nearly as much interacting as I would've liked, what was there was done superbly. I do not know if the author is a trained historian, or merely did his research, but he sold me on his knowledge base. I was convinced, and with a bachelor and half of a master's degree in history, I'm practically an expert!

Characters:

A Long Time Until Now had ten main characters, way too many for me to connect with all of them. I struggle to name all of them. Many of these soldiers blended into the scenery, leaving you wondering who they were.

However, a few of these people stood out; Lieutenant Elliot, Sergeant First Class Spencer, Sergeant Casswell, Sergeant Alexander and Specialist Dalton. They were a motley collection of troops, thrown together in a convoy that was designed to drop personnel off at their new homes and continue moving. These convoys happen, I was on a few of them. However, the odds of finding people with just the right skill sets listed in this novel so these guys could survive would be astronomical. Seriously, I served with a lot of extremely intelligent soldiers with advanced degrees (Master's Degree and/or PhDs). That wasn't my issue, it was that these characters seemed to have just the right skills to let them survive.

While I liked some of the characters, but most left me scratching my head trying to figure out who the heck they were. Not bad, just meh. Maybe some of this was because it didn't feel like the head hopping between character point of use was done well? I sometimes couldn't tell who the POV character was, leading to my confusion.

Some of the reviewers said that this was a formatting issue from the book that carried over to the audiobook, but I can't verify that. It does fit with what I heard, so I thought it was worth mentioning.

I had one character I actively wanted to dropkick out of the nearest airlock: Sergeant Casswell was a stereotype of everything that I hate and made me want to throw the book several times. Glad I didn't succumb to my frustration; my iPhone just went past my warranty date!

I was less than satisfied with the characters, was how they were portrayed. Namely, I felt many felt flat. They lacked depth beyond their role as the possessor of whatever their skill set was. Oh, and Sergeant Casswell pissed me off. She was such a whiner, the antithesis of every female warrior I served with. Part of what I didn't like about her I can't mention on my family-friendly blog post, so we'll move on.

My dislike of Casswell, however, tied into my other complaint about this book. I'm no prude, but there was too damn much talk about sex and sexuality. We get it, soldiers are generally young and virile, operating during their peak sexual years. I'm aware what that entails, and so is your average reader. There was no need to dwell on it to the degree that it was, making me think that this aspect was more about the author and less about the story. I have to leave part of what I mean by this out of the review because I want this to be family friendly. What I can't say is that reproduction and consent were harped on in a way that took away from what was otherwise an amazing story. Seriously, it really felt gratuitous at the end.

The World:

This is the first book I've read by Michael Z Williamson, but I'd heard good things and his reviews were solid. I wasn't disappointed! This world was very flushed out and left you curious about the larger

universe. The author superbly illustrated the world that was Neolithic Afghanistan. The world was a lot of fun and left me wanting more from this universe. The world was very well flush out, describing everything about the universe where this grand time traveling adventure happened. There was never a point in that world where I couldn't suspend my disbelief, I deftly bought into the concept of a temporal rift. Not only could I, but I did envision myself setting.

This is one area where Michael Z Williamson's skill as an author shone through. This book was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. There wasn't a single spot in this novel where I couldn't visualize what was going on. I loved the Neolithic setting; I could picture every hill and dale. Heck, the scenery was set so well that I could even smell the rhino dung, let me tell you those beasts need to eat more fiber! Seriously, the scenery was described in vivid detail. The equipment was written with such attention to detail that your friendly neighborhood doomsday prepper was taking alone time to sooth their frayed nerves. However, when it comes to the characters, we get much less detail and that was frustrating. We know everything about their sex lives and body shape but not so much on their general appearance. I did love reading about the other historic cultures that stumbled through the time anomaly, my inner history nerd was geeking out hard core. If you love alt history and/or time travel, this book is worth your money and time. Overall, I loved the descriptions in this book.

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! I'd listen to more books by Dennis Holland, though he clearly wasn't a favorite of mine. His audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about, but it didn't sing to me either.

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 4 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

Book Cover:

Wow, how much can I gush over this cover before you tell me to shut up? It had a futuristic warrior, a Roman Legionnaire and an American GI fighting a woolly rhino from the top of an MRAP military vehicle. The color scheme for the cover set the perfect tone of gritty survival novel set in the distant past. The author's name and the book title were colored in such a way that they stood out, but at the same time blended in with the painting used for this cover. I loved it, would seriously put a print of this on my wall and give this cover artist 5 out of 5 Grenades!

Why buy it?

Before I put this review to bed, another aspect of the storytelling that I really appreciated was how the author resisted the urge to have the soldiers enter the past drastically oversupplied. They gear that they carried was exactly what you would expect from a mission they were on, which limited the soldier's ability to cope. Further, the lack of supplies meant that the characters had to improvise, adapt and overcome. Their journey of survival was what made me love this novel. We took the basic soldier skills, and then got to see them use the nonstandard manner. If it was my story, I might've been tempted give them more goodies to make it through their ordeal. Seriously, hats off to the author for resisting the temptation. The story was better because of it.

If you love epic sagas involving time travel that mess with your mind, then you should read this novel. Plenty of adventure and intrigue to keep you glued to your seat in this page-turning novel! It's the perfect blend of time travel and action orientated and military science fiction. If this sounds like your flavor of badassery, then you've come to the right place!

Overall, it's an amazing adventure, a look into Michael Z Williamson's twisted imagination, and leaves you wishing that his therapist has a therapist. This is a book I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Heck, I would even recommend that you buy the novel! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money! This is definitely a novel worth buying, versus merely reading for free at the library. I give this novel a solid 4 out of 5 Grenades!

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 Mad Mike fan. And then you track him down and climb into his window in your skivvies and he shoots 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!

Dauntless: The Lost Fleet 1 by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

John Henry wrote a trio of forgettable sci-fi novels prior to The Lost Fleet series. Fortunately, the publisher gave him another shot, albeit with a pen name, and The Lost Fleet series spawned more than a dozen brilliant novels in the series and its spinoffs.

Dauntless is the first book in the series and offers everything you'd want in a interstellar war novel: heroic hero, stacked odds, clever gimmick advantage, supporting cast of characters fair and foul, and a plot that moves.

The premise is that the Alliance is losing a 100-year space war to the Syndicate, a corporation-Mafia hybrid. For Star Trek fans, think of the episode A Piece of the Action, but imagine if the Federation bumped into a corporation-Mafia empire and not one planet.

An Alliance fleet deep in Syndicate territory finds a hibernation survival pod containing legendary hero Captain 'Black Jack' Geary -- still alive after a century in stasis. With his ID confirmed and a combination of Syndic treachery and Alliance stupidity wiping out the fleet's admirals, his century of seniority grants him command of the remainder of the Alliance fleet.

He uses his century-old appreciation of tactics and honor, which the naval academies conveniently forget to teach anymore, to extract the Alliance fleet from immediate danger and set it a-wandering to try and bring back the hypernet 'key' to Alliance space.

OK, you have to buy all these gimmicks at the outset, but when you do, you get a rollicking space opera story that is well-written and captivating. I'm surprised Netflix or Disney hasn't made a streaming series out of it.

I recently received the latest Campbell/Hemry books as a gift, but it's been so long, I decided to reread the series and spinoffs.

Enjoyed it.

Fearless: The Lost Fleet 2 by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

The sequel is as good as the initial book. Geary's plotting courses and battles as best he can against the Syndics and opposition from within the Alliance fleet. Supply plays a big recurring role in operations, as you might expect, but rarely get, from sci-fi books with hyperspace-level tech.

One of the hero gimmicks is that current fleet tactics consist of 'hey diddle diddle, charge up the middle,' which Geary uses against the Syndics to show how maneuvering can help inflict losses on the enemy while reducing losses on the Alliance fleet.

That ruffles feathers of other commanders, especially after liberating a POW camp and releasing Alliance commanders back into the fleet. Mutiny swirls around the newly released even as the Syndics close in. A worthy sequel.

Enjoyed it.

Courageous: The Lost Fleet 3 by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

If you're at the third book, like I am here, then you've bought into the premise and the characters, as I have. I'm still a bit mystified about fleet movements, but a little handwavium isn't such a bad thing. The Alliance Fleet under Capt. Geary keeps winning, the Syndics keep losing, and a very long story arc about humans not being alone in the universe starts to emerge.

Meanwhile, the debate over the cult of the individual festers in the background between expediency and institutional preservation. It gets a little well-worn after three books, even if the threat remains as Geary pulls off one narrow escape and victory after another.

Enjoyed it.

The Nightingale's Tooth by Sally McBride

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

I have followed Sally McBride's career since her first story in the original volume of Tesseracts, edited by Judith Merrill back in 1985. I used that story ("Totem") in my lectures for years afterwards as an example of what made Canadian SF different from the American version of the genre. So it was with great excitement I heard she had a new novel coming out and it is every bit as good as I hoped it would be.

The Nightingale's Tooth is set in 13th century France in an alternate timeline in which the Huns hold much of Europe and Christ is a forgotten prophet who gave up preaching rather than risk getting in

trouble with the authorities. Consequently, Europe is a patchwork of competing religions, with various gods interfering in the affairs of men for their own cruel amusement.

Our heroine is Vara Svobodova' bint Jameel, the young daughter of a noble household, whose father is a successful merchant trader and whose maternal grandfather is a bit of a Da Vinci figure: scholar, inventor, and Vara's teacher. Vara suffers from occasional visions which possess her at random inconvenient moments, the significance of which are not immediately obvious. Things take a worrisome turn when one vision shows her death only a few years hence.

Magic in *The Nightingale's Tooth* is unique—or at least, I've never seen anything quite like it before, though it has the feel of some old-world tradition that might stretch back to the beginning of time. McBride has tapped into timeless archetypes (the eagle, the crone, the orphaned boy) to give a sense of inevitability to how the *de resu* manifests, even though the characters themselves don't quite understand how any of it works.

The first half of the book is entirely Vara's first-person narration; Part Two switches to third person. It's a subtle shift in style, one many readers might not consciously notice given that McBride keeps the action going flat out, but it's one reason this novel is such a tour de force. We also get a second viewpoint character in Part Two, another necessary shift if the resolution of the trust issues that would inevitably arise at the climax is to be believable. Indeed, the novel is perfectly structured, the foreshadowing all there when one gets to that climax and looks back—but you didn't remotely see that coming, did you? Kind of a *Sixth Sense* moment, at least it was for me, which is even harder to pull off in print.

Another magnificent novel from Sally McBride, the first in a promised trilogy. I cannot wait to see where she takes things from here.

And hats off to Brain Lag, the oddly named but rapidly rising Canadian SF&F small press that has been knocking them out of the park lately. Publisher Catherine Fitzsimmons has latched onto some of the best Canadian genre talent out there, like Arlene Marks, Hugh Spencer, and now Sally McBride. I'm going to have to start taking a closer look at some of Brian Lag's other authors, because Fitzsimmons really seems to know what she's doing.

Slay Bells Ring – Operation Klaus, edited by J.R. Handley

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Coal is expensive, but bullets aren't.

Better watch out – better not cry! Santa's checked his Naughty List twice, and he has decided that lead is less pricey than coal. *Slay Bells Ring – Operation Klaus* sees Old St. Nick dealing with those who have been bad boys and girls personally.

The story

This wild holiday anthology begins with H.P. Holo's uproariously funny GameLit short story *The Last Great Hunt of Santa Claus and the Candy Goose*. Here the heroines of *Monster Punk Horizon* are enjoying the *Monstrous Continent's* version of Christmas: *Hallowmas*, a holiday that lasts from Halloween to Christmas. But when the dreaded Candy Goose arrives to eat the local kids, the women must find a way to help Santa bring down his mortal enemy once and for all!

A Christmas Ride-Along, by Jonathan Watson, has Santa taking a boy on the Naughty List along on his Christmas routine to learn the true spirit of vigilante justice. Young Jack is already in trouble for car-jacking, so if he doesn't shape up, Santa may have to come for him when he's an adult! In Michael J. Allen's Stolen Night, Mobius Cadet Alden uses his powers to help his department maintain goodwill across time and universes – until a group of cyborg dwarves steal his superior officer and their sleigh! Now he has to team up with an interdimensional trucker, but given the man's distracted attitude, can he rely on him?

Matthew Olanon's Operation Hallow's End has Santa sending the ghouls and monsters of Halloween back to the grave, while Nathan Pedde's Kris Kringle's Origins explains that Jolly Old St. Nick got his start as Santa by hunting werewolves. Wild Santa, by G. Clatworthy, finds Santa on a mission to rescue a trafficked little girl from Dark Elves – only to learn there is more to Christmas magic than even he remembers. A Sentinel and Santa follows Robert W. Ross' married hero and heroine as they guard the Spirit of Christmas Present from demons, while A.M. Stevens' touching Santa's Heroes follows the titular character as he seeks to answer the last letter from a boy who believes in him. Young Nate only wants one thing for Christmas: he wants his father home from the Vietnam War. And come hell or high water, Santa intends to see the impossible done. He just needs to recruit a little help to accomplish it...

Slay Bells Ring adds the sound of bullets and explosives to the choruses of bells and angels, and the mixture may surprise some for how it matches the tone of the season. After all, the Reason for the Season came as an Infant King to end the Prince of this world's reign. That prince didn't go quietly on the holiest night of the year, so why should his minions?

The characters

The characters are all well-drawn with interesting personalities. While there are variances in how Santa and his ensemble are portrayed, the differences do not strike a reader as too much in either direction. The changes all make sense in context of the tales and are poking fun at the general holiday mythology without mocking or degrading it. A number of parodies and comedies using the popular conception of Old St. Nick could learn a thing or two from all the stories in this anthology, as they have fun without making Santa, his elves, or his reindeer meaningless jokes. Santa is no gag; he's the roughest, toughest, meanest spirit of Christmas these writers could find. The rest of the world forgot that – but they did not.

The world

Each world is different from the other, and thus memorable in its own right. Some short stories are set in the world of a series which the author has created, so the tales in this collection would count as good introductions to these serials. Every world fits the setting and theme of the holiday without being obnoxious or otherwise "too much" for a reader's senses or sensibilities.

The politics

One story takes place amidst the current unpleasantness in Eastern Europe. It pokes fun as only dark humor can at the situation while recognizing that it is a terrible event, and we all hope it ends soon – particularly for those on the frontlines. That is the extent of the politics in the book, however.

Content warning

There is lots of cursing, a fair bit of gore, and no small amount of horror in this collection. Mature readers will be fine, but this is not an anthology for younger members of the audience.

Who is it for?

Readers who want a series of fun holiday romps that are outside of the wasteland that has become pop culture, but which still respect the spirit of Christmas will love this anthology. It brings the right amount of magic, the right amount of fun, and the proper respect for the mythos that is severely lacking in most other forms of entertainment during this season. Anyone hoping to make their favorite reader smile would be wise to pick this collection up as a Christmas gift – especially for themselves!

Why read it?

It's fun, quirky, and wild. What more could you ask for in a collection about Santa cleaning up the Naughty List?

Stealing God and Other Stories by Bruce McAllister Review by Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

Bruce McAllister has quite a history: the son of a Navy officer and an anthropologist, he grew up in places all over the world. That life experience, combined with his degrees in English and writing, led him to the conclusion that he's not cut out to write full-length novels.

Which actually fits pretty well, as McAllister long ago found his niche in short stories and poetry.

Stealing God and Other Stories is an interesting collection of short tales. They're short, but not small. Each story is tightly written and deeply emotional. And knowing McAllister's background, it's not too difficult to see those influences in his work.

One thing that strikes me with this collection is the diversity of type. There's voodoo and vampires, time travel and stamp collecting. And throughout the whole thing, I got the sense that I was reading a set of stories that would have felt right at home on Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. These are stories that really center on the characters, not plot contrivances. Relationships live at the heart of every story. And I like that not every relationship is a good one. There are some toxic ones thrown in for good measure, but the progression of ideas from one scene to the next make it inevitable that these personalities would find themselves on the same page.

Some stories resonated with me a little more strongly than others. "Ink," for example, was both chilling and emotionally satisfying, and its twist at the end was what really put this into *Twilight Zone* territory for me. "La Signora" is a haunting tale that weaves the slightly disobedient attitude of an adolescent with the consequences of choices made with immature haste. Sometimes we have to learn the hard way, and sometimes there are no happy endings.

The anthology isn't full of downers, mind you. But like Serling's morality plays, McAllister's stories will leave you thinking. And that's really what the whole thing is all about, isn't it? Science fiction, fantasy, and horror should hold up a mirror and give us a look inside ourselves. *Stealing God and Other Stories* does this quite well. Don't let the fact that these are short stories put you off. Sometimes you don't need a full-length novel to get the point across. We need good short stories. It's not quite a dying art, but it's certainly getting to be a lonely one.

Pick this one up after you watch my interview with McAllister on *Live From The Bunker*.

The Terminal List by Jack Carr
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Military fiction from a man who knows it firsthand!

Authenticity is one of the sharpest arrows you can have in your quiver when you're trying to get readers to buy into your story. Since Jack Carr actually is a Navy SEAL, he puts it right through the bull's eye with THE TERMINAL LIST, which you've probably heard of on Amazon.

Admittedly I tried the show a couple of months ago and haven't yet finished the pilot. It seemed slow and was hard to follow when the action scenes popped up. When a friend recommended that I try the books, I pulled the trigger, and was thoroughly impressed from the get-go. This is contemporary military fiction at its finest.

The Story

James Reece is a husband, a father, and a Navy SEAL. While on a mission in Afghanistan, his entire unit gets ambushed, resulting in the death of 40 special operators. Only Reece and his best friend Boozer survive, and within a short time of coming home, Boozer "commits suicide."

But Reece knows Boozer and knows he could never do that. Other details don't add up, and when he gets debriefed, Reece quickly realized the op was a setup, and he doesn't know why. He's about to go home when his wife and daughter are "randomly" assaulted by gang members in San Diego.

Reece doesn't have to have all the pieces to this puzzle to know it paints an ugly picture. Powerful people want him dead. Problem is, he's a Navy SEAL, not an idiot.

What follows is half a detective procedural, and half unrestrained open warfare as Reece sets the entire world on fire to find out why he got set up, and who's pulling the strings. And holy crap, was it a wild ride.

Of the many things I loved in this book, at the top of the list is that fact that it didn't waste time getting to where it was going. When we meet Reece, he's already been a SEAL for a while. He knows how to do the job, and he just does it. He's up against a powerful villain but he doesn't go hide in the wilderness for 60% of the story, leveling up so he can fight him. He just says "f*** it" and goes Full Metal Badass as he pulls on the string, unraveling it to the very top.

The Characters

Reece gets most of the page time here. I just love his competence, not only with his trade, but with his ability to read other people, decide who he can trust and why, and also, just how hard it is to make him trip up. He's not invincible, and it isn't like he goes the whole story without making a mistake. He gets his butt kicked a few times. But it's not because he's in over his head—he's just against staggering odds, and he doesn't care.

The supporting cast is the usual cadre of helpful ride-or-dies in military books—people that Reece can call in a situation like this and get help when he needs it. Carr gives us just enough of their backstories to show that they're interesting and show why they're useful to Reece.

No matter what this year brings, it's our choice whether we take it as the opportunity to rise up above it or hang out down with the stink and the ooze. Can't make the time to write every day? Grab a prompt over at [More Odds Than Ends](#) and write once a week.

Need a market for a short story? Check out Raconteur Press and their anthologies, the Baen short story contests, or collect several shorts and release them as a collection. Join forces with other writers, and share information on open markets – the Book Club With Spikes has a channel specifically for this purpose. We also share information on editors, daily accountability, book discussion, book promos, and much more. It's not the only place like that on the web, but I know it best.

Need to learn more about the business of writing, publishing, and marketing? Read this here blog on the regular. Listen to the Writer Dojo podcast. Ask questions in the comments (please! We always need new topics) here, or in a trusted writers' group. Be aware that some large online writing groups are, well, see that there blazing dumpster? Yeah. Fly out of that crap. Don't let it stick to your feathers. Fewmets may sound cool, but you don't want to roll around in dragon poo.

One of the downsides to going Indie is that you're on your own. One of the upsides is that you don't have to wait on anyone, and there's a community of us who have been there, done that, happy to share tips and tricks with you.

So let's make 2023 the year of new beginnings. Personally? I'm going back to what worked beautifully for me in 2019 and keeping a daily spreadsheet/journal. I have a big erasable calendar hung on one wall of the office, to see the year at a glance, all the better to put publishing goals in my face. I've got fun stickers to use on that, incentivizing myself to do stuff like exercise and write and so forth

I have a 4x8' whiteboard on another wall to keep track of plots, story ideas, graphic design deadlines, honey-do list (for my husband, but also me), blog topic ideas, and some art a visiting child drew for me that will be preserved forever. If you don't have room for all of that (and most won't – but I designed this office around that white board, for one) then I highly suggest you look at Google calendar, and use its notifications and alarms to keep you on track.

I'm also going to be tracking my reading. I have my library all unpacked and available to me, I have goals that require I settle down with some solid research, and I love that sort of thing. So reading will be happening. I have some other, very specific projects I'll be working on with friends... more on those as they start to unfold in the New Year.

Just do me a favor, eh? If you feel like you've fallen down on the job, don't beat yourself up. Dust yourself off, figure out what tripped you if you need to, calibrate, and go at it again. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough. For all that we'd like our phoenix to rise from some aethereal bonfire in the enchanted forest... it's much more likely to be coming up from the neon-lit alley that smells of things you'd rather forget existed.

Flap harder. You don't want to stay here. Let's see what 2023 has to throw at us, and how we can learn aerial combat if we have to. Sure, we might lose a feather here and there, but not all of them.

As for the villains, they make up the eponymous 'terminal list.' Reece figures out who's involved, hunts them down, interrogates them, and kills them. Dead ones get scratched off and new names get added until there's nobody left. The scheme goes all the way to the top of our filthy, dirty political system, ending with a power couple that totally aren't Bill and Hillary, wink wink, nudge nudge.

The World

Strikingly similar to ours, but none of our politicians are mentioned. Other than the tongue-in-cheek Clintons, none of the other leaders make convincing comparisons to ours. We're still in Afghanistan, America's still in a bunch of debt, and guys who shoot guns still get more chicks than guys who drink soymilk.

The Politics

It's not a right-wing/left-wing thing, but it absolutely bucks the trend of what major studios and publishers are Allowed To Say, which by their definition makes it extremist and right-wing.

That said, Carr isn't writing a book where the bad guys are all donkeys and the good guys are all elephants; it's the believers versus the schemers. That's the only line that matters.

Content Warning

Hard-R. He doesn't hold back from the real violence that a SEAL would encounter in these situations. The killing scenes were brutal and detailed, but the hardest part to read was Reece's assault on a cartel brothel in Mexico, where he had to raid a whorehouse as certain, eh, activities were underway. So be advised. Reece operates in the cold dark corners of the world as he goes deeper into this roach hunt.

Who's it for?

Readers of fast-paced, detailed, realistic fiction. Especially military fiction.

Why read it?

Because it's badass. So refreshing to read a book where the good guy is good, the bad guys are bad, and the good guy doesn't have any problems with putting the bad guys in the ground because they are, objectively, consistently, and on a long-term basis, pure evil. We'd all love to live in a world where justice is swift and thorough and unrelenting, but we don't, so we read about it when we can. Here it is.

Prose Bono

Fewmets by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Out of the dumpster fire of the last couple of years, the phoenix rises. This may not be the firebird we want, but it is the firebird we deserve. On the shimmering heat of the burning trash, it rises, and with it, we have hope for a bright new future in 2023.

Infusing Your Many Talents into Your Writing

A. C. Cargill

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

You can infuse aspects of your own talents into your writing, applying them to various characters in your story or novel as a way to inject more humanism to them or applying them to various scenes to texture them with more interest. These talents can be broad ranging. For example, I am somewhat of a poet and songwriter as well as an award-winning artist, former IT tech writer, and former website coder. So guess what some of my characters do? Yep, poetry, songwriting, painting, drawing, and setting up websites. In a recent scene in one of my chapters, I had a musical group performing and made up some song lyrics. (I also made up a melody, which my composer husband wrote down for me.)

Other talents that you might have and therefore could use are cooking, knitting, crafts, masonry, auto mechanics, astronomy, mathematics, and bodybuilding. Your hobbies and other interests, such as solving crossword puzzles, collecting coins or stamps or other objects, can also be used. You can have a character known for her great pies (my character is Katherine Baum), for example. You can have a character that works in one field but also has an interest in another (I have Tom Summers, who is an expert on cattle breeding but who also sets up websites when needed). You can have a character who owns a special collection (my character Jim O'Connell has a collection of Meissen porcelain).

Things like this will flesh out a character but can also provide plot points. Katherine wins a prize at a local annual fair for her pie in the baking contest, in contrast to how her husband Henry is treated in the woodworking contest. Tom sets up a website for the ranch so they can show the world how a mated pair of golden eagles nesting on the ranch are faring. And Jim O'Connell has his Meissen collection targeted by his enemy, who wants it in exchange for ... well, you'll have to read the book to find out.

Such additions can also become a memorable item for your readers and viewers. Columbo had his cigars and a wife we never got to see. Miss Marple knitted. Poirot was fastidious in his personal habits. Even more recent characters have their personal quirks. We've recently come across a police detective who loves country-western music and drives a classic car.

Got a character that seems flat? Incorporate your extensive knowledge of wines by mentioning that he or she judges wines at a local competition or bring in your love of crocheting by having a character that crochets tea cozies for a local charity to auction off.

Examine your talents or those of people around and see which you can use.

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

Sanderson and Speechify Look to Break the Audible Monopoly

Report by Michael Gallagher

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Brandon Sanderson looks to team with the audiobook seller to give authors a better paying alternative.

Good guy Brandon Sanderson, bestselling author of . . . well, a lot, ended 2022 with his customary State of the Sanderson blog post and video on his website. In it, he covered quite a wide variety of up-

dates for his famous “secret novels” and other upcoming projects in the pipeline for 2023. One item in particular that’s been getting a lot of attention was his scathing criticism of Audible’s practice of low-balling author payouts. Sanderson notes that the going rate for most forms of digital media is 70% for the creator- it’s the standard payout rate for an ebook on Kindle, an app on the App Store or a game sold on Steam. Most brick-and-mortar bookstores offer 50% for a book’s physical copy. But an audiobook on Audible? A mere 40% at best. Says Sanderson:

“I knew things were bad, which is why I wanted to explore other options with the Kickstarter. But I didn’t know HOW bad. Indeed, if indie authors don’t agree to be exclusive to Audible, they get dropped from 40% to a measly 25%. Buying an audiobook through Audible instead of from another site literally costs the author money.”

Sanderson says he was approached by Speechify, creators of the popular text-to-speech reading software, in addition to being an audiobook seller. They offered him an incredible deal, which Sanderson, to his immense credit, bargained down in exchange for offering the same deal he was getting to other potential creators:

“...they came to me and said—full of enthusiasm for the project—they’d give me 100%. I almost took it, but then I asked the owner (who is a great guy) if this was a deal he could give other authors, or if it was a deal only Brandon Sanderson could get. He considered that, then said he’d be willing to do industry standard—70%—for any author who lists their books directly on Speechify a la carte. So I told him I wanted that deal, if he agreed to let me make the terms of our deal public.”

Sanderson further notes that he won’t be listing his “secret novels” on Audible for “a year, maybe more,” and takes pains throughout the post to make it known that while he enjoyed working with Audible, they’re “a good company doing bad things”, that has a “near-monopoly” on the format and that their “unconscionable” treatment of authors will only lead to stagnation.

I’ve attempted to contact someone at Speechify to verify the terms of the arrangement on their side and when it will be scheduled to take effect. They have not contacted me at the time of this post, but I will update the article if that changes. For now though, here’s hoping that 2023 presents a great opportunity for indie authors to flourish on the audio platform.

Story Progression
By Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I could talk about the human psychology of my own reactions – because they bear on writing fully developed characters – but instead I’m going to talk about authorial foresight.

Most usually, when I start writing a story, I begin with a scene, and work forward from there. Which is not to say the stories are completely chronological, just that I’ll often start in media res, filling in the before and after as I write. There are mechanisms for this. Telling the audience is one, and that can be done in ways that are not the dreaded info-dump. Flashbacks are given a bad name, but also are very real, especially in a story where the memory of the character is flawed. Outside traumatic memories that are crystallized at the moment of occurrence, like god’s own flashbulb of hellish recollection, the human brain has a remarkable capacity for forgetfulness and preservation of sanity through the mists of time and distance from some painful event. There is also, of course, the omniscience of the author within the story world, where memories of the past can be accurately retold, in the context of the character’s present. The author knows all, sees all.

Unless she doesn't, of course. Which is where I am, a pantsner, with a scene that I know is not a good jumping-off point for the rest of the story. It's a short story, and the scene is near the end of it, and so I don't want to start there. I could, oddly enough, if I were writing a novel. It would change the emphasis of the plot, into something more focused on recovery from and the consequences of an incident on a starliner, a passenger ship on a routine trip from planet to planet. Since I'd like to have this remain a short story, with the focus of the story being on space marines conducting a search and rescue when they wound up at the right place at the right time, I knew I had to take that scene and make it the end, or almost end, of the tale. This is not how my brain works.

Instead of my usual process, figuring out what comes next, based on character actions and motivations, I had to go backwards. Where did this begin? What people did I want to focus the story on? The fact that I was writing for a themed anthology made that a simple enough decision – I needed to write space marines. Never having served in the military myself, I wanted to write a scenario I did have some experience with. Search and rescue, then, complete with narrowing in on a downed (well, ok, drifting in space) craft using electronic measures. Staying safe in a potentially dangerous environment while reaching the survivors, if there are any. It was an interesting exercise to suss out why they would bother, when the situation made survival highly unlikely. Which would set up the seed scene I had in my head.

As a writing exercise, it was good for me. As an author on a deadline, it was highly annoying as it slowed me down rather a lot. It would speed my work up if I did have that authorial omniscience! But I don't, so I'll work my fog until I find some landmarks, and sometimes they will make the bridges between story elements obvious.

Like this, which came from the central conceit of the story, and illuminates my next path forward in the tale.

Marine Captain Genesio Tressach was dictating his notes when he heard the tap at his hatch. He spoke the end command, then raised his voice.

“Enter.”

Staff Sergeant Consolato put his head through the hatch, sideways. He looked incongruously like he was standing on the bulkhead at an improbable angle.

“Sir? Have you gotten... Ah, nevermind.”

“Yes, Sarge. I have the last of the interviews here.” He poked the desk and enlarged the screen. “Can you read it better now?”

“Sure can.” Consolato, unabashed, came all the way into the cabin. He hadn't been standing on the wall, just contorted. The man was more than just double-jointed, his superior officer had learned some time ago. It made training with him... interesting.

“Learn anything new?” He asked now, his eyes narrowing while he scanned the lines of transcript on the screen.

“Not much. We have a layout of the ship drawn up. We still don't have a clear idea of what happened to her. Compartments were breached and decompressed. There are reports of explosions, but the eye-witnesses are contradicting themselves.”

Consolato shrugged eloquently, accepting this as a constant of the universe. “And we had no scan data from the lifeboats.”

“Not equipped for it.” His captain tapped out of the transcript and opened another. “Best we can figure is that about half the people aboard got off. There weren’t enough lifeboats to take them all, even if they’d all made it.”

“Yeah.” Consolato ran a big hand through his short hair. “I heard that, too.”

“So there were people aboard her.” Captain Tressach leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “We don’t know if any are still alive. There were fires. Particulate matter... smoke. That’s the killer. Unlike a fire on planet, the smoke has nowhere to go aboard ship, even if the fire is out. Scrubbers will fail. Smoke inhalation has likely killed anyone that survived the initial incident.”

“Seems like the scrubbers would at least...” Consolato stopped talking when he saw the look on Tressach’s face.

“They were not being maintained.”

“What?”

“Much of the crew didn’t make it off. One who did was a junior maintenance technician. He told us that the scrubbers were serviced only in ports. Never while underway. They didn’t have spares. They didn’t even have the parts to service.”

“Saint Tallulah preserve us.” Consolato shook his head, an expression of disgust on his face. “They had a deathwish.”

Literary Criticism

Musings on the Campbell Awards Kerfuffle

By Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

As per usual, please keep disagreements (and there will be some) calm and reasonable.

I’ve got a habit of trying to avoid jumping to conclusions, posting commentary and generally taking the first reports too seriously, whatever happens, because the first reports are – at best – often lacking in context. I find that waiting often adds context, allowing me to see a fuller picture of what actually happened and, slightly less importantly, lets me see what other people (for or against) have to say about it. These days, you just can’t trust anyone to present a full picture in the expectations you’ll make up your own mind. People have a nasty habit, now, of trying to serve as ‘thought leaders’ rather than trusting their readers.

In this case, events moved on more than I had anticipated, although I suppose I should have expected that. The Campbell Awards have been renamed, with the response ranging from ‘about time’ to ‘yet another craven surrender to the social-justice bully mob.’ The idea of renaming the Hugo Award has

been ruled out (for the moment). Another award has been renamed. And there is, as always, much bad feeling on both sides.

For what it's worth, here are my thoughts:

I have never (knowingly) met Jeannette Ng. I have never read any of her books. I don't have any real feelings, positive or negative, for her. That said, I do think it's rather cheeky to accept the award, on one hand, while bashing the award's namesake on the other. It would have made a much greater impression on me, I admit, if she had declined the award because she didn't care for its namesake. Instead, she seems to have wanted to have her cake and eat it too.

Personally, if I knew the award's namesake (who died eleven years before I was born and therefore couldn't have voted for or against me) would have hated the idea of me winning the award for things beyond my control, I might have indulged in a minor gloat. But that would have been pointless. The people who voted for or against me (and, in the real world, for or against Jeannette Ng), were not chosen or directly influenced by Campbell. The award has not only outlasted him, it has outgrown him.

It is a fundamental fact of history that all of the greats, men and women alike, have feet of clay. We now know that JFK and Martin Luther King were womanisers. We now know that Nelson Mandela flirted with communism. We now know that Abraham Lincoln had some repressive instincts, that George Washington owned slaves, that Bonnie Prince Charlie was a drunkard and a wife-beater, that ... I could go on and on. Go back a handful of years and you'll discover that people who were 'woke' for their era are nothing of the sort for us. But does this mean that we should reject what they did? The greatest people of history are not weighed down by their sins. They manage to rise above them.

John Campbell was not, even in the view of some of his contemporaries, a very nice man. He seems to have been one of those people who was either loved or hated, with very little middle ground. (I never met him). By modern standards (and even by some contemporary standards) he was a racist. He was a sexist. He may have been a fascist. (I'm reluctant to say anything definite about that because 'fascist' is one of those words that has lost a great deal of meaning through overuse.) This is not easy to deny. I've read a handful of his essays and some of them made me uncomfortable. But then, Campbell would hardly be the only writer to make me uncomfortable (and some of them are contemporary writers.)

At the same time, John Campbell was also one of the founding fathers of science-fiction. It was Campbell who recognised the talents of people like Heinlein, Asimov and many others. It was Campbell who gave them a platform and a chance to make their names. Without Campbell, would we have Heinlein, Asimov, et al? Would we have a community that has – as I said above – outgrown its founders? Would science-fiction as we know it today even exist?

There seems to be an unspoken and thus unchallenged assumption amongst many of the 'erase Campbell from history' commenters that a community without Campbell would have embraced a golden age of 'woke' science-fiction, in which authors of colour and gender would have been appreciated for their talents instead of being unfairly excluded. But is that actually true? The history of racism and race relations in the United States is a great deal more complex than such assessments suggest. Real-life Benny Russell characters faced more problems than just a single bigoted editor. Campbell believed that their work wouldn't sell, and he might have been right – I say might because I don't know. Campbell's job was not to purchase works merely on their merits, but purchase works that would sell. Publishing a story that might not, for whatever reason, sell would be a misstep, one Campbell might not be able to afford. Could he take the risk?

This was more pervasive than one might expect. Heinlein, who was pretty much the figure in science-fiction in his later years, had to use a number of tricks to obscure his early non-white characters. Mr. Kiku from *The Star Beast* is very clearly non-American, for example; Rod Walker of *Tunnel in the Sky* is black, but written in a way that allowed Heinlein to claim plausible deniability if this blew up in his face. (He did this so well that his editor raised suspicions of an interracial romance (miscegenation, in the parlance of the times). And while one may make sharp remarks about *Sixth Column* (written by Heinlein, following a plot heavily influenced by Campbell), it should be borne in mind that the crimes of the Pan-Asians of the novel pale in comparison to the real-life crimes of Imperial Japan.

Campbell was not perfect. Far from it. But his contribution to the field cannot be denied. It is certainly far in excess of the contributions made by his detractors. And yes, I feel we should not forget the good he did, as well as the bad.

A number of commenters have claimed that POC authors feel uncomfortable accepting awards named for people who would have rejected them, for publication, on the grounds of skin colour. I don't know if this is true. (Jeannette Ng accepted the award.) I do know that I don't feel that way. The award has outgrown its namesake.

To put this in some context, consider this. The Order of the Garter is among the most prestigious honours Britain can bestow. And yet, it was established by Edward III, who believed in a number of things I find offensive. He believed in the divine right of kings, England's (i.e. his) right to rule France, strict social hierarchy and many other things I don't like. And he wouldn't have liked me either. A middle-class author with ideas above his station, daring to criticize the divine right of monarchs? Off with his head!

But you know what? If I was offered an Order of the Garter, which isn't likely to happen, I wouldn't say no.

I don't think there's a single person writing, these days, who will not be judged harshly in the future. Depending on how things go, I'm sure there will be reviewers in 2100 who'll sneer at me for being married when everyone knows marriage is an outdated social construct ... or, even worse, reviewers who will accuse me of miscegenation. Judge not, least you be judged, is not always good advice ... but it is in this case.

But there's a second major issue that should also be taken into account.

I am a nerd. Like most nerds, I was nerd-shamed at school. I was bullied and mocked and generally humiliated for being a nerd. And I was, for most of my teenage years, utterly alone. There were no other book-readers in that hellhole, the comic-readers weren't inclined to befriend me and, while there were a couple of other *Star Trek*/*Babylon 5* fans, they weren't inclined to befriend me either. (The only nerd-show that was genuinely popular was *The X-Files*.) I spent longer than I want to think about being mocked for reading, as if there was something wrong with reading. That sort of treatment – which appears to be common for nerds – leaves scars. It makes it hard to empathise with others who have their own problems, but – to us – appear to have it all their own way.

And so we cling to our nerdy status because it is all we have. Heinlein, Asimov and Campbell – yes, even Campbell – are part of our community. To erase them is to erase our history. And we see that as a direct attack on us, particularly when it is strikingly clear that the attackers have either missed the point of the story (*The Cold Equations* is rather more than a “parable about the foolishness of women and the role of men in guiding them to accept the cold, hard facts of life”) or taken it out of context.

The reformers, call them whatever you like, say they are improving science-fiction, that they're making it more inclusive. But others – nerds like me – see it as the popular kids imposing their will on the social outcasts. We hate and resent it, because it brings back memories of being bullied for being nerds. And, on some level, we don't see it as much-needed reform. We see it as nothing more than an excuse for bullying.

To put this in some (more) context, there was – at one of my schools – something called gay-bashing. The bullies would beat up kids they believed to be gay, on the grounds that they were gay. I don't believe that most of them knew what being 'gay' actually meant – our sex education was very poor – and, to the best of my knowledge, no one at that school was actually gay. (And if they were, I would not have blamed them for remaining in the closet and keeping the door firmly closed.) The gay-bashers didn't care. It was just an excuse to beat up on people and feel righteous while doing it.

I have the same feeling, sometimes, whenever someone pokes their head into my community and insists that something must change, immediately. As a mature adult, I can understand that people might reasonably argue for renaming the award, but the bit of me that was traumatised by endless bullying makes it hard to believe. People who demand an immediate response make it impossible to calm down and consider their reasoning logically. I've found that anyone who pushes for immediate action does not have my best interests in mind.

I'm not the first person to compare this to schoolyard bullying. I will not be the last.

There may have been a case for renaming the Campbell Award. But it should not have been done now, not when a sizable percentage of fandom would draw the wrong lesson from the kerfuffle. From what I've heard, there are people who argue that pressure campaigns work; they should do more of them. And, on the other side, there are people who are even more determined to resist next time, even if they're dying on a hill no rational person wants to die on.

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone ... and, looking back from a (relatively) short space of time, there is no one who was perfectly innocent at the time, but – now – is a criminal beyond redemption. Standards change, people change; can you, can anyone, look me in the eye and say they will never be accused of being 'un-woke?' That, ten years from now, they will be attacked for something – in or out of context – that is no longer acceptable. It is terrifyingly easy to look at a handful of modern-day writers and craft narratives that bash them, that make them out to be things they're not ... is there anyone, realistically, who wants a world where this is a thing?

Frankly, we – the community – have far more important things to worry about. The Hugo Voters (everyone who votes, from Sad and Rabid Puppies to SMOFs) are a tiny percentage of science-fiction and fantasy fans. I don't believe they're even 1% of fandom. The more people go on about diversity and inclusion, the more harm they do to diversity and inclusion ... because the people pushing diversity and inclusion don't really grok humans. Conventions are becoming less friendly to fans and more commercialised, people are being hammered and blacklisted and disinvited for daring to disagree with the 'woke' ... I think, I really think, that we shouldn't be tearing ourselves apart and beating each other up ...

After all, if there's one lesson every nerd learns at school, it is that there is always someone else willing to do it.