

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

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Minutegirls
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Fiction

Analog 6

Review by Perry Middlemiss

This anthology was editor Campbell's choice of the "best" stories from sf prozine Analog from the year 1966. It is safe to assume, from this selection, that 1966 was not a good year at all for the magazine. This volume consists of six novelettes, seven short stories and one non-fiction essay. Of the novelettes, "Call Him Lord" by Gordon R. Dickson was on the ballot for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, winning the Nebula (it's an interesting take on the measure of power and responsibility) and is certainly the best of the novelettes here; "The Message" by Piers Anthony and Frances Hall is a tale of first contact, and fits Campbell's preference for humans to always get the better of any aliens; and "...Not a Prison Make" by Joseph P. Marino just sneaks in as it had potential that it didn't quite realise. Of the short stories Bob Shaw's "Light of Other Days", on both the Hugo and Nebula ballots but without a win, is the best of the bunch, and was a truly new concept when published. The rest are mediocre to poor. J. E. Ender's essay about potential earth-wide problems with "Giant Meteor Impact" is also above average as it tackles a problem that, in 1966, was only just becoming recognised. Overall, this is a rather feeble collection, leaving out some reasonable stories and choosing others that are not worth your time. R: 2.2/5.0

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Ark dust by Alex Smith

Review by Heath Row

Previously Seen in Faculae and Filigree

This relatively slim collection includes 10 short stories by Alex Smith, who's active in the Philadelphia-based Black- and queer-oriented sf arts collective Metropolarity, as well as the Laser Life sf reading series and Afrofuturist and adjacent sf communities. Many of the stories previously appeared in fanzines and on Tumblr.

The stories are sharp, sparkling, and deadly serious, as well as viciously inventive. Based on these stories alone, Smith is a writer worth seeking out—and worth publishing more broadly. Reading the book as a whole, the stories collected are spicy, sweaty suggestions of strength and solidarity—cloaked in the garb of comic books and military science fiction. "The Final Flight of the Unicorn Girl" and "Galactic" approach speculative fiction by way of postmodern superhero pastiche and critique, reminiscent of Watchmen, Green Lantern, and perhaps even Ender's Game.

"What We Want, What We Believe" alternates the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program with fictional segments addressing love, activism, and the fantastic. An unnamed character envisions Bouncy, a large, suited rabbit—or is it another costumed superhero? What role does the hadron collider play at the end of the story? Just what are we about to let inside?

While there's an undercurrent of concern running throughout the stories, the darkness deepens slightly in "These Are Things That Bad Men Hear at Night," which is closer to horror than fantasy or sf. Who do we listen to when we do the things we know we should not do? "Optimum Body" returns to the interstellar soldier framework of "Galactic" and incorporates addictive drugs and gay love. Perhaps the most explicit story, it communicates its theme of turnabout and survival well.

“Girls Who Look Through Glass” also picks up the concept of heroes unaware of their larger role or higher position—similar to “Galactic.” “House of the White Automaton” is a very funny and frightening story considering what might occur if government intervention forced diverse households to become less diverse.

The remaining stories also address the multiple modes by which one can seek independence and freedom, forging a meaningful future of your own—seeking inner peace... and perhaps outer space.

Arsenal by Jeffrey H. Haskell
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Full Metal Superhero, #1: familiar world, new story.

In 2017, Jeffrey H. Haskell published the first in a nine-volume series called Full Metal Superhero, starring a young female lead who was one-half Oracle (DC) and one-half Iron Man (Marvel.) As this was the same year that Marvel was at its peak and DC was trying to get people hyped for the forthcoming Justice League movie, a series like this was well-poised for success, ready to feed off of two audiences.

Although we now live in a world so over-saturated with superhero movies that not even Paul Rudd can get butts in seats for Ant-Man 6: The Search For Any Remaining Fandom, it’s nice to know there are still writers taking the genre seriously.

The Story

Amelia Lockheart has genius-level intellect and a sizeable bank account. (Although she lacks the philanthropy and playboy-ism of a certain goateed counterpart.) She’s wheelchair-bound and has been ever since age 6 when her family was in a car accident. In that same accident her parents were carted off by Shady Officials(TM), and a post-surgery Amelia was assured that they died in the crash.

She knows that story is crap, she just needs the means and opportunity to prove it. By age 20 she’s built her own high-tech power armor and is trying to work her way onto a government-endorsed superhero militia so she can use state information to find her parents.

After so many decades of comics and movies, the superhero genre has established not only tropes, but cliched storylines as well. I liked that Haskell only gave the tropes/building blocks as much time as they really needed, and instead focused on a story that we haven’t already seen a hundred times. This book felt familiar and accessible, while not being completely predictable.

The Characters

Since Haskell wrote this in first-person present tense, getting the protagonist right was a must. Amelia has to be competent and likeable, while still having flaws, and she shows all of those things in spades. Her super-genius intellect is often credited as a superpower of its own (an idea she doesn’t agree with), yet she’s still capable of overlooking things and making mistakes in a very human way. She’s humble enough to realize that and even be hard on herself when it happens.

The supporting cast of characters is also grounded and enjoyable, without falling into clichés. The Dia-

mondbacks—Arizona’s superhero militia—consist of Major Force, Domino, Mister Perfect, and more. So right out the gate you’ve got potential analogs for Captain America, Jean Gray, and Doctor Strange, but none of the characters come off like that.

Yes, Major Force is a former Marine with super strength and the like, but character-wise he’s not a vanilla Boy Scout. If anything he’s your average modern man, and he has superpowers, and he takes his job seriously. I could still admire him as a character without feeling overly attached to an anachronism. That’s pretty much how the other heroes manifested too. Everything felt grounded, even in a spectacular setting where people have superpowers.

Speaking of the setting...

The World

More than once I got the feeling that Haskell had read THE LAW OF SUPERHEROES before crafting this world. Whether he did or not, the setting shows a world of metahumans existing within the legal framework of the U.S. Constitution. How do Federal heroes work? How are state militias organized? Is vigilantism legal? All of these questions have functional answers, proving that he put thought into it without spending a ton of time over-explaining it all.

Tech-wise, things are a short distance into the future. You’ve got a few more Elon-Musk-Types running around, inventing bonkers stuff that elites have access to (teleporters, for example), and a big battle at the end sees the Diamondbacks duking it out with a 150 foot-tall tentacle monster near the U.S./ Mexico border. But I liked how it all took itself seriously, and we weren’t getting tongue-in-cheek pontification from Amelia or any of the other characters. They had real reactions to this stuff and that made it all more immersive.

The Politics

None

Content

Mild side of PG-13 on the language and combat violence, and some characters have pheromone-based superpowers that add to their augmented persuasion. Tastefully dabbles with sensuality, doesn’t go overboard.

Who’s it for?

Basically if you saw a Marvel movie in the last fifteen years and liked it, this will remind you of why. If you saw a Marvel movie in the last three years and it sucked (let’s just be real) this will get the taste out of your mouth.

Why read it?

Personally, I liked remembering that this genre doesn’t have to be dead. You could tell this kind of story (an orphan doesn’t believe the official story about her parents’ death) in any genre, but dressing it up in power armor and giving it a callsign feels like a fresh take.

Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction: 16th Series

Edited by Ed Ferman

Review by Perry Middlemiss

– This anthology brings together editor Ed Ferman’s selection of what he considered to be the best from his Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1966. It seems, to me, that F&SF produced a better range of short fiction in 1966 than Analog, although this selection wouldn’t really lead you to that conclusion. Where are the Zenna Henderson stories of The People, or the stories by Benford or Bloch? I can only assume that publishing rights precluded their inclusion. But we do have Phil Dick’s “We Can remember It For You Wholesale”, and Zelazny’s “This Moment of the Storm”, as well as “And Madly Teach” by Lloyd Biggle Jr., “The Key” by Asimov, “Experiment in Autobiography” by Goulart and “The Adjusted” by Ken Bulmer to help raise the quality of the book. The less said about the others the better. So, six starred stories out of eleven. Above average, just. R: 2.7/5.0

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Bleed More, Bodymore by Ian Kirkpatrick

Review by Michael Gallagher

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What begins as a missing persons mystery takes a turn for the darkly fantastical in the initial entry in the Bodymore series.

I came across BookTuber Ian Kirkpatrick (better known on YouTube as Kirkpattiecake) vlogging about some publishing controversy or another that had been broiling over the past year, and quickly became a fan of her channel. Or perhaps I should say half of her channel, as contentwise she seems an even split between commentary on various publishing biz scandals and Yakuza playthroughs and damn it, I’m a God Hand man ‘till I die. Still, if you’re in the market for a booktube channel that’s apolitical, funny and interesting, check her out. But can she write?

Well, Kirkpatrick is also the author of four novels, including Bleed More, which I happened to grab when it was on sale last year. It begins as a missing person’s story turned personal, and takes the reader into the deadlier parts of Charm City and on to a darkly beautiful netherworld and back, all of it gradually unfolding like some weird police procedural whose dangerous allure keeps you on for the ride.

The Story

A missing body in Baltimore isn’t a story. Unless they’re a friend. Our story finds Joey, a twentysomething skateboarding tomboy employed by a local garage driving into Leakin Park (colloquially known as “Murder Park”, just as Baltimore is called “Bodymore”), where her friend Wayland’s Ford Taurus has broken down. While setting up for a tow, she discovers he’s not in his car, or anywhere around it, and his texts are going unanswered. With night having firmly fallen, eerie sounds coming from all around her and with the dark shadows of the surrounding trees harboring who knows what, she secures the car and gets back to the garage. However, her night’s about to get worse.

Looking over the car, the trunk is opened and a mutilated body is discovered that no one recognizes. The cops are stumped, and as Wayland’s disappearance continues to haunt her, she finds herself going into parts of Baltimore people just don’t go, looking for answers. During a daytime visit to the crum-

bling ruins of Fort Armitage, she's attacked by some shadowy presence and finds herself waking up on the shores of the afterlife. Her stay is brief as she's not actually dead, so she can't hang around (more on that below), but it's after this point things start taking a really weird turn. Because back in the land of the living, she notices ravens are now watching her everywhere she goes and she finally starts getting texts from Wayland again.

The same Wayland she swore she caught a glimpse of in the spirit realm.

The Characters

For the most part, the story's cast centers around a working-class group of folks, all of whom are a bit rough around the edges to one extent or another. Joey (Josephine) is a high school dropout who lives in a trailer park with her abusive drunkard father. She does everything to try to avoid him, yet also can't help but take some modicum of care for him. She can trade verbal jabs with the rest of the guys at the garage, but has plenty of moments of vulnerability and even tenderness, especially while around her co-worker and love interest Jagger. As the story progresses, and her connection to life and reality stretch, warp and grow thin, one's feelings rise and fall as she struggles to stay sane on her search to discover the truth.

Detective Stone Grant (immediately nicknamed "Rocky" by Joey) is the erstwhile detective investigating both the disappearance of Wayland Cross and the matter of the body in his recovered car. His is an antagonizing yet oddly stabilizing presence with Joey, who is naturally untrustworthy around police. He represents both a literal authority figure who is invested in trying to bring closure behind Cross' disappearance while also often questioning Joey since she has a habit of winding up around dead bodies and troublemakers. Kirkpatrick does a wonderful job of casting doubt as to whether or not Joey, and by extension the reader, can trust him, but the moments of banter between them, which can range from joking to concern to predatory probing, makes for a particularly vibrant thread of tension in a tightly woven story overall.

Charon and Val are two figures who seek Joey out on the Other Side—and the first clue that Kirkpatrick's at least a bit of a weeb. Charon is impeccably dressed in a luxurious fur-accented all-white suit with slicked back platinum white hair, Val is decked out in all black with black eyes and perfectly messy black hair. Both are excruciatingly handsome; and their appearances could easily be at home in the pages of any manga. Charon is a reaper tasked with guiding souls to their final destination, with Val as constant companion and loyal attack dog (uh, so to speak. Read the book, you'll get it).

The World

Kirkpatrick's worldbuilding is par excellence, in both the real and surreal. She brings the grim metropolis of Baltimore to forlorn, graffiti-covered life, from the foreboding trees lining the paths of Leakin Park at night offering sanctuary to all manner of predators, to the needle-strewn and flooded chambers of the ruins of Fort Armitage whose spray-paint covered walls both mock its foolish visitors and scream dire warnings to turn back. Every minute in the place is soaked with a sort of desperation, the feeling that the characters themselves don't want to be there, and would take any chance they could to get out. And yet, Kirkpatrick nails why they stay. Joey, pondering why she doesn't just walk out on her drunkard lay about of a father, frames it this way:

If I walked out, it would be my condemnation of him. I would be the reason he gave up and put a gun to his head and fed the blood-lusting mud of Bodymore. I don't know what it is about this place that makes people desperate.

Desperate for a future.
Desperate for money.
Desperate for someone else.
It's always everything we don't have that's going to solve that desperation.
If only we could get it.

Bleed More's land of the dead starts visitors in *Cavae Mortem*, a place dreamily similar to a town on Earth. It has streets with buildings and shops, a hotel and even a bar, *The Bin*, where all furnishings are made of bone. Like a dream, experiences there seem real, yet vague and ephemeral. Pleasant music plays, but is quickly forgotten. Lyrics fade from memory as soon as they're spoken. Couples dance and whisper to one another, but walk along streets with oddly vacant eyes, as if only going through some numb routine, though they seem strangely happy. Taps flow with beer that never runs out and disappears into nothing if the glass is tipped. All around it, a dense purple fog obscures a dark, ominous and thickly wooded forest, the *Caedis Sylvis*, that begins whispering things into your mind if you venture too closely.

What gripped me about *Cavae Mortem* was how Kirkpatrick's descriptions leave one with seemingly opposing feelings of both small-town wistfulness and discordant alien beauty. You know you're not home, but it's just familiar enough to keep you from losing your mind and after a little stay even starts feeling comfortable. In other parts of the realm, familiar-looking shades haunt the shores along the river *Styx*, whose waters are filled with the spirits of those tortured by regret. Trust me, if you ever find yourself traveling along *Bleed More's* iteration of this fixture of ancient Greek myth, I don't care who you think you see calling to you from the shores: stay in the boat.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Occasional mild language comes from Joey and Jagger, but nothing excessive. There are brief flares of sensuality between the two, and moments of drunken harassment of Joey at the hands of her abusive father that include verbal abuse and at times brief but intense physical violence. Nightmare sequences that detail the trauma Joey's struggling with are also depicted and not for the faint of heart, but are usually brief, and nothing that kept me from enjoying the rest of the book.

Who is it for?

Anyone looking for some refreshingly unique fiction—it's a story that's a study in contrasts. It brings the grimness of modern-day Baltimore to life without venturing into morbidity. There's drama and tragedy that doesn't veer into misery porn. It starts out as a police procedural that surprises the reader with its sharp turn into the fantastic. While I felt that the character development was by and large on the thin side, the dialog was snappy and real enough to keep me more than interested and didn't take me out of things; the reader still gets told what they need to know; Kirkpatrick keeps the story moving while still painting the still, slow moments in a lush, bruised palette.

Why buy it

Kirkpatrick did something few authors can do—surprise me. The book's atmosphere and settings pull you in, with enough twists and hints at the next big reveal to keep one hooked along the way. And if you really want to get in the mood for this read, she even put together a soundtrack for it.

Caterpillar by Travis J. Corcoran Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When the Killdozer becomes the Livedozer

The most popular zombie stories are full of idiot characters who would actually be dead inside of twelve hours under those circumstances (yet somehow *The Walking Dead* is on course to have more seasons than a soap opera.) The best zombie stories show competent characters working their way through the problem and, preferably, meeting it with a superlative level of firepower (we do love *Monster Hunter International* in these parts.)

In *Caterpillar* we get an honest version of the former, with just a touch of the latter. Homesteader and writer Travis Corcoran takes us down to Boston which, IRL, is about 90% of the way to a zombie apocalypse, but I digress...

The Story

Right out of the gate, the reader is dropped into a dark office that we can both smell and feel. There's a fat coder plugged into a desktop with a rising pile of empty chip bags and buzzy drink cans around him. Every app and program he owns is set to "do not disturb" while he goes on a coding bender for work. He's been in *The Box* for a couple of days, and in that time the entire world has gone to hell.

Oh no! Zombies! And we're in a high-rise multipurpose corporate concrete box in Baawwston! Quick! What do we do?

Well reader, this story is only 108 pages, so whatever we're gonna do, it better be fast. Operation: GTFOH is underway. We've got a scant pile of practical resources throughout the entire building, and a ticking clock working against us, because the city next door is on fire and it's only going to spread to *The Town*.

Fortunately the maintenance guy survived, and there's an old bulldozer in the basement that he uses for snow removal. Whether we can slap enough armor on that SOB to get us to safety is a matter of grit, blue-collar working skills, and hard math.

That, and the big X-factor:

The Characters

As cool as the premise is, it's the description of the four characters that told me this was going to get interesting. None of them are the stereotypical Survival Crew you see in a Hollywood movie. You're not getting Mark Wahlberg in a cheap suit with Ben Affleck and Matt Damon in the next two cubicles, and Current Hot Actress Under 30 at the front desk.

Each of these characters has a strength to contribute, plus a flaw that can hold them back. And chances are you've worked with each of these guys in your life.

TODD: Mechanical skills? High. People skills? Very low. Alcoholism? 94%. Yes boys and girls, the janitor is coming to save the day, provided he doesn't have crippling withdrawal symptoms during the

bulldozer refit.

CHRIS: Computer skills? High. BMI? Also high. Hope for survival? Well, 2 out of 3 ain't bad...

STACEY: Follower count on Insta? High. Physical fitness is a must, and she's got it. Emotional constitution? Yikes. She's a secretary, everything is usually surface-level for her. If she can't get her head in the game, she's going to get bit before she even knows what's going on.

DAVID: We DID say physical fitness is a must, and he's got it, but this guy is an accountant. He calls someone like Todd when there's a spider in the bathroom. Gonna need you to sack up, David, or you're ngmi. Pull it together.

I found it refreshing to see characters go through intense internal challenges even as they worked together to overcome the external threat. In a simpler version of this story, Todd would save everyone while throwing out slurs and being proven right from beginning to end. He'd be a member of a minority political party, and everyone else would apologize for not voting that way ten years earlier.

But Corcoran really put the effort into these people, to humanize them and give all of them an admirable quality to embrace, even while their faults held them back. In the short time it took me to read this, I was cheering for all of them to make it. Feels good man.

The World

Utterly indistinguishable from the actual Boston when the Patriots lost to Eli Manning's Giants or Nick Foles' Eagles.

The Politics

If anything, CATERPILLAR is philosophical, not political. The only time politics comes into play is when Todd laments Massachusetts gun laws and how he can't have a pistol at work.

But that's not for the reasons you might think.

Content

Won't lie to you kids, you're gonna hear some words you don't like. And there's blood. Rated R.

Who's it for?

People who wanted The Walking Dead to be good, and people who know Marvin Heemeyer did nothing wrong. Also welders. Welders are gonna like this book.

Why read it?

It's short, which is great for a new story in a saturated genre. As Corcoran writes a lot of articles on homesteading and engineering, this book will motivate the reader to maybe spend less time in a coding program and more time in a shop. When the excrement hits the fan, we might not be facing down zombies, but you're still going to want practical skills to survive, and it'll give you some ideas.

Plus it's just awesome. Dozer up!

Chain of Command by Frank Chadwick.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Yes, game designer and wargamer (and NY Times bestselling author from his nonfiction Desert Shield book back in the 1990s) Frank Chadwick moved into science fiction with a look at battles among the stars. Oddly enough, while I was reading this, I kept thinking of Guadalcanal et al from the above Morning Star, Midnight Sun. Sure enough, at the end of CoC, Chadwick cites the Guadalcanal and Solomons campaigns -- not Traveller RPG -- as inspirations for some of the events in the novel. Solid main character with 'advantages' that all good main characters contain, evil aliens to boo and hiss, and a supporting cast of heroes, heroines, incompetents, and red shirts.

Would like to see a sequel. Enjoyed it.

Empire of Bones by Terry Mixon

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews! I've read this book several times, but I decided to re-read it and write a review of the first book in a series that I love. I probably won't review the rest of the series in this level of detail, but I wanted to give you some insight into a series that I know and love.

I've listened to the audiobook as well as reading the books. I've enjoyed this adventure on all of the mediums where I've enjoyed this amazing romp through space! Now that I'm writing more reviews, I wanted to share a series that is near and dear to my heart with you! But enough about me, onto this review. Now let's get to it!

Summary:

First, let me say that none of what I'll say in this section couldn't be found on the back copy of the novel. Heck, I cribbed this summary from the back, and then I added my own twist! And not even much of one, since most of the books I read have kick butt descriptions (aka blurbs). If the blurb doesn't catch my eye, then I tend to skip the book unless a friend recommends it. Generally speaking, my goal is to provide a spoiler-free review, so here goes nothing!

After a terrible war almost extinguished humanity, the New Terran Empire rises from its own ashes. Desperate to regain what was lost, an exploratory mission was sent off to the dead worlds of the Old Empire. Given command of the endeavor is Commander Jared Mertz, the illegitimate offspring of the Emperor. Together with his crew, he sets off into the unknown. Except the Old Empire isn't quite dead after all. Evil lurks in the dark. With everything he holds dear at stake, Jared must fight like never before. Victory means life. Defeat means death. Or worse.

If you like epic space opera with plenty of action, then you should read this series. Plenty of adventure and intrigue to keep you glued to your seat in this page-turning novel! If this sounds like your flavor of badassery, then you've come to the right place! This novel is the brilliant beginning of the Empire of Bones Saga, where the author harkens back to the heyday of pulp science fiction!

Characters:

In this novel, there are two main characters who we follow: Commander Jared Mertz and Princess Kelsey Bandar. Keeping the focus on two characters made you feel closer to them, which is how I like things. All of the secondary characters were a lot of fun as well! They were all fully realized, none of them felt flat or fake.

Commander Jared Mertz: He's a senior naval officer of the largely peaceful New Terran Empire, but he felt real and not one of those stereotypical military pencil pushers from the Pax New Terra. He was a consummate professional who genuinely cared for the sailors and Marines under his command. He was a good officer, who knew his craft and was tactically creative during combat training simulations. He's the kind of guy you'd want on your side if war ever did break out in the New Terran Empire. He's the illegitimate son of the emperor, whose royal pedigree was discovered on his entrance physical for the Imperial Navy. This knowledge came with dark undertones, the Fleet tried to hold him back to prove they weren't giving him special treatment. He was my favorite character in this novel, I enjoyed following him from the first word until the last! Overall, I really liked him and felt like there was so much more to come from him!

Princess Kelsey Bandar: When we first meet her, she's the spoiled daughter of the New Terran Empire, a petite bombshell of sassy entitlement. Picture a princess in your mind, and you can envision Kelsey. She's the "spare apparent," a term I first heard from Terry Mixon and summed her role as the second in line to the imperial throne. When she decided she wanted to find a mission for her life, to become more than her status as an imperial princess, her father turns her life upside down. I can't say how without spoilers, so you'll have to read the novel to find out. Overall, I was thrilled at her growth in this novel. Her character came alive on the page, giving Jared fits as he tried to corral her.

Overall, I really loved the two main characters and the entire supporting class of this book. I give these characters 5 out of 5 Grenades and can't wait to see where the author takes them in the books to come!

Plot:

The premise for this series was not that different from other space opera stories out there, humanity post-earth trying to reclaim the spacefaring society that they'd left behind. However, the execution is where the author excels. His stories are pure escapism and enjoyment, under the banner of intergalactic science fiction.

This book, like the rest of the novels in this series, fits squarely within the scope of space opera that I love to read. I loved that there were never any lulls that bored me, this novel was action-packed with a defined plot. The story is set as the New Terran Empire is finally revitalizing their exploration of the empire that they lost during the rebellion hundreds of years before the story began. It was never boring, and the characters and universe behaved in a way that made sense for the worlds the author created. It was a good set-up and well-executed premise that held my interest. Since I've read the rest of this series, I can assure you that there are bigger things to come from the Empire of Bones universe. I think that this is partly because I've become conditioned to these large expansive worlds because of the copious amounts of space opera that I read.

This plot fits nicely into that framework, and Terry is raising the bar on this one. As you can tell by the gushing, I really got into this book. I couldn't put it down; the plot was that compelling. Heck, this is my fourth or fifth re-reading of this series. I really loved the premise, and more importantly, I enjoyed the execution. The pacing was excellent, and there was never a slow moment. There was never a point

where the plot was confusing, or that I couldn't figure out what was going on. I couldn't ask for anything more; a unique premise, perfect execution, and incredible pacing! I again give Terry Mixon 5 out of 5 Grenades!

Worldbuilding:

This is the first book in the Empire of Bones Saga, and I absolutely loved it. The world was fleshed out, and everything was explained in a way that made sense. The universe was consistent, with just enough of the mundane facets of life thrown in that it all felt grounded in this reality. Everything made sense and sucked you into the story. Some of the details seemed inconsequential, but those hooks just make me think that the larger universe will continue to grow and expand. I loved reading about the culture of the New Terran Empire, and Terry spoon fed us those details in a way that didn't feel like an info dump. There was never anything he described that I couldn't envision, or that felt like it wasn't "real." We get to see the weaponry and technology has evolved (or devolved) since the fall of the Terran Empire and feel inspired by what the characters have we gained access to. I could picture every setting described, easily envisioning myself living there. Heck, I've even entertained myself on long road trips telling a side story set in this larger universe.

When describing the world, Terry was light on the details... but not so much that I was lost or experienced the floating head syndrome. I could always picture the scene in my head, watching it in the movie theater of my mind. Despite being a bubblegum space opera, Terry has upped the bar of excellence, adding more sensory input to the mix; sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. He didn't reinvent the wheel and instead built on the existing tropes of space opera. Even better, he brought that fun adventure into the 21st Century! Overall, the world building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Terry Mixon created. Like most of the stories I read, this one didn't take itself too seriously, which allowed you to focus on the fun which is why I read in the first place. I give the world building 5 out of 5 Grenades.

Description:

I have to give it to this author; this novel was chock-full of quality visualization. You can definitely imagine yourself in this world he created! He described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how the world felt. While I could visualize all of the characters, I would still love it if Terry could describe the characters physical traits in more detail. He kept it light on the details, with just enough specifics to allow you to visualize it for yourself. I loved that Terry kept his language simple, reminding me of what I liked about Tom Clancy's style of writing. Their genres aren't the same, but their style of language is similar, and I like that. He balanced the explanation of this new world with the need to move a story along. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible and I enjoyed it.

The author's description of his universe was evocative, and enough to please your average readers. Again, I always prefer more descriptions over less, but Terry did enough to get the job done. In summary, I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of Terry. I wish he were more descriptive, but he gave you enough to form your own visual image. If you want a pulp era space opera, then this is the book for you! I give him 4 out of 5 grenades in this category.

Narration:

I've become a huge fan of audiobooks! I've listened to over a hundred hours of stories read to me by awesome narrators like RC Bray, Luke Daniels and now Veronica Giguere. I'm confident in what I en-

joy and what I dislike. I know that I hate accents that seem too cheesy and despise narrators that sound like robots. With those pesky caveats, I will review the narration quality of this novel. The audiobook was well done, and the accents were consistent.

The narrator, Veronica Giguere, did a fantastic job narrating this book. I would definitely listen to more books by her, and with Amazon's recent audiobook price increase, that is saying something. Heck, I've already bought all of the books by Terry Mixon that she's produced. I've even bought books outside my preferred genre because I enjoy the quality of what she puts out there. She won't bore you, or make you zone out because of her monotone or vocal fry. Did that make me sound smart? Because I have no clue about vocal fry, but I do know that Veronica puts together a fine narration. Her performance didn't feel robotic like a machine was reading the novel to me. You'll often see that from me because it'll drag me out of a book so fast that I can't listen to it anymore. With Veronica Giguere, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that she couldn't put down. Only she made kind of cool voices, with believable accents that didn't yank you out of the story. Overall, I give her 5 out of 5 grenades for her performance.

Overall:

I really loved this book; it was a lot of fun to read. It is worth mentioning again, I've read these novels multiple times and never once felt like it was a waste of time. They brought back the era of pulp science fiction that started the genre we know and love. This novel harkened back to what I loved about space opera. The vibe of this story was amazing, and I loved seeing where the adventurers would end up. I wanted to know what happened to the Terran Empire, and how they lost so quickly to the rebels that broke an intergalactic empire in several weeks. There were no deep messages, or political themes, just good clean fun.

Like the other novels in this universe, the first thing that caught my eye was the cover. They are all branded in the same universe, and the first one fit the market when it was released. I would go on more about the covers, but I don't think that would be fair as I'm colorblind and likely missing some of the nuance so we'll go on to the next point.

Now onto the book itself! The military culture shown was spot on, just what I'd expect from an Army veteran. He created a compelling interstellar naval force, but again... the author spent some time working for NASA, and it shows. The place where this novel really shined was the characterizations, nobody felt like cookie cutter clichés or parodies.

One nitpick that I had was that I didn't like how they handled the trouble that happened when the crew jumped through the weak flip point. It seemed like they should've been more concerned about being trapped so far from home, but it was a necessary plot element for the rest of the story, so I went with it. It wasn't badly told, it just seemed like a normal person would've reacted a little differently. Once we move past that, I believe that the characters responded as expected in the situation they found themselves in.

When the crew finally engages in combat for the first time, however, I do believe that their understated reaction to the loss of life strains the bounds of incredulity. I didn't need wailing or gnashing of teeth, but at least some indication that the losses were felt. The combat felt a little too sterile for my liking but fell well within the bounds of normal for the space opera subgenre. Again, I won't downgrade for this because I believe this is just my preference for military sci-fi bleeding through. Speaking of military sci-fi, one of the things that I did enjoy about Terry's novel was that they did seem to run out of supplies. He doesn't dwell on it, but several casual mentions that they'd packed for a journey of several years

was enough. He also showed the New Terran Empire's newfound allies re-supplying them, which cemented that little attention to detail.

Another place where this novel shined was with the pacing. The action was intense, and the characters responded as you'd expect in those circumstances. He kept the story moving along, constantly introducing new complications just when they'd come to some sort of resolution to the old one. The brief example of ground combat was primal, though not fully immersive. He kept the action moving along, illustrating the chaos of combat while not dwelling on it. Again, it was everything you expect from this sub-genre.

The fleet battle scenes were believable, gripping and I never felt like the author missed a chance to get creative with the tactics. It was in the fleet battles where this novel really stood out, technically speaking. The main character, Jared Mertz, is a career naval officer who has spent his entire service under peace time conditions. This allowed the reader to tamp down their expectations about his prowess on the battlefield. Rather than letting this create a hang-up, Terry leans into it. The ship's onboard Marine complement take charge, when necessary, much like you expect if that situation happened in today's modern military.

When it comes to creating believable civilizations, Terry stood heads and tails above his peers. He created two believable political polities and made the differences between them facilitate the reader's ability to easily distinguished one from the another. I liked that he messed with the language of the Pentagarians. It felt just alien enough to be different from how we would normally speak, while still being accessible to modern readers. I detected a slight medieval vibe to some of the word choices, which he managed to pull off without sounding overly cheesy. I could definitely envision myself walking among these people, interacting with them and that's all you could ask for from an author. Another aspect of these two societies that was believable was how Terry handled their first contact situation. It went as you'd expect from two peoples who'd just met, with the usual distrust and wariness.

Other than a few typos, I didn't really find any grammatical or technical issues with this book. Seriously, I realize I've gone full fanboy, but the author has definitely raised the bar for space opera. He's one of the shining stars of science fiction authors everywhere, you should check it out. Even with the occasional misspelled words and other inconsequential flaws of this novel, it was still leaps and bounds above most of what's out there! I was hooked from the first page because he wove the action in such a compelling way that you wanted to jump into the book and join the party. Some of that was because I'm already invested in this world, but if you've been following me, you already know that. Basically, they had me hooked from the beginning and kept it going throughout the whole novel. This is a book I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Buy the novel! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money! I give this novel a 5 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 you decide to join Commander Jared Mertz as he jumps through the flip points into the unknown. And you after you enlist or take a commission, get kitted up, you realize that the god of your world is a dick. He likes to torture you with evil, sending men with guns after you. In a rush to stand a fighting chance, you decide to try some old empire implants. But you clicked the wrong button and add a computer virus inside your brain. What could possibly go wrong? Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. Or maybe you'll be okay? I mean, you could be the first sailor to make it out of Terry's insane world alive? On second thought, be warned, fanboy/fangirl syndrome just MIGHT kill you. Be wary, you were warned and if you have to go out like that at least enjoy the view from the end times!

The Employees by Martin Aitken
translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken.
Review by Perry Middlemiss

Shortlisted for 2021 International Booker Prize. Subtitled “A Workplace Novel of the 22 Century” this work is told, in the main, in a series of statements from humans and humanoids who work on the Six-Thousand Ship, a starship which has voyaged to the planet New Discovery where the crew has discovered a number of objects that they have collected to returned to the ship. The numbered statements, not always in order, are small snippets of corporate jargon that, combined together, gradually start to form a larger picture of the alien objects and the way they impact the crew of the ship. It takes a while to get into the flow of the book and I suspect it is probably best to read it in one sitting, and then maybe go back and re-read it shortly afterwards. I did the first of these – it is only 136 pages, many of which only contain one paragraph, or even one sentence – though I suspect I won’t be going back to it in the near future.

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Inside Man by K. I. Parker
Review by Perry Middlemiss

Parker returns to the world of his earlier novella, Prosper’s Demon, in this tale of a demon who was once a Duke of Hell but who is a noted underachiever and who has been relegated to the role of attempting to interrupt the prayers of monks in order to get them to question their faith. But the monks are having none of it and actually welcome his presence as it forces them to concentrate that little bit harder during their prayer vigils. Then the higher powers are approached by the exorcist from the earlier book who needs the help of a demon in order to further the design of the great Plan. So our curious and suspicious demon is co-opted to the role and finds himself at the mercy of an eternal bureaucracy that appears to have everything worked out way, way in advance. Parker is a fun writer and this is an amusing tale of a demon who likes to think he is in control of his own destiny but who obviously isn’t. These are light and amusing tales told from an uncommon point-of-view. R: 4.0/5.0

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Into the Black: Odyssey One by Evan Currie
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Earth survives World War III, albeit with both sides still in place in some sort of Cold War, with us clever North Americans launching the first faster-than-light exploration ship. The Odyssey, which also carries fighters, stumbles into an interstellar war featuring more advanced aliens and planetary genocide. A stalwart captain and crew, submarine-style tactics, and lots of lasers, torpedoes, and fighter action make for an interesting read, although I wasn't crazy about the too-neat twist at the end.

Kill Ratio by Janet Morris and David Drake

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Terrorists carry out a test run of a DNA-centric virus on the UN's moon base and a customs agent and security chief race to foil the plot before the virus gets released on Earth. It's not a great book. It's not a bad book.

Lost Souls by Noah Chinn

Review by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

Lost Souls is good old fashion space opera, complete with spaceships, space rangers, and pirates. The setting is the familiar universe of interstellar federations and humanoid aliens. Star Trek, but the comedic episodes. Think A Piece of the Action or I, Mudd; science fiction in the tradition of Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat or Lois Bujold's Miles Vorkosigan.

The three main point-of-view characters are Moss, a down-on-his-luck adventurer; Hel, who accidentally becomes a stowaway on his ship, and Roy the pirate pursuing them; but we also hear briefly from Steva, another pirate; Violet the ship (it's complicated); Tameria, the alien; and very briefly, the Governor of a gangster colony. It is a comedy adventure, but to be clear, sufficiently on the adventure end of the spectrum that not all of these characters make it out alive.

The story starts in the middle of things, and then backtracks for deep dives into the lead characters' backstories. At one point, Moss pauses to watch a documentary on his own life--which struck me as a bit cheesy (like when an author has their character look in a mirror so they can describe what the character looks like)--but turns out, the documentary is an important and necessary bit of foreshadowing. Far from being irrelevant backstory, their pasts are all crucial to the book's central mystery and the characters' motivations. The mystery unfolds in layers, with each solution leading to yet a bigger mystery. By the end, the stakes are high, the heroics truly exciting, and all the little pieces Chinn has set in motion come together. I cannot say anything more specific without violating my "no spoilers" policy but suffice to say the mystery holds up well and the resulting action drives significant character development. I particularly liked the pirate's character arc, showing his reluctant personal growth in the first half—which makes him a far more dangerous pirate—and then reverting to type when those changes do not entirely work out for him.

Each cleverly titled chapter begins with imaginary excerpts from Moss's (presumably future) writing. I normally detest when writers try to sneak in irrelevant background through quoting imaginary encyclopedias, future histories, or diary entries, etc, but I actually enjoyed these pointed epigraphs. There are some actual insights buried in these snarky commentaries, and Moss's sardonic voice works well to provide a continuity of tone across chapters that vary between the comedic and actioner.

I loved every minute of Lost Souls. It is a cozy mystery wrapped in an even cozier space opera, and it all works. Yes, it's all safely familiar and there is no pretense here to great literature, but I'm always up for a new episode of Trouble with Tribbles or a new take on Galaxy Quest. This is good stuff, a quick fun read for when one needs to get away from the fact that our own reality is on fire and people kind of suck. Moss gets it and models how we all need to cope, get on with life, and do the right thing.

Lost Souls was released in January, the first in a proposed trilogy . . . and I await the TV adaptations. (Well, some up- and-coming Canadian producer is bound to see the potential here!).

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

In 2021, Rob Kroese set out to write a “different sort of apocalypse.” At its core would be the human tendency to destroy everything around us in the quest for riches and power, realizing the Biblical truth that we “cannot serve God and Mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

Thus the Mammon series was born, comprising a core trilogy of three books as well as an anthology of tie-in stories from Travis Corcoran, Fenton Wood, myself, and more. This literary world would sit at the intersection of politics, economics and finance, mining, international relations, space travel, and the Internet, just to name a few things. Heaven only knows the headache Kroese must have taken on in order to tie it all together coherently, but hot damn, he pulled it off.

The Story

In TITAN, we’re introduced to our core roster of characters, most of whom are connected to Kade Kapur, a curry-flavored Elon Musk. He’s got a space company that can supposedly move mineral-rich asteroids into Earth’s orbit for high-altitude mining. Due to political and corporate meddling, the project is initially successful, but falls victim to sabotage so that the US Government can seize Kapur’s company. Having banked on the success of the project, the world descends into economic chaos as inflation starts to drive the cost of everything through the roof.

The sequel MESSIAH not only follows the escalation of the economic fallout, but the resultant damage of the asteroid mission’s sabotage. What was once a one-in-a-thousand chance of the asteroid colliding with Earth quickly becomes one-in-a-hundred, then one-in-ten, then...well, the unthinkable happens. The asteroid Mammon shatters and hits the Earth.

Now we get to NEMESIS, and there are a handful of big powers maneuvering to pick up the asteroid’s remains. Most of it landed in the Sahara, so for the hundredth time in human history, superpowers look to Africa as a basket of resources ripe for the pillaging. America, Russia, and China all mobilize for war.

This entire story scares the hell out of me because of how incredibly viable it all is. We get the occasional long and detailed conversation between characters about the goings-on of the world, and it sounds eerily familiar if you’ve been watching the news since 2020.

Even so, it’s like a car crash that has some element of redemptive hope in it—like forty-seven Honda Civics that keep plowing into a flipped-over school bus and the bus is full of puppies and you’re scared for the puppies, but the bus can take it...and you have to get to the end to know that the puppies make it out okay.

In the midst of this new gold rush is a rich cast of characters trying to save the world while they navigate their own personal problems. This brings us neatly to...

The Characters

When we last saw Kade Kapur, he was nestled deep in a floating server farm that was likely to be destroyed by Mammon’s fragmentary landfall. Having survived “M-Day,” he now has to preserve the

computers from the ocean and make contact with the survivors of the outside world. and save what's left of his loved ones.

Valerie Sutherland is stuck with the other survivors in the castle in Libya, with several predators at the gates. Various Islamic terrorist groups are liable to invade the castle for its precious food stores, and uncomfortable alliances must be made with certain mercenary groups who would like to seize control of everything. This is only made more complex by the arrival of her estranged husband Rick, who is his own flavor of bastard, but can be useful to the castle.

Rounding out the protagonists are men like Jeong and Nowell, a young tech/finance guru and an experienced lawyer, respectively. (There's a chance I botched the spelling of their names—I listened to the audiobooks.)

I liked all of these characters because they went as far as they could to max out in their own fields, and actually applied the knowledge they had despite all of the opposition they faced. It was their pluck, their drive, their resilience that kept me rooting for them.

The World

Ours, now with 12% more bastard. The tech is more or less ours, the politics are definitely ours, and while all of the characters are fictitious, they are very real. This could (and probably does) happen here in our lifetimes.

The Politics

Well, it's not exactly Ayn Rand, but more or less it's the libertarians who save the world, right? Haha. They don't set out to save the planet with Objectivism, it's more that People Doing The Right Thing (TM) are the ones who get everything back on track, using sound economic principles and aggressively flipping the bird to the Powers That Be.

Content Warning

R for language and violence, and implied sensuality. That last part is a little toned down from book 2.

Who is it for?

Fans of THE MARTIAN and the good parts of ATLAS SHRUGGED, where the author can make his point in about 1/10th the word count.

Why buy it?

When the smart characters sit down to discuss and explain what's going on, these novels take on the better qualities of a textbook. Those discussions are worth revisiting in detail and learning from. Plus, the positive conclusion to two brutally hard entries in the trilogy is very whitepilling. Go get your copy.

Neom by Lavie Tidhar
Review by Heath Row
Previously seen in *Telegraphs and Tar Pits*

As recounted in *Faculae & Filigree* #19 and *Snow Poster Township* #9, I've returned to reading down the shelves at the library, scanning the new arrivals and fiction shelves for books labeled Fantasy, Mystery, or Sci-Fi to take advantage of the local library's holdings. So far, the practice has yielded several books—and authors—I wouldn't have sought out on my own or even been aware of.

This week I read Lavie Tidhar's novel *Neom*. A previous novel, *Central Station*, received the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Neukom Literary Arts Award, and was nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke and Locus awards. His next novel, *Unholy Land*, won a Prix Planete SF award and was shortlisted for the Campbell, Dragon, Locus, and Sidewise awards. And Tidhar received World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and British Science Fiction awards for other works. I was surprised I hadn't heard about him! Billed as "a novel from the world of *Central Station*," *Neom* is a wide-ranging, intriguing and inspiring portrayal of a future Middle East that draws on Tidhar's life experiences growing up on a kibbutz in Israel and living in Laos, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Vanuatu. The book is frequently mind-swimmingly inventive. Some pages, paragraphs, and sentences contain multiple ideas or concepts, any of which could be explored or built on—but are merely offered as everyday details in the world within the pages. There's even glossary-like back matter, "Beyond *Neom*: An A to Z," though it's more fun than functional; it's not really needed, like some book glossaries are.

While the book reads well on its own, it does make me want to read *Central Station*, and other works related to that earlier novel. In 2022 alone, Tidhar published about a dozen short stories in periodicals such as *Apex Magazine*, *Clarkesworld*, *The Dark*, *Future Science Fiction Digest*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *ParSec*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and the odd anthology. That suggests that *Analog*, Asimov's, and *F&SF* no longer hold the reins on new talent.

Neom's setting on the eastern shore of the Red Sea is decidedly Middle Eastern, as are the book's sights, sounds, and scents. A golden android unearthed by a robot who previously served as an assassin attracts the gathering of assorted decommissioned military robots and drones, biological hybrids and constructs, and other creatures—suggesting a Christ figure for robots. Meanwhile, itinerant laborers, security guards, and other residents struggle to make ends meet while helping each other find food, shelter, and companionship. Meanwhile, the lingering—or malingering—works left behind by terrorist-ists threaten to upend the efforts of all in *Neom*. One of the terrorist-ists' names brings Rudy Rucker to mind.

And Tidhar's writing occasionally reminds me of that of Cory Doctorow, though at least one blurb evokes Ray Bradbury, Nalo Hopkinson, and William Gibson. If you've never read Tidhar, do be sure to check this out. He's an author we should at least be acquainted with. And there are apparently at least a dozen related short stories published in 2012-2013, so a collection might not be too far distant from the two novels *Central Station* and *Neom*. If his other books or stories are as good as this one suggests, Tidhar's an author to seek out.

Old Soldiers by David Weber

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

A sci-fi novel about the bolo supertank Lazarus, obsolete but repaired from an earlier battle against the floppy-eared 'puppies' that were slowly grinding Earth's Empire into dust with planetary genocides across the stars. Earth sends out a colony task force in the opposite direction but gets intercepted in a space battle that leaves all warships destroyed, but most human transport ships, including the ones with the bolos, intact. Alas, a stealth puppy transport shadows them to the new world and enter the ground contest between the last bolo, Lazarus, and a heavy assault brigade.

Been a while since I read a Bolo story. Enjoyed it.

On Basilisk Station by David Weber

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The Story

This book shares the story of Commander Honor Harrington of the Royal Manticoran Navy. She commands the HMS Fearless, having assumed command after several new weapons were added to her vessel. These changes have the rank-and-file upset, but Honor is determined to give it the old college try when she participates in the navy's war games. Her career goes sideways after a sneak attack ends with her ship scoring a direct 'kill' against the flagship of one of the Lords of the Admiralty. She ends up banished to picket duty on Basilisk Station, essentially an assignment to Siberia in her universe. There is the usual tension, as Honor has issues with members of her command. There is also the fun drama of ground combat with the Medusa locals a smattering of intrigue and political shenanigans. And lest we forget, since this IS a novel about the Royal Manticoran Navy, there are spaceships knocking it out to the bitter end.

I felt like the plot moved along at a steady pace, a bit slow in places, but not enough to draw you out of the universe David Weber was creating. The plot was enough that I kept turning the pages for more, which is all we can really ask for! He went a little heavier on the science of his space flight than I like, but I was able to skim over those pages easily enough and enjoy an otherwise good space opera. The parts where David Weber described the combat on the ground were entirely believable, given the way he set up the primitive natives. It fit with what I knew from my own training as a historian and my time as a grunt. The only real issue I had was that the changes in POV felt jarring and were hard to follow. I read this novel as an eBook, and it was originally published as a trade paperback in 1993. I'm guessing that the novel was simply poorly converted, and the indications of the swapping POVs weren't carried over, though I haven't verified this. Either way, it was an issue for me.

The Characters

The main character in this novel is Honor Harrington, a naval commander who is given command of the HMS Fearless at the beginning of the novel. I found myself very much drawn to her, she was a well-developed character, who had enough depth to make her believable. Having grown up a Navy Brat and taken Navy JROTC in high school, I felt like she fit with the upstanding naval officers I've known. Admittedly, I went on to an Army college and then enlisted into the infantry so otherwise my exposure to the Navy is almost nil, but I felt like she fit with what I've known in real life. She's a no-nonsense kind

of woman, who gets the job done and overcomes, no matter the cost. Honor does all this without sacrificing her troops needlessly but isn't afraid to risk all and pull the trigger when the need arises.

The World

I felt like the world building in this novel was solid, there was just enough to understand everything. The setting was cogently written, believable and fun to imagine yourself joining. Probably a bad idea, as lots of people die in these fights, but such are the dangers of Sci-Fi fandom. Admittedly, I came into these novels after being seduced to the dark side by the TRMN Fan Club at RavenCon in 2016, so I knew a lot about the universe when I cracked the digital spine. I think it would've still stood on the laurels of the world David Weber created, but I felt the need for full disclosure.

Description

I feel like this one is hard for me to assess fairly; my visualizations were colored by the outside representations. I've seen the costumes created by The Royal Manticorian Navy (TRMN), a large fan club that created a naval force for the imaginary ships straight out of David Weber's mind! These fans are dedicated and cosplay his universe and they take it to the Nth degree. When I read these books, that fan club was what I pictured. I think it was well done, but it's possible my affiliation with his rabid fans colored my readings of things.

Overall

Aside from my issues with the jarring switches from one POV to another, I really enjoyed this novel. It kept me hooked and gave me an idea of how to make the hard science fiction approach to space combat more enjoyable. It was a bit heavy on the math, which I'm in no way qualified to judge the veracity of, but was otherwise enjoyable. I did like it enough to buy book two and will be reading that next. When the author is such an iconic master like David Weber, us noobs need to read and learn.

It wasn't a WOWZER five grenade novel, but it was good. Despite my issues with it, this is a book I would happily recommend. Heck, I would even recommend that you buy the novel! Some novels I've only liked enough to check out from the library, but this one you'll want to buy for your reading pleasure and keep on your bookshelves.

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 David Webber fan. And then, because you're unemployed and need a job, you enlist into the Royal Manticoran Navy. As a spacer, you are then deployed to the front lines. Forcing you to desert, so that you might live. And then you track him down, the man who ruined your life, 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!

Rating: 4/5 Grenades

Past Master by R. A. Lafferty Review by Perry Middlemiss

A finalist for the 1969 Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel.

In the far-future, Earth has been nearly abandoned and humankind has migrated to a small number of planets in nearby solar systems. On one of them, Astrobe, an attempt at building a Utopian society is in danger of collapse and all attempts to install a ruler to fix the problem have failed. So the leaders decide to snatch Sir Thomas More – chosen for his honesty and legal and moral sense – out of time, shortly before his death. This novel then explores More's attempts to come to terms with the Astrobe society and documents his conflicts with the planet's leaders who thought he would be easy to manipulate. There are hints of Cordwainer Smith here, with the strange human hybrids and stranger mechanoids. I'm sure Lafferty meant this novel as a commentary on the whole concept of Utopia, and a discussion of More's novel Utopia, but, if so, it all went over my head. Originally written in 1964, it was then recast as a short story which editor Terry Carr commented was attempting too much for a story of that length. Re-written as a novel, Carr accepted it, though demanded some re-writes as he considered it contained stilted dialogue and too many expositions. I don't think Lafferty re-wrote enough. He's way better at a shorter length. R: 2.2/5.0

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Powered — by Scott Bartlett Review by JR Handley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews. I'm feeling lazy, so there will be no long winded introduction! Enough about me, onto this book review. Let's get to it!

Summary

First, let me say that none of what I'll say in this section couldn't be found on the back copy of the novel. Heck, I cribbed this summary from the back, and then I add my own twist! And not even much of one, since his description was so spot on! Further, I wanted to provide a spoiler free review, so here goes nothing!

The Steel Universe is a dangerous and chaotic place, and after fleeing the Sol System, humanity is tired of losing. Enter the mech.

After the mysterious discovery of an alien mech inside a comet, Darkstream Security can finally complete its own design. They assign Chief Gabriel Roach with the task of whittling down hundreds of bright young recruits to form a team of elite mech pilots, which he will command.

Their mission is simple, protect human colonies from the large and ferocious Quatro. A single Quatro can take down an entire squad of traditional soldiers. Bigger than a draft horse, more muscular than a grizzly, with jaws that splinter bone. And zero fear. They almost defeated humanity before, and now they're back - in numbers we didn't know they had.

But Roach is the perfect one for the job. Almost too perfect. The Quatro took from him the only woman he ever loved, and now, he's determined to make one thing clear: it's them or him.

If you like mechs, explosions and plenty of gritty combat, then you've come to the right place! This first novel is a brilliant introduction to the Mech Wars, an epic military science fiction series. To give you an easy comparison, if you enjoyed the Four Horsemen Universe by Mark Wandrey and Chris Kennedy or the Land & Sea Series by Blaine Lee Pardoe, then you'll love this novel! There are other mech books out there, but I won't recommend books I haven't yet read.

Characters

In this novel, we get to interact with a large cast of characters. In retrospect, it didn't feel as large until I sat down to write this section. All of the characters were flushed out, and three-dimensional. I found them to be a lot of fun to get to know over the course of this book. They were all flushed out at this point that they transcended into the forth dimension! I felt like I could relate to them as people, and I would love to hang out and drink a beer with them. Here's a summary of the main characters.

Jake Price: He's the son of a former Darkstream soldier, who follows his father's footsteps, despite his father's reluctance to support the decision. He's consistently scored at the top of the leader board for the lucid dreaming simulations, which brought him to the attention of the Darkstream Corporation. Once he's recruited, he's quickly assigned to the mech pilot unit. Now all he needs is for the company to invent a viable mech robot. I really loved Jake's character development throughout the story. I can't tell you more about this character without spoilers, so I'll leave it right here!

Gabe Roach: He's a grizzled veteran of the UAF and a Chief in the Darkstream military forces. He is the stereotypical military badass, with a duffel bag full of regrets. He's the kind of guy you'd want on your side in a firefight, though he's a bit of an ass to his own subordinates. After losing someone very close to him, he takes the risky job of helping his employer start the new mech unit in training the new recruits. We, the readers, get to see a moderate amount of character growth from him, though given his age and experience, we are forced to determine that most of his growing happened years ago. He was, however, by no means a static character. Overall, I really liked him.

Lisa Sato: She is a junior enlisted soldier for the Darkstream military, and is a true believer. She's trained all her life on the lucid dreaming, or just lucid, simulations and has reached the pinnacle of combat training. Unfortunately, she learns the hard way that training on dream simulations does little to prepare her for real life combat. In this novel, *Powered*, we see her grow as a soldier and as a person. I'd give an example, but I promised a spoiler free review!

Tess Notaras: She is a gray haired, retired Darkstream soldier, who is disillusioned and jaded. She's got nothing nice to say about the company and thinks they train soft soldiers, unlike her training in the UAF military. She befriends Lisa, and seeks to shepherd her into the promised land of competency. As a character, she was very flushed out. She doesn't have any real growth, but it's the first book in a series, so I'm willing to cut the author some slack here!

Quatro: This is the alien species that inhabit the Steel System, and I envision as a cross between a horse and a bear. Humanity thinks they're not fully sentient, merely apex predators and that's all I can say without spoiling bits of the plot. Let's leave it at saying you'd feed them your Granny to get away from these hulking monstrosities!

Meddlers: This was the alien species that was never present, but lurked in the backdrop. They created the Amblers and the Gatherers, robots that seemed to collect resources for some unknown reason. The humans in the system took advantage of this, never wondering about who or what built these machines and whether or not they would come back.

Overall, I will give these characters 5 out of 5 Grenades and can't wait to see where the author takes these characters throughout this new series!

Plot

Like most of the military fiction, I love to read, this was an action-packed novel. The story is set in a world where humanity has ventured past the Sol System. The premise for this series starts with humanity having used worm holes to colonize the Steel System. This happens under a purely capitalist society run by the Darkstream Corporation. It was a good set-up and well-executed premise that held my interest from the first minute of audio. There were more characters than I normally like, but it was so seamless that I didn't even notice until I sat down to write this review. The author balanced the action out with plenty of exposition and world building, so the story never felt flat. Even in the audiobook format, the novel was easy to follow. I really loved the premise or plot of this novel. More importantly, I enjoyed how Scott Bartlett executed it. The pacing was excellent, and there was never a slow moment. I couldn't ask for anything more; the unique premise, perfect execution, and incredible pacing! I again give Scott 5 out of 5 Grenades!

World Building

This is the first book in the Mech Wars Series, and I absolutely loved it. Whenever I get some cash, I'll be buying Scott Bartlett's entire back catalog! This novel had a very flushed out world that was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. I loved the way he handled inserting new tidbits about the larger universe and its history in such a way that you didn't even notice. He did it so adroitly that I was able to start with this series, even though it's an offshoot of his earlier Ixan Prophecies Trilogy. You never felt like you were missing anything to understand the world and made me want to become part of the larger world. I was hooked, and now I want to know it all! Maybe it's time to start considering Scott Bartlett Worlds Support Groups? Scott described the world with just enough details to let me picture it.

However, I struggled to visualize the Quatro aliens. Since they were so vital to the world Scott created, it was a bit irksome, Maybe it was the audio? Since I didn't read it while I listened to Mark Boyett's sultry voice, I'll give Scott the benefit of the doubt. Another part of the world that I really loved was the concept of lucid dreaming and how it fit into the plot and universe. Basically, this was set up like a dream based virtual reality simulator. I think the idea has a lot of merit, and I don't think I've ever read this idea anywhere. Give the man points for creativity!

Further, I found his decision to use naval ranks for the Darkstream military interesting. They were serving in a dirtside garrison and policing role, which made that choice stand out, but it didn't distract from the plot, so I merely note it here for those who care about such things. Overall, the world building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Scott created. It was a fun ride that made me wanna suit up...which is the goal of action/adventure authors! Like many of the stories I read, this one didn't take itself too seriously, which allowed you to focus on the fun which is why I read in the first place. I still give the world building 4.75 out of 5 Grenades. If I could've pictured the Quatro better, it would've been a perfect score for me.

Description

I have to give it to the author, this novel was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. The only scenes that were confusing and difficult to envision were the alien species known as the Quatro. I wouldn't mind it one bit if the author shared the artist's rendering of these creatures! Another place where Scott went light on the details was on how everyone looked. I know this is the current trend, so I reluctantly accept it, but I don't personally like it. A huge plus for

me was Scott's descriptive use of language, he balanced the explanation of this new world with the need to move a story along.

This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible and I enjoyed it. The author's description of his universe was so evocative that I began imagining myself in the mech suit fighting with Gabe and Jake. It was a little bit distracting, but it's a sign of an amazingly built universe. I didn't find any issues with the descriptions, except for the previously mentioned alien species. Like many authors these days, Scott Bartlett was lite on the details of what the various characters looked like. I don't really like this trend, but the action was so gripping that I just didn't care. I wanted the action, the adventure, and the PEW PEW! Scott brought it, this was definitely his A game. I give Scott 5 out of 5 grenades in this category.

Narration Quality

At this point, I've listened to enough audiobooks that I am confident about what I like in a narrator. I know that I hate accents that seem too cheesy, and despite narrators that sound like robots. With those pesky caveats, I will review the narration quality of this novel. The audiobook was well done, and the accents were consistent.

The narrator, Mark Boyett, did a fantastic job narrating this book. I would definitely listen to more books by him, and with Amazon's recent audiobook price increase, that is saying something. Let's be honest, the recently increased price of audiobooks has taken them out of the range of impulse buys. Even at the new price, I would listen to more by this narrator! He didn't bore you, or make you zone out because of his monotone. His performance didn't feel robotic like a machine was reading the novel to me. You'll often see that from me because it'll drag me out of a book so fast I can't listen to it anymore. With Mark Boyett, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. Only he made kind of cool voices, with believable accents that didn't yank you out of the story. Overall, I give him a 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

Overall

I really loved this book, and it made my morning walks extremely enjoyable. This book I "read" entirely via the audio book. I didn't even buy the eBook, just loaded the audiobook into my Audible and went to town. The production quality of the audio narration was top notch, and the story was compelling. Gave me a case of the feels, as I found myself getting angry at the injustices perpetrated by the Darkstream Company. I mourned the loss of the brave warriors killed in battle, and drank a few shots in their honor!

This was my first novel by author Scott Bartlett, and I'm sold on his writing style. What first caught my eye was the fantastic cover, it was amazingly compelling. I like how Scott made this cover fit with those for the other two novels in this series, they really work together. The military culture shown in this book was spot on, though the author did slip once on the rank structure. I'm not sure the average reader would even notice, but it jumped out at me. He also had a moment where he mentioned the character Lisa Sato's emotional reaction to her first kill when it was actually her second in the book. However, I couldn't find any other issues to complain about, so I call it a win!

Moving right along, the ground combat Scott described was visceral and immersive. It was just what you'd want from the military science fiction genre. I've never considered mech combat in my worlds, so I've not had reason to think about what their tactics might be. It was clear that the author HAD spent the time reasoning this out because the battle scenes were believable. I never felt like the author missed

a chance to get creative with the tactics. Such a detailed portrayal of the tactics is rare, especially when coming from a civilian. Seriously, the author weaponized the awesome power of the PEW PEW for this gripping novel and hooked me from the first page! He wove the action in such a compelling way that you wanted to jump into a mech as well.

Basically, Scott had me hooked from the beginning and kept it going throughout the whole novel. This is a book I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Buy the novel! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money! I give this novel a 5 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 inspired you to create your own mech. And on the journey of discovery, you end up accidentally creating a sentient robot. And then that robot starts a computer system and calls it Skynet. Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. Or maybe you'll be okay? You could do better than John Connor, right? On second thought, be warned, fanboy/fangirl syndrome just MIGHT kill you. Be wary, you were warned and if you have to go out like that at least enjoy the view from the end times!

Rating: 5/5 Grenades

Pulling the Wings Off Angels by K. J. Parker Review by Perry Middlemiss

K. J. Parker continues his series of novellas about an alternate Europe where demons and angels exist, and God may well be that old guy walking through the village. His main character here is a student of Saloinus, self-styled as "the smartest man who ever lived" and who has appeared in several others of Parker's works. Our unnamed protagonist is a priest who has been swindled in a card game and now finds himself in debt to a local gangster named Florio, who will forgive the debt if only he can be provided with a living angel. Which our narrator is able to procure due to the fact that his grandfather concocted a way to cheat god and captured an angel in the process. These stories read like amusing pulp detective fiction with wise-cracking characters, caustic angels and schemes aplenty. But it is all leavened by a dark side that considers the pacts that religion has made with god, and the way these tend to badly impact the little man. All good fun. R: 3.4/5.0

Perry Middlemiss's reviews appear in his zine Perryscope.

Red Rabbit Presents #1: Science Fiction for the People Issue! Edited by Ellen Campbell Review by JR Handley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Today my book review will be a bit different, I'm going over a short anthology I recently purchased. Since the collection only has four short stories, I'll review them all. This is my second review of an anthology, but I like this format for the reviews.

If anyone has a different or better format to review an anthology, please comment below! I'll include the actual summary of the story from the blurb and then write my thoughts on the story separately and conclude with an overall review of the collection.

The Stories:

General Mikeal is a living relic, a sentient robot allowed to survive the Great AI Purge three-hundred years ago. Rewarded for siding with mankind, the general now commands the 6th Mechanized, a cadre of lethal machines. The 6th is on-planet to break the back of an uprising; inter-dimensional aliens have possessed a species, manipulating their tech for war purposes. But there are dangerous surprises on the desert planet Erudia. Ambushed by an overwhelming foe, the general has to accept the help of the one thing robots hate the most: cyborgs.

My thoughts: I'm torn on this one, because if I rated the concept, I would sing this one to the stars... but I have to rate the presentation. Keep in mind, what works for some won't be appreciated by others. This is entirely subjective. Having said that, I found some of the sentences to be very clunky. I had to reread parts of this story several times, and if I wasn't writing the review, I might've stopped reading. I'm glad I didn't, however, because the concept was amazing! The main character, General Mikeal, was so humanistic that at first, I missed that he was a robot. I like that he made the robot feel like a real person, it added depth and dimension to the overall story. The more I got into the story, the better it got. The author chose to put a lot of the world building in the middle and at the end of the story, which made for smoother reading as we progressed. Once we got to the ending, however, the author lost me again. There wasn't so much of an ending, as the story just stopped. It felt like the author hit the word count, and then didn't keep going. I wasn't a fan of that approach, but if this was flushed out into a full-length novel I would buy it in a heartbeat! I give this story 3 out of 5 grenades! If this was flushed out into a novel, I could see giving it 5 out of 5 grenades and buying the next book in the series.

Pest Control by Rhoads Brazos

Summary: Millennia from now, the last member of our meddlesome species seeks atonement. As deft as a surgeon, relentless, purging the vermin—he's grown used to the task. After so many years, he moves through his job with ease. Today might just be another workday, but the galaxy is a big place, and there's no telling what's in it.

My thoughts: This story started out brilliantly, and only got better from there! The main character is basically a futuristic Sci-Fi version of the Terminix Man. The blurb on the book's Amazon page tells you that the main character, Geoff, is a futuristic human. However, when you meet him, he's some sort of tentacled creature. The mystery of that plays throughout the whole story, and it was brilliantly executed. I loved watching it unfold as the story progressed. The writing style was great, and I would definitely read more by this author. I was a little confused at first, but I expect that with short stories. Even when I was confused, however, I was highly amused. The witty use of humor in the dialogue had me hanging on every word. This wasn't my usual fare, but I really liked it. I said, and it's worth repeating, I will read more by this author. The ending was unexpected and wrapped the story up nicely. I enthusiastically give this story 5 out of 5 grenades!

Imagine All Insects by SH Mansouri

Summary: Space Marine Eric Sanders wants nothing more than to rock-out on Mars with his Gibson in peace and make a few friends along the way. But with his fellow marines hell-bent on wiping out anything that treads on four legs, Eric must choose between the sound of heavy metal or plasma rounds ripping through his new friends.

My thoughts: This story started out a little rough but got better as the story unfolded. The main character, Space Marine Eric Sanders, was what I would expect if a hippie from the 60s joined the Marine Corps and went to colonize the galaxy. Seriously, all that was missing was a peace sign and some patchouli. He wasn't very relatable, and I didn't like him. However, I'm old enough to remember living

through parts of the Cold War, hearing about “killing a commie for your mommy” and tales of the evil “hippies” of past decades. It wasn’t that the character was badly written, he just didn’t resonate with me. His sidekick, however, was awesome. I really loved Jiminy, his pet insect named after a cricket. I did enjoy the musical interlude vibe; the author really made me hear the music in my head. He used it creatively, having it be the key to communicating with the insectoids on Mars. Nobody believes him when he says they are sentient, which adds another level of depth to the story that I liked. It was a little heavy-handed on the preaching, but at its core was a tale of the clash of cultures. Overall, I enjoyed this story, and I would enthusiastically give this story 4 out of 5 grenades! Also, I would be willing to give this author’s other books a chance.

CON4AN the Cybarbarian by Nick Cole

Summary: R.E. Howard’s most famous character comes to life in this future horror re-imagining of the legendary Conan the Barbarian. A runaway Reaper-Model Cyborg, fleeing the Tech Sorcerers of a world gone mad, enters the post-apocalyptic kingdoms of man’s last age. Considered a barbarian and an outsider, the Cyborg soon finds himself caught up in the intrigues and cabals of an eerily familiar world where men, mutant monsters and tech magic slay and plot for power, gold and salvage. But first the machine must survive the wilds of No Man’s Land and find a name, instead of an alpha-numeric identifier. This is Terminator meets Conan the Barbarian in a sword and cyber-sorcery epic only one man could’ve imagined long ago.

My thoughts: The story was easy to jump into, but I have read a lot of the Pulp Era Sci-Fi stories. I’m not sure if it would be a smooth transition without that background. There are two main characters; Old Danwards, a scavenger, and an unnamed youth who we later find out is Conan the Barbarian. Well, CYbarbarian anyway. The characters felt a little flat, but that is expected in serial stories. Sometimes, the wording was a little bit cryptic and a tad literary, but in a good way. I thought Nick Cole pulled it off, and I was hooked. There wasn’t a scene I couldn’t picture, and I felt shades of the Fallout franchise of games while reading this. Having read a lot of Nick’s other stuff, I can say that the literary bent is just his style. Overall, the story was a neat twist on an old tale that came before my time. I enjoyed the ending; it was a satisfactory conclusion that opened up the possibility of a follow-on series. If he writes it, I will read it! I enthusiastically give this story 5 out of 5 grenades! And if you don’t agree with me, you’re probably a dirty commie hippie! Okay, I was joking... I think?

Overall:

First, I need to start with the presentation of the book. I am not a fan of the cover art, it was too busy, and the image was hard to see. As I’ve mentioned before, I am colorblind, so your mileage may vary. If you loved it, start a discussion in the comments and we can talk about it! With that out of the way, let’s talk about the anthology itself. I enjoyed this collection of short stories, they were quick reads that entertained me.

At only 85 pages, I finished it in one sitting. As with the anthology format, the stories will be a hit and miss. I really loved three of the four, and one just wasn’t for me. Let’s be real that is normal for an anthology, and part of what makes them useful. You get exposed to new takes on things and see the world from multiple perspectives.

I’m confident that you’ll find you like more stories than you would normally skip, hence my recommendation. Even though one of them wasn’t my thing, there were parts of it that I really loved. Like always, I went the spoiler-free approach. What does this mean for my overall ranking? I really enjoyed this collection, and happily recommend it.

Singer Distance by Ethan Chatagnier
Review by Heath Row
Previously seen in Snow Poster Township

While I continue to own a sizable home library, some of it in storage and not all of it yet cataloged, I recently returned to the public library to see if I could read down the shelves like I initially did as a youth. Turns out that I can! The Los Angeles County Library branch near our home labels fantasy, mystery, and sf books with little colored decals on the spines. For example, Sci-Fi is blue, and Mystery is red. So you can scan down the shelves in the fiction section—or on the new arrivals shelves—for titles of possible interest.

In recent weeks, I've read two excellent books I would not have encountered or sought out otherwise: Alex Smith's collection *Ark dust* (Faculae & Filigree #19) and this novel. Published by Tin House, whose little magazine by that title ceased publication after 20 years in 2019, Ethan Chatagnier's *Singer Distance* is decidedly literary fiction that's also science fiction — rather than straightforward genre sf. And it's an excellent book.

Inspired by Ken Kalfus's 2013 alternate history *Equilateral*, Chatagnier's novel is a consideration of theoretical mathematics in the 1960s, intelligent life on Mars, interplanetary communication, and the impact of all of the above on fellow students, friends, lovers, and family members.

The Martians play a muted role in the book, communicating via math sent as signals between the surfaces of the two planets—literally spelled out in agricultural fields and other locations with fire or luminescent paint. A group of students led by a brilliant young woman ends up attracting the Martians' attention, which leads to the students' successes, as well as failures, as academics and people.

The role of the radio scientist Lucas Holladay as a force for popularizing math and science is thoroughly enjoyable, and the relationships between Crystal Singer and the narrator, Rick Hayworth, as well as one particular family member, are richly warm and affectionate. Chatagnier's characters feel fully developed and very human. The science is interesting, too: Relative space and time based on your point of view, translating eventually into music.

The Stars My Destination by Alfred Bester
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

It's hard to believe this book was written in the mid-fifties for so many elements of the writing and the story feel so modern. That being said, about halfway through the book it struck me that it is most likely a science fiction retelling of the *Count of Monte Cristo*. Above all it is a tale of revenge and like in *Monte Cristo* revenge is a hollow thing to live for, leaving one vacant as success becomes imminent. But revenge is not the only aspect of the book, it is a well-rounded story and even manages to tug on the heart strings a bit. Parts of the story were absurdist and decadent, bringing to mind Moorcock's *An Alien Heat*. The book is obviously an SF classic, but it is also hard to understate how much of an influence it became for so many writers, and now, myself included. Finally reading this book puts into perspective how it was influential to so many different camps of science fiction authors and will likely remain so. Fans of anti-hero stories will especially enjoy this tale. After reading this book I am greatly looking forward to reading more of Bester's work, including but not limited to *The Demolished Man*. Highly recommended. \

Stories of Your Life by Ted Chiang
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

I have read in several places that Ted Chiang is one of the most important voices in modern science fiction and after reading this book I fully agree with this statement. Stories of Your Life is a collection of short stories that for the most part were originally published in magazines. Each of the stories dealt with wildly different subjects, proving Chiang's versatility as an author. And each story was deeply compelling and filled with truly original ideas. My favorite kind of science fiction is the kind that forces you to put the book down occasionally and ponder the implications of the ideas being presented. This collection had no shortage of these moments. Another one of my favorite issues in science fiction is linguistics and communication difficulties, the title story that was made into the film Arrival, did a wonderful job at addressing this issue and presented fresh concepts that I will be considering for some time to come. The best books are the ones that keep you thinking for months on end, and I have no doubt that this book has had that effect on me. I don't want to give away the premises of these stories because I found them surprising throughout and wouldn't want to deprive you of a similar experience. Highly recommended!

Book link: <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9781101972120>

There Will Be Stars by Billy Coffey
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

I thought this would be science fiction, and it is to a point, but it is NOT space opera-type fiction or space anything fiction. It's more Five People You Meet in Heaven meets Groundhog Day. It's quirky, bizarre, and you know it needs to cycle through all these plot threads to an end, but I never quite figured it all out ahead of time -- and that's a good thing. You have to plow through the opening chapters, but the payoff is well worth it. Fascinating characters.

Enjoyed it.

Tin Man: A Galaxy's Edge Prequel
Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Summary:

First, let me say that this story will be harder for me to keep spoiler free, but I'll try. Unlike my normal book reads, this time the blurb didn't draw me in. I received this for free because I'm on the Galaxy's Edge mailing list. I didn't even read the blurb, I saw the cover and dove right in. If you want to receive your own copy, click the link! In this story, we follow H292, a repurposed warbot, on his last mission. We get to watch his AI mature, showing the heart of a hero as he wades into the battle not to destroy—but to save. Fighting in the wilds of a jungle planet, the Legion fights in brutal combat as Republic marines fly their SLICS from one tragedy to the next. Only the bravery and self-sacrifice of this fully realized machine can turn the tides.

Characters:

In this short story there are two main characters; H292 and Captain Reese. Both of these characters were flushed out, more than you'd expect in a story that's only 60 pages long. There isn't a lot of growth from Reese, instead leaving you with a desire to know more about him. When we revisit H292 years later, we find him struggling with the loss of the troops he couldn't save, humanizing the war machine.

H292: This is a war bot brought back online to fight with his legion brothers, first as a medivac pilot, and then as a one-man army. When space to pull out more wounded troops was needed on the medivac, he volunteers to stay behind. Despite the risks, he was willing to sacrifice his own existence.

Captain Reese: He is a Marine medivac pilot, trying to use his piloting skills to save the lives of the legionnaires fighting against the Doro in the Aachon Valley, an inhospitable landscape.

There was a lot of room for growth with these characters, but the limits of a short story didn't allow for it. In all fairness, this is why I tend not to read shorter fiction within larger worlds. I prefer my short content to stand-alone. But despite that, I loved these characters and want more of them! Overall, I give this character 5 out of 5 Grenades.

Plot:

This story was action packed and kept you turning the pages. I read it in one setting, and I honestly couldn't put it down. It was easy to follow and is set before the events of the main series so you could read it as a stand-alone adventure tale. I got even more from it because I've read the first nine novels in season one of the main series, but it wasn't required to love this story. Overall, there weren't any parts of the plot that didn't work for me. I wanted to know why the legion needed to fight on the planet, instead of bombarding it from orbit, but it is addressed by one of the main characters. While we don't know the backdrop of this campaign, we know it wasn't left out as an oversight by the authors. My overall review of this story is definitely slanted towards my preference of longer works, but I give the plot a 4 out of 5 Grenades. If it had had more time to explore all the unanswered questions, I would give it a 5!

Worldbuilding:

This is a standalone short story and told the story of a war bot and a marine medivac pilot. While the scope of the plot was limited, the world was very flushed out. The setting struck me as an analog for the conflict in Vietnam, but not in the trite way we often find in literature. This story works within the scope of the larger world, but it doesn't stand in the shadow of it either. This story stands alone, a fully realized universe in its own right. The authors balanced the micro with the macro for this world creation and did it well. They put together a compelling landscape, which served as a backdrop for this story. I give the world building 5 out of 5 Grenades.

Description:

The descriptions for this story were compelling enough to keep you reading, though limited by the scope of the adventure. I believe I was able to envision it very well, despite this, because I have read the main series. I loved the chaos they described in the jungles, and could envision the Doro, or Dobies, that the Legion was fighting. It was also fun seeing this world from the eyes of supporting services and machines, instead of only via the buckets of a legionnaire. I give Anspach/Cole 5 out of 5 Grenades in this category!

Overall: I loved this story, and the only complaint I had was that it was too short. There weren't enough of these characters, and I wanted more. I've become addicted to my #leejcrack, and I need it! This was the equivalent of going to the bar and being served near-beer instead. It was good, but what a tease! The story was action packed, with plenty of visceral combat scenes to love but it could've been the next big thing if they'd kept going! They got the military vibe down, and the chaos of combat. I was honestly surprised when I heard that Nick Cole's time in the Army didn't include combat. He faked it well, and the audience benefits from that ability with a glimpse into the lives of our combat veterans. He got the tactics down, at least you assume he did since we saw a narrow view of the action, instead of the bigger picture. He addressed the one glaring issue, so I'm satisfied that it was a plot decision and not an oversight. And in case you were unclear, I judge the tactics on how they fit in the world the author created, and nothing else. Again, my one complaint was that I wanted more! I wanted this story to be longer, and to find out what happened to them all. I definitely recommend that you join the mailing list and check out this mini thriller! It's worth your time, and I say that knowing how precious that commodity is. I give this a solid 4 out of 5 Grenades!

Unstoppable Arsenal by Jeffrey H. Haskell Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The sequel to 2017's ARSENAL helps to grow the character as well as the world she inhabits, adding complicated layers to her quest to find her missing parents.

The Story

At the end of ARSENAL, Amelia had pulled off her mission of joining the Diamondbacks, the official superhero militia of Arizona. Now that she has access to their resources, she can start digging through government files on her missing mom and dad.

Right out of the gate, we get big advancements in Amelia's saga. I think Harry Potter kind of reprogrammed readers to expect a lack of payoff in series books. I kind of figured it would take several volumes to get to this point, but nope, Amelia's got their location and she goes off half-cocked to find them.

But hey, it can't be that simple, can it? Of course not! When she rescues them from Evil Science Labs Inc (not its actual name) their memories have been wiped. They don't even remember that they had a daughter. They're just doing science slavery for someone super shady.

To add an extra degree of difficulty (and a new element of this world) we find out the Oracle of Delphi is in fact real, and she's been watching all of the possible outcomes for the world. Thus far the outcomes have been infinite in number, but once Amelia joined the Diamondbacks, the possible outcomes started to reduce. Now there are just two: Amelia succeeds and the world ends, or she quits and everything's fine.

I dig the stakes. She's not necessarily a prophesied hero, but she has to quarrel with herself and what she wants, against the fate of the entire world. We all know what the right thing would be on paper, but we're saying that as readers who have to assess someone else making the choice. The way Haskell writes it, you feel the weight. He takes it seriously. That makes all the difference.

The Characters

Amelia still has limits despite her accelerated intelligence, and she's conscious of them. Not only is she navigating the fame of being a Diamondback, she's also dating Major Force, and she's never really had a boyfriend before. She's also never had a friend like Karen "Domino" Petrinelli, another super who feels betrayed when she finds out Amelia didn't include her in her rescue plans.

The relationships have real considerations behind them. You're not getting Drunk Genius Tony Stark but you're also not getting Minority Super-Awesome-You-Go-Girl Riri Williams.

The World

Ours, only the Wardenclyyffe Incident in the early 1900s (Tesla) broke the laws of physics and allowed for people to get superpowers.

The Politics

Not really an issue, there are only legal questions that arise that make the story more interesting.

Content

Mild PG-13, even more mild than an Avengers movie.

Who's it for?

People who didn't see Ant-Man 3 because they knew it would suck. Those people were saving their money for Full Metal Superhero and didn't know it.

Why read it?

Because in the first book, Amelia stated a goal and hadn't reached it yet. Here, she reaches it, and now she has to deal with new responsibilities leading into the next one. I personally enjoy having a big (finished) series to move through. The books are also very "consumable" in terms of length—you're not picking up a 500-page monster every time. They're a nice light treat to consume.

Prose Bono

How Do You Get Started?

A.C. Cargill

<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/2022/06/21/types-of-editing-for-your-work-of-fiction/>

Just as some painters are daunted by that blank canvas or sheet of paper, we writers can be daunted staring at a blank sheet of paper or the blank screen on our laptop, electronic tablet, or even our cell phone. Never fear. You can take that first step toward writing out your story, poem, article, novel, etc.

Get an Idea

You don't start writing by saying, "I'm going to write a novel." Instead, you get an idea, such as "Billy killed Johnny and spent the rest of his life trying to escape justice." Of course, now the hard work begins.

Ask Questions

You have a host of questions to answer for the reader:

- Who is Billy?
- Who is Johnny?
- How did Billy kill Johnny?
- Why did Billy kill Johnny?
- Where and when did Billy kill Johnny?
- Who is impacted by this killing?
- Who is investigating this killing?
- How does Billy keep one step ahead of the investigator?
- How does it all end?

Come Up With Answers

Then, sketch out your answers to the above questions. You don't need to get too detailed here. Keep these answers handy as you begin to write. Again, don't lock yourself into the goal of writing a novel. This could end up being a novella or a short story.

Think Up an Opening

And then, start with an intriguing opening. The trend these days is to give readers a bit of a jolt in the first paragraph or two. You don't need to do this, but you can hint at the jolt that is to come. In *Hammil Valley Rising*, my first paragraph ends with:

"It was a beautiful morning. But that sense of beauty can be misleading on a ranch."

A rather tame opening paragraph tells of trouble ahead.

Detail Those Answers

From here you can go on to work in those answers above, telling about Billy and Johnny before the killing or starting with the killing and working in their details later. In fact, what details and how extensive they are will be some tough decisions. You'll also want some idea of the overall tone (lighthearted, humorous, darkly serious, etc.) you intend.

Final Thoughts

There are plenty of writing courses out there that will tell you to follow this or that pattern. They're fine for starting out, but sooner or later, like a young bird in the nest, you'll have to stretch your own wings and fly. For years I studied art, taking classes in watercolor, drawing, oil painting, color theory, and even hand lettering. Eventually, I had to use what I had learned to create my own art in my own style. The same was true of my studies in English literature. Over the years, I had to develop my own style. Time for you to develop yours.

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

Please check out my Works in Progress. <https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com> And thanks for reading.

~Finis~