

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

FICTION

- 2 ... A Reluctant Druid by Jon Osborne ... Review by Jim McCoy
- 3 ... A Spring for Spears by Katie Cross & Derek Alan Siddoway ... Review by Declan Finn
- 6 ... Cherry Drop by P.A. Piatt ... Review by Jim McCoy
- 8 ... Dust by Hugh Howey ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 8 ... Hell Spawn by Declan Finn ... Review by Graham Bradley
- 10 ... Heroine Complex by Sarah Kuhn ... Review by Chris Nuttall
- 12 ... Hull Zero Three by Greg Bear ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
- 12 ... Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell by Susanna Clarke ... Review by Tom Feller
- 13 ... The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold ... Review by Tom Feller
- 13 ... The Moon and the Desert by Robert Hampson ... Review by Declan Finn
- 15 ... New Writings in SF-5 ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
- 15 ... New Writings in SF-8 ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
- 16 ... One Italian Summer by Rebecca Serle ... Review by Tom Feller
- 16 ... Orbit 4 ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
- 16 ... The Prisoner by Thomas M. Disch ... Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
- 17 ... The Red Tide: The Chinese Invasion of Seattle by Chris Kennedy ... Review by JR Handley
- 20 ... Shift by Hugh Howey ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 20 ... Ship of Destiny by Frank Chadwick ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 20 ... Splashdown by Blaine L. Pardoe ... Review by Graham Bradley
- 23 ... Star Bounty 1. Absolution by Rick Partlow ... Review by Declan Finn
- 24 ... Steel World by B.V. Larson ... Review by JR Handley
- 29 ... Stigers Tigers by Mark Alan Edelheit ... Review by JR Handley
- 34 ... To Sleep In A Sea Of Stars by Christopher Paolini ... Review by Mindy Hunt
- 36 ... Tower of Silence by Larry Correia ... Review by Graham Bradley
- 39 ... The Traveler by Stephan Bolz ... Review by JR Handley
- 41 ... When the Tripods Came by John Christopher ... Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
- 41 ... Wool by Hugh Howey ... Review by Russ Lockwood

LITERARY CRITICISM

- 42 ... Is the Term "Science Fiction" Passé? by A. C. Cargill
- 42 ... Dangerous Visions and New Worlds: Radical Science Fiction, 1950 to 1985
Edited by Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre ... Review by Tom Feller

PROSE BONO

- 49 ... Crafting Your Characters by A. C. Cargill
- 51 ... Don't Look at the Words by Cedar Sanderson
- 51 ... Feeling Romantic by Cedar Sanderson
- 53 ... Finding a Style by Cedar Sanderson
- 55 ... How to: Author Central by Cedar Sanderson
- 56 ... It's a Mess by Cedar Sanderson
- 57 ... Just a Little Brain by Cedar Sanderson
- 58 ... Urges and Impulses by Cedar Sanderson
- 59 ... The Working Writer and Artist by Cedar Sanderson
- 60 ... Never Say You Can't Survive by Charlie Jane Anders ... Review by Tom Feller

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Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series
Eye of the Staricane
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George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls
The One World
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Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World
Airy Castles All Ablaze
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Practical Exercise

...

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Fiction

A Reluctant Druid by Jon Osborne

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

First off, the disclaimer: I'm a Christian who not only attends church regularly, even if I missed it this week, and has plans to eventually have a prison ministry. That's going to be a rough road, but I want the challenge because it's important. I can't quite believe that I found myself reading a book where the good guys are the pagans and their enemies are the Christians, but here we are. I liked it so much I'm actually going to promote it on my blog. Then, at some point, I'm going to read the rest of the series.

Our hero is a dude name Liam Knox and he starts out way over his head. Like trying to stand on the bottom while swimming over the Marianas Trench kind of over his head. It's crazy. He has no clue what is going on or what is happening to him. I mean, we've all seen this before, right? It's kind of a trope. This one goes from Buck Rogers to Harry Potter and back again, only Knox seems to have it worse.

I mean, with Harry Potter he takes everything in pretty quickly. I love the books, but it almost seems too convenient how quickly he adapts to his new surroundings when he goes from the cupboard under the stairs to the king of the freaking world. Knox takes a bit longer but, if you can believe it, his world is even further from where he started from Harry's. He gets to where he needs to be mentally slowly but surely, I think. There's more to this story than just this one book, and he seems to be getting what's been thrown at him. Then again, the kitchen sink has not quite been thrown yet, that I remember anyway, so there could very well be something he hasn't anticipated. Or at least that I haven't.

I really got a kick out of the way Osborne worked in a lot of mythological figures. No, I'm not going to list them all but trust me, you'll recognize a lot of them. I sure did. I got a kick out of it. I'm hoping to find out more about who from the Christian side is working with their champion in future books. So far, not a lot has been revealed that I remember but that should be interesting. And it's not like a good author is going to give away everything in the first book of the series. If I don't want more, I won't read more and the author doesn't get paid. So not knowing everything is a good thing, I guess.

I'm tempted to believe that a lot of research went into including all of those mythological beings into A Reluctant Druid. I'm also half tempted to believe that Osborne might just be one of those guys who likes reading mythology and decided to throw a bunch of it into his book because he could. I'm not sure if it's one, or both, or something else entirely but either way I approve. He did a great job.

Sometimes trouble can come from unexpected directions and Osborne gets that. He sure gives his main character a lesson or two at the School of Hard...

Knox.

Get it?

Ok, so that was terrible. Please do not take my poor attempt at humor as being reflective of the quality

of A Reluctant Druid. I'll accept the thrown tomatoes. Osborne deserves better than that, even if he let me review his book.

SIGH

No system is perfect, I guess.

The supporting cast here is huge and lots of fun. As already mentioned some of them are major mythological figures, but not all. Some of them are just regular people. Some of them are just regular people, only with powers. I love the fact that you don't necessarily know who is who and what's what when someone walks in or something happens. It actually does drop in the pot at one point and we're all just cruising along like, "Yeah, sounds rough." for about two or three pages before we realize all hell has already broken out and we were just clueless.

No, not like the movie. I'm neither that young, nor that hot.

Anyway...

There is a lot of suspense here. I spent most of the time I couldn't read the book (listen, I've got a job, okay? And like, reading and driving don't mix and no, I don't do audiobooks.) trying to figure out what's coming next. Osborne seems to have found that weird middle ground between revealing too much and ruining interest and telling too little and getting your book launched against the wall at a high velocity because the reader is too frustrated.

Not that I'd ever do such a thing. At least, not if it were an e-book. I need my phone too much for that.

A Reluctant Druid is the perfect kind of book to knock out on a rainy day when you're stuck in the house. We all know the situation, right? Nowhere to go, nothing to do, oh wow how did I finish that book in one day? I mean, I remember that feeling at least. It's been a long time since I've been able to actually do it.

Of course, you can still read it if you're busy. I read it while working sixty plus hours a week. I'm just saying that A Reluctant Druid is the kind of book that can keep your mind absorbed for an entire day and make you feel like you got something out of it. Actually, if I hadn't been writing all day (going on three thousand words today, it's my day off) I'd probably be reading the sequel right now.

It's called A Tempered Warrior. I just found it on Amazon. I'll be checking it out soon.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Lightning Bolts

A Spring for Spears by Katie Cross & Derek Alan Siddoway
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

It's a fantasy novel about a young woman's coming-of-age story, but cooler... because— wolves.

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well!

I found this book from an author who I adore. I've never read her books, but Katie Cross is a frequent guest on my podcast, The Blasters & Blades Podcast, where we talk about all things speculative fiction. She writes YA fantasy novels and is the wife of a former US Army special squirrel. So after we interviewed her about this book, I had to read it, and now here we are!

What is this book about? It's a fantasy novel about a young woman's coming-of-age story, but cooler... because—wolves. This epic fantasy adventure has plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat.

So, grab your coffee, set some Kibble out for the Amarak wolves, and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

Seriously, this book will have you hooked from page one!

The fate of the Wolf Riders falls on an outcast who struggles to process the fact that she still hasn't been chosen. The main character, Astrid, would give anything to become one of the vaunted Ulfsark. She dreams of becoming one of the fearless warriors who ride giant Amarak wolves to glory. Like her ancestors, she yearns for the soul-deep bond with a wolf as its chosen—to share that connection and union. She's desperate to prove her worth and live up to her mother's legacy.

Astrid refuses to accept her fate when it appears that the chance to be chosen has passed her by. And just when you thought it couldn't get any more desperate for her, a chance encounter with a nature spirit and a foreign princess dashes her last hope for normalcy. Everything changes for her when she's accused of killing a royal guardsman. Forced to travel deep into enemy territory to clear her name and prevent another war, she must face her fears and march stoically to her destiny.

Will Astrid save a fragile peace and embrace her destiny? Or will her dreams of the Wolf Song fade in distant lands?

Join Astrid and her new friends on her thrilling new fantasy adventure in *A SPRING FOR SPEARS*, the first novel in the *WOLF SONG SAGA* series by Katie Cross and Derek Alan Siddoway.

Now that we've sold you on the novel's premise, let's dive in deeper. First, the prose from Katie and Derek was conversationally poetic, made even more incredible when you listen to Katie narrate the story. I listened to some sections several times to hear the soothing cadence of her reading the story. Since this is the first novel I've read by either author, I can't tell you where one of their voices stopped and the other began, but it blended seamlessly into a coherent, compelling style.

I could keep going about the quality of their prose, but let's move on to the other facets of this story. These two seasoned storytellers also knew how to expertly pace the story so it flowed smoothly from one plot point to another. It kept my attention while giving me room to breathe and process the various parts of this epic adventure. Even better, this novel felt like it was setting up book two to kick the action up a notch, and I'm here for it.

Another aspect of this story that is worth evaluating is the audiobook quality. One of the authors, Katie Cross, read this novel. She hit the ball out of the park, telling me a story that I couldn't put down and kept me going when I should've been doing other things. She nailed the various character accents, keeping my ears engaged from start to finish. I honestly hate Katie, just a little bit, for being so good at everything. She's a business genius, a narration goddess, and an author who we'll talk about long after her grandkids have grandkids. I predict this series will be one for the ages, and I don't say that lightly.

The Characters

This novel follows one main character, the Skolvarg named Astrid. She is a 19-year-old young woman who is training to become an Ulfsark. It has been her lifelong dream of Astrid to become one of the mounted warriors who ride Amorak wolves into battle. She wants to serve her tribe through her bond with a chosen wolf companion. Her mother was a famous Ulfsark, and her people expected she'd also become one. Despite her dreams, no wolves had chosen her to bond with. During this process of continual rejection, we get to watch Astrid struggle to make peace with the idea that her dreams might not come true. Through this, we see the strength of her character, which is impressive.

What I like the most about Astrid is that she is a strong woman and a competent warrior. Despite being extremely petite in her society of Amazon-sized people, she is a fighter. She uses her cunning and speed to outfight and defeat warriors larger than her in very believable combat sequences. You can tell that Katie Cross relied on her husband's special skills because these scenes checked out. Furthermore, while Astrid started out a bit naïve, watching her grow was worth the price of admission.

What I liked the most about this character was that she wasn't a raft, floating along the waters of life in this book. Instead, Astrid was both affected by and affected the world around her. This symbiotic interaction added to the superb world-building that made Vigard a fun world to experience. It showed the reader her role in the world and added together to create a three-dimensional experience.

Astrid, the main character, will make you chuckle at her initial innocence. She will make you want to shake her silly throughout this novel, as she misses what was so obviously right in front of her. She was written as a cross between Arya from Game of Thrones by GRR Martin and Xena, Warrior Princess.

The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Siddoway and Cross, who know how to tell compelling stories set in beautiful worlds they've created. Everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, this incredible duo didn't info dump all their world-building up front. Instead, they fed it to us in drips and drabs. Seriously, these two were the perfect drug dealers. They expertly strung us along and always left us wanting more. I know that sounds toxic, but trust me, this story was anything but. It was an exciting thrill ride from start to finish. What's not to like about their already expansive world? This novel was definitely a Tolkien-Esq Master Class in creating fictional universes. Seriously, I'm practically gushing over this novel.

Politics

This novel was apolitical in the sense that it didn't deal with any real-world politics. However, we did see some political struggles from the political parties in this world. It was a background struggle in this novel, though there were hints of more to come in future books. What I did love to see was freedom being lionized through the story of the Skolvarg People. The inhabitants of the Wolfmoor are the quintessential everyman, with the benefit of a boon to their natural healing abilities. They're a nomadic people in a world that is quickly becoming more agrarian. Vigard, where the story takes place, is a medieval setting. This proto-Europe backdrop is par for the course of a modern fantasy novel. In addition to the world that's trying to kill them, the main characters must fight the existential evil of greed, the pursuit of power, and an unthinking quest for vengeance. Predictably, it ends badly for everyone involved. Like in the real world, there are no real winners in war. You've probably heard that before; it's a tale as old as time.

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 13. A Spring for Spears had zero vulgarities, though one scene hinted at unwelcome romance against the female protagonist. Nothing happened on screen, but it feels worth mentioning, as this can be a sensitive issue for some readers. Further, this novel is about a young warrior, so there is violence in this book. It wasn't overly gory, but it was there.

Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoyed reading the Dragon Riders of Pern but think wolves are cooler than dragons! This novel, by the award-winning duo of Derek Alan Siddoway and Katie Cross, has the conversational prose of Neil Gaiman or Jim Butcher and the world-building of David Eddings. Throw in some shades of Xena, Warrior Princess, without the sexy leathers, and you've got this story summed up in a nutshell! This one will surely be a story for the ages!

Why buy it

This is the story of the everywoman, an underdog warrior who overcomes her tiny size to achieve greatness. The authors take into account the reality of size differentials. Instead, they had Astrid use cunning, wit, and speed to triumph against her opponents. If you love a thrill ride through nature that would make Alexander the Great proud, this is the novel for you!

Why buy it?

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? If this tale doesn't make you a superfan of Katie Cross or Derek Alan Siddoway, then you didn't read the same book that I did! Once you buy and read the book, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

Cherry Drop by P.A. Piatt

Review by Jim McCoy

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

So I was kind of reluctant to read Cherry Drop. See, I had read and reviewed P.A. Piatt's Redcaps Rising and, while it was a very good book, it was very humorous. I was kind of concerned that Cherry Drop was some kind of weird allusion to a cold medication and that this was going to be some weird, humorous craziness. I mean, I like humor in my Urban Fantasy but well-written Military Science Fiction has this sort of feeling to this that the type of humorous atmosphere in Redcaps Rising is just not conducive to. I wasn't going to read it. It wasn't going to happen. Then one of my friends, who I don't believe has ever read Redcaps Rising, but reads lots of MilSF, said something nice about it. I trust my buddy's judgment, so I thought I'd try it.

I'm glad I did. Cherry Drop is every bit as well-written as Redcaps Rising, but it doesn't have that comedic feel. It has the military feel that it needs. I'm extremely happy to report that it works. I felt like I was there with these guys. Now, part of that may very well be that it's been hotter than the inside of Satan's armpit here in Michigan, but whatever works. They were in the jungle. I was baking my behind off in a cab in a hot, humid place. It just felt right. I will grant you that there were no crazed aliens trying to eat me, but I can feel comfortable thanking God for small favors there.

The story begins with our hero, one Second Lieutenant Abner Fortis, about to make his first drop into combat in his Cherry Drop. He's been sent to lead a short platoon whose last platoon leader is no longer available for duty. His men don't trust him. His platoon sergeant is a corporal. Yes, you read that right. His troops are kind of cranky...

And they send him on a mission to a planet where he has no way to contact higher. So he's on his own, with a little help from a non-promotable subordinate and a mess lands in his lap. Granted, this SHOULD have been a milk run but it turns out that it wasn't. Fortis watches everything drop in the pot when he should have spent his deployment napping and waiting for his ride home to show.

There are a lot of action sequences in Cherry Drop and they are all well done. Piatt has a knack for keeping things moving and unpredictable. Fortis, being a cherry, has a tendency to do the dumb thing every once in awhile but that actually fits. There is a reason so few second lieutenants make it back from their first combat assignment in the real world. The fact remains that Fortis has just enough luck, enough brains and enough support from his NCOs that he makes it through and actually manages to get some stuff right.

The initial enemy Fortis and his troops face is not all that creative or dangerous. I mean, the bugs can kill you but they rely on numbers and ferocity as opposed to tactics and strategy. The troops are missing a key piece of intel on them and they still manage to win some battles before they figure it out.

Fortis's Marines face a situation that would not be familiar to many United States Marines in that they get hung out on a branch with no help and a jacked up situation. Fortunately for them they, also like real world Marines, manage to bring themselves through somehow. No matter what the odds, they seem to at least keep their integrity intact.

Of course, every Corps has its traditions and the ISMC is no exception. Whether it's using slang terms (like DINLI, which stands for Do It, Not Like It and is a term I'd actually like to see pass into general usage because it works so well.) or brewing homemade hooch in violation of regulations (which, oddly enough, is called DINLI) the ISMC has things that need to happen and they do. I love that aspect of the story because it's part of what makes the book work. Every military force has its own idiosyncrasies and that is one major part of what makes Cherry Drop work.

The enemy is not who it initially appears to be. This is a good thing, because it makes things more interesting. The reason I never liked Pern (and yes, I know that's heresy) is because thread sucks as an enemy. It is mindless, falls in sheets and has no real ability to fight smart or use tactics. I can't deal with that kind of an enemy. After awhile, we see someone new enter the fight, and they have a lot more intelligence and adaptability. Of course, none of that means that their superiors are going to see eye to eye with their decisions or that they're going to be exceedingly popular with the public afterward, but c'est la vie, right?

I like reading newer MilSF because the tech makes sense. There's so much that the modern military has that a writer forty years ago could never have imagined that it boggles the mind. Still, when I see troops in a far future story they should be using things like unmanned drones with webcams. It makes no sense if they're not. Now, maybe I'm wrong and at some point in the future we'll invent something that's man portable and works better. I'm not counting on it though, and until a better idea crops up, they need to be there. A lot of really well written older science fiction is missing concepts that your average Joe would come up with now simply because no one had thought of it then. I'm not blaming the authors. I get why it's not there. I'm just saying that as a fan reading a story now, some things need to be there and Piatt includes them.

All in all, this one's a keeper. Also, I'm kind of bitter that I didn't realize that I could nominate it for a Dragon Award until it was too late.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Lost Troopers

Dust by Hugh Howey Review by Russ Lockwood

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

The third and last book in the Silo trilogy brings the story to a conclusion. If you thought I was reticent about the second book, I'm keeping my trap shut about the third.

I will say that I was left confused about aspects of the original "plan" for the silo. I reread parts to try and figure out, but let's just say that the "percentage" underpinning of the silo doesn't make sense to me. Maybe they'll fix it (or maybe make it worse) with the TV movie or mini-series that is being developed. I still can't understand the logic behind the ending that I reread several times. If I missed something, it wasn't apparent to me.

That said, I didn't enjoy the third book as much as the first or second. All are well written, have good character development (those that survive, anyway -- not too much of a reveal that characters die across a trilogy), and offers a sense of completion. But I'm still going to say: Enjoyed it.

Hell Spawn by Declan Finn Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

For the last couple of years, anyone who's been in Declan Finn's social media orbit has definitely seen his promo posts about his Saint Tommy NYPD series. At last count he's up to about a dozen volumes featuring an NYPD homicide detective who handles everything from ancient superweapons to Vatican ninjas to human trafficking. Along the way, he gets some help from On High as he battles the forces of darkness in the Big Apple.

Between the motif, the titles, and the subject matter, I always summed up Declan's series as "Catholic Dresden Files." Now that I've finally gotten around to reading the first entry, I can confidently say that description fits.

Granted, there are some exceptions: Saint Tommy is a very streamlined series that doesn't spend too much time staring at the scenery, while the last few Dresden Files books have reeeeeeeally taken their time to get where they're going.

There's also the minor distinction where every woman in Harry Dresden's world is a hot sexual libertine with giant boobs who aggressively tries to get him in the sack, only for him to (usually) reject their advances. Thomas Nolan is a married and devoted man who doesn't have time for that behavior.

But let's handle the basics first:

The Story

An evil spirit is hopping around and inhabiting different hosts in Queens, New York. Whoever has this spirit inside them is incredibly strong, vicious, violent, and kills people. Tommy Nolan encounters this spirit without first knowing what it is, but as he interacts with it, certain new abilities manifest within him that help him meet the threat.

That sounds simple and straightforward, but the road to victory is twisty and full of potholes. Before he gets to the end, his wife and son face mortal danger, his house is haunted, and bodies start piling up. We've seen this kind of "body-hopper" ghost before, but Finn's unique take is on how it carries out its killings. Once Tommy recognizes the killer's M.O. matches that of an Old Testament demon, things get very hairy.

Why? Because even if Tommy Nolan is a fictional character, this murder method isn't, and killers inflict it on their victims every day IRL. This wasn't "Dresden, but he's Catholic and has rosary beads instead of a staff." This quickly became a story that showed evil demons doing evil demon things, and when they pull the mask off, you see that it's something happening around us with shocking regularity.

We throw around "LOL" a little too casually. You aren't actually "laughing out loud" when you LOL. Me? I was listening to this at work last week and when that plot development dropped, I did an actual "Oh damn!" out loud. No spoilers. Let it hit you like it hit me.

Declan Finn definitely goes there, and he goes at it full speed, showing the work of demons in the real world and putting it into his story.

The Characters

Saint Tommy is an action hero that Christianity in general—and Catholicism in particular—can really sink its teeth into. I myself am a different flavor of Jesus Follower than the main character or the author, but I still saw something I could admire in Detective Nolan's ironclad adherence to his faith, and the role it plays in saving his family from evil, even to the point of calling on God for a miracle.

I also liked that this was an overlap between the mundane and the divine where Saint Tommy didn't have to hide what he was or what was happening to him. He's still feeling out his new "powers" and the rules that come with them, but unlike Generic Superhero Trope Stories, he doesn't try to hide it from his loved ones or his superiors. When he uses them at work he kind of has to dance around it with Internal Affairs, but there's a reason for it. Other than that, he's got a supporting roster of characters he can trust. It's another element that adds to the streamlined nature of the story.

The World

Definitely ours, with spiritual explanations for much of what happens around us. Also, I don't know if Declan Finn or someone close to him is a police officer, but he is really sharp with the details here. Maybe he's making it all up (I doubt it), but the day-to-day machinery of New York policework plays a present role in the narrative. Saint Tommy gets into crime stats, the rules cops have to follow, the procedures after various levels of interaction with the criminal element, and more. It feels authentic.

The Politics

At times the "politics" are painfully authentic too. Saint Tommy deals with a media storm once the press realizes that a Catholic cop is on the hunt for what amounts to an Evil Scientist with institutional support. The government and the media go scorched-earth to destroy him in a way that practically

Tweets itself at you. In one particularly harrowing scene, Saint Tommy begs God to save his wife Mariel from a mortal wound, and when she recovers from severe blood loss, the papers accuse Tommy of lying about the degree of peril she was in. Public sentiment trusts the papers, and that's that. It's enough to make you scream because you see it all the time.

Even so, the book is more "right or wrong" than it is "right or left."

Content Warning

Horror elements, blood and combat, a pair of F-bombs a few other instances of profanity, but not overly present.

Who's it for?

Again, Catholics specifically, Christians generally, and in all honesty, fans of urban fantasy or police procedurals.

If you liked the Netflix Daredevil run, this is up your alley.

Why read it?

Because it's really damn good and it'll make you want to get into book 2.

Good news, there are 12 of them out...so far. So go buy the first one and start catching up.

Heroine Complex by Sarah Kuhn Review by Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

A while back, there was a kerfuffle over what was true science-fiction storytelling. Was it hard science-fiction, with the story grounded in hard science, or was it anything with a futuristic spin? Could science-fiction include a love subplot, could it include a love story with science-fiction trimmings? There was no good answer, as one might expect, which is probably why the debate was so tedious. But it is true that if you write a romantic novel in a science-fiction guise, you might alienate readers who wanted a true SF novel rather than *Gone With The Wind In Space*.

Heroine Complex tries hard to combine a superhero story with what can best be described as a cross between a coming of age story and a romantic story. It manages to be more of the coming of age story than either of the other two, but there's too much focus on the other aspects for the story to be truly satisfactory. The decent aspects of the plot – and the world the author created – are often overshadowed by the storyline itself.

Several years ago, there was a demonic intrusion in San Francisco. The aftermath of the invasion left a number of people with superpowers ... relatively minor superpowers. There are only two true superheroes in the universe, Aveda Jupiter and someone whose name I've forgotten. Aveda is more of a slightly enhanced ninja than anything else, a woman who combines demon-fighting with celebrity.

The story isn't about Aveda. It's about Evie Tanaka, Aveda's former childhood best friend and current personal assistant. Unlike Aveda, who loves the limelight, Evie tries to stay in the shadows, patiently

handle her boss's tantrums and raise her teenage sister Bea. She is, sadly, very bad at standing up for herself. She isn't best pleased when Aveda is injured and she has to stand in for her boss. Worse, she has a superpower of her own that might be the most dangerous one of all.

My feelings about the story are a little complex. There are aspects I liked and aspects I disliked, some more than others. Let me see if I can put them into words.

Right from the start, I simply didn't like Aveda. She's a spoiled little diva, to say the least; she's a user and, to some extent, an abuser. The relationship between Aveda and Evie started out well – the childhood flashbacks are surprisingly sweet – but went downhill as they started their shared careers. By the start of the story, it's clear they're heading for a rocky breakup even before Aveda is forced to step back to recover from an injury. The writer tries hard to justify it – Aveda's parents regret she isn't a doctor, which comes across as absurd given how many lives Aveda has saved – but my tolerance for such behaviour is very limited. She's the type of person who gets on my nerves very quickly.

Evie is a lot more likable, but – at first – her passivity is just annoying. Again, there are good reasons for her cramming her emotions into a tight little ball at the back of her mind, but I grew tired of it fairly quickly. She – and Aveda – read more like schoolgirls than mature women. Unlike Aveda, however, she develops into a stronger person as the story moves along.

(The writer comments on the relationship between the two here.)

The storyline itself is fairly one-dimensional. It's clear how things will develop as the players take their places on the storyboard. The lover hiding a dark secret, the bratty teenage sister developing a little more common sense (although making bad calls on a regular basis), etc, etc. There are a bunch of oddities that don't quite make sense, although not really enough for me to throw up my hands in horror.

Heroine Complex is widely praised for starring Asian-American characters, as opposed to white or black characters. (It also includes a considerable number of LGBT characters.) It genuinely does let us see inside their heads, for better or worse, although it does focus on stereotypes more than I would have preferred. (Aveda's problems with her parent's expectations, for example.) It also manages to remind us that the two main characters are people, with all the wonders and follies of everyone else. Neither Evie or Aveda is remotely perfect and the book is all the stronger for it.

That said, the book does touch upon the representation trope. Aveda was inspired to become a superhero, before she actually got powers, by watching a movie with Asian-American characters. I've never been sure that actually works. Watching a movie representation of yourself – your race, your class, your water – doesn't translate into becoming ... well, whatever you're watching. The characters on scene have a friendly scriptwriter to smooth out the bumps. One of the reasons I hated Wesley Crusher so much was that he was a staggeringly unrealistic character – he was rewarded for the traits that got me beaten up when I was his age. Frankly, one should be less concerned with the race (or whatever) of the character or actor and more concerned with how the character works.

Overall, Heroine Complex suffers from many problems shared by other first novels. The author tells a fairly coherent story, but there are mistakes and missteps that suggest she isn't quite there yet. Characters act like children – Aveda worries about a zit – or make dumb decisions in the interests of the plot. It isn't exactly the superhero or humorous story I was led to expect. But she's on the way.

It wasn't my cup of tea – I would have preferred more action and adventure to interpersonal activities – but you might like it. Try the sample here or on the author's site.

Hull Zero Three by Greg Bear Review by Perry Middlemiss

The review also appeared in Perryscope 29.

This novel was on the shortlist for the 2011 John W. Campbell Memorial Award. I am rather embarrassed to admit that this is probably the first novel of Greg Bear's that I have ever read, and I probably only picked this up at the library because he had recently died. He just seems to have been one of those authors that passed me by, coming into the field, and being at his peak, when I wasn't paying a lot of attention. This novel is set on a generation starship that has run into difficulties, in this case an internal conflict between crew factions has severely damaged the ship placing the whole mission in jeopardy. There is a lot of depiction of people wandering around the ship in this novel. So much so that I started to skim over these sections, and I don't feel that I lost anything in the process. This is as much a puzzle piece as anything else as our main character – who wakes from an extended sleep in "Dreamtime" – struggles to work out who he is and what is going on. This now reads as somewhat dated, with the interactions between characters being rather superficial. I got the impression that the author was more interested in the hardware than anything else.

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell by Susanna Clarke Review by Tom Feller

The last time I counted, I had read over 50 of the novels that have won the Hugo Award. However, this is one that eluded me. It must have come out when I was going through one of my periods when I was reading little science fiction or fantasy. It is set during the Napoleonic era, beginning in 1806, and it postulates an alternate history of England, especially a three century period when northern England was ruled by a magician king named John Uskglass, aka the Raven King. Nevertheless, in 1806, George III is king of England and Napoleon is ruling much of continental Europe. For some time, magic had disappeared from England until Mr. Gilbert Norrell reveals himself by animating statues in York Cathedral. He and his servant Childermass, who secretly picks up some magic spells himself, then relocate to London where Norrell establishes himself as a practicing magician. Although he does some work for the Admiralty, his most important feat of magic for the purpose of this book is to raise a young woman from the dead. She was the fiancée of a cabinet minister and had been dead for two days when he summons a malevolent fairy. In return for his services, the fairy, referred to throughout the book as "the gentleman with thistle-down hair", is given control over the lady for 12 hours a day.

A few years later, Jonathan Strange has an encounter with an itinerant magician which leads him to pursue magic as a career. He learns a few spells on his own and impresses Norrell sufficiently for Norrell to take him on as a pupil. Then Strange is sent to Portugal to serve under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular Campaign and later is present at the battle of Waterloo. By 1815, Strange is Norrell's equal, and they part amicably. Unfortunately, he loses his wife to "the gentleman with the thistle-down hair", and much of the latter third of the book is devoted to his attempts to rescue her, which makes the book hard to put down. Another sub-plot is that "the gentleman" also enchants an African-descended servant named Stephen Black with the intention of making him a king. I would say that the awards and the critical acclaim are well deserved. Stylistically, it is in the tradition of Dickens and Austen with archaic spellings, although it adds footnotes that contribute to the novel's verisimilitude. Some reviewers have called it "Harry Potter for Grownups".

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold Review by Tom Feller

Years ago, my wife was in a Christian book club, and this was their most controversial selection. It was not just that the narrator, 14 year old Susie Salmon, is raped and murdered by a serial killer/rapist in the first chapter, but rather its rather secular view of heaven in which the residents can easily return to the Earth as ghosts and, in one instance, actually possess the body of a living person. However, the central part of the story is the devastating effect the murder has on Susie's family (mother, father, sister, brother, and grandmother) and friends, including a boyfriend, and takes place over the course of a decade. Whether the killer will ever be caught and punished is just a sub-plot, and the murder takes place in December, 1973, so DNA testing is not available.

Heaven is individualized for each individual, and Susie's is a high school without teachers and homework. She meets Holly, whose heaven is close enough to Susie's for them to become friends and eventually roommates, and Franny, a social worker when alive who becomes their guide. Susie learns to go back and forth between heaven and earth to keep track of her family and friends in the Pennsylvania suburbs. Her little brother sees her occasionally, but her family dismisses the sightings as wishful thinking. (Frannie says this is common and is the basis for "imaginary friends".) Each of them grieves in their own way, and, eventually, each of them is ready to move on, so it ends on a positive note. I enjoyed the first half more than the second, because it gets more and more sentimental with each page.

The Moon and the Desert by Robert Hampson Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Six Million Dollar Man as character-driven technothriller

So, what would happen if the Martin Cardin novel *Cyborg* (perhaps better known by its TV show adaptation, *The Six Million Dollar Man*) were written by someone with more degrees than a life long grad student? You would get Baen's latest novel, *The Desert and the Moon*.

Doctor Robert E Hampson was inspired by fiction to go into the field of bionics—having discovered it did not exist at the time, he's spent his entire life helping to invent the field. With degrees in physiology, pharmacology, and neuroscience, he's smarter than you, me, and a dozen other people put together. But having met him, he's far, far too modest about it.

If you don't recognize the title, it is taken from the pilot episode of the Lee Majors TV show.

The Story

Glenn Armstrong Shepard was always going to go into space. After a ten-year career as the chief medical officer on the moon, a training accident nearly kills him. What doesn't kill him doesn't make him stronger, but costs him an eye, an arm, both legs, and other medical issues. In most cases, Space Force members have a Do Not Resuscitate order, because "anything in space that didn't kill you instantly might as well have done so anyway."

But instead of a DNR, he has a different medical directive on file. Because the Space Force can rebuild him. They have the technology. They can make him better than he was. Better, stronger, faster. But the

price tag is going to be a lot more than a lousy six million dollars.

Despite the events of the books covering four or five years, this story moves. We open with the inciting incident in media res, and Hampson wastes no time getting Shepard fitted with biotechnology. From there, half the book follows Shepard along the path to recovery, through physical therapy and through post traumatic stress. He may never get back to space, and many are trying to keep him out of action.

But then there's an emergency with a Mars mission. The crew is slowly going mad, ending in death. There's only one man who can survive the G-forces needed to make it in time. From here, we have a medical mystery that requires every upgrade, skill and medical knowledge he has in order to save the crew, and to survive as well.

But dang did I enjoy this one. It even has a sense of humor with lines like "Ohm wasn't built in a day" or a nurse labeled "L. Charon." And we won't even go into what he does to the sensitivity speaker. And Hampson has a series of one-sided telephone conversations reminiscent of Bob Newhart.

The Characters

You would think that for a man with as many science degrees as Hampson, this would be a very different book. *The Desert and the Moon* is a techno-thriller that puts Tom Clancy to shame, but it is also largely character driven. We follow Shepard through the accident, into surgery, then rehab, PTSD, and coming back to being a functional human being again—in some ways, more functional than he was before. He's a fully fleshed out character with a complete character arc and a well-sketched out biography.

Another member of the cast is Jennifer Butler, a reporter who has fallen into a profile of Shepard's life, and falls into his life as well.

And then there is the character of General Boatwright. Somehow, Hampson has created a science fiction version of John Le Carre's George Smiley. Boatwright is a hidden force behind the scenes of the entire novel, impacting every level of the story, and we barely see him until the last 10% of the novel.

Everyone gets a character arc in this novel. Everyone. And it is impressive how much Hampson achieves with the secondary characters, using relatively little space.

The World

Most of this world is ours, less than 20 years old. Much of that is built around the technology, or through little excerpts of "ChirpChats". For example, one such chat explained, "A portmanteau is a combination of two words, with a meaning that combines both. Example: Biologic + electronic = bionic."

Despite being tech-heavy, this novel never lost me, and I don't have a fraction of Hampson's science background (I'm a historian with a philosophy degree).

Politics

The only politics is a page about the defense of why we should go into space.

Content Warning

None, really. There's no nudity or language that left an impression.

Who is it for?

For anyone who wants to see a Tom Clancy recreation of The Six Million Dollar Man, this is your book. If you've ever wanted to see a medical mystery in space, you definitely have to read it.

Why buy it

You buy The Moon and the Desert to watch a character study of someone who needs prosthetic limbs, and rebuild both his body, and himself from the ground up, and then launch into a medical mystery in space that I haven't seen since James White. It's just a fun, well-crafted novel.

New Writings in SF-5 Review by Perry Middlemiss This Review also appeared in Perryscope 30

Another in this series of original anthologies out of the UK. I note that I've read these anthologies a bit out of order, probably because I can't find my copy of #4. There is nothing at all wrong with this anthology, but there is nothing that really stands out either. All of the stories are three stars or below, and I didn't include any of them in my recommended reading list for 1965 (see The Alien Review 2). The reviewer on the GalacticJourney blog disagreed and highly rated four of the stories here, so it may well be a matter of taste. To me this is a collection of stories that perfectly reflects the state of sf in the mid-1960s – male, and backward looking – though I have to admit that I am reviewing it nearly sixty years later and can only look at it from my current perspectives. The anthology includes two stories by Australians: Lee Harding's "The Liberators" and John Baxter's "Takeover Bid". I'd put Harding's story as the pick of the bunch here.

New Writings in SF 8 Review by Perry Middlemiss This Review also appeared in Perryscope 30

At last a decent collection of stories in this original anthology series, with five of the six worthy of being on a recommended reading list for 1966. Colin Kapp returns with an Unorthodox Engineers novelette in "The Pen and the Dark", which is the best of those I've read so far. Keith Roberts supplies the other novelette in the anthology with "Synth" – an interesting tale about a synthetic human being involved in a divorce proceedings – which is the only story here which is not a planet-based space story of some sort; contact with aliens on extra-solar planets was a strong theme in the mid-1960s obviously. Of the short stories which worked well, Gerald W. Page's "Spacemen Live Forever" reminded me of the recent Chris Pratt/Jennifer Lawrence film Passengers; "The Final Solution" by R. W. Mackelworth pits two militaristic, fascist planetary societies against each other in an attempt to determine whose is the more racially pure; and Australian John Baxter's "Tryst" deals with a planet on the galactic rim that has been abandoned by its rulers. John Rackham's "Computer's Mate" is the only story that falls flat. It has possibilities but the author falls into the trap of stereotyping women in space and spending too much time philosophising, in a condescending way, about the nature of humans with disabilities.

One Italian Summer by Rebecca Serle Review by Tom Feller

Many years ago, I attended a panel at a science fiction convention. One of the panelists, the late Robert Asprin if I remember correctly, compared writing fantasy to blowing up a balloon. If the writer makes one mistake in building his fantasy world, it is like a balloon bursting. That was my experience in reading this novel.

Katy Silver is a 30 year old married woman whose mother Carol has just died of cancer. They were very close and had planned a vacation to Positano, a real place on Italy's Amalfi Coast, for just the two of them. Carol had spent one summer there decades previously and always remembered it as one of the best times of her life. Since the airline tickets were already bought, Katy decides to take the vacation anyway, leaving her husband Eric behind. They have no children and have started to discuss divorce, so Katy decides that they need some time apart. Then after Katy arrives at her destination, the Hotel Poseidon, an actual hotel, she turns around and sees her mother as she was before she accepted the responsibilities of marriage and family. In other words, it is a time travel fantasy, although many reviewers have classified it as magical realism. Katy gets to know her mother before she was her mother and also has a flirtation with Adam Westbrooke, an American businessman staying at the hotel. Unfortunately, I was enjoying it until I came to a plot twist toward the end that burst the balloon and ruined it for me.

Orbit 4

Review by Perry Middlemiss

This Review also appeared in *Perryscope 29*

#4 in this series of original sf and fantasy stories. The stories in these anthologies are nothing less than interesting, even if some of them don't work that well. Due to the vagaries of the Nebula Award nominating period during these early years Ellison's story here, "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin", was nominated for the 1970 Best Short Story Nebula Award, which it lost to Silverberg's story in this volume, "Passengers", both of which I enjoyed. Charles Harness's novella Probable Cause was also nominated for a Best Novella Nebula Award in 1970 but seems to be making up the numbers there. It's a long-winded story about the US Supreme Court dealing with psi abilities and would have been better placed in Campbell's Analog. Others I enjoyed were Kate Wilhelm's "Windsong", Jacob Transue's "The Corruptible", and Lafferty's "One at a Time" (showing, yet again, that he's better at shorter length). I make that six out of nine starred stories I would put onto a recommended reading list for 1968; so, much better than average. A great Chris Foss cover here as well.

Perryscope 29

The Prisoner by Thomas M. Disch

Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

I was surprised to see that Thomas Disch wrote a TV tie-in and I usually stay away from these sorts of books, but occasionally there is a gem in the schlock pile. I'm glad I looked past the lame cover because the book was actually quite enjoyable. What struck me most about the story was how English it came across. The Brits have a lovely way of sounding polite while being condescending and the book was full of these antics. In many ways I liked this book more than the TV show, the book wrapped up

nicely and had good dynamics, while the show stretched on for too long and began to feel repetitious. This book, for obvious reasons, was much different than the other Disch I have read, less edgy to be sure. I often wonder what it would be like to have to assimilate a movie or program into a novelization, whether authors do it for the challenge or the paycheck, and how a writer can take a mediocre television show and turn it into a decent book. I'm looking forward to reading more Disch in the future but probably won't touch a TV tie-in anytime soon.

The Red Tide: The Chinese Invasion of Seattle

by Chris Kennedy

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

We thought the war against China would be fought in Asia, not Seattle. We were wrong.

Written by a former aviator with over 3,000 hours flying attack and reconnaissance aircraft for the United States Navy, including many missions supporting US Special Forces, *Red Tide: The Chinese Invasion of Seattle*, is a look at one possible future that isn't as improbable as you might think. Events in it are not only possible, they're already happening. Could China attack the United States to get back Taiwan?

Yes.

We thought the war against China would be fought in Asia, not Seattle. We were wrong.

Rating: 5/5 Grenades

The Story

Analysts have long predicted that China would go to war to reintegrate the province of Taiwan. It isn't a matter of "if"; it's a matter of "when". For decades, the only thing that has kept China from invading Taiwan is the American promise to defend it, even if that means World War III. To date, China has not been ready to go that far. But what if China figured out a way to put the United States on the sidelines of their fight to regain Taiwan? Would they do it then?

Drawn from today's headlines, *Red Tide: The Chinese Invasion of Seattle*, is set in a not-too-distant future where China decides to invade Seattle to use American citizens as high-stakes chips in a game of nuclear blackmail. Will the United States get Seattle back? It will, if a shot down F-18 pilot, a retired Navy SEAL, and a platoon of Army Rangers have anything to say about it.

The Characters

While it seemed like there was no main character in this novel, there were three that we're told to watch for on the book's blurb. So here goes a review of those people!

Shawn "Calvin" Hobbs: He is a fighter pilot for the US Navy who gets shot down during the opening salvo of the war and ends up leading a small band of disenfranchised troopers in a war against the occupying force.

Ryan O'Leary: He is a retired US Navy SEAL who's taken to the hermit lifestyle when an invasion of his home forces him back into the fight. When Lieutenant Hobbs is shot down, he rushes to save him and together they take on the world.

Army Ranger Platoon: Just your average group of grunts who join in on the mayhem to resist the occupying forces. They provide the troops that O'Leary and Hobbs lead into the mouth of the Chinese Dragon.

While the novel's blurb says that these were main characters, it didn't really feel that way. There are too many characters popping in and out of this story, which meant I didn't really get behind any of them. This made it even more important for the premise of the story to be compelling and boy did Chris provide that. The characters that were there, and there were a lot, felt hollow. Not because Chris is a bad storyteller, but because we only saw them for those brief moments before they died. Despite all of that, I understood what Kennedy was doing. Admittedly, I was helped by my time in the service, it allowed me to relate to the characters. In all fairness, I don't know that someone without my background would get out of the characters what I did. I will say, however, that even though there were too many characters to get close to, I didn't notice it until I sat down to write this review. Because the pace of the story kept me hooked, and deprived me of sleep, I'll give the author 4 out of 5 Grenades.

Like most of the military fiction I love to read, this was an action-packed novel. The story is set in modern-day Seattle and follows a series of events that lead to China invading as a feint to keep the US from honoring our commitment to Taiwan. If you don't know, the US has treaties with Taiwan that state America will defend the nation from China in the event of an attack. It was an interesting set up and premise, which had shades of Red Dawn in it. I loved Red Dawn, and consequently I loved this story.

With my military background, I thought the way the military was portrayed was credible. I will say that the Chris Kennedy, a retired Naval Commander and aviator, spent a lot of time addressing the air war. I'm not qualified to judge those situations, but from the outside looking in it was credible, which is all I needed. Why is the critique of the military in the "Plot" review section? Because in a military fiction novel, the tactics are integral to the plot. In this section, I give Chris 6 out of 5 Grenades!

The Worldbuilding

This is the first book in The Red Tide Duology, and I absolutely loved it. This novel had a very fleshed out world that was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. This is the second book I've read by Chris Kennedy, but I gave it a chance. Why? Well, I loved the first book written by him, so it was an easy call! Further, this novel had solid reviews, so I was sold. And oh boy, I wasn't disappointed! After this novel, I went and bought every one of his published novels not set in the Four Horseman Series.

This story universe was very flushed out, but it was set in the modern world, so it had the advantage of the readers pre-existing world view. Regardless, the novel built on the modern world and made his divergent path extremely plausible. I can't wait to read the rest of this series and see where the war with the occupying forces in Chris's world goes. This novel has been placed in the science fiction section on Amazon, but in the first book in this duology we see none of it. Other than that one complaint, it was a great book and I can't wait to read the second book in this series, Occupied Seattle. I give the world building 5 out of 5 Grenades.

Description

I have to give it to this author, this novel was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imag-

ine yourself in this world. They described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how the world felt. You could definitely imagine yourself in this world. However, in some places Chris went a little overboard with the explanation of the various military minutia. Maybe this is because I already know about some of this and don't particularly care about military aviation? Others might have a different opinion here, so if you do sound off! Regardless, these flaws didn't distract from the book to such a degree that I wouldn't finish the series. While parts of it were a flop for me, I still give Chris a B+++ in this category!

The Narration

I enjoyed this book exclusively in the audiobook format. It was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. Seriously, the narrator, Craig Good, did an amazing job on this book. 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. Instead, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. The voices of the various characters were cheesy and wonky, but overall it kept me engaged throughout the periods I was listening to this book. I would give him a 4 out of 5 grenades for his explosive performance. The only reason it wasn't a 5 Grenade experience was the lack of voice acting for the various characters.

Overall

This novel is a very Red Dawn-esq story of what it might look like if America was invaded. In Chris Kennedy's twisted imagination, China uses an attack on America to hide their campaign to reclaim Taiwan. It works, and an unprepared America quickly loses the Pacific Northwest. But despite how bloody things get, the CCP can't crack the will of the American people. Will the United States get Seattle back? It will, if a shot down F-18 pilot, a retired Navy SEAL, and a platoon of Army Rangers have anything to say about it.

I really loved this book, though the head popping was a bit jarring. However, this wasn't really an issue for me because the story was so engaging that I couldn't put it down. This novel was awesomely written, and the cover was amazingly invocative. The military culture shown in this book was spot on, especially the nicknames, even though the author laid it on a bit thick. Again, with such a compelling story you won't notice! As for the military equipment, well it was like a Naval Aviators porno, with the amount of details given. I was able to skim over these details, so I could still enjoy the action in this story. Basically, Chris had me hooked from the beginning, and kept it going throughout the whole novel. It's an amazing adventure, a look into Chris's twisted imagination. It leaves you wishing that his therapist had a therapist, though, just so we knew they were safe! This is a book I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Heck, I would even recommend that you buy the novel! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money!

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out, you won't regret it! Well, unless it motivates you to squeeze your fat body into your old uniform and you die from the shock to your system. And when you die, you end up in limbo, all alone. And since you're alone, you go insane from the solitude. And in your insanity, you try to fly, but can't. Instead, you're left merged with the asphalt you fell onto at your failed effort to recreate Kitty Hawk. Stuck in the asphalt, your soul wastes away until there is no you left and you fade out just as Ragnarock begins. Yeah, it would suck to miss that so maybe you should tread lightly! Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. But hey, at least you got to see eternity pass you by as you fade into nothing. On second thought, be warned, fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be wary, you were warned and if you have to go out like that at least enjoy the view from up there!

Shift by Hugh Howey
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

The sequel to Wool continues the Silo trilogy. I hesitate to reveal too much, for this book explains how the silo came into existence, who built it, and why everyone was in the silo, including some of the main characters. I'll only let on that nano-technology plays a role in pre-silo activities. Sometimes the logic in the book gets a little stretched (and sometimes a lot -- page 488 "eggs" -- really?), or at least to me, but altogether, enjoyed it.

Ship of Destiny by Frank Chadwick.
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

The follow-on novel to Chain of Command continues the saga of Sam Bitka -- our exceptionally competent captain, hero, and too-honest personnel evaluator of the son of the Chief of Naval Operations. Bitka gets shuffled off to command the armed transport USS Cam Ranh Bay to bring some Marines, diplomats, and celebrity passengers to some backwater planet.

Alien intervention via a sabotaged jump drive shoots the ship across the universe. Before he can bring the ship and crew home, he has to face new aliens, new dangers, and new challenges -- especially how to un-sabotage the jump drive.

The sequel brings even more Bitka cleverness in combat tactics, introduces a new cast of other characters offering varying degrees of support and ingenuity, provides an interesting take on immortality, and continues the behind-the-scenes political maneuverings of the top brass for better or worse.

In the review for Chain of Command, I said I'd like to see a sequel...and the Ship of Destiny's odyssey is every bit as good as CoC. How about another, Frank?

Enjoyed it.

Splashdown by Blaine L. Pardoe
Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Blaine L. Pardoe experience with Battletech, and paired it with his extensive knowledge of American military history to pen some stories in the Land & Sea mecha series.

Being a 90s kid, I saw a fair bit of mecha in my day. Gundam episodes made their way across the Pacific, ExoSquad had a decent legacy run, and of course there was the heavy-hitter, Battletech, with its desktop game series MechWarrior.

Then the 2000s hit and everything became either a Pokemon or a superhero, and we gearheads have had to content ourselves with Iron Mad or middling Transformers movies for our entertainment.

Well, it just so happens that Blaine L. Pardoe has some experience with the Battletech IP, and decided to pair that up with his extensive knowledge of American military history to pen some stories in the Land & Sea mecha series.

His first entry makes a—ahem—big splash.

Love that cover art. It's what made me stop and click to see what the story was all about. Give me big heavy metal things firing missiles from afar and throwing punches up close. Check it:

The Story

A little over a decade into the future, the western world is recovering from a protracted military campaign against Russia that played out in Alaska. We won (hell yeah) and now we're in the post-war phase, where a lot of broken veterans are trying to re-integrate into the civilian world. Some of them have physical scars or bionic limbs, others are facing the reality that their highly specialized combat skills don't exactly translate to practical things. Bummer.

We spend a decent amount of time getting to know a cluster of these veterans by their challenges and their situations. In a very general sense, they miss the camaraderie and the purpose they had in combat, and they're not looking forward to this next phase of life. Once this became clear to me as the reader, I kind of nodded my head and kept reading—it's a very readable, if not unexpected, piece of military fiction that says a lot of the same things as other mil-SF these days.

But that's okay, it's not the only thing this book is about. While the veterans are doing their thing, a bunch of Government Watchdogs and Nerd Scientists start to notice strange happenings in the oceans of the world. Planes are disappearing. When they show up, they're damaged by...well, it's hard to say. Could be animal. Weird claw marks and such indicate that they're dealing with something new here.

Then they make some breakthroughs, and realize that Earth is in the early stages of an alien invasion. Worse, it's been going on for more than five years, the aliens just hang out underwater and are studying us by stealing our biggest machines and taking them apart. Now that they know we're on to them, they begin the kinetic phase of their invasion, and suddenly America finds itself at DEFCON 1.

Fire up the mechs, boys. We're going to war.

The Characters

Because of the volume of military SF I've read this year, I'll admit I've started to become a little bit name-blind to characters in these books. It isn't necessarily that they're all the same, but rather that their situations all tend to be very similar. I'm a trucker, so if I read a bunch of books about guys who were truckers, I'd expect it to go the same way.

That said, it was easy to follow the goings-on. One officer in particular, a longtime mech operator whose ex-wife and estranged daughter are working their way out of his life, gets a BS assignment to inter casualties in Arlington National Cemetery. He's in an extremely low place when the invasion breaks out, and suddenly finds himself needed again, and he throws himself into the new conflict with refreshed purpose. I'll always cheer for someone getting another chance at greatness.

In the periphery of the military figures, you have other power players making moves: ambitious media personalities who definitely aren't (wink) a younger version of MSM supermodels, or tech moguls who

definitely aren't (wink) a more debonair version of Elon Musk. You know them by their attributes, and their motives make sense because of that. Pardoe writes easily identifiable characters here so that he doesn't have to waste time setting the table. You get to dig right into the meal.

And for a book series based on game mechanics, well, that's one of the top commandments.

The World

You'll recognize the international beefs, with a few differences because it's set in the 2030s. Also, the militaries of the world have gone toward mechs, and you get a quick rundown of the different types and sizes of machines that they use. (Something tells me I'd be a Rhino pilot...)

The Politics

Nothing from our zeitgeist.

Content

R for language, and combat violence.

Who's it for?

Fans of Battletech/MechWarrior, especially since the series creators both worked for that IP before getting cancelled sometime last year. I haven't looked into how or why and I don't really care to, cancel culture is stupid and this book is not. It's also definitely for veterans, but accessible to guys like me who aren't.

Why read it?

I love a fast-paced book like this one, a book that can put me in the world without taking ten thousand words per chapter to do it. And I really want more high-quality mecha to go mainstream. It seems like those are hard to come by in novel format, and I finally got one here.

On to the sequel!

Star Bounty 1. Absolution by Rick Partlow

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

I have your space western right here

I have tripped over Rick Partlow for the past few years. Unfortunately, I always confused him with Richard Fox, and I could never remember which one I was going to review next.

Due to a series of bizarre events, I found myself on a plane four times in the space of four days. I finally had time to read. Conveniently, Rick had just put out a set of his Star Bounty series.

So I started with Star Bounty: Absolution.

This was quite a ride.

The Story

Grant Masterson is a bounty hunter doing what he knows best: bringing in criminals. He used to be a Marshal, but he crossed one line to many, and lost everything. Now, he's off bouncing around the star system, bringing them back alive, and usually to his old colleagues on the force.

Grant has finally taken a job that should keep him out of the way for a while. He can finally stop stepping on toes. He's looking into a treason case that strangely, no one has followed up on. But when he finally gets his target, it's like everyone in the universe is coming down on him and his prisoner. He will need everything in his arsenal and then some in order to get out of this alive.

Star Bounty: Absolution moves along at a good pace. The pace is more on par with the old serials, later mimicked by George Lucas.

By the end of the book, we have a solid resolution to Absolution while very efficiently setting up the next novel.

The Characters

While I know I referenced Dirty Harry Callahan above, Grant Masterson is closer to Timothy Olyphant on Justified; he even wears a Stetson. He's relatively calm and easygoing, down to giving advice to prisoners about how to get through prison. He's a nice enough guy, just don't trigger his mean streak. The entire narration is carried through his first person POV, so we know him pretty well by the time the first chapter is over. He's likeable, smart and tough. Like a Timothy Zahn protagonist, he's just as likely to think his way out as shoot it out, but he's no slouch in either department. Even his fighting requires thought. Also, he named his ship after the first bounty hunter, back in antiquity, so Grant has an interesting education that we don't get into.

Grant is an interesting, complex character, and he makes the story work, even in the slower moments—not that there are many.

There is also Grant's sidekick, Dog. He is an utterly adorable robot with a sarcastic AI. He thinks growling is undignified, but has no problem restraining a perp by his crotch, teeth dug in.

Our third character is ... a major plot point who I can't really get into without spoiling.

The World

Rick Partlow handles world building deftly. He only fills in the gaps when you need them filled in, but there are a lot of gaps that need filling. Guns are common and spread out on sidewalks like knockoff paperbacks on a New York street in the 90s, while blasters are harder to get. Sexbots have been perfected... or at least, perfected enough to do the job (prostitution is legal, pimping is not.).

Welcome to the libertarian space cowboy revolution, as written in the prophecies of Tom Stranger.

It was enough of a western that my final note on the book was simply "Hi Ho Silver, away!"

Politics

None.

Content Warning

While there are mentions of prostitution and sexbots, there isn't really anything else that'd particularly lurid. Strangely enough, they even become a plot element.

Who is it for?

Absolution has all of the smart writing and intrigue of Timothy Zahn (okay, with fewer corkscrew twists in the plot). It has the western vibe of *Justified* or even Larry McMurray.

If you want sci-fi *Lonesome Dove* as written by Timothy Zahn, I'd recommend this wholeheartedly.

Sure, you could compare this to *Firefly* with a cast of three, or *The Mandalorian*, if that's your preference of SF western.

Why buy it

It's one hell of an adventure that's got something sure to please sci-fi fans of many stripes. If you're looking for a great can't-put-down action read, look no further.

Steel World by B.V. Larson
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, I hope today finds you well! This is yet another post on this amazing book review website! Woot, I've become a regular... now why won't they give me the super duper secret password to the bar? Anyway, enough about me! Let's get onto the book review that brought us here!

Rating: 5/5 grenades

The Story

This book is set in the beginning of the 22nd Century, in a world where Earth has been brought into the Galactic Union at the point of a bayonet. Earth sent probes out, trying to explore the stars and included welcoming messages. Unfortunately, the legalistic and deadly Galactic Union noticed.

The Galactics arrived with their battle fleet in 2052. Rather than being exterminated under a barrage of hell-burners, Earth joined their vast Empire. Swearing allegiance to distant alien overlords wasn't the only requirement for survival. Earth had to have something of value to trade, something that neighboring planets would pay their hard-earned credits to buy. As most of the local worlds were too civilized to have a proper army, the only valuable service Earth could provide came in the form of soldiers. Someone had to do their dirty work for them, engage in their fighting and dying. Humanity fit the bill, so Earth got to continue living.

Into that mess was born James McGill, a non-conforming college drop out joins the Legion Varius. He was too bull headed for the cool legions, so he had few options. He ended up serving with those less picky about whom they recruited. During the process of adapting to his new world, he shakes up the

galaxy.

If you like military science fiction, you should read this series. Plenty of explosions, with authentically gritty combat. If this sounds like your flavor of badassery, then you've come to the right place! This novel is a brilliant start to the Undying Mercenary Series and will have you hooked from the very first page. If you enjoyed Richard Fox's Ember Wars Series, or Jason Anspach and Nick Cole's Galaxy's Edge universe, then buy this book!

The Characters

In this novel, we meet an extensive cast of characters, but the main point of view is that of Recruit James McGill. While McGill is the main character, Legion Varus felt like a prominent enough secondary character to mention. In this novel B.V. Larson showed his skills as a wordsmith. None of the people who inhabit these pages felt flat. You could definitely relate to them, especially if you've ever spent time in a military uniform. You definitely won't have anything to complain about with these folks! These were real people, not cardboard cutouts or overly done tropes. But let's move past the platitudes and talk specifics. There were two prominent characters in this novel, so I'll break them down for you.

James McGill: He's a highly motivated slacker, who went to college just to get his parents off his back. He'd rather play video games and hang out with his friends than work. Until one-day reality takes a crap on his lawn; his college loans were denied and he was forced into the scary world of adulthood. Suddenly the 20-year-old slacker is forced to grow up and get a real job. He's played the Legion video games and done well, so James figured it was his chance at a better life. Except the glamorous legions don't want him. Instead, he joins Legion Varus, the land of rebels and misfits. I can't say more in a spoiler-free review, but he felt like a stand-up guy at his core. The classic lovable slacker, with a core of iron who's loyal to his squad mates. If you're in a firefight, you'd definitely want this guy on your side. However, if you were his garrison sergeant, you'd go prematurely grey!

Legion Varus: This is a legion that's less parade ground, more fight club. They're the type of gritty fighters that get the job done, but not always in a conventional way. An outfit of misfits, rebels, and broken souls seeking redemption. I've listed the legion as a character because you really get the impression that if James had been in any other legion, the story would've played out differently. All of the warriors from this legion felt fleshed out and three-dimensional. The author added to what is clearly a vast and expansive universe. Legion Varus was a lot of fun to get to know and reminded me of how different the Army was while on wartime footing from the peacetime force that I'd enlisted into. The author pulled off that distinction with this crew!

In conclusion, I felt like I could relate to the characters in this book. They were real people, and I would love to hang out and drink a beer with them. You hated some of them, and you loved some of them. Regardless, they were all real. Overall, I give these characters 5 out of 5 Grenades and can't wait to see where the author takes this character throughout this new series!

The Plot

Like most of the military fiction I love to read, this was an action-packed novel. The story is set in the not too distant future, where Earth has joined the Galactic Union. The grand premise for this series was that humanity called to the stars, but what answered wasn't our friend. Humanity is forced to serve, and our warlike nature forces us into the role of mercenaries for hire. Into this trope, BV Larson takes a sudden twist with the idea of machines that re-grow your body for you after death. You become immortal, getting to live for as long as there is a revival machine to remake you. The action in this story was

non-stop, pure escapism and enjoyment, under the banner of intergalactic science fiction. We again get to see the world through a first-person point-of-view, which I've been reading more of. I've come to appreciate this point of view, at least when it's executed well. And Larson delivered, and then some! Because of Larson's narrative techniques, we get to feel the chaos and confusion that combat and intergalactic intrigue brings. It was a good set-up and well-executed premise that held my interest from the first sentence. It was easy to follow, and didn't require an extensive background in the genre to understand the story. I never really felt like it lagged, the action literally went from the beginning to the end of this novel.

The author balanced the action with the exposition and world-building, so the story never felt flat. I never felt confused by the universe, which isn't that hard to do to my TBI riddled mind! I read this book when it first came out, so this time I listened to the audiobook. I wanted to have the story fresh in my head for this review, so this was my second time with James McGill. Even twice through this universe, I felt that Larson's world was intuitive. You could so easily immerse yourself his book. More of the world was being threaded together and woven into a tapestry of epic awesomeness, and I heartily approve! With the fast pacing, this action-packed adventure story never slowed down and left you wanting more.

As you can tell by the gushing, I'm still addicted to this universe. Okay, I'm hooked on quite a few, but that's the life of a serial book reader! I can't be faithful to just one world, does this mean I'm a polygamist reader? Anyway, I couldn't put it down, the plot was that compelling. I really loved the premise, and more importantly, I enjoyed how the execution. The pacing was excellent, and there was never a slow moment. I couldn't ask for anything more; a fun premise, perfect execution, and incredible pacing! I again give this book 5 out of 5 Grenades!

The Worldbuilding

This is the first book in the Undying Mercenary Series, and I absolutely loved it. This novel had a very flushed out and relatable world, for all it was set in the future. It was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. The tech Larson created, for all it seemed fantastical, made sense within the context of the world he created. Like most military science fiction that I read, the author created visceral emotions that made you want to shot the dinos and suit up with Legion Varus. Larson inserted morsels about the larger universe, without slowing down the adventure of the Steel World!

The author fits in the universe history in such a way that left you wanting more, starting from the opening scene. We learn the history of the wars with the occupants of Steel World, and what they look like. I had no problem visualizing them, and Larson did it without pulling me out of the action. It was just the right amount of exposition, seriously the author was a skilled craftsman carving a sculpture from the words on the page. Seriously, B.V. Larson described the world with plenty of details, and there wasn't a scene where I couldn't picture it. They didn't reinvent the wheel and built on the existing tropes of science fiction. There were some unique twists on the standard tropes, the author used the standard ingredients to create a unique and tasty dish. They just made it sexier!

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 Larson created. It was a fun ride that made me wanna suit up... which is the goal of action/adventure authors! 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

This novel was full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. The author explained things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how the world felt. Even with the legionnaires wearing full body armor, al la HALO style, the author manages to describe the smell and feel of the planet where the action occurs. That exposition never felt contrived, or like he was looking for a way to shoehorn it into the narrative. Instead, it felt natural. This is how it's done, and I hope to get that good someday. I could visualize the world, it was definitely a fully immersive experience reading/listening to this novel.

Unlike some books I've enjoyed, the lack of description about the various characters wasn't as noticeable because Larson wove in subtle cues that allowed my subconscious to fill in the voids. To be honest, until I sat down to write this review, I missed how skillfully he hid his lack of details. It was done so that the reader could insert themselves into the narrative, and now that's something I want to learn to do myself. Larson's descriptive use of language balanced perfectly against how and where he explained this new world, without slowing down the story. This book was a hit in the non-human description categories, he really only went lite on how the people looked. Again, I suspect this is so the reader could picture themselves as the various characters. There wasn't a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible and I enjoyed it.

The author's description of their universe was evocative, and converted me into an uber fan! In summary, I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of the author. The action was gripping, and the story was fun. I give him 5 out of 5 grenades in this category.

Narration

This audiobook was excellently produced and was fun to listen to. The narrator, Mark Boyette, did an amazing job with this book. I've listened to other books he narrated, and they were all well done. He doesn'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 too me. Instead, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. And the accents he did made me smile, and laugh a few times. It kept me engaged throughout the periods I was listening, which is all you can really ask for. Overall, I loved the quality of his work and would recommend this narrator to other audiobook fans. I give him a 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

The Cover

First, the usual disclaimer that I'm colorblind so your mileage may vary. The first thing that jumped out at me was the typography used. The font and the white color of the text jumped out as consistent with the rest of the series. I know that I'm reviewing the first book, but the next nineteen are available for comparisons. The coloring used for the font also nicely contrasted with the blue space image in the background. Even cooler, the metallic construct just behind the text catches your eye, even when viewing it as a thumbnail. Most importantly, the image looked cool! Like I mentioned previously, this cover looks great across all mediums! It's equally impressive on your Kindle, Audible App or other smaller devices, though it really shines when you look at the full-sized cover on the Amazon site! Overall, this cover really speaks to the inner nerd in me! There was a sense of the vastness of space that this image evoked, and I loved it.

Overall:

I really loved this book, it was one of the first series I found when I bought my first Kindle all those years ago, and I've re-read it several times. It was a lot of fun to read then, and I still enjoy it when I

read it again. Like all good, no great, stories, this one made me feel like I was in the trenches with the characters doing heroic deeds. Isn't that why we read in the first place? Let's be real, my fighting days are over, but I could forget that while I read this book. I could be young and spry again, capable of chewing lead, spitting out bullets and walking through fire. Isn't that the essence of why we read military science fiction, so we could again reach for greatness and be gods among men?

Steel World definitely sucked me in and played with my emotions. I found myself wanting to be a part of it all, well except for the times when everyone was dying of course. It's right up there with Terry Mixon's Empire of Bones series, and Anspach/Cole's Galaxy's Edge series. Reading this book, I felt connected with the characters on an emotional level. This was my first B.V. Larson novel, and I've moved him into the "auto-buy" list. I own the eBook and audiobook for the first ten of his Undying Mercenary books. When I can afford it, I will get the rest as well!

Additionally, Larson did a great job describing the military culture. It was spot on, just what I'd expect from someone who'd been there. However, I don't think the author served in the armed forces of any nation. Not sure what research he did, but he did it well. Bravo, Mr. Larson, bravo. Using a lot of common sense, Larson made sure to avoid some of the errors some science fiction authors did. The troops run out of ammo, dumb luck happens, and good soldiers still die. Further, the troops bust each other's balls, and their interactions felt like what I remembered from my time in the infantry. The females that were on the front lines used technology to overcome biology, so you didn't have to deal with the modern day politics that currently surround this issue. I loved how he side-stepped this tricky issue and skipped the need to preach at the reader. I don't know Larson's politics, and I don't care. Regardless of his belief system, you couldn't tell them in his story because he followed the Golden Rule of Writing. The story is king, and nothing else matters.

Speaking of the military angle... the ground combat in these books was extremely primal, just as it should be. The action was described in all the gory details needed to create an immersive, and easy to visualize, adventure. Everything you could possibly want from this genre was there. The battle scenes were believable, gripping and I never felt like the author missed a chance to get creative with the tactics. They weren't super innovative, but it fits within the scope of the universe Larson built. Such a detailed portrayal of the tactics is rare. The characters were well written and helped flush out the larger world, which all lent itself to a perfectly executed plot. Each individual element of this novel was executed perfectly, but it was in the union of the various aspects of the story that the universe really shined.

I realize I've gone full fanboy, but the author definitely raised the bar for military science fiction authors everywhere. If you've noticed, I say that a lot but that's intentional. I choose to study authors who do it better than I could, hoping to learn from the seat of the masters. Because, seriously, I was hooked from the first page! He wove the action in such a compelling way that you wanted to jump into the armor myself. This is a book I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Hell, I have read it multiple times already, so buy the novel! I give this novel a 5 out of 5 grenades! If it weren't cheating, I'd give it 6 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 serve in Legion Varus. And then you enlist, only to realize that you're stationed on Steel World. Then you're put on the front lines, where you get to feed the dinos. And then the other shoe drops, you, they revive you and repeat the process. Except, instead of using this to win the battle, you get to be the prey in some weird rendition of Groundhog Day. Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. Or maybe you'll be okay? I mean, you could be the first Legionnaire to break the cycle and make it out 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!

Stigers Tigers by Mark Alan Edelheit

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Rating: 4/5 Grenades

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 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!

In this fantastical military fantasy novel, we see what life would be like if you threw the Roman Legions smack dab into the middle of Middle Earth. Check out this review, you'll be sold on this series.

A tarnished legacy. A dangerous mission. The beginning of an epic destiny...

Nobleman and born soldier Ben Stiger never backs down from a fight. Even as the son of an infamous imperial general, an outcast from society, he refuses to crumble under the unforgiving shadow of his once-powerful family's disgrace. When he's reassigned from his crack company to the struggling southern army, he's eager to help turn the tide against a growing, deadly rebellion.

Supported by his faithful lieutenant, Eli, one of the last remaining elven rangers, and a holy Paladin on a quest for the High Father, Stiger fights to gain control of his new company, resentful and mediocre soldiers... who he must train and then lead on a desperate mission to reach an outpost cut off by the enemy. But as he force-marches his men through hostile territory, the veteran commander faces more than he ever expected, rebels, bandits, a magic relic from an age long gone, and an ancient evil freshly risen that has the potential to destroy the empire he loves and serves.

Can one outcast hero make a difference and save his empire from annihilation?

Stiger's Tigers is the engrossing first book in The Stiger Chronicles, an epic fantasy series about an Imperial Officer. If you like brave champions, sword and sorcery, breathtaking twists and turns, and authentic battle scenes, then you'll love Marc Alan Edelheit's Roman-inspired adventure series.

Buy the Stiger's Tigers award-winning series! Winner of the Independent Publisher Book Award for Fantasy & Finalist for Best Series Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

Find out why thousands of readers have fallen for Amazon bestselling author Marc Alan Edelheit's captivating series!

If you like military fantasy, you should read this series. There are plenty of battles, sword fights and ancient tactics layered with gritty combat. If this sounds like your flavor of badassery, then you've come to the right place!

The Characters

In this novel, we follow a small group of characters, which is how I like my fictional universes. We meet Captain Stiger and his elf companion and see the life of the legion through his merry band of sol-

diers. All of the characters were a lot of fun to spend time with. Their bonds made me long for the camaraderie I enjoyed during my time as an infantry sergeant in the US Army.

Captain Ben Stiger: He's a grizzled veteran officer of the numerous campaigns, but he felt real and not one of those stereotypical military killers. He was badass, a consummate professional and genuinely good officer for his troops. He's the kind of guy you'd want on your side in a firefight, well sword fight. We don't really see any character growth in him, but he was an established veteran, so I didn't feel cheated. I'm not sure if there are other books with this character, so maybe we see his life story somewhere else, where he grows into his personal traits? While he wasn't one of my favorite characters in this novel he was well thought out! Overall, I did like him and felt like there was the glimmer of a chance for more to come from him.

Lieutenant Eli'Fa: He's an enigmatic character, whose origin is shrouded in mystery, not just to the reader but to Captain Stiger as well. He's a Ranger, an expert on the forest and serves as a scout in the Legion. He's lethally effective, which made him fun to read. I really wanted him to get more screen time. I felt like his character was the deepest and most complex one in the novel. He was fully developed, but that could be because JRR Tolkien had previously given me a template for all things elven. He DID have pointy teeth, which was an interesting play on this race, so it wasn't all cookie cutter stereotypes. Physically, he was a beast who could run for hours without stopping and endure the harsh environments of Vrell in the winter. Overall, I would love some stand-alone stories about the elves, or the high born as they're called in this novel.

Lieutenant Ikely: He's a young Legion officer, and the XO that Stiger inherited when he was given command of the 85th Imperial Foot. He seemed young and untrained, but willing to learn what it took to become a better officer for his fellow legionnaires. He reminds me of every lost lieutenant who I had to train when I was an infantry sergeant. That said, his lack of skill didn't read as incompetence. I really liked him, and I enjoyed his arc. Like the elven ranger, I would love books just about his story.

Lieutenant Lan: He was a young nobleman, the second son in his family who joined the Imperial cavalry to make a name for himself. He leads the 187th Imperial Horse Regiment. He's a veteran of the last battle to reach Vrell with supplies and lost most of his troops in the encounter. We meet him as a skittish officer, who wants to be better for his men and to avenge himself on an enemy who killed 90 of his men in the last engagement. Throughout the novel, we see him grow as a man, and as an officer. He's the earnest sort of man, whom you feel like would make an awesome commanding officer.

Father Thomas: He's a paladin and a preach of the High Father, who is sent to join Stiger in the fight against evil that is dwelling in the South. He's a big man, with a merry and laid-back personality. He comes across as a friendly traveling monk, whose happy bearing hides an iron spine and dedication to his faith.

Overall, the characters were fun to get to know and felt like the author put some thought into them. The names were a bit confusing, but I listened to this as an audiobook, and when I went into the actual eBook I saw that this wasn't an issue. This could be because of my hearing issue, apparently rupturing your eardrums multiple times is bad for your hearing, now speak into my good ear! I give these characters 5 out of 5 Grenades and can't wait to see where the author takes the survivors of the Battle for Castle Vrell!

The Plot

The premise for this series was to stick a version of the Roman Empire into a world that included dwarves, elves, and other magical creatures. It reminded me of Middle Earth, but with the Roman Legion

marching around in full kit. The story was easy to follow, but I could be biased because of my academic training. I have a bachelor's degree in ancient and medieval history, and I was well on my way to a master degree in Colonial American history before my head injury in Iraq. The plot played out chronologically, so no complaints there. This adventure tale was a lot of fun and left me wanting more. It offered me escapism and enjoyment, under the banner of a military fantasy novel.

This book was like most of the military fiction I love to read, it was an action-packed tale of vengeance, retribution and the arduous nature of loyalty. The story is set as the world in turmoil, where the empire has pushed out too far and the barbarians are now at the gates. I could almost picture the Visigoths lurking around every corner, and imagine Rome burning. Except this wasn't set in Italy, it was set in a Middle Earth-esq environment. Overall, the plot was fun with the appropriate amounts of tension and excitement. It was never boring, and the characters and universe behaved in a way that made sense for the worlds the author created.

That said, it was confusing at the end. It felt like the story stopped in a jarring way and left me more confused than ever. It was a good set-up and well-executed premise that held my interest from the first sentence. I can definitely see the potential for bigger things coming from this world. This book is definitely worth checking out, I couldn't put it down. Well, turn it off since it was an audiobook for me. I really enjoyed the premise, and more importantly, I enjoyed the execution. The pacing could use some work, and the ending felt like it dropped off but I can overlook this since book two is already written and cued up. The premise was unique, and the execution was well done, so I give Marc Alan Edelheit 4 out of 5 Grenades!

The Worldbuilding

This is the first book in the Chronicles of An Imperial Legionary Officer Series, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Can I say that enough? Okay, back to the nitty-gritty of the review. This novel had a very fleshed out world that was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. It definitely made me want to become part of the larger world. I liked reading about the various species and races that existed on the peripheries of this story, it added depth to the what could've been a flat world. I love the battle armor and wouldn't mind a set for my birthday! The Legion had some sexy kit, and it's a site to behold if you see it in person. Even in modernity, it has the ability to intimidate! The vividness of the world leaves you wanting to travel this land in your own chariot! It'll have you desperate to serve the glory of the gods and the Emperor!

This world definitely still has some mystery left in it and it kept me hooked. Now I want to know it all and bought all of the books the author has written. Audiobooks too! Shh, don't tell my financial managers! I definitely see room for Cosplay and a fandom for this world and can't wait for my own legionnaire armor! Think they come in an extra fat version? They described the world with plenty of details, and there wasn't a scene where I couldn't picture it. The author didn't reinvent the wheel, instead he stood on the shoulders of giants and built on the existing fantasy troupes.

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 Marc Alan Edelheit 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 the authors, this novel was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imag-

ine yourself in this world. They described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how the world felt. This was especially noticeable with Eli'Fa, the elven lieutenant. While I could visualize all of the characters, I'm not sure if that is because of the writing or my own educational background. Not knocking the author, just trying to let you know where I'm coming from. That said, I do believe that he gave you the building blocks you needed to see it for yourself.

Even if you're not as historically accurate as the author described, you'll get the drift. I do wish the author had used more descriptive use of language, there were points where it felt repetitive, but it wasn't so bad you couldn't enjoy the story. I will say that the author did balance the explanation of this new world with the need to move a story along, which many authors miss. You either have too much, or not enough details and I believe that Marc split the difference. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible and I enjoyed it. The author's description of their universe was evocative, and enough to please rookies and uber fans alike! Seriously, it made you wanna take a moment and explore every nook and cranny, but that's a sign of an amazingly built universe.

As I mentioned when writing about the characters, there is plenty of room in this fun world for side stories and adventure. In summary, other than some repetitive descriptors I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of the authors. The action was gripping, and the story was fun. If you want the action and adventure, then this is the book for you! I give them 4 out of 5 grenades in this category.

The Narration

This audiobook was excellently executed, though the British accent and pronunciations were a little bit distracting at first. Once you get past the accent and pronunciation, the narrator did an awesome job. The narrator, Steven Brand, was someone I hadn't heard from before, but I would definitely read more books narrated by him. He didn't bore you, or make you zone out because of his monotone. His performance didn't feel robotic, nor like a machine was reading the novel to me. Instead, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. Except, Steven did the voices and made some vocal sound effects for the battle scenes that was amusing. Once I adapted to it, his accents and dramatic reading style kept me engaged throughout the periods I was listening to this book. Speaking of the pronunciation, you get the British vibe with words like lieutenant, which he pronounces like 'left-tenant.' He had an odd pronunciation for the word cuirass as well, but you really did get used to it eventually. Overall, I give him a 4 out of 5 grenades for his performance. Sorry, but the accent and pronunciation drew me out of the story momentarily.

The Series Writ Large

I read the next two books in this series as well, but I won't be writing reviews on them. If you're interested, you can [click here](#) to jump to the series landing page. If I wrote about the other books in the series I'd basically say the same things, and I don't want to bore you. There's also the pesky little fact that their fantasy novels, and I try to focus on science fiction. Like in book 1, the characters were awesome and I really liked them.

The audio narrator, Steven Brand, grew on me enough that I bought all of the other audiobooks in this universe. Then I turned around and bought the e-books for the authors entire back catalog. Keep that in mind with my criticism, because I really did love this world and these characters. The plot was well thought out, but the pacing in later novels could use some work. In book three the pacing seemed to improve greatly, so there is some hope. The build-up to the battles was perfectly timed and executed,

but the boss battles themselves seem to be a little bit rushed and the ending of the books were very abrupt. The main battle in the third book fixed these issues, but then the book dropped off dramatically. Marc is clearly a member of the “Society of the Cliff Hangering Bastards.” I’ve found that I hate this, I want endings that feel complete.

There was also the issue with description, and that sometimes they were repetitive, and you were left with a déjà vu feeling several times throughout the series. Again, while I point out these faults I bought everything this author has written after reading his first book and plan on buying book for in the series when it comes out. The world building for the other books was excellent as well, and even got better I really like the way he described this everything in the later novels. He built on what was already there, which is exactly what you expect from a series. So, in conclusion, I give this series a solid 4 out of 5 grenades!

Overall

I really loved this book, it was a lot of fun to read. It brought back the epic historical fiction battles that I read as a kid. Throw in some of the Middle Earth, my first love, and you’ve got a recipe for awesomeness! This book definitely had a lot of the fast-paced combat full of carnage and the fog of war that I expect from gritty sword fighting. Add in some magic, and you’re all set for a rip-roaring good time! The novel built on what I liked about epic fantasy, with a few twists thrown in to make this novel stand out as one of a kind. There were no deep messages, or political themes, just good clean fun. The story was compelling and made me want to know more about the world that Marc built.

Thinking about this book from the outside, in, I want to talk about the cover. The first thing that caught my eye was the fantastic battle scene with the Roman legionnaire in his full kit. The scene was breathtaking and made you feel like you were in the thick of things. It was an amazingly compelling scene and grabbed my attention from the first glance. This series made me decide to add a section about covers to the book review! I couldn’t take it anymore, wanting to comment on it! Okay, I might be color blind, and art dumb, but you can skip that section if it isn’t your thing! This cover reminded me of the iconic fantasy books I loved as a kid or the posters from the choose your own adventure books I devoured when I was supposed to be studying. When I finally have a dedicated office or man cave, I’m decorating it with these covers! Come to think of it, I say that a lot. Might need a larger office!

Now onto the book itself! The military culture shown was spot on, just what I’d expect from an actual veteran. Except I don’t think the author IS a veteran, he’s just that good. Nobody felt like cookie cutter clichés or paradoxes of the warrior, and the ethos was spot on. I liked how they handled the harsh transition soldiers had when they joined the Legion fold, it felt realistic and historically accurate-ish. However, you didn’t need a Ph.D. in Roman History to understand the series. This author clearly understood the culture of the ancient grunt! At least, as I remember reading it in college. It also seemed to fit with what I knew from my own time in the Army. Marc Alan Edelheit made it clear that this world was flushed out and didn’t fall into some of the traps most military fiction did. The troops run out of arrows, dumb luck happened, and good soldiers still died. My god, lots of them! I have a feeling that this will change in book two, and I can’t wait. Rivers of blood ran throughout this novel, luckily this time it was the rebel scum dying in droves. The action was intense, and the characters responded as you’d expect in those circumstances. Moving right along, the ground combat described was primal, and immersive. It was everything you want from the genre. The battle scenes were believable, gripping and I never felt like the author missed a chance to get creative with the tactics.

There were only two real issues with this novel for me; pacing and the repetitive descriptions. In some

places, it felt like the descriptions repeated themselves and they were rather simplistic. I don't mean that condescendingly, it kept the action moving but I would love him to get even more visceral with the world. In all fairness, I do tend to nitpick the books I like the most because I'm more vested. If I didn't enjoy this book so much, I wouldn't be this picky. The novel was extremely enjoyable and easy to read. Can we really ask for more?

Moving along, let me talk about my issue with the pacing. The build-up in this novel was fine, but the major boss battle seemed rushed and fell flat for me because of this. Finally, with regards to pacing, the ending of this book felt abrupt. I felt like he should've chosen a better place to pause between books but the writing itself was good. For all my issues with where the books were split, I bought Marc Alan Edelheit's entire back catalog in both eBook and audiobook. I love the story, and the universe and the rest are just details.

Seriously, the author definitely raised the bar for military fantasy genre authors everywhere. Even with the 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 they wove the action in such a compelling way that you wanted to jump into the page and join the party. Some of that was because I'm already a huge nerd when it comes to all things historical, but if you've been following me, you already know that. Basically, the author 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 4 out of 5 grenades!

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out, you won't regret it! Well, unless it inspired you to serve the Legion. And you end up enlisting and get assigned to the South with the 85th Imperial Foot. And just when you feel like you're safe under the massive walls of Vrell, Captain Stiger orders you to attack the rebels who outnumber you twenty to one. Then you're put on the front-line unit, getting to be on the tip of the spear. Except, you find out that the enemy aren't the feckless rebels but are hardened orc warriors. Then, in your first battle, you realize that the supply officer was on the take and your weapons fall apart after the first time you slam it into the enemy's soft underbelly. And then the other shoe drops, you figure out that the paladin fell asleep, and won't be there when the dragons arrive. Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. Or maybe you'll be okay? I mean, you could

To Sleep In A Sea Of Stars by Christopher Paolini

Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

I like Christopher Paolini still and I'm sticking to it.

A few years ago we had reported that Paolini was venturing outside the fantasy world of his amazing Inheritance Cycle and stepping into the world of science fiction. This would be a first for him. He had the books in the series written and would be releasing one each year. I was excited because I was a huge fan of Eragon and the other books after a good friend recommended them (she also said to skip the movie, which I have even though I like Jeremy Irons). I quickly finished the books and painfully waited for the final book Inheritance to be released. (At least Paolini didn't take as long as some other authors...). Normally, sci-fi books are not in my usual rotation, but since I enjoyed Paolini's other books, I thought why not.

Not disappointed at all.

Years into our future, humanity has colonized beyond our system. Kira Navárez's work as a xenobiologist with a private company places her on an uncolonized planet doing studies. During a routine survey mission, an accident causes her to make the discovery of a lifetime, which turns into both a dream and nightmare for her as well as the rest of the galaxy. War breaks out between humans and alien lifeforms, which are actually two groups who are in a timeless war with each other as well as trying to find Kira and her discovery – each for their own different reasons. This starts a trip down a road to first contact and discoveries that she's only had dreams about, learning about herself and how she may be the only hope in this war to save humanity.

One of the talents I found Paolini had with his *Inheritance Cycle* was his world building. I felt he left no stone hidden on Alagaësia. He was thorough in his descriptions and if something was mentioned in the story, he made sure to let the reader know its importance. He does not add fluff to his writing. It's the same here. I find science fiction tougher because it's not like fantasy where you can say something is so and have no logical reason behind it because it's "made up". Science fiction, in my opinion, will be made up but it also has to have some sound logic as well. This science could happen in our life as we have seen before. Paolini even has appendixes at the end to explain some of the scientific theories that occur in the book. He also includes a glossary of terms. I like this because it helps readers like myself who are not familiar with certain scientific theories (like FTL) learn more.

But back to his world building: now that humans have moved off Earth, there are several locations the story takes place and since this is not all on one planet like his other books, there's much more for him to first introduce, second describe, and third give the reader a sense of how HUGE the universe is. Traveling from one place to another is no simple feat. And with the situation Kira is in, you really get to feel that commute time.

Another talent of Paolini's is his character development. Kira is a simple enough woman who grew up in a colony and went into a field that her family supported even if she only makes it home every few years. What complicates her life is the discovery of a xeno that she becomes attached to. Quite literally. The bond between them opens up a world of insight into herself but also an alien life beyond her understanding. Similar to the bond between Eragon and his dragon, they are two separate identities who are one.

The spaceship crew that rescues her is at first simply giving her passage to a colony, but she soon finds a home among the complex group of people with diverse pasts. There's the military vet, a scientific colony doctor, a starving homeless teen, and of course, a pirate of some sorts. Each of their unique personalities provide something to Kira's growth as a person and, well... something else I don't want to talk much on and spoil the story. I especially love the ship's mind, Gregorovich. Ships are essentially run by the brains of humans who have died. They are transferred into a machine and are smarter than almost...well, everything. It should say something when Kira explains the massive psychological processes they go through yearly to make sure they're not going mad. But it's his logic and dry humor that adds an odd lightness to the humans' situation. He talks in riddles and refers to the humans as "meatbags". How can you not like this mind?

As for the story? It holds up. As soon as I picked up the book, I didn't want to put it down. As I mentioned, the world building, learning more about the characters, their interactions with everything from the ship to the science to other beings. And what I find best is this is just our beginning voyage into what is Paolini's Fractalverse. Yup, we get more. *To Sleep In A Sea Of Stars* is a good solid opening for wherever he takes us. He has set the stage to move us farther into the universe to continue on the mission Kira and her xeno are on. Similar to Eragon's journey, you're not quite sure if you will see the other characters again and I assume we will, hopefully, but I know that Paolini will not leave the reader

hanging with half-baked characters even if we see them for only a few moments. His detail is in everything.

I'm looking forward to his next entry into the Fractalverse, Unity. It's an online supplement story where you have a mission before you go into the third installment. Different but interesting in my opinion.

If you're a fan of Christopher Paolini's work, then pick up this book. You won't be disappointed.

Tower of Silence by Larry Correia

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Book 4 of the Saga of the Forgotten Warrior

There's an old parable that writers use to create an engaging story, using a protagonist and a tree as the central elements: at the beginning of your story, you have (let's say) a boy and a tree. Before you get too far into the book, the boy should climb the tree. By the second act he's stuck in the tree, and you start to throw rocks at him. By the start of the third act, you're lighting the tree on fire.

Between rocks and fire, you've applied escalating degrees of pressure and discomfort to the boy. Aside from this behavior outing you as a total psychopath, it forces the boy to do whatever he can to mitigate what you're throwing at him. Thus a character and a story are born. Now all we have to figure out is the ending, which will determine what the genre is.

In TOWER OF SILENCE, the fourth installment of Correia's Saga of the Forgotten Warrior, the tree catches fire, and we're in for a bumpy ride...

The Story

For a recap of the previous three books, check back on Upstream for a forthcoming writeup. As for book four, be aware that spoilers may lie ahead.

In the closing chapters of DESTROYER OF WORLDS, Ashok and Devedas finally had their long-awaited showdown. It was brutal and epic. Offense was taken. Offense was given. By the end of it both men were beaten to a pulp and it looked like Ashok was dead, until he somehow washed up on the distant shores of the Isle of Fortress.

The closing line to book three was epic, he meets a stranger who more or less says "You should be dead" and he replies "I'm starting to think I'm not allowed." Throughout the whole series Ashok has struggled to accept that he's an instrument of gods that he doesn't believe in, and after those gods keep hitting the reset button on his life, it's starting to get through.

So where does it go from here? Well, a significant portion of the book is dedicated to what the Sons of the Black Sword do when their champion is missing and presumed dead. Like any movement built on zeal and grit, they keep up the cause, only now they look to the prophet Thera to lead them against the ruling caste. Without getting into the minutiae of their operations and all that, I really liked this element of the story. Ashok is definitely a founding figure to the Sons, a mascot and a powerful leader, but when they carry on without him it shows just how many of them are really committed to the vision, not

the man alone.

(It also makes it that much sweeter when he returns.)

There was another component to book four that I thought was creepy and cool, showing just how devilish the Inquisitors have been for decades: there's a flashback to a demon attack long ago, but instead of killing the demon, the Inquisitors capture it and hide it in a tank of saltwater. Demons regenerate and their body parts are powerful sources of magic, so this is the equivalent of finding fissile nuclear material that constantly regrows, provided you know how to harvest it.

I'm not going to spoil the ending, but the demon has a role to play, and he pulls a move in the epilogue that has me rocking on my heels for the final book. Things just got really bad for people in the land of Lok.

The Characters

We're 80% of the way through the saga, so these people have made a lot of progress in their arcs. There's an undercurrent to the overall story that suggests the old gods are raising new champions who may eventually become gods themselves, like a pantheon from Greek mythology (or in this case, your preferred Southeast Asian flavor.)

Ashok is often called 'the living embodiment of the Law.' By the end of the third book a similar epithet is applied to a smuggler named Gutch, who becomes a living embodiment of commerce. The pantheon is taking shape and rather than resurrecting themselves, the old gods are raising up new ones in the face of the heretics that tried to erase them.

As for Ashok himself, he's a lot like some other Correia protagonists: huge, powerful, capable of extreme violence, and unwilling to suffer fools. Still, he's got a unique persona; you could describe Owen Pitt, Jake Sullivan, and Ashok Vadal with similar attributes, but they all have very different backstories, and if the three of them sat down at a table to play cards you'd get three very different conversations out of them. I find it refreshing that his leading men don't waste time sorting through BS to figure out what's going on around them. They're competent and driven and they move the story forward.

It is perhaps in this way, though, that Ashok is the most different to other Correia characters, because his journey is one from atheism to apotheosis, and that will require a lot of experience and evidence. The series, then, is a showcase of those experiences, written at the pace of a thriller and not your average epic fantasy.

While the other characters have their own arcs (the aforementioned Thera, or the Keeper of Names Rada, or the villainous Grand Inquisitor Omand), my personal favorite has been Jagdish, a guy who started out way back in book one as potential Redshirt material and has really grown into his calling. He was a prison guard when Ashok was locked up, and during his time with the man, Jagdish started to realize the Inquisition was adding 2 + 2 and getting 7. He eventually joined the Sons, had a tragic loss in the family, and found an inner strength along the way.

It's like if Jimmy Olsen from Superman decided he had protagonist energy and wanted to make something of himself. You can't help but cheer for the guy as he claws his way from insignificance to relevance.

The World

I'm nobody's expert on India, but the few things I know about the place make it clear that it inspired the world of Lok. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if by the end of book five we learn that this whole world is our Earth, remade from the wreckage of some deity's tantrum in the future, and that Lok is in that quadrant of Asia.

There also seems to be strong parallels between current-day tech and the magic of Lok. The two magical sources are black steel and demon parts, which could be connected (I'm not exactly clear on how), and on more than one occasion I've wondered if Thera's black steel prophet mirror is actually some sort of iPad device? It often behaves like one, but she never has to charge it or anything.

What I'm saying is this is definitely a fantasy world powered by gods and demons and magic, but it feels like it was built on ours, and the closer we get to the end, the more layers peel off to lead me there. We'll have to see.

The most important element of the world, though—at least for this story—is the caste system. A driving force of books 3 and 4 has been the Inquisition's efforts to pull an "Order 66" and execute every casteless individual in the world. This would include Ashok, who learned way back in book 1 that he was a casteless bastard. Since then it's come to light that the casteless themselves are descendants of the "dead" god Ramrowan, and hold his power. Naturally the Inquisition is nervous about this, and they want to quash the opposition before the proof goes viral.

The Politics

Theofascist tyranny versus rugged liberty. So...more philosophical than political, but it's a Larry book, he sneaks in a few jabs here and there.

Content

All of the profanity is Lok-centric. Nothing from our world really comes through. (Side note, check out the WriterDojo episode that Larry and Steve did on profanity, it's excellent whether you write or not. He talks about this.)

There's also a fair bit of violence, it's prevalent throughout this series.

Who's it for?

For all of the readers saying they want epic fantasy that doesn't have a Western European bent to it, this whole series ought to be what they're looking for. I have yet to read anything else like it.

If you like the worlds of epic fantasy but don't like how slow and ponderous it all is, this is for you.

Why read it?

The best reason is right here:

Larry Correia writes that if everyone buys it, the book may make #1 and then maybe the guys who made RRR would buy the movie rights.

The Traveler by Stephan Bolz
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

An anthology
Rating: 5/5 Grenades

The Story

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). As I have said before, 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!

Every day after school, twelve-year-old Tee works as an apprentice in her father's blacksmith shop. From him, she learns how to weld, forge, and make beautiful things out of ordinary pieces of steel and metal. When her dad has a stroke and lying on his death bed, he whispers one last inaudible word to his daughter. Following it, Tee eventually discovers a notebook hidden inside his workshop. In it, she finds detailed instructions on how to build a time machine.

She longs to see her father again, and she wants to honor his last wish to build the machine, but deep-down Tee knows that there is no such thing as traveling through time. Reluctantly, she begins to build what she believes is simply a means, set up by her father, to ease her grief and help her get through the darkest time of her young life. She doesn't know yet that her father's last gift to her will change her life in the most profound way.

If you dig intense emotionally evocative stories of life and love, you'll love "The Traveler" by Stefan Bolz. Get your copy today and share it with a friend.

The Characters

The main character, Tee, is a young girl mourning the loss of a father she loved dearly. In the story, I don't remember finding her name, but it's in the blurb so it must've been there. The girl was driven by grief to complete her time machine, a final gift to her father. Her character was very flushed out, someone you could relate to. Despite the length of this story, I really connect to this girl, who becomes the "every man" for people who've had to mourn a loved one. She was written in a way that leaves the readers wanting more. Seriously, I remember hating when the book ended because it meant the main character went away.

The Plot

The basic plot is about a girl's journey through the stages of her grief. The story moved on at a good pace, there were no points where I felt like it got bogged down in the weeds. It wasn't an action story, the plot was more cerebral and visceral, but it was fun. I enjoyed hearing how the machine was built, interspaced with snippets of her earning the funds to buy needed parts. It didn't feel like things were handed to her, she earned every inch of her forward progress. The basic plot of this story was fun, it was moved along, and it kept me engaged. Here the author accomplished his goals as a storyteller!

The World

There wasn't a lot of world building in this short story, but it wasn't needed. This story was set in the modern day, with enough tie-down points to anchor you in the fiction of Stefan Bolz. I could certainly envision myself in this world where a kid made the improbable possible. The story also built upon the worldbuilding of author HG Wells, at least with regards to the machine itself. This short story set the scene for a larger universe that left you wanting more. Because of his work here, I could buy the premise of a kid somehow forging this epic, one-of-a-kind time machine. I would say that here the author accomplished his goals.

The Narration

The author used just the right touch here, I could picture every setting and even the machine itself. You could process this story through all your senses because Stefan Bolz left none of them untended. I smelted the forge, heard the clank of the hammer and felt the heat from the hearth fire. Hell, I could even smell the salt from Tee's tears as she cried out for the loss of her father. If Bolz isn't a blacksmith in this life, he channeled his past lives! I feel like the amount of description here was perfect for a short story. This is what description looks like when done right! I could picture myself in the various set locations, seriously... Grade-A work! It is the first solid 5-Star review for an author's descriptive talents I've ever given.

The Cover

The saying that you don't judge a book by its cover is the biggest lie known to book nerds! So, I'm including my thoughts here with the disclaimer that I'm colorblind so your mileage may vary. With this novel, the image of a figure on the cover was so dark that I had trouble making out many of the details. All I could see was a blob of light surrounded by dark with white lettering. I don't feel like it is one I could adequately or fairly review so I'll draft my minions. They said that the cover looked good, but it didn't pop out and give you the "wow" factor other covers do. They liked the font, which was blocked and three-dimensional and they enjoyed the wind-blown look of the girl on the cover. Overall, my minions gave this 4 out of 5 grenades.

Conclusion

I absolutely loved this short story! Time travel stories that are more literature than pulp aren't normally my thing, but this short story showed made me rethink that choice! I found Stefan's prose to be easy to read, written in a way to keep the story moving along without lagging. Because I listened to this as an audiobook, I can't comment on any typos, but none of the phrasings yanked me out of the story. The story was visceral, pulling all the right emotional heartstrings. Because of how this is written, it was the perfect story for the short story medium, but it still left me wanting more. I wanted it to keep going, which is a good sign. I found the basic story premise to be highly entertaining, though in a melancholy sort of way. Stefan Bolz used several creative tactics to make the basic task, the building of a time machine, plausible for the 12-year-old main character. This was partly because the narrator, Arden Hammersmith, did such an amazing job! Between the two of them, the narrator and the author, they entertained me in creative ways that were entirely believable within the context of the world they created.

In conclusion, I would recommend this story to everyone who loves fun science fiction and give it 5 out of 5 grenades. But don't take my word for it... if this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out!

When the Tripods Came by John Christopher
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

Reading this book was a real nostalgia trip for me. My first experience with science fiction as a kid (outside of Wells and Verne) was reading the original Tripod Trilogy. I loved the strangeness and sense of adventure experienced by children coming of age, just as I was. I had not been aware at the time that there was a prequel written decades later, after the BBC television show had come out (which I also didn't find until recently). The prequel tells the story of how the Tripods arrived on Earth and how they came to dominate the world and convince people to be capped and brought into subservience. While I only seldom read young adult novels these days this one was a pleasure to read and I believe I would have been captivated even without reliving a childhood memory. Whether you are young or older these books are well worth a read and have aged quite well in my opinion. The series is a great place to get kids started on science fiction and I believe that I would say that even had I not read them as a child.

Wool by Hugh Howey
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

This book started as a self-published effort that drew rave reviews, so a smart publisher snagged it for a printed version.

I'm generally not a fan of dystopian fiction. Mostly, it's because I'm an optimist about the human race lasting long enough to reach the stars. However, Wool proved so compelling, I kept staying up until one and two in the morning reading about these self-contained silos that extend 144 levels underground. The Earth may be a wasteland of toxicity, but here the last of humanity awaits the Earth to become habitable again.

Every so often, a condemned criminal is sent outside via airlock to clean the sensors using steel wool. They have just enough time to clean and start the trek to see what's over the next hill before the hazmat suit fails and they become just another corpse among many...and therein begins the intrigue with the character of the Sheriff taking point.

The book is actually a series of six linked novellas. Slowly, you start to learn more about the silos, its inhabitants, and how things work or don't.

There's far more to it than that and I don't want to tell you anything more other than the prose is brilliant, the characters you meet are well-rounded and well-developed, and the plot draws you inexorably onward into this underground world.

Brilliant. If you are going to pick a sci-fi book from my reviews this month, this one is it. Enjoyed it.

Literary Criticism

Is the Term “Science Fiction” Passé?

A.C. Cargill

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

Substack: <https://accargillauthor.substack.com/p/is-the-term-science-fiction-passe> 26 April 2023
Medium: <https://medium.com/@accargillauthor/is-the-term-science-fiction-pass%C3%A9-a3f9551c0aa4> 26 April 2023

We live in an age when things that were once regarded as the delusional ravings of mad writers in the genre “science fiction” are now commonplace. You, the writer, can’t astound your readers, stretching their brains beyond the here and now, with such things. It takes much more. You have to stretch your brain or simply have to use some other way to show that you’re writing about a future, past, or life elsewhere.

And that is why I ask: Is the term “science fiction” even valid anymore?

How about using the term “space fiction” since most science fiction now seems to involve space? Or using the term “fantasy fiction,” especially if you’re dealing with world building or the total fantasy ideas of time travel and parallel universes?

A bit of nitpicking, to be sure. But as a writer, I tend to pick nits over words, and most likely so do you. For me, the term “science fiction” has certainly seen its time come and go.

But not to be ungrateful, I clearly acknowledge that we have the science fiction genre to thank for many things in our modern world. Laptop computers, cell phones, space stations, lasers, drones, and lab-grown meat, to name a few, are now household words.

Inventions

In the early days of science fiction (the 1800s just as real inventors and scientists were announcing amazing new things such as the Curies’ discovery of polonium and radium), writers thrilled readers with technological ideas that seemed beyond possibility. The purpose of these invention mentions was originally to convince readers that they were reading about the future where anything was possible. Often they were also plot devices. For example, teleporting from a spaceship to the surface of a planet and vice versa (Star Trek) created interesting scenarios such as beaming whales onboard. Landing a craft capable of soaring through space on a planet or asteroid and taking off again (as in the short-lived TV series Firefly) involved a completely different set of possibilities. But sometimes the authors were warning about science going beyond moral considerations or conveying a promise of wonders yet to come, some of the more practical ones being here now or in development, as shown below.

Items that first appeared in science fiction:

Common:

Mobile phones / cell phones — In 1973 Motorola introduced the DynaTAC. It was nicknamed “the brick,” weighed almost 2.5 pounds, and had a hefty price tag (about \$1,000). The inventor, Martin Cooper, claimed in a 2015 interview that the idea was based on the 1946 comic strip “Dick Tracy” two-way wrist radio.

Videophone, video conferencing — The earliest reference to videophone was by Jules Verne in *In the Year 2889* (1889). He called it a phonotelephote – a means of personal conversation involving the transmission and receipt of voice and pictures. The 1911 novel *Ralph 124C 41+ : A Romance of the Year 2660* by Hugo Gernsback featured the “telephoto,” a video-conferencing device. In *Metropolis* (1927) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* a wall-mounted videophone is used. Today we have Zoom, Facetime, and other options for connecting across distances.

Ear buds — Tiny radios that fit in a human ear and headsets for music and talk were part of the world of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. They are a reality now in the form of ear buds.

Newscasts — Jules Verne, observing the technology of his day, let his imagination speculate on how they could evolve. The modern concept of a news broadcast came from *In the Year 2889* (1889), which some think his son Michel Verne wrote, following his father's ideas. In the novel, news was read out loud to people.

Tasers — Jules Verne mentioned in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1875) a device for hunting underwater; it transferred a powerful electrical charge to the prey and was called the Leyden ball. In a 1911 novel titled *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle*, a boy creates a blaster that stuns targets with electricity. NASA engineer Jack Cover claims this inspired the TASER which he patented in 1974.

Lasers — In H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Martians use a heat-ray to incinerate humans with a flash of light. In 1960, Theodore Maiman fired up the first operational laser at California's Hughes Research Laboratory.

Atomic bombs — H.G. Wells introduced the atomic bomb in *The World Set Free* (1913), more as a warning and a justification for globalism – some all-powerful government that would assure world peace. Unlike actual atomic bombs, Wells had his exploding for days, week, or months while radiating energy and causing death and destruction.

Tablets — In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968, Stanley Kubrick and Sir Arthur C. Clarke introduced the electronic tablet where Dr. David Bowman and Dr. Frank Poole watch news updates from their flat-screen computers, which they called “newspads.” In 2010, Apple released the iPad.

Digital billboards — We see digital billboards everywhere now. They can be rather distracting to drivers. But when *Blade Runner* came out, no such thing existed, which made the movie look all the more futuristic. Now it looks modern day. Andrew Phipps Newman, the CEO of DOOH.com, was inspired by the movie and saw the potential for revolutionizing billboard advertising.

Drones — *Dune* (1965) by Frank Herbert had tiny assassin drones. *Star Wars* had various autonomous flying vehicles. Now drones are used for a variety of purposes as well as fun – aerial photography, emergency response and agricultural precision crop monitoring. The first commercial drone permit was issued by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration in 2006. They issued 100,000 remote pilot certificates for operating drones in 2018. That same year Walmart filed a patent application for tiny drones that can detect and spread pollen, what the TV series *Black Mirror* calls “robo-bees.”

Medical:

Defibrillator — While the fictional Dr. Frankenstein used lightning jolts to reanimate a creature pieced together from several corpses, the real life Dr. Claude Beck jolted a teenage patient's heart with 60 Hz with his homemade defibrillator, consisting of two silver paddles wired to an outlet. More advanced versions are now standard equipment in hospitals.

Bionic limbs — Luke Skywalker's father chops off his hand, which is then replaced with a bionic version in Star Wars: Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back. Research is ongoing at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia, for an ultrasonic sensor that will enable the wearer of the prosthetic hand to move the fingers.

Genetic engineering — H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) shows how the mad doctor used transplants and blood transfusions to create human-animal hybrids. Some very rational scientists are working on animal organs some day being transplanted into humans when a human donor isn't available. So far, they have not conquered the human immune system rejection problem. What Wells didn't realize is that it would take more than a pig's heart beating in our chests to reduce us to a porcine level.

Space:

Space stations — Edward Everett Hale wrote of a skyscraper-sized brick sphere and its passengers flung into space using a river--powered flywheel. That was in 1869. In 1971, the Soviets launched a 65-foot -cylinder and crew. They took photos of Earth and conducted experiments. The movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* comes into play again, portraying a large space station in low-Earth orbit where astronauts can bounce around in microgravity. Now we have the International Space Station (ISS), orbiting Earth since 1998 and inspired by that movie.

Ideas from Jules Verne — *From the Earth to the Moon* (1867) presented several items that became reality.

Lunar Modules/Space Travel – launching in a way similar to that of a gun and a bullet – not quite what is used these days.

Air Renewal – where air is re-oxygenated within the projectile spacecraft.

Light Pressure Propulsion – light itself as a form of propulsion for spacecraft.

Retro-Rockets – small boosters provide a thrust counter to the current velocity of the spacecraft, slowing it down or stopping its progress altogether.

Splashdown – landing a space ship in water.

Weightlessness – a space traveler's weight seems to be reduced to zero in free fall.

Solar Sails – a way of using light to propel a ship through space, currently planned for use in future missions around the world.

Water-Springs – using water to cushion the living space of a spacecraft from the effects of acceleration.

Launching Facility in Florida – a specific spot to support space launches.

Transportation:

Autonomous cars — In 1964 Isaac Asimov predicted that cars with “robot brains” would be featured in the World’s Fair in fifty years. Movies featuring Ian Fleming’s iconic character James Bond also show automobiles that drive themselves with a little human assistance. Tesla is now working on a self-driving feature for its vehicles. The technology isn’t perfect yet, but some expect that by 2025 it will be. NASA is helping develop these cars for use in exploring the Moon or planets.

Flying cars — A common idea with good reason. Flying cars get to their destination faster, being able to fly in a straight line, not over roads that curve and twist, as well as traveling at faster speeds. Flying cars have been in a slew of science fiction books, movies, and even cartoons such as *The Jetsons*, Hanna-Barbera (1962-1962, 1985-1987), *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang: The Magical Car* (3 volumes), Ian Fleming (1964-1965), the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, United Artists Pictures (1968), and the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling (1997-2007). The military and NASA as well as private investors are developing “autonomous urban aircraft.” They would carry one or more human. Some predict them being in common use by 2040.

Hoverboard — Marty McFly uses a hoverboard to make a quick getaway in *Back to the Future Part II*. That was supposed to have been in 2015. Arx Pax in California actually did create a hoverboard in that year. It uses Magnetic Field Architecture (MFA™) to levitate the hoverboard.

Helicopter — Jules Verne sketched out various aircraft over the years. In *Robur the Conqueror*, he detailed a description of a machine made of pressboard controlled with high-speed rotors that propelled the aircraft upward. This may or may not be the precursor of the helicopter, since prototype sketches were around at the time. Whether he had had any opportunity to see them is unknown.

Other:

Diving Apparatus — Jules Verne described equipment used to go for walks on the seabed in 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1875). That equipment became the direct ancestor of modern scuba diving equipment.

Machine learning / artificial Intelligence (AI)— Machines that could think and even advance so far as to maintain themselves and build others have been forecast since Samuel Butler’s 1872 novel *Erewhon* and raised to nightmare level in *The Terminator* movie series. The technology going under the misnomer “artificial intelligence” is even more nightmarish, though, if not reined in. And it has been a reality since the 1950s when IBM’s Arthur Samuel coded a checkers player that could refine its approach until it could beat him. As for AI, *Blade Runner* has synthetic humans that run on AI. The movie has disastrous results, but there are some useful applications such as machines that can explore planets. The question is if humans will focus on that usefulness or resort to become totally dependent on things like ChatGPT, becoming intellectually stunted just as people who rely on calculators often can’t do even simple math.

Lab-grown meat — Amazonians in the 1880 short story “Mizora” by Mary Bradley Lane described turning the chemical elements of beef into synthetic burgers. Bill Gates and others are now touting this lab-grown meat as a solution to what they call a “climate crisis.”

3D food printing — *The Jetsons* had a food machine in their home that created whole meals. *Star Trek* had a replicator, creating food out of thin air. Neither was very scientific. The real scientists at Columbia University created 3D printing technology that produces entire cooked meals from prepared ingre-

dients, not from thin air. The technology is still being perfected.

3D holograms — In Star Wars, the robot R2D2 projects a holographic image of Princess Leia asking Obi-Wan Kenobi for help. At Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in 2018 researchers created a real hologram that is sort of like an Etch-A-Sketch toy but uses particles at high speeds. Lasers trap particles and move them into a designated shape. Another set of lasers emit red, green, and blue light onto those particles, creating an image. It's very small for now, but many great things have started that way. Virtual reality (VR)— Stanley G. Weinbaum's 1935 story "Pygmalion's Spectacles," Steven Lisberger's 1982 film "Tron," and Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel "Snow Crash" all deal with virtual reality. Facebook's Metaverse (which has been set aside in favor of developing AI) and other VR developers describe their systems the same as those works did, escaping into alternate worlds using goggles that provide immersive 3D images and sound along with Haptic gloves that let us experience touch.

Researchers are working on ways for you to experience flavors and aromas, too.

Significance

What does this mean to you, the writer, as you sit there typing up your work of fantasy or science fiction?

For one thing, being totally original is going to be very challenging. In my alternate future series about a nation called Freelan, I mention a vehicle that is like a car, truck, or van, depending on the model, but that flies through the air, ascending straight up and then heading off to the location on its navigation system. Oh, yes, it has a nuclear engine. About a year after I had put that vehicle in one of my WIPs, I also heard a radio personality describe that very thing right down to that nuclear engine. That's fine. Frankly, I didn't expect to be original. In fact, it helps the reader accept the rest of my story as very possible, which I want.

For another thing, don't worry about it. The familiarity will help readers relate to your writing more. So type away about spaceships, submarines, and other now real inventions. Who knows? You might come up with something totally original that will be the next big reality. The main thing is to treat your inventions in a unique way, making it interesting for the reader. And don't think of your novel or short story as "science fiction." Today, such things are just fiction!

Total Fantasy Ideas

The bigger issue, in my opinion, is when a writer of a novel or short story classifies it as "science fiction" and uses a clearly non-scientific idea as the basis of his/her science fiction. I mean, we are past the time when such ideas could even seem to be possible. At least, I hope we are. (Remember, this is my opinion.) Just call your work "fantasy fiction" instead.

Time Travel

A popular staple of science fiction is the idea that time is a dimension, something through which people could travel back and forth like going from one train station to another, if they only had the right technology. Time is instead a manmade thing – a system for measuring change. Someone figured out how many hours constituted a day (one full revolution of the planet Earth), how long a year was (one full orbit around the Sun), and then divided each up. The concepts of seconds, minutes, and hours were created. Sixty seconds became a minute, sixty minutes became an hour, and twenty-four hours became a day. And that trip around the Sun was determined to be 365 days (actually, 365.25 days, so every four

years we add a day to the February on the calendar and call it Leap Year). All we did was set up a way to measure between sunup and sundown to the next sunup and then count them out to determine how many of those orbits have seen us or others taking their fill of oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide.

Nothing dimensional about it. Even if the Earth reversed rotation and then its orbit and we survived such a jolting, time would continue on, tracking change – nothing more.

Yet, time travel remains a very popular idea in fiction – pure fantasy, not scientific – no possibility of ever being real.

One of the most famous works featuring this dimensional idea of time is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* where travel is by machine. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) has Scrooge traveling to Christmas Past and into Christmas Yet to Come by virtue of the "magic" of two spirits. Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) has time travel occurring as a dream. The idea has popped up in countless other works of fiction, episodes of the old TV series *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, and as the basis for the newer TV series *Quantum Leap* (both the original and the remake). Other time-travel films include *Back to the Future* (1985), *Looper* (2012), *Primer* (2004), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Terminator* (1984), and *Twelve Monkeys* (1995).

The accompanying idea to visiting the past or the future is that going back in the past has two hazards: meeting oneself and thus causing a cataclysmic event, and making changes that adversely affect the future, possibly causing a paradox such as killing one's own ancestor (grandfather or father before you are conceived) and thus not existing in the present. Authors seem consistently to be sure things don't work out well or that attempts to correct things go awry and end in futility. In Stephen King's *11/22/63* (2011; television series 2016), the goal is to stop the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, hoping that it would result in a better future. Things don't quite go that way. In the *Twilight Zone* episode "No Time Like the Past" Dana Andrews goes back in the past to stop the bombing of Hiroshima, to assassinate Hitler, and to warn the Captain of the *Lusitania* that they are about to be torpedoed but fails at all three. In the episode "Back There" Russell Johnson (the professor on *Gilligan's Island*) goes back to the night that Lincoln is assassinated at Ford's Theatre, tries to warn him, and again fails.

Physical objects jumping from one point in time to another is seen in several time travel stories. C.M. Kornbluth's *The Little Black Bag* (1950) where a doctor's bag from the future appears in the present. Poul Anderson's *Guardians of Time* (1960) and Fritz Leiber's *The Change War* (1978) have warring groups of time travelers battling one another back and forth through time. Barrington J. Bayley's *Fall of Chronopolis* (1974) is described as a "time opera." In John Kessel's *Corrupting Dr. Nice* (1997), major historical figures are kidnapped by people from the future and used as lackeys and other degrading positions.

One of the most famous time travel series is *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 2005–) where a phone booth (called a Tardis) is the means of travel. The long-standing success of the series shows that the appeal of the idea of time travel, despite the scientific impossibility, is undeniable.

Parallel Universes

This is another common element in science fiction and goes quite contrary to reality (but of course, that is often done in fiction). It is better to be called "fantasy fiction." In addition to being very unscientific, it is often done poorly with trite or cliché results, such as a man and woman stuck in a parallel universe and becoming the new Adam and Eve.

Parallel universes are the ultimate “what if” stories – conjectural and hypothetical. The movie *Sliding Doors* shows what would happen if a young woman had caught the subway train in parallel with what happened when she didn’t. Eventually, the two universes join. It was refreshingly clever. Usually, parallel universes deal with minor changes between characters. In a *Twilight Zone* episode, an astronaut returns to Earth to find his house now has a fence, his rank is now Lt. Colonel instead of Major, and his wife and daughter sense something very different in him. He has to go back up into space to return to his own universe.

Bottom Line

Technology has advanced so much that scientific musings and so-called futuristic developments in novels don’t have the impact they once did. Also, the main plot elements fit into other genres, such as mystery/crime, adventure, horror, thriller/suspense, urban, romance, and even western (remember *West World?*), with a bent toward science. I consider my *Freelan* series to be literary fiction/fantasy (alternate future) with mentions of naturally occurring technological advances as a result of that future. It seems to be the new way to see these things.

But again, that is my opinion. Your thoughts always welcome.

See my article on fiction genres: <https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/2022/09/26/publisher-agent-fiction-genres-defined/> (complete with downloadable PDF).

Please check out my list of works in progress <https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/my-works-in-progress-wips/>. And thanks for reading.

Dangerous Visions and New Worlds: Radical Science Fiction, 1950 to 1985 Edited by Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre Review by Tom Feller

The New Wave led by Harlan Ellison and Michael Moorcock changed science fiction back in the Sixties, at least according to this well illustrated critical study consisting of 24 essays. As you would expect, there is a great deal of space devoted to the *Dangerous Visions* anthologies and *New Worlds* magazine. The authors consider the “dueling” advertisements in the June 1968 issue of *Galaxy* that featured lists of science fiction writers supporting and opposing the Vietnam War to be a turning point in the history of science fiction. The subjects of the essays included Judith Merrill, John Wyndham, R.A. Lafferty, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, Ira Levin, J.G. Ballard, Barry Malzberg, Philip K. Dick, James Triptree, Jr., and others. My favorite was an essay contrasting and comparing Heinlein’s *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and Leguin’s *The Dispossessed*. Other subjects included authors and novels I had never heard of, so there was much that was new to me. *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* are even mentioned. One oversight is that an essay on young adult fiction mentions Andre Norton, but does not consider Robert Heinlein. Otherwise, it is a solid contribution to the history of science fiction.

Prose Bono

Crafting Your Characters by A. C. Cargill

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

You have a great plot. You've written the perfect opening where Billy kills Johnny – an opening that will hook a prospective reader instantly. (See my post “How Do You Get Started?” here.) Now you sit back and think, “Who the heck is Billy? Who is Johnny?” Time to craft those characters to bring them to life for your readers.

Profile Your Characters

Your readers need to be able to identify with the characters in your writing. To do that, those readers need a profile of each character. That profile should include:

- Gender and how it affects and is a part of the life they live (this is true even in these days when gender has become such an issue)

- Age (helps readers better understand a character's life experiences, reasoning ability, and personality)

- Race / ethnicity, both being items that can shape a character's personality and how that character interacts with others

- Cultural background (helps create a back story for your character, telling practices they uphold and what they believe in)

- Basic physical appearance (height, body type, facial structure, and physical limitations to help you write how that physical appearance affects them)

- Where the character is from (hometown, state, country), with mentions of their childhood, economic situation, and lifestyle

- Interaction with others (Who are their friends and associations, their enemies? Are they outgoing or loners?)

- Skills, talents, hobbies, and interests – this might include their favorite author, even (one of my main characters is an Ayn Rand fan)

Remember, elements in that profile will also serve as your characters' motivations, an answer to “Why did Billy kill Johnny?”

You don't need to state each item in your narrative, but you need to keep them in your mind and allude to them as you write. A good tip is to keep a pad of paper handy to jot down profiles of your characters or type them in a separate document. Some writer software has a special place for you to list your characters and their profiles. I have an extensive Excel 2003 spreadsheet that tracks ages throughout the novels written so far.

How Dialogue Can Show That Profile

Dialogue is the perfect vehicle to demonstrate your characters' profile, since they are talking directly to your reader. They express their personalities more clearly than pages of narrative text. You can reveal

other aspects of a character through that dialogue. A deep thinker will say something like, “There’re friends, and then there’re friends.” A more simple character will say, “They’re not friends. They’re just here for the free food.”

Vocabulary, wording, speech rhythm, complexity, and accent are other factors that you can use in dialogue to convey a character’s profile. One article I saw on character development says that each character’s dialogue should be so individual that readers could tell them apart without the character speaking being revealed. Frankly, I think that’s excessive, but the choice is yours.

Copying from People You Know

I see this tip a lot. It can be tricky, though. You may end up getting sued if your character is too recognizable as being patterned after someone in real life, especially if that person is in the public eye or being portrayed in a negative way.

Safe choices:

- Spouse
- Siblings
- Parents
- Neighbors
- Co-workers
- That friendly librarian or store clerk
- The mail carrier
- The guy or gal who makes donuts at the local donut shop
- A favorite literary character or two

Blend traits of several of these choices into once character or spread them across several characters. Jim O’Connell, the hero in Hammil Valley Rising, is a blend of my husband, me, and a few literary characters.

Why Bother

Knowing your characters well will help your writing flow and keep you from having a character do something he or she shouldn’t be. One of the biggest issues I see with a lot of writing is characters that act contrary to the nature the author has given them. Yes, people have sudden changes of heart (it seems to happen a lot in movies on The Hallmark Channel), but an evil person doesn’t suddenly become a philanthrope, like Ebenezer Scrooge (shame on Dickens!). It took my heroine Rose Wilson in Hammil Valley Rising a year (and thirty-six chapters) to learn who Jim O’Connell really was.

Readers will remember truly compelling, vivid characters long after they have finished reading a novel or watching a movie. My guess is that you are thinking of such a character right now. Scarlett O’Hara from Gone With The Wind, Dagny Taggart from Atlas Shrugged, Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, or even Charles Dickens’ title character from David Copperfield jump into my mind.

One thing to avoid: using great character profiles to compensate for weak plot or a so-so writing style. (Yes, I actually saw someone recommend that you do this.) It can be as annoying as seeing a movie that has as its one redeeming feature great special effects, a great movie score, or a tour-de-force acting job. Everything has to work together in balance.

More Tips

Keep it real, and you will keep your readers coming back for more. A key is giving your characters a problem to overcome based on a strong need, longing, or desire. Survival is top of the needs list. It is accomplished by keeping a job, marrying someone rich, or otherwise securing the means to provide food and shelter. Get even more specific, though. Jim needs to protect his business from those who seek to destroy him. Rose, his neighbor, needs to learn how to make a living on a ranch and how to tell who is really on her side.

Avoid overdoing the quirks. They have become a cliché, especially in detective novels, movies, and TV series. Sherlock Holmes has many, such as a Persian slipper that holds his pipe tobacco. Hercule Poirot is fastidious in his personal habits and touts his “little gray cells” as the secret of his success. Lt. Columbo smokes cigars, wears rumpled clothes and a raincoat no matter the weather, and keeps saying, “One more thing.” And on and on. Quirks are not the same as habits, though. Rose has her cup of tea at breakfast and at other times during the day. Jim likes to gaze at the stars on a clear night. Not too quirky. Oh, and if you do add quirks, make sure they fit your character, possibly revealing part of that character’s back story. Sid Minot has an oily, sly personality and a smile that can send shivers down your spine. It comes from his years of learning to get his way through back channels.

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

Don’t Look at the Words by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

This post was originally published on CedarWrites as ‘Blind Writing’ in November 2017. I’m off on a field exercise today, shooting wildflowers, so I opted to do a blast from the past post...

Sometimes pulling words out of my head is as hard as pulling teeth. I sit here for long, silent moments before I finally get the fingers into motion and make words come out. And even then, it might only be in an exercise like this, where the brain feels fuzzy and empty, like a warm glowing mist universe. There’s not a lot going on in there, it’s all just soft and uncertain, nothing sharp and defined. Words are crisp, their edges hard. It’s like my digital painting efforts. For some reason my work on the screen looks soft and furry. On paper I can manipulate a brush to lay down ink or paint just so, and the result is purposeful, direct, clear. Most of the time. Some days it just doesn’t gel.

Like today and words. I can sentence. I can’t plot. I’m not even sure I can essay. Heck, even sentenc-ing isn’t easy when I start thinking about it too much and don’t let my fingers do the flying on autopilot. It’s a good thing no one has to edit this!

Blind writing. I’m not a good enough touch-typist to actually close my eyes and type. I need to be able to at the least see the words as they scroll across the screen. I remember learning to type. Mom found a manual typewriter somewhere. I know now that it was an engineering thing of beauty, but at the time it was literally a pain – it hurt my hands to hammer away on it. I think she was not only anticipating the need for typing (this was far before the era of computing, so I don’t think that was part of it) but also she was trying to get me to write. Up until I was about 14, she had to force me to write. I hated to write at all and would sit and sulk for hours over homework that wanted me to put more than two sentences

down for an answer. But in my freshman year of highschool, the cork was drawn, and I started to write and haven't stopped since. I wrote essays, fiction, poetry...

I wrote a lot of poems. Most of my journals are long lost now. But I filled a few every year with journaling and poetry. Stories about my life, and later, the babies as they came along. Poetry was as compelling for me as fiction is, now. I have a vivid memory of one long poem coming out while I was out with friends, and them basically shielding me and guiding me back to the car to return to dorms because that poem was pouring out of me. Years later, one of them found me on facebook and asked for a copy of that. I don't know if I even have a copy of it any longer.

The poetry came to a crashing halt one night when I was arguing with my fiance, and I wanted to write out how I felt, because I was better able to express myself on paper than in words. I was literally tongue-tied, and he lost his temper with me. After that, at age twenty or so, I stopped writing again. The cork was back in the bottle. I tried to pull it out, a few years later, but it was wedged in there pretty hard. Only once did it pop out on it's own, at the nadir of my life, when I realized that this could not go on. Coming back out of that, the poetry flowered again for a few days, and then it was gone again, like a desert spring. It would never come back again. The poems I still physically possess are in the most part really awful. Trite, badly written, just... dreck.

But in the wake of their passing, I found fiction again. And in the creation of worlds to tell my daughter a story, I rediscovered the intoxication of writing characters and having them come to life in my head. Daydreaming on the page. It's really the best high when it's going well. It's a complete pain in the tush when it's not, and I know better, now, than to let it go dormant. I have to push, sometimes, to get that cork loose and the story pouring out. Because I know now what I didn't know back in the day. I'm not on the outside pulling the cork. I'm on the inside pushing it out and gaining my freedom. The genie is out of the bottle, and nothing can keep me locked up in there again.

I write. I am a writer. I don't have a choice, the words need out. I don't need readers, although they make me happy. But I must write. Even if I can't see what the words are doing until they're out of me and lined up across the page in formation. I'm not a neat and tidy writer. It's a messy process, like fingerpainting in the dark. Sometimes, you flip the light on to take a look and flip it right back off. Other times, you turn it on and giggle a little because it worked, it really worked.

Feeling Romantic by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I woke up to the gurgle of the coffee pot, and sat up in bed knowing that my husband had made coffee. He'd timed it for when he knew I had to be up and about today, so I could have a first sip with no waiting. That's romantic. After ten years, we know one another well. It can be joking about the last child flying the nest so we can run around inside the house with no clothes – sadly, although today is World Naked Gardening Day, we don't have a place remote enough to ever make that possible, he notes. I add my own snark that with my skin (I have no pigment over large areas) not to mention Texas is home to many angry plants, it's never practical. Still... those are the sorts of moments that bond us, where we are letting one another know that in spite of age and body shape changes and all the sundry insults of the passing years to the physical, inside we are still the same couple that was smitten from the start.

None of the above is likely to be found in a romance novel, although there are some that do give a more nuanced and mature glimpse of what life and love really are. Over at the BroadCast we did a two-part romance novel unbagging, (Part 1 and Part 2) and laughed ourselves silly, but it was also educational.

Romance writers, cover artists, and blurb writers, you all will get something out of that. If you don't write romance, you'll likely still find something there. Because romance is, at its heart, the human condition. We all came from the union of a man and a woman, if you boil it down to the essence of biology. Being humans, not strictly driven by our biology, there's more to it than that. But on the other hand, being humans, we don't always understand our hormones and the underlying power of urges can lead us down the primrose path...

Which makes for interesting stories. Maybe not a comfortable life, if it were real, but romance novels are highly stylized and as much a flight of fantasy as any book with magic in. While we were filming, and talking about the random books we pulled out of the bags, one or the other of us would open the book to a page and generally, be able to predict what was happening in that part of the story, because there are story beats that the authors must adhere to. The readers of romance novels know what they are getting, and get upset if that's been thrown off.

Formulaic is comfortable. Comfort reads are nothing to sneeze at, they sell better than any other genre. Why? We live in an uncertain world, and all too often an unhappy one. Romance novels give us a place to escape and find love. Although there is also the genre of novel that is a direct descendent of the Gothic, and that's a novel intended for readers who have very safe, comfortable lives and want to experience a distant (so distant) frisson of fear and drama. Safely in a book.

CV Walter shared a beat sheet for romances with the Spiky Book Club, which is very interesting to look at. Not being a plotter, I couldn't write a story based off it, but I can retro-fit a story in edits, I think. At least, it will be interesting to try that. I don't plan to write 'traditionally' romance tales, but there are reasons to fit the story into existing frameworks, not least of which is that I want to write books that will sell well and not garner irritated reviews from readers I've stroked in the wrong direction and left all their fur standing on end. If you check the 'recommendations' channel on the Discord server, you'll find an excel file where you can customize the beat sheet to intended story length.

I'd asked this in the discussion on Discord in the Book Club with Spikes, but I'll ask all of you as well. What is your favorite romance novel, traditional or not-so much?

All of the images in the original version of this post were rendered using MidJourney, with the prompt: romance in the garden, classicism, oil painting –ar 3:2.

Finding a Style by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

You've got style. Whether you realize it or not.

I'm not talking about writing voice, here. I'm talking about the underlying document styles that you compose in on any word processor. There are a lot of variations, I'm going to touch on two, and hopefully show you a couple of tricks that will make life easier when it's time to clean up a document for publication or submission to a publisher.

The topic came up in a discussion of the Postcards anthologies. Most of the Raconteur Press staff sat down and chatted about the interesting challenges these have posed to us – they were an off-the-cuff fun challenge, and they took on a life of their own! As a part of that conversation, I commented that I should write up how to set a style for MGC... and here I am.

If you haven't seen the Postcard challenges, there is one going on this weekend, and you're all welcome to ask for a prompt and submit a story. It's fifty words, how hard can it be? The answer is... it's not easy. Send off an email to us and you'll get a unique image prompt. What do we do with these? Well, take a look at Steam-Powered Postcards and you'll see!

The first of these is to begin as you mean to go on. One of the issues we've been running into with the Postcard submissions is the lack of consistent formatting. We've gotten more specific, as you'll see in the graphic above, to give the editors a fighting chance in dealing with a minor flood of submissions – we aren't getting hundreds, but we were originally not expecting above a couple of dozen, and this workload is on top of an already ambitious schedule for Raconteur Press. It occurred to me that some people might not know how to set a style before they started work on a document. I'm going to cover Word, and Google Docs, below. Whatever you use, you should be able to find out how to do this with some judicious button-pushing or googling.

I'm using MS Word 2016, and central to the home ribbon are the styles. If you click on the tiny expansion arrow in the far right corner (Just above the Styles dropdown in the above screenshot) you'll find that you can select an existing style, or create a new one (the button on the bottom left of the dropdown box, highlighted in blue).

Here's where all of the fun happens. For the purpose of this exercise, I've set the style to Time New Roman, 12 pt font. You can also give this style a name, and save it for easy access later. If you select the 'format' button on the bottom left of the initial popup, you get the popup shown here on the right, which allows you to set up the indentations and spaces that govern an entire paragraph.

Using the tab key on the keyboard introduces an 'invisible' character, which can play merry havoc when trying to format the document for publishing. You will want to always, always use the indentation to set as I am showing above, for the first line to be indented. 0.5? is fine. Sometimes 0.33? works well too. Default is 0.5? and that works for most purposes. If you don't do this, and you use the tab key, you'll have to do a universal find replace to eliminate it, and trust me when I tell you it's a complete PITA and takes more time than you want to spend. A moment with the default styles and you'll be much happier (Why yes, I am speaking from sore experience!).

Google Docs is a lightweight cloud-based wordprocessor. I know many don't want to use it, and that's perfectly fine. I do use it, because I can access and work on a project from any device, anywhere I have internet, and if I plan ahead and know I'll be working offline, I can have access that way, too. Because it's not as feature-rich as Word (which is frankly not a detriment if you aren't in need of all the bells and whistles) you won't be able to create a new style and save it with your own name. What you can do is set up your style in the top ribbon, and then in the options at the bottom of the droplist, save as my default styles.

The indentation can be set from Align & Indent, indentation options.

My final thought on Google Docs is that you'll want to be sure of your format when downloading a file. I download personal (Indie) projects in .docx and finish them in Word, or Vellum. If you plan to submit a short story to an anthology, say, or a novel to a publisher, you'll want to pay close attention to the format they want. Raconteur likes .docx, but other presses only want .rtf so be sure you've read the submission guidelines!

Finally, and before we started doing Postcards I'd have not thought this was necessary to remind au-

thors of... put your name in the document. Header is nice, and some venues may require this. But in the document, before the story, you'll have the editor happy if you have your title, your author name, and a way to contact you. Emails get separated from documents. Don't have an orphan story!

How to: Author Central by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Every author should set up their Amazon Author Central page in the lead up to their first publication. This is true if you are a traditional author, not exclusive to Amazon, or if you only have a short in an anthology coming out. Eventually, your book will be on Amazon, one way or another. Having the Author Central page allows you some control over them, tracking of sales and rankings, and a good bridge for a reader who wants to find more of your work.

It's easy to do, and free, so there's no reason not to do it. Yes, you should have a profile picture, but for the camera shy, security conscious, or just plain stubborn, you can get away with a clean professional graphic instead of a photograph. If you're starting out and have no budget, you can hit Pixabay or the like for this for free, or have a logo done (they are usually about \$50) if you have long-term business plans.

As you can see from my primary page, the back-end of the Author Central page offers a lot of information to you, the author, that can aid in targeting your marketing, tracking how well a book is doing (vital if you have handed off control of sales to a publisher, as you'll never be able to see your daily sales in the way that an Indie author or someone who is working through PubShare will be able to see), and reviews. Don't read your reviews. Well. Not at first, anyway. Once you've gotten to the point where they won't get under your skin (in my experience, about six novels in) then go for it. Still, don't give the reviews any weight.

Once you have navigated to the initial author.amazon.com page, you'll see the join or sign in options. If you have a kdp account (the Indie Author's publishing account) you can use that. If you don't, no worries, you will be walked through the sign-in process. Once your account is up, you'll be prompted at the top to complete some basic tasks. I'll be working up my open penname, Liania Begley, to show you the process.

Here's where you will want to edit your photo and bio. If you don't already have a bio, you should at least draft one (seems like we've played around with that before, do you all want another workshop on bios?) and include it. This isn't like a work bio. It should relate to your writing, a touch of personal (have a pet?), and perhaps some background relevant to the writing (she was once an apprentice shepherdess and midwife to goats...). And here is where the photo comes in. If you are using a photo, make sure it's professional level. Well-lit, sharp focus, should normally not be a snapshot. Definitely never a crummy cell phone pic. If you haven't got a good one, go with a crisp graphic/logo instead. Remember, this is a professional, business branding thing.

Once you've got a bio up – it need not be long – and an image, you'll be ready to claim your first book.

I've chosen to use a little cartoon I created for my penname. I also make it clear in the bio who I am, as this is an open penname. Finally, I'm promising more, as currently I have one title published, but I'm working on another that should be out soon(ish). How do you add a book? Very easy. Click on the 'Books' tab at the top, and you'll be taken to your book feed. There, at the bottom, you'll see a button for 'Add a book' and...

Once you click add a book, you'll be given a search bar. Usually the title is enough. If the book has just been published, it may take a day to show up here, so don't worry if it doesn't pop up in the early hours after publication.

Finally, if you click on the 'Reports and Marketing' tab at the top, you'll find some potentially useful tools. Once you have followers on Amazon, they will show here. These are readers who like you well enough to sign up for notification by Amazon any time you have a new release. That's a powerful tool, and I'm happy Amazon offers it.

You'll also be able to see the book's overall ranking on Amazon, which can be handy when you are watching a new release, but I don't worry much over it. I do my promotions and ads, and with Amazon ads you're tracking engagement on that page, but that's a whole 'nother post... The Bookscan weekly sales report is all but useless and frankly I ignore it. It's wrong, I know it's wrong, and it's misleading – it only tracks a tiny fraction of paper book sales outside Amazon, so really it's not helpful. The Customer Reviews is... look. Reviews are one of those things that authors struggle with. We need them, don't get me wrong. But a negative review can be crushing, and for no good reason. However, you might want to evaluate your reviews and watch to see if trends develop. For one thing, this will tell you if the book is hitting it's target market. If it's hitting readers 'wrong' then you might want to evaluate if your cover needs to be re-done to signal your genre more strongly, and ditto for your blurb. You want to attract the kind of readers who will enjoy your book. (which is why I separated out my romance work from my F&SF).

And this is what it will look on Amazon proper for readers, with a little time and a lot of persistence.

The Author Central setup won't take long, and it's important, trust me. I see so many authors on Amazon that don't have this set up, and that makes it very hard to find more of their stuff. Particularly if you plan to have more than one work released, take a few minutes and get this started. You can always edit it later if you need to. Also, make sure you claim all of your books!

It's a Mess by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I was sitting here trying to think of a topic to write on, and messing with my hair. I'm going to be out later, on another field trip (birdwatching, yay!) and so I braided my hair this morning rather than twisting it up and skewering it with Hairborne Defenses or another hairstick option. The problem with this, and the reason I was messing around trying to make it more secure, is that at my last haircut I'd gotten long (think chin-length) sweeping bangs and layers into my mid-back length hair. Which looks great when it's down. I don't wear my hair down all that often. You'll see it down on the BroadCast, but that's when I'm sitting indoors. As soon as I'm headed outside I'm putting it up. If I don't, I do a nice imitation of Cousin It as soon as I make the door, thanks to the Texas breezes (or downright wind). And for long outdoor expeditions, I wear a hat, because I have no pigment in my face any longer. So, braid.

Which is all to come back to this: how does your character wear her hair? Or if male, how does he? How do they take care of it? Frankly, if I were in a survival situation I think I'd chop the hair off and keep it as short as feasible. Day to day, the reason I have long hair? It's easier to take care of. I don't have to go get it cut every few weeks to maintain a style. On average, I visit a hair salon about every year, and it's often more like two years. Sometimes I get wild and have my hair cut from waist-length to just above bra-strap, and a few years ago I tried it short, but that lasted until I realized I'd have to go

get it cut that often. Sure, it's faster to wash and dry when it's super short, but I'm used to the process. My hair has been long most of my life, after all. Now, I never did grow it out to knee-length like my sister did at one point, but it's always been long enough to pull back and braid.

Then you have to think about the kind of hair your character has. Mine is wavy, although it will form into true curls briefly before the length pulls them out again, and fine. Curly girls have a whole other challenge, and have to really think about hair maintenance and protection. When you get into 4C curls, that's going to take time and consideration on the character's part, and you'll have readers wall the book if you don't give a plausible reason to skip it (shaved head? For MilSf or even MilFantasy that's likely the most practical idea). While some women can get away with very low-maintenance hair (like mine) others cannot. And even mine can be a pain in the tuchis, like today where I'm attempting to make sure it isn't all straggly under the hat.

Above and beyond the practical lurks the world of hairdressing, and elaborate hairstyles, and stories about princesses, or at the very least, Regency-era balls. Here's where you really have to think about hair, and hats, and having help with the hair because some styles aren't possible on your own. Not to mention that women of a certain status wouldn't be doing it themselves, or even know how (now, there's a Lost Princess bit for a story...). In some cultures, hair has a status all it's own. Whether that's long hair, covered hair, braided hair... even the way hair is 'put up' has a coding that speaks to those who know how to read it.

For me, today, I'm contemplating the French braid, with combs at the sides of my head and high (above and before my ears) to keep my bangs and layers in place. So long as it stays off my face, I'm happy. This is another reason I keep it long – I can pull it all the way back and off my face and neck. It's actually cooler for me to do that than have it touching me when it's hot. Again, it's all what you are used to...

But it's a great way to work in some verisimilitude to a story. Unless your character hasn't got hair (and if that's the case, you really need to mention it and give it a reason, as it's far outside the realm of experience) and even then, you can have fun with it. I knew a mother and daughter with alopecia who both had amazing tattoos of intricate colored flowers all over their skull. It was beautiful, and very striking. For me, I tend to forget about it, but then again I'm bad about not describing my main characters, particularly not if I'm writing first person. I need to make an effort to consider it when I'm writing, and if it should come up in the story. Oh – and it's not that easy to cut off a whole braid at once...

Just a Little Brain by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I need some brain. I'm really tired. I've taken on a lot more physical stuff this week than is my norm... well, ok, my norm for the last couple of years. I'm sadly out of shape. That, and my hiking gear is scattered to heck and gone. I went out yesterday with a friend and it was only ninety minutes but I didn't have water. I forgot a hat (thank goodness I have sunscreen stashed everywhere). This morning, preparatory to a field trip for the Master Naturalist class, I'm pulling my gear and checking it. I'll have to replace some stuff... like the little candle that melted in my survival kit and sealed it shut (great waterproofing?). Texas is not the same as Ohio is not the same as Alaska...

Which is where I'll bring this back to writing. When you have a character going somewhere, and they have time to prepare, they still won't be able to anticipate everything, unless they have a lot of experience in the region. Even then, unexpected things happen. Sudden storms. Earthquakes, tornadoes, and bears, oh my! I was watching a video made by a hiker (who does stuff I don't want to do, like through-

hikes on the Pacific Crest Trail, for instance) and he mentioned that bear ‘incidents’ on the Appalachian Trail are on the upswing. Well, yeah. The AT is practically a highway, easily accessible to inexperienced hikers who don’t know how to handle food storage, and to add to that, the Eastern Seaboard is becoming more and more populated. Bears, at least black bears, adapt to using human trash and so forth as food sources quite readily. More people, more bears.

When you’re sending that character out into an unknown territory – say, exploring an alien planet – it’s very difficult to anticipate everything that can happen. What you can plan for will be based on how much foreknowledge you have. For me, I have a tiny kit I carry in a waist pack when I’m hiking, but I’m not in wilderness areas any longer: I have a candle, and matches for firestarting. I always have a knife, often more than one (a belt knife if I’m way out there), and usually a multitool. I’ve got cord for fishing or tying together a shelter, and safety pins for more of the same. If I were making up a big kit, I’d have other things, but this is all in an altoid type tin, tucked into the waist pack.

Moreover, you want your character to have practiced doing the things that might save their life. Can they light a fire when it’s cold and their hands are stiff? Can they build a shelter when there’s three feet of snow on the ground covering all the easy debris that you’d use in summer? Fire and shelter will get you through a lot. Food and water are distant third and fourth, unless you’re not going to have a hope of rescue (or getting out yourself) in a reasonable amount of time. Planning helps you keep your head when things are going to the crapper all around you. Having done it, and more than once! helps with the muscle memory that might save you in a true emergency. Training is important, and there’s a reason a lot of books use this with character building. You don’t necessarily need to follow the character through that, but at least mention it. And if you plan to get out in the woods, you do it. Backyard camping is a good way to start, where you can run for the house when there’s a thunderstorm and the tent goes flat. Or when it’s 50 below zero and you’re setting up the Baker half for the first time to see if you can sleep out in it – because if you try it overnight before you’re sure, you can wake up dead.

There’s a reason that an entire sub-genre of book plots is ‘Man v. Nature’ because sometimes you wonder just how someone survived back in the day. Heck, even now. There are a lot of ‘mysterious disappearances’ here in the contiguous US, often in the big National Parks, that pop culture is saying ‘wooooo’ and I’m over here saying ‘do you have any idea how easy it is to die out there, even right off a traveled trail, and how small a space a human body occupies? You can search for months and never step on it, and that’s a known thing, too...’ Plan, prepare, and don’t let your guard down.

And now, I’ve got to pour more coffee in myself. This class is good for me, body and soul. I’ve missed being out in nature (can’t say the woods, anymore, not really a thing in this part of Texas). But ow! That adjustment back to the shape I used to be is painful!

Urges and Impulses by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I had the urge to sleep in this morning. I’d had an alarm set – I always do – for a bit after five in the morning to get up and write this post. If I have it done ahead, on rare occasion, I shut off the alarm and roll over to sleep the sleep of the just. Then again, more mornings than not these days I have a kitten cavorting over me before settling onto my chest to purr loudly enough the neighbors are wondering about distant thunder. Her timing is impeccable. She knows I get up at 5 am. You can’t say cats aren’t smart enough to tell time.

This morning I chose to sleep in, and write this post a bit late, but it was a calculated decision. You see, last weekend we were busy from Wednesday until late in the day on Monday. This weekend I'd planned for Saturday supper at my house to be a simple, laid-back meal (hotdogs and hamburgers on the grill, potato salad, coleslaw, banana pudding and poundcake for desserts. All-American cookout fare). Then I had someone invite themselves to my house for lunch, and I'm trying to get it clean and ready and dealing with my son having built a grill during welding class for me but it's not done yet and... I slept in. I shut off the alarm, went back to sleep, the kitten opted to wake the boy rather than me, and it felt wonderful. I'm not sorry I did it.

The art of writing is portraying humans. I mean, you can absolutely write aliens, but to get your very human readers to connect with the stories, there needs to be humanity in there. Humans are impulsive. We listen to our guts, which is not the same as doing whatever we have an urge to do. In my case, I had the urge to sleep more, but I didn't give into that just to be lazy. The opposite – I have a very long and busy day ahead of me, taking care of friends and my own family, and I need the extra rest now because I won't have another chance to sit down, it looks like, until late tonight. This is a calculated equation based on experience.

Listening to your gut is a far more complex equation than you might think. It's based on reading unconscious signals that you aren't processing on the surface level (at least, not initially) and then acting on them in a conscious manner. In some cases, you don't have time to do all the mental math involved, you need to just react to the gut signaling that it's time to be elsewhere, fast. It might look on the surface like an impulsive, even rash decision, but the reality is far deeper.

How best do you write this in fiction? You can't weight it all to the after, in the story. If you do, you risk losing the reader. Ideally, you'll want to foreshadow this subtly, so as to make it clear the character doesn't even know what's going on. Oddly, this can be done better in film than in writing. Music from the score, lighting, and ambient noises all make up an uneasy sense in the viewer that is very difficult to pull off – but not impossible! – in text. Similar effects can be had by describing the scene a bit. Not in huge detail, unless you ordinarily do it, but perhaps a bit more detail if you don't go in for much. In your dialogue tags, you can use vocabulary to convey heightened emotions from the characters. When you are writing in 'god mode' or third-person omniscient, you can even describe hidden motivations, but this will give away some of the tension in most cases.

And you should take the time to go into it after the decision. In the aftermath of the gut call, take a little time to go into what tripped the alarm – or sparked the impulse. Explain for the reader, don't assume they picked up on the foreshadowing, as they might not have. For that matter, most of us mere humans who acted on an urge don't always realize what we were doing until later. Sometimes we can't explain it at all. And a few people never investigate their own motivations, but that's not useful! How will you know what to write if you don't know why you did it?

The Working Writer and Artist by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

There are two lists on the big whiteboard in my office. One is headed with 'graphic design' and the other, with a flourish, 'fiction.' There used to be a third labeled non-fiction, but for some reason it was erased, and I need to put it back up there, although really it's only one item currently: the cookbook.

On the other side of the office are two calendars. One is a full year, with enough room for every day that I could write on them. Or put up stickers, tracking when I last wrote any fiction (a week and a half

ago, no, that's not right. I forgot to put up a sticker for Tuesday). Above it is a month calendar, also dry erase, and on this one is the reason I've been so slow in making progress in March. Last weekend I was at a convention. Small, fun, and for me less a working con than a getting-away-with-friends which was just what I needed. Then there are the book releases.

For the rest of the month I have another postcard challenge upcoming to celebrate FantaSci. I won't be going, but CV Walter and Lawdog will be, and I believe Jonna will, as well. So the task I'll have will be coordinating handing out the digital prompt images, and also working on setting up the book layout for Steam-Powered Postcards from last weekend. I will also be attempting to get some of my writing done, as I have two deadlines looming in a couple of weeks at the end of the month.

I'm also slowly wiping down the graphic design column. I had a lot of fun working up the cover for Kelly Grayson's latest. It took sitting at the con listening to him read part of this story out loud, and laughing inordinately, for the artwork to finally gel so I could finalize his cover.

Just like writing, art for a book cover takes some research – in this case, I was thinking about past great covers, not just the Amazon best sellers. Picking a good font and treating it properly, not just slapping it on the art, particularly when you have a lot going on as this art does. That's a whole other kind of research, as well. Sometimes, though, it's very easy. Talking with Lawdog about the upcoming Space Marines anthology, we settled on the art style for those covers (there will be two, possibly three, of them). "Pick out a good science fiction font!" he said. "Oh, that's easy! I have one in my font library called Space Marines."

And so it goes. Some days are easier than others. Some days you have to deal with all the things. Others, you can dance with the cat and share dinner with friends and work through story ideas. Life of a writer, plus a day job that lurks under the surface making my time available much shallower than it may look from above.

I'm having fun, though. And with all of the organization, plus the new processes with Raconteur Press that are keeping all of us in the loop for deadlines, I'm not feeling overwhelmed and like I've forgotten something important. Which is the good part here, since I have a tendency to overcommit. Keeping it visual tells me when I'm approaching that point, so I can turn down proposed projects, regretfully, but it's what I have to do to keep myself happy and productive. Saying no. So hard. Keeping it fun is the goal, not making this into something that will replace the day job, so I have to say no sometimes.

Never Say You Can't Survive by Charlie Jane Anders Review by Tom Feller

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

~Finis~