The N3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor
October 2023

Fiction

Literary Criticism

Prose Bono

Free Books

Promise to write a review of a book for Amazon, GoodReads, or wherever , hopefully with a copy coming here, and these authors will send you the ebook that you request for your reviewing efforts. List of authors and books — request one book at a time, please — is on the next page.

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>
The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmcscifi@gmail.com>
Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>
The Concordat of Archive Books: "Starships and Empires."
Become the Hunted
Not In Our Stars
The Captive's Rank
The Universal Prey
The Praesidium of Archive
The Empire's Legacy
Voyage of the Planetslayer
Revolt and Rebirth

The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy with Demons
Warsprite
Web of Futures
The Iron Gates of Life
Deserts of Vast Eternity
The Last Age
The Shadowy Road
When Angels Fall
The Computer Ferrets
The Sea Dragon
The Thug Acrostic
What You See
Painterror
Adrift on a Foreign Sea
The Silver Crusade
Each Shining Hour
Gravelight
The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series
Eye of the Staricane
Capitulation of the Carnivores

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>
Minutegirls
The One World
Mistress of the Waves
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World
Airy Castles All Ablaze
Stand Against the Light
Practical Exercise

Simultaneous Times
https://spacecowboybooks.com/free-content/

Free ebook – featuring stories by: Cora Buhlert, Kim Martin, Brent A. Harris, Renan Bernardo, RedBlue-BlackSilver, Robin Rose Graves, Douglas A. Blanc, Michael Butterworth & J. Jeff Jones – with illustrations by: Austin Hart, Dante Luiz, Chynna DeSimone, Douglas A. Blanc, & Zara Kand

Editorial

Of particular note in this issue, besides all the fine reviews and A.C. Cargill's writing advice, is Tom Feller's superb review of all the Hugo nominees for written fiction, and what other Hugo voters thought of each of them.

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Battle for the Wastelands by Matthew W. Quinn
Review by Chris Nuttall
http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

Battle for the Wastelands is a curious mixture of genres that holds together surprisingly well. It is set in what is probably a post-nuclear war (or other disaster) America, with flavourings of brutal horror, political intrigue, steampunk, wild west-style action and a desperate fight against a tyrant. This has the weakness of being confusing, at least at first; I assumed the story was set on a colony world rather than a post-nuclear Earth.

There are essentially two threads running through the story. The first follows Andrew Sutter, a young man from a wild west town, who finds his town being taxed to death by the Flesh-Eating Legion. Things spread out of control, leading to a doomed battle that destroys the town and leaves Andrew on the run. For better or worse, he finds himself saved by the rebel forces and winds up fighting for them. His thread leads to the first major victory against the Flesh-Eaters.

The second thread follows Grendel, the leader of a band of tribes that includes the Flesh-Eaters. Grendel is a warlord with many other warlords under his thumb, as well as a brood of growing (and eager) children and a harem of ambitious women. His lands are starting to fracture under the stresses of peace, leading him to plan a war against distant foes in hopes of keeping his realm together; he is unaware, even as he prepares his forces, that he is on the verge of facing a whole uprising.

On a personal level, the two main characters are fascinating. Andrew is a forthright young man, brave and daring; learning, steadily, how to become a leader of men. Grendel is a born manipulator, carefully managing his subordinates to keep them from banding together or falling out to the point where they clash into civil war. In many ways, Grendel is the more interesting character. He's a genuine empire-builder, planning to leave a united realm to his son … and steering his son's development so the son is ready to inherit. It's easy to lose track of the fact Grendel is also a monster, commanding legions of rapist cannibals who are steadily squeezing the land dry.

The world building is also fascinating. Grendel and his troops deploy zeppelins as well as 'old world' tech, the latter forbidden to everyone else on pain of complete and total destruction. It's a fun little world, although Quinn never loses sight of the price. There's a very clear sense that the population is just hanging on, that the latest empire is going to vanish with its leader. There's also a sense that, as the kids grow older, the empire might plunge into civil war. It reminds me of how Henry II built an empire, the greatest the post-Roman world had seen, only to lose it to disputes between his sons Henry the Young King, Richard the Lionheart and John Lackland.

The book's only real flaw is that it seems a little condensed. It could have done with more development and more sense of a complete story, even one that didn't resolve the overall story arc. But that's a very minor matter indeed.

Death Planet by N.R. LaPoint
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

The only thing cooler than big stompy robots? Big stompy dinosaurs. - Declan Finn

NR LaPoint is becoming my go-to author for quick, fun romps. His books always feature solid characters, out-of-the-box thinking, and deep world-building, no matter how things look at first. He's gone

from killer Catholic schoolgirls defeating the forces of Hell to rabbit mages and Texans with endless ammo.

Now, LaPoint goes where every man has wanted to go before: Jurassic Cavalry.

The Story

Captain Ambrose and his band of random refugees have captured an alien craft from the Vidarian invaders who came to destroy their world. During an opening chase scene reminiscent of the finale of On Basilisk Station, they crash land on a terraformed world, shaped and molded in the distant past by a private billionaire.

And then they discovered that someone with more dollars than sense thought that it would be just really awesome to populate an entire planet with dinosaurs.

That's right. This is Jurassic World.

Unfortunately for Ambrose and the crew, things get stranger. The Vidarian ship they captured may not be completely free of Vidarians. The planet may have other fauna that's even less friendly than the dinosaurs they encounter.

Through a series of extremely plausible yet fantastic events, this all culminates in a final shootout that would have made H. Rider Haggard or Robert E. Howard smile in approval. They even get to save a princess along the way.

There is an innovative story device wherein LaPoint goes back and forth between our heroes in action on their new planet, as well as their lives just before the opening of the book. It evens out the pacing when things "slow down." But for a LaPoint novel, slow is always relative. And it's difficult to get to "slow down" when the planet's fauna and flora are trying to kill our heroes.
The Characters

In the immortal words of Babylon 5, no one here is entirely what they seem, be it the Captain running the ship, his second-in-command, or the cute redheaded communications officer. Everyone here starts as an obviously superficial cliche, until you find out they're far deeper than one would expect … unless you've read LaPoint before, in which case, you know that he can't create superficial characters if he tried.

Captain Ambrose is smart and surprising in a variety of ways. There's Wink, the little nerd who could. Raum Borg (which is the worst pun in the novel, I promise). Even the "obvious love interest" is developing into something that not even she understands yet.

And our villains … they're evil bastards who you will love to hate.

The World

You would have thought that the world filled with dinosaurs was the most interesting part of this book…

Not quite.

Let's just say that LaPoint developed two cultures, three planets, and outlined a war for background information, all while fist-fighting an alien, escaping a dinosaur (and a flock of other dinosaurs) and setting up healing nanites called Pollules, all in 55 pages.

He also develops two other cultures, at least three separate potential plotlines going forward,

Imagine Mickey Spillane or Max Allen Collins writing space opera, and you get the idea of how fast this all goes … and LaPoint still has enough time for all the world building.

Politics

There are no politics here aside from aliens who are basically Reddit Atheists.

What do I mean?

How much of this sounds familiar?

"Through genetic manipulation and strict breeding practices, we have perfected sapience. We have no need for genetic melding. We have abandoned gender and marriage. Familiar bonds throughout history showed us their folly. They keep the living from their true purpose… We have removed religion from our makeup. Worship of sky gods distracts thought and enamors the mind with the falsehood that there is something greater…"

As the kids say, if you know, you know.

Content Warning

Thinking back, I think the entire book could be given to twelve-year-olds.

Keep in mind, I read The Once and Future King and Jurassic Park when I was in sixth grade, so my perception of what's appropriate will vary.

The closest anyone comes to inappropriate thoughts is how our captain and his communications officer are aggressively planning to get married as soon as they can arrange something.

Who is it for?

Take the alien exploration genre, combine the high action of H. Rider Haggard or Robert Howard, the world building of a Timothy Zahn, the fun of Raiders of the Lost Ark, then add dinosaurs. If you like any or all of the above, you should buy this book.

Why buy it.

Death Planet has superb world-building, entertaining characters, a little romance, and enough action to overfill the original Star Wars thrice over. Why wouldn't you buy it?

Destination Moon by Robert A. Heinlein
Review by J.-P. Garnier
https://spacecowboybooks.com

A fun short novella adapted from the Destination Moon screenplay. I imagine that when this story was first published, long before we made it to the moon, it was terribly exciting, especially since the technical progress was being made to make the moon shot a reality. The story doesn't have much characterization and is mostly about the technicalities and politics of the first moon launch. It is interesting that Heinlein chose to make the endeavor from the private sector instead of a government effort. It is also interesting that he chose the Mojave Desert, specifically Lucerne Valley as the launch site, because today Space X isn't too far off from that location. All in all, this wasn't my favorite of Heinlein's work but it was an enjoyable read and an interesting companion piece to the film. The original screenplay was adapted from one of Heinlein's juvenile novels Rocket Ship Galileo, and I'll have to read that as well to look further into how this story developed.

Dirty Water by Tom Kratman
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

So, let's start.

Every year, twice a year, we are besieged with Christmas movies, courtesy of the Hallmark channel.

This year, we get a Christmas novel: a time traveling tale of an older man who goes back to the hometown of his youth, to share with his grandchildren just how much better it really was back then. Along the way, he finds new love, and has to wrestle with what he's going to do for it…

But before he can attend to that, our hero is going to have to go to war with Whitey Bulger and the Boston mob and destroy an alien that's one part Pennywise the Clown, and one part the alien from I Come in Peace.

Because this book is brought to you by Tom Kratman and Baen. It must end in fire.

The Story

During a heartwarming trip to ye olde stomping grounds of Boston, Sean Eisen wants to introduce his grandkids to what's left of the town he grew up in. During a visit to the old neighborhood toy store (now a massage parlor) his youngest grandchild discovers (and falls into) a portal that takes her back to 1965.

In relatively short order, Eisen comes up with a plan. Eisen can take the grandkids back to the Boston he grew up in. And, at the same time, he can develop a nest egg: First, play the horses, then play the markets, then put away a nest egg for the grandchildren in the years to come.

But when Whitey Bulger figures Eisen has rigged the betting system, and may be muscling in on his territory, it's an all-out war.

And then the aliens showed up and added their own problems to the party.

Dirty Water is so well written, it's truly difficult to know where to begin. The writing is excellent. Kratman has always felt like a culmination of all the best aspects of great literature. While the opening of Dirty Water reads almost like a travelogue, it may be simply that Kratman was trying to rush through to get to the good parts. Since the book is 416 pages, I don't blame him. But the ride to get there is enjoyable every step of the way.

I am not being insulting when I compare this to a Hallmark Christmas film. While the opening is heartwarming, and there truly are a lot of "Christmas" moments throughout the book, this is a Christmas novel written by a brilliant writer and someone who is obviously an adult, not some insipid has-been or never-was over at A Certain Cable Channel.

When I say Kratman is brilliant, I am not exaggerating it. Just looking at his characters and you can see the author's mind at work. Everyone is playing chess at some level. Our hero Eisen (and Kratman) has thought through every aspect of his plan into the past. The team going into the past needs money with the correct dates on it. Eisen and his grandchildren need 60s era clothing, so they get a Sears catalog of the day … until they realize that those catalogs were regional, and Spring in Texas doesn't help with Winter in Boston. (Sorry, Bahstan.)

Like Timothy Zahn's Icarus series, Eisen makes deductions and conclusions, and plans accordingly. Unlike Zahn, Kratman will show you the character thinking through every step along the way. Zahn is working with the Sherlock Holmes school of keeping the audience in a state of tension by not telling the reader everything. Kratman's characters have more than enough problems just trying to outmaneuver Boston mobsters, as well as a cosmic horror along the way.

If there is any quibble with Dirty Water, it's that you might find yourself slightly disoriented until the pieces come together. If you remember Tom Clancy novel The Sum of All Fears, Clancy goes on for pages about a Japanese sequoia meant for a temple in the United States, and the reader has no idea why this is important … until it falls off its cargo ship and nearly starts World War III by almost hitting a nuclear submarine. So, be patient, everything will come together.

The Characters

Sean Eisen is described as an older Boston native, with a German last name in the middle of Irish Boston… I'm sure this has nothing to do with Tom Kratman, who is the same.

Okay, I'm certain that Eisen is a bit of a self-insert character to some degree, but he has none of the Mary Sue characteristics one would expect. Eisen is a calculating planner, who dissects his own plans from every angle. And then he usually gets hit with something he doesn't see coming.

We also have several other POV characters, from the youngest grandchild to Francesca, a 1960s native caught up in the insanity. Even Whitey Bulger has his own moments to shine.

The World

The worldbuilding is wonderful on multiple levels.

First, Tom Kratman has to recreate the Boston that he loved so well, back in the day. He does it so vividly that he may be the best of the current authors who do this. After The Romanov Rescue and Dirty Water, I'd put Kratman up there with Bernard Cornwell and Georgette Heyer for the vivid recreation of historical settings. While the opening sequences read like a history and travelogue, Kratman's recrea-

tion really shines once the family goes back in time.

Then there is the Q'riln, the monster of the piece. The Q'riln feed off suffering and agony like a drug, travelling from one point of concentration to another. When there isn't enough suffering, the Q'riln will create the circumstances for it. The Q'riln can shape-shift away from its real form, to whatever is necessary, even if it is to look like Kali in India to create the Thuggee. It's a far better and efficient means of accomplish the same goal than, say, being a great interdimensional being, only to be stuck in Maine for centuries as a clown. As noted above, the Q'riln feels like a cross between the 80s film I Come in Peace and Pennywise the Clown.

Then there's a twist within Q'riln society that's just so brilliant, I wish I could go over it, but that's a spoiler too far, and you'll have to read it yourself.

Politics

As a historian, I view the politics presented in this book less as "politics" and more of a history lesson about long-term effects of policies from 60 years ago to the current day. It's established history more than political bents.

Sure, Kratman has commentary on Massachusetts taxing people to death, but I've heard worse from people who live in or around the state. Eisen's view on gun control is "you hit what you aim at," but he's also a veteran who has to contend with a cosmic horror from beyond the stars.

There are also some notes on gun laws that I'm sure are accurate (since Kratman is a lawyer) but I'm going to have to look up.

Content Warning

There is nothing that really stands out as far as nudity or language. Violence isn't even gratuitous. There is a mention of sex, but nothing graphic: it is mentioned that it happened, but that's it. I wouldn't hesitate to give this to an early teenager — but keep in mind, I was in grammar school when I read The Once and Future King and Jurassic Park, so your mileage will vary.

Who is it for?

This is basically the best piece of Christmas action media since Die Hard.

Dirty Water has finally given us the Hallmark Christmas story we really want— with explosions, shootouts, and an alien that may as well be straight from Hell.

Why buy it?

Tom Kratman takes a walk down memory lane and turns it into Hogan's Alley, with Lovecraftian monsters and gang shootouts. What's not to love?

Divided We Fall edited by Tiffany Reynolds and Patty McIntosh-Mize

Review by Becky Jones

http://ornerydragon.com/

I've always liked anthologies because I can get a taste of multiple authors at one time. Anthologies also introduce me to authors I haven't yet read and finding new authors is always fun. This week's book review subject is Divided We Fall: One Possible Future edited by Tiffany Reynolds and Patty McIntosh-Mize. The authors include Sarah A. Hoyt, Brad Torgerson, Mack Henkel, Jon Del Arroz, and more. There are twelve stories in all. All twelve are good to great, but I'm only going to go into detail about a few of them here.

The premise of the anthology is the current upheaval following the 2020 election and the fraud that accompanied that election. (If you don't believe me that the fraud was in place, I highly recommend you go read the Time magazine piece which shows how the election outcome was controlled. Of course they believe it was for the better…I'd argue that controlling an election outcome, no matter your intentions, is in fact fraud. But then, I'm picky that way.) These are not "happily ever after stories" although many of them do end on a hopeful note.

Here's the blurb for the book:

Political upheavals can be a very dangerous time, especially when ideologies are as far apart as they are now. Divided we Fall presents one possible future, one where powerful forces act behind the scenes to effect the change they've wished to create for decades, and have largely been held back. What happens when a nation is sharply divided, anarchistic forces allowed to run wild, and the police are held at bay or even defunded? Add in a presidential assassination, and you have all the potential for a world changing situation. In this world, Divided we Fall.

A collection of talented veteran bestselling authors and several new ones join together to paint a picture of the post 2020 election that none of us hope to see come about. But the more we watch events unfold, the more anything seems possible.

The first story in the collection sets the scene for the reader and provides the context within which the other stories take place. In "Fourth Estate" Mack Henkel gives us the story of the run-up to the November 2020 election, the immediate aftermath of the inauguration of Joe Biden and the consequences for President Trump from the point of view of a reporter who was there but is writing several years from now. He tells the story of growing up in a strong union and Democratic household. We follow his growing career and doubts until the November 2020 election and aftermath. Along the way we also get a short history lesson about highly contested elections and the role of the Electoral College in American politics. The story is written in the style of a Bob Woodward "tell-all" political book with the insider's view of events contrasted with the public view. I came away from this story thinking, "it's plausible, really plausible, and I really don't like it." A good story makes you come blinking back into your own world wondering what just happened and that's what I did with this one.

Brad Torgerson takes on the political attacks against churches in "Secret Combinations". Torgerson explores one man's reactions to federal actions shutting down churches, specifically, Latter Day Saints or Mormons, and declaring a faith outlawed. Obviously, a huge move in contradiction to the First Amendment. The protagonist, Ephraim Roberts, a veteran and former federal law enforcement officer is faced with the dilemma of helping LDS members who are trying to make it clear that they don't want a violent end to the situation or working as an informant for his former employers who are convinced

that the LDS group wants to start a shooting war. The frustration Ephraim feels at what he views as the overly optimistic outlook of the LDS members, and the deliberately obtuse view of the feds comes through loud and clear. The decision facing Ephraim is a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation.

Stories by William Dietrich, "Dangerous Words", and Leigh Smith, "Delenda Est", give the reader a father and son facing the same problem. In "Dangerous Words" the son, Bruce McAlister, is a Marine sergeant watching fellow Marines get hauled away for saying the wrong thing to the wrong people. He's trying to figure out when and where they will be deployed…within the US. He's also writing a now-illegal blog about the political situation. If anybody finds out about the blog, not only will Bruce be dishonorably discharged, but he will also wind up in jail. Bruce discovers his estranged father's secret and reaches out in the hopes that the retired Marine lieutenant colonel will be able to give him some fatherly and Marine-worthy advice regarding his options. Bruce gets far more than he expected.

The other side of Bruce McAlister's story is "Delenda Est"; the story of Bruce's estranged father, Lt. Col. (ret) Ash McAlister, who is facing his own dilemma. He's been recalled out of retirement. Like father, like son, Ash is torn between calling out current abuses and upholding his oath. He also has a young family to protect. Finding himself trapped between conflicting courses of action, Ash is equally surprised to reconnect with his son from his first marriage. That reconnection gives him a renewed sense of purpose and another ally in his fight against the unconstitutional actions of the federal government.

Both stories combine the sense of personal loss and renewal in the father-son relationship with the loss and renewal of purpose and country. Both stories ended on a note, even if small, of optimism and made me remember that there are people out there who will do the right thing in the face of huge obstacles.

Sarah A. Hoyt gives us the story of the origins of the USAians in "Teach the Children." Driven from their homes, a group of unlikely neighbors begin the process of insuring that the children in their care know and understand the founding documents and values of the U.S. The new-found (or perhaps renewed) determination and strength the characters find is why I found hope in the conclusion. As with the father and son Marines, this story is a reminder that there are lots of people out there who will continue to do the right thing in the face of overwhelming odds.

One story that stood out for me, because it didn't seem to fit in with the others in the sense of people fighting to preserve values and freedoms, was "The Ballad of Becky and Karen" by Jon Del Arroz. Granted, it was a story about those on the "other side" of the equation. Becky and Karen are two high school/college-age young women who decide to show support for the oppressed minorities in Oakland. As a former college professor, I do understand the dangers of indoctrination within our educational system. But I still thought that Becky's refusal or inability to understand the reality of her situation was a stretch. I've known and worked with some clueless college students, but never any who were that bad. This piece was an odd note among the other stories in the collection.

In the end these stories are tales of hope, faith, courage, and determination in the face of what may seem like crushing opposition. Like I said above, these are not happily-ever-after stories, rather they are stories of Americans, humans, who will fight for their freedoms and liberties. While I was uncomfortable with the plausibility of the situations described in some of the stories, I was also reminded of the resilience and strength of the majority of Americans. This is a great collection of stories for these uncertain times.

Eve of War by Richard Weyand
Review by Jim McCoy
http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

The Agency doesn't exist. I know it. You know it. I bet even he knows it. But somebody forgot to tell Bert Magnum and he works for the Agency. I know, I know. I mean, I get it. If it doesn't exist then how can he work for it? Listen, I'm a book reviewer. If you wanted a sense maker, you came to the wrong blog. That's not my thing. But you can read Richard Weyand's Eve of War and then we can not make sense together. Togetherness is a good thing, right?

This is actually a really entertaining story. A detractor might be tempted to say that it's pretty much James Bond INNN SPAAAAAACE, but honestly, I thinks it's totally James Bond IIIIIIINN SPAAAAACE! and I love it. Listen, folks. Things work because they work and James Bond works. There's a reason that James Bond has like 876897689768768768686889698698768689689 76 movies and they all sell like a billion tickets each, then live forever on rentals/streaming. And trust me, it's not just the martinis.

What could possibly be better than a super-cool secret agent with lots of neat toys who gets the girl and does the super-spy stuff and tries to save the day? I'll tell you what. It's the super-cool secret agent with lots of neat toys who gets the girl and does the super-spy stuff and tries to save the day who has an alien companion. I mean, the fact that it basically lives in the shower IS a bit weird but, I mean, it's an alien. It's SUPPOSED TO BE WEIRD.

There should be a song about how aliens are supposed to be strange. Maybe we could set it to the tune of someone else's song. Does anybody have Weird Al's number? Seriously guys, you don't want me to sing it. You just don't.

Anyway...

There are widgets and gizmos and superdrugs and hot chicks and guns and bombs and mishaps in cars and maybe some other stuff...

To go with allergies. Seriously, that was a shocker. What secret agent has allergies?

And yes, we get to find out how the alien got there EVENTUALLY. I won't tell you how but it works and it's interesting and yes, it's weird but we just had that conversation.

There's a lot of good stuff here, and the even better news is that there is more coming. It seems that Eve of War is the first book in a series called The Agency, which apparently DOES exist. The books, not the Agency. The actual Agency is basically just like Area 51 and Delta Force. It doesn't exist, never will and does all kinds of stuff that never happened. Actually, I know a couple of guys who served on submarines. Maybe they can tell me how things that never happened in places they never were worked. Uhh...

Never mind.

You know, the whole Science Fiction thing doesn't mix very often with the whole Super Spy thing, except in cases where the spy has nifty tools that don't exist in the real world. Eve of War is a legit Science Fiction story complete with star nations and interstellar travel. Humanity is still humanity, but they're out there.

Eve of War takes place in a corner of human space and the rest of humanity is only mentioned passingly. There are definitely strong hints of something out there though, and I kind of get the feeling that the playing field is going to expand in future volumes of the series. I haven't read any of the follow on books yet (and I think only one exists at the moment) but there's a hint, a possible hit of foreshadowing I detected...

Yup, you're right. I'm more Inspector Gadget than James Bond, despite the similar first names. Go, go Gadget review!

Didn't work, still writing.

So yeah, I think there's more coming, similar to how David Weber started his Honorverse in one corner of the universe and then made it bigger, or how I started my Dungeons and Dragons campaign with one town and expanded it. This is an approach that a lot of writers use because it makes sense and it works. Try to cram too much in too quickly and you get the Green Lantern movie. It's better this way.

I'm really looking forward to where this universe can go. It's kind of refreshing to read some SF that's not the same old SF and Weyand has achieved that here. I love starships and big, stompy robots and weird unobtainium power sources, etc but there's more to the genre than that and it's nice to see someone step outside of the standard tropes and give us something new and, this is key, do it in its own universe.

Seriously, those of you have read John Ringo's Human-Posleen War/Legacy of the Aldenata series may remember The Weapon and the trilogy of books centered around Cally. Those were good books, well written and action packed with believable characters but I think they lost something because they didn't fit in with the rest of the universe. For me, at least, the LOTA universe is, and always has been, about mass combat and asskickery. There may have been a bit of "Uh oh, here they come" at the beginning of Gust Front, but the story is supposed to take place on the front lines.

For Weyand, that's not an issue. He didn't pull the bait and switch with this story. This is a spy-centered story and that's what he's given us. I hope he keeps it that way. The day may come when mass space battles are part of the story of Bert Magnum and The Agency, but I hope they either happen "off-screen" or as a small point of the larger story rather than a focal point. Magnum is the kind of guy who risks his life for his star-nation, but in a different way. Don't get me wrong: I'm excited for more of this series but I want it to stay like it is. Here's hoping, anyway.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Doses of Com-Ply

Gemini Cell by Myke Cole
Review by Jason P. Hunt
http://SciFi4Me.com

Navy SEALs are pretty hard-core Operators, no question. The training, the drive, the esprit de corps that makes their teams so tight-knit… all of that helps to define a select number of Navy personnel as the best of the best.

Jim Schweitzer is one of those best. He considers himself an artist. Not in the way his wife Sarah is an artist, certainly. She works with canvas. He works with high-velocity ammunition. He has a certain special set of skills, which makes him uniquely qualified for a new super-secret government operation called the Gemini Cell.

But he has to die first.

Taking place in the Shadow Ops universe, Gemini Cell is the first in a new series telling the origin story of a new kind of warrior. Schweitzer, now dead, is bonded to the spirit of an ancient jinn, and the resulting entity is a magic super-soldier capable of great feats without fatigue or pain. The biggest problem is deciding who gets to drive the body, as the ancient Ninip is regularly fighting to dominate and push Schweitzer out to oblivion. Ninip is an ancient warrior, and his code consists mainly of bloodlust and straightforward combat, whereas Schweitzer is a modern professional soldier whose entire career has been built around information and teamwork. Recklessness gets a SEAL killed and an operation blown, and he has to adjust to the fact that he's already dead.

And Ninip is nothing but reckless. The more he kills, the more he wants to kill, and Schweitzer has a tough time keeping him in check.

The Gemini Cell is an operation ostensibly of the American government, and it's not the only one in the world. But Schweitzer is unique, and this matters to some people who want to figure out why that's the case. And it's interesting to see how Schweitzer uses the things he knows, the skills he's acquired, to adapt to his new circumstances at the same time figuring out that there are certain things he needn't worry about anymore — like breathing.

Meantime, there's a side story thread involving Jim's best friend Steve, and that looks like it might head somewhere in subsequent stories (or it might not). There are some indications that at least part of this government operation might be treading into the shadier side of the room, and there's enough to cause one to question just which persons are the "good guys" overall. At one point, I got the impression that this is either a much bigger operation than first portrayed by Schweitzer's handler, or we're looking at multiple compartmentalized operations. Could one or some of them have gone rogue?

The story is tightly written, and the violence isn't gratuitous; it's just enough to get across the idea that various factions involved here are more layered than just your typical moustache-twirling villain. Ninip demonstrates both irrational bloodlust and contemplative sulking, while Schweitzer is both the professional warrior and the out-of-control thug depending on whether he lets Ninip have too much control or not. The fact that he's the first Operator who hasn't gone completely mad is of interest, and I think there are pieces laid down in this story hinting that there's more to Jim's wife Sarah than what originally meets the eye. Perhaps this plays out in later books. I'm playing catch-up, so no spoilers.

I thought the "magic" aspects were an interesting addition to the prototypical origin story. It's a military SF story, yes, but with zombies (of a sort), and that makes it more intriguing. It's especially so since Schweitzer knows he's dead but for the most part wants to behave as if he's still alive in order to hang onto his humanity and rationality. This also gives him an edge over Ninip, it seems. There's no good indication as to how old the Ninip entity might be, but I think it's a hoot that Schweitzer tries to civilize him a bit by reading Little Women in his spare time. Schweitzer's a thinker, and he's always thinking and analyzing his situation, not just in the field, but also with regard to his current circumstances and what information they're telling him about his wife and son. He knows things aren't on the up-and-up.

And where things stand at the end of this book, there are plenty of ways it could go, and enough questions left hanging that I'm inclined to get the next book in the series. So now I need to go back through the pile and see if I have any others from Myke Cole, or else go track them down and catch up that way. I enjoyed this one, and while it's yet another series to dig into, it's a new-to-me title from a new-to-me author, and that's ultimately a net positive. This one's a recommend.

The Invisible Man by H.G. Wells
Review by J.-P. Garnier
https://spacecowboybooks.com

I think that I read this book as a kid, but I could not remember and figured that it would be worth a re-read, and boy was I right. I have always considered Wells to be a top-notch storyteller but had forgotten just how beautiful his prose can be. Although he is often criticized for largely skirting over the science in his science fiction, I found his inclusion of science in this story satisfactory, especially considering the year that this book was published. Despite the issues with science, Wells is also adept at characterization and story, much more so than Verne who tends to wallow in technical details. What I found most thrilling in this story is the way in which the Invisible Man finds that his discovery leads to more problems than good and ultimately interferes with his sanity. This essence of the tale makes it feel accurate and I attribute this masterful device to the longevity of this book and others by Wells. If you are interested in proto-science fiction, or more accurately scientific romance, then I highly recommend this book and Wells' other classics of the genre.

Knowingly Familiar by Alma T.C. Boykin
Review by Becky Jones
http://ornerydragon.com/

This week's book review is Alma T.C. Boykin's Knowingly Familiar. It is Book 16 in the Familiar Tales series. And, until this week, was the latest in that series of stories about the magical community in Riverton. I like to think that the Riverton of the familiars is the Riverton my grandparents lived in and I visited frequently as a small child. The weather and some of the town features are similar… hmmm….but, back to the book.

Return to the world of Familiars and goth shadow mages. André and Lelia Lestrang and their familiars, Rodney, the kit fox, and Tay, the ring-tailed lemur, are now dealing with teenagers, a daughter who lovesloves unicorns (especially pink and purple unicorns) and wants a house-dragon for a pet. The cherry on the cake of all that chaos is an ancient evil that arrives in Riverton via an archaeological exhibit at the university. Lelia and André are the lucky shadow mages who get to do the heavy lifting for this one. Oh, fun.

As is usual with her Familiar stories, Alma Boykin provides a good mix of mundane life and its ups and downs, magical encounters, and funny moments. Here's the blurb for Knowingly Familiar:

Something moves. A Mesopotamian curse sends ripples through the magical community of Riverton. Mages André and Lelia Lestrang find themselves fighting ghosts from their past. The battle draws them closer to Master Saldovado and the clans, closer perhaps than Lelia's heart dares to go. How long before Patrick Lee and Riverton's other magic users demand answers about the clans? The Familiars are keeping the secret. For now.

But breaking ancient spells comes easily for shadow mages. Juggling parenthood, budgets, car repairs, school schedules, and a six-year-old daughter's desire for a pet unicorn? (Or a house dragon, preferably pastel pink.) That's difficult!

We catch up with André and Lelia about 15 or so years after the event in Judiciously Familiar. The university archaeology department has received a shipment for an upcoming display, but something is off. One spell is broken and the evil within destroyed. But now Lelia and Dolores have to explain to the

dean why she cannot and should not allow the exhibit to proceed without a thorough magical cleansing of all the artifacts destined to go on display. As an academic administrator though, the dean cannot conceive of anything as silly as an ancient curse affecting the highly sought-after exhibit.

The evil that moves into and through Riverton affects the entire magical community. We get to see more of the personal dynamics within the magical community as some of the mages express their curiosity and growing distrust of Lelia and André's relationship with Master Saldovado's clan. It turns out that Master Saldovado's clan aren't the only ones suspicious of outsiders. The Riverton magical community tends to look askance at magic users it does not know. And now there's another magical guest in their midst.

I enjoyed the glimpses of the mundane chores and family issues that Lelia and André have to deal with as well as the more dramatic magical encounters. Boykin's description of the ins and outs of university politics is spot on as well. I've had deans like Dr. Tierney and I really wish I'd had Dolores and Isabeau to help deal with them.

The story's action ebbs and flows and keeps the reader fully engaged. In fact, I read this installment in the series in one sitting. We get to see Lelia as a full adult now (whether she likes it or not) and her growth into her role as a shadow mage. She still hates that she and André have to deal with monsters from abyssal planes and the humans who opened the gates for those monsters, but she has finally recognized that understanding evil does not mean that she herself is evil. Her daughter's unbridled love of all things cutesy and pastel-colored will be Lelia's undoing well before any abyssal monster catches her. That, and the fact that Deborah clearly has Master Saldovado wrapped around her little finger.

If you haven't read any of the Familiars books before, I recommend you start from the beginning and work your way through. You won't regret it. There's another reason to do that as quickly as you can… Learnedly Familiar was just released this week and you'll want to get started on that one as soon as you can. You can read more of Boykin's work on her blog, Cat Rotator's Quarterly.

Mistress of the Waves by George Phillies
Review by Russ Lockwood
https://george-phillies.com/

On a feudal world, local fishergal Amanda saves an offworlder from drowning and receives some high-tech medical help. And that's pretty much the extent of the science fiction in the novel. What's left is a marvelous character study of a resilient young lass who figures out capitalism in a feudal society. Step by step, she builds a transport and retail business despite the byzantine regulations meant to hamper innovation. Cleverer than the officialdom -- and with the help of a good lawyer -- she also learns the levers of money and power to keep the authorities and rivals at bay.

There's no real individual bad guy or evil gal, but more a systemic opposition to her plans. Towards the end is another encounter with off-worlders on the lam crash-landing on the planet, contributing to her capitalist ideals. It's well written, too -- quite a bit better than the previous novel MinuteGirls, which had the typical uneveness of a self-published book.

Enjoyed it.

Mountains of the Gods and Crucible of the Gods by D.T. Read
Review by Jim McCoy
http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

Listen folks, go read these books!

REVIEW WRITTEN! PUT IT IN THE CAN!

Takes celebratory gulp of Coca-Cola Classic

Sorry to those who are disappointed by that statement but I don't really drink and Mountain Dew is the Hard Stuff, so...

Yeah.

Okay, so I'm not that lazy. Usually. That's not the whole review. Probably.

Being dead serious though, D.T. Read has outdone herself with Mountain of the Gods and Crucible of the Gods. These books kick so much afterburner that I had to congratulate her on her Facebook page before I had finished Crucible. It and Mountains are that good. I thought Running from the Gods, the first book, was amazeballs (and it is) but these two kick it up a notch. I guess I kind of expected that, but I didn't really expect that.

I mean, the first book in a series like this is usually world-building and moves a bit slowly. This is especially true when the first book is basic military and Military Occupational Specialty training. Things take a minute to build to where they really take off. Starting with Mountains that's not really the case anymore.

Mountains of the Gods is the story of a young pilot's introduction to real-world combat. He serves in a military that is currently losing a war and needs him out and doing his job. He does his best to do it, too. Don't get me wrong Akuleh Masou (AKA Ku) is a terrific pilot and he's game for the fight, but things seem not to go the way he wants them to at times. The historian in me believes that this just might be because the other side gets a say in what happens, but it hurts Ku just the same.

And that is something that is missing in a lot of military fiction. I just had this conversation with a friend of mine on Sunday night while I was out with some friends from a fan organization that I'm part of. The author of the series is amazing and writes truly awesome books (that's why I joined the organization) but I hadn't really thought about that until recently and I wonder if it's his background as a history student that causes that. Historians, after all focus mostly on the Butcher's Bill and not as much on individual stories, unless they're talking about some general somewhere.

Ku faces war and all of its ugliness head on. I don't want to spoil too much here, but he faces the psychic shock of the experience in a very visceral way. Ku is not the hero of a World War II movie that was made during the 1950s. He goes through a lot and it beats him up sometimes. He has to deal with the flashbacks afterward. More than anything else I've read, with the possible exception of J.A. Sutherland's Alexis Carew series, Ku has to deal with the things they don't show on the recruiting poster.

It almost feels paradoxical to say this, since military fiction is a lot older than I am and leaving that part out has always been part of a working formula that sells, but it adds a lot to the story. I've read a lot of heroes of a lot of works that don't seem as real as Ku and his friends do and it's because they deal with

the parts that people don't want to talk about. Seriously. I'm a huge Mel Gibson fan and Hal Moore didn't feel this real in We Were Soldiers and Hal Moore was a real guy who really did what they show on the screen.

I guess that's what really drew me into these books. Ku acts like he would act in real life. He deals with problems as they come up, just like he would in real life. He struggles with a lot. I've been there. I haven't had the same problems, never having been anywhere near a combat environment, but struggling is a feeling that I'm a lot more familiar with than I wish I was.

Let me put this out there, too. It's spoiling but I can't help it. Ku has to seek out help for his mental issues at one point. His PTSD hits him hard, and he finds someone to lead him through it. Again, mine wasn't combat related but I've had to do the same. It wasn't easy for me. It wasn't easy for Ku. There probably aren't many people on the planet who find it easy to ask for help with mental issues. But he did it. I did it and so have many others. But we've endured and so has Ku. He also has a tendency to bounce back from physical trauma that is truly impressive. I'm wondering if a particular injury he suffers wasn't stolen from something that happened in the real world, because it feels realistic but has just a bit of "I don't think you could make that up" to it.

Maybe I'm spending too much time on the protagonist and maybe I don't care. Ku is on my Top Ten List of Fictional Characters to Have a Drink With Someday, Except never, because he doesn't really exist, but you get the idea. It's not all just about what he does while in uniform either. I really have to tighten the snerk collar here, but Ku does things in an honorable manner in his personal life when it is very obviously hard for him to do it. He's a solid dude, the guy you want at your back when things go awry.

Sigh

Yes, I'll have his babies, but only if he asks politely.

Something else I've noticed that I don't always see in Science Fiction: Read treats matters of faith with respect and reverence. It has happened elsewhere. I've reviewed Declan Finn's work here a lot and he's a man whose faith comes out in his work. J. Michael Strac, Straz, Stratz...

The guy who wrote Babylon 5, who I believe is an atheist, was also very respectful of religious beliefs but that's not always the case. Asimov wrote a planned future of the human race with no mention of religion or religious movements. Suzanne Collins never put so much as an "Oh God" in The Hunger Games. The organizers of David Weber's own con wouldn't let him hold a prayer meeting on a Sunday even though he's an actual deacon in his church. Seventh Shaman is so named because it involves a lot of religion which, in its own way, is closer to something you'd see in Dungeons and Dragons than what you'd get in a JMS work, but I say that lovingly. I've been a D&D guy since Second Edition. I'm still trying to roll the stats to get a paladin. It's not just the way the religion feels either. It's the effects granted by its chanters which are considerable.

Speaking of religion, there are parts of what Ku deals with that remind me of things I've read in the Old Testament. I won't say what and I won't say how, but I have a feeling that Read may have done a bit of study in her time. I just get that feeling based on things. I don't want to reveal too much here so I'll move on. If you're familiar with the Old Testament though, I dare you to read Crucible and tell me I'm wrong.

Ku, of course, is not the only character in the book. People like Hanuk, Gram, Derry, Kimmie, etc..

They make sense too. Pretty much anyone Ku comes in contact with has motivations and takes actions that make sense in their own mind. That doesn't mean that everyone is friendly or that it's all hunky-dory, but once you're immersed in Read's work, you'll stay that way until your dispatcher calls and sends you on another call...

Oh, sorry. That's more of a 'me' thing I guess.

The action in both books is realistic and engaging. Things go bang and boom when they should, and the actions taken by Ku and his fellow pilots are both realistic and believable. At times it almost feels like you're in the cockpit. As mentioned previously, the other side gets a vote in ways that matter and that makes the lives of Ku and his fellow pilots interesting in ways that they probably wished that it would-n't but that's how it would work in the real world.

There is a lot of foreshadowing going on here. In some ways it feels like the prophecy in Harry Potter. It's not quite the same though and the outcome doesn't seem quite as obvious. I'm pretty sure I know what's coming but not exactly when or how or what it will mean once it happens and I'm not sure the characters in the books do either. I'm okay with that because it adds a little more intrigue to an already tense series and I can't wait to see it resolved.

I got into this series too early. It's not done yet and I need to know where it's going. I know the fourth book will be out soon. I'm thinking there might be one or two more after that, but I'm not making any promises. I can hope though, right? It's not like I'm losing it or anything.

Probably? Maybe? Well, let's just say that shaving my head keeps me from pulling my hair out.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Missiles Fired

Outlaws of the Moon by Edmond Hamilton
Review by J.-P. Garnier
https://spacecowboybooks.com

Another adventure with Captain Future. This book is from the era that gave science fiction a bad name, complete with wooden dialog, unbelievable characters, and a totally unrealistic plot. That being said, the story was a lot of fun. The writing isn't beautiful but it doesn't matter. I read the book in one sitting and have to say that I enjoyed every minute of it. Sure, the book isn't a great work of art, but it makes no claim to be, nor does it need to be to be a good read. Fans of schlocky space adventure will love this book for the same reasons I did. The action never stops and moves forward at rapid speed, from one peril to the next. And it kept me turning the pages. While not a masterpiece, if you are looking for an enjoyable escapist read this book is for you, and there are many more Captain Future stories to keep you busy for a while.

Slan by A.E. van Vogt
Review by J.-P. Garnier
https://spacecowboybooks.com

Super fun golden age action. This wonderful novel was first published in Astounding Magazine and was awarded the Retro-Hugo for best novel of 1941. I don't know why it took me so long to read van Vogt, but I know this won't be the last of his books that I read. I tore through this in a few days because it was really hard to put down. While the plot had a few twists and convenient technologies fall out of the sky that were quite frankly ridiculous, it didn't really matter that things seemed implausible solely

for the fact that this was such a fun story. I have heard that Philip K. Dick was a big van Vogt fan and Slan made it clear that this must be the case, as the movement of the story has a very Dick feel, especially how the book wrapped up (trying to avoid spoilers). If you are interested in Golden Age science fiction classics this book from the highly prolific Grand Master is not to be missed.

Son of the Black Sword by Larry Correia
Review by Graham Bradley
https://upstreamreviews.substack.com

One of the obstacles that prevents readers from enjoying epic fantasy— other than the biggest authors refusing to finish the biggest series— is that they're often slow, plodding narratives that like to examine the history of every blade of grass, every obscure village custom, every tertiary character's distant family tree. An epic fantasy book can move slower than rush hour in a snowstorm when you really need a bathroom.

Looking to cure readers of this problem, sci-fi author Larry Correia burst into the genre in 2015 with his first Saga of the Forgotten Warrior novel, SON OF THE BLACK SWORD, an epic fantasy that moves at the pace of a modern-day thriller. And boy does it deliver on this promise. Now that the fourth volume is out, here's a spoiler-laden recap of Book One.

Set in a fantasy world that feels very much like Southeast Asia, we're transported to the continent of Lok, where we follow the exploits of Ashok Vadal, a Protector of the land and the bearer of the lethal ancestor blade Angruvadal. Ancestor blades are kind of like Thor's hammer, in that they can only be wielded by someone they choose, and the bearer has to conduct himself with honor while carrying it. Any shameful or disgraceful act will cause the sword to shatter, and any House that loses its sword is vulnerable to its political enemies.

Unlike Thor's hammer, ancestor blades aren't just impossible to lift if you're not chosen; it'll force you to hurt yourself and perhaps even commit suicide if it finds you lacking. So if you're going to try lifting an unclaimed blade, have your affairs in order.

Angruvadal is especially dangerous in the hands of Ashok, who also has powerful magical enhancements and does not possess the capacity to feel fear. This makes him the ideal warrior to deal with seafaring demons that occasionally come on land, and this is where we get a glimpse of the history of this world.

Long ago, there was an Apocalypse-level event where demons rose up out of Hell and the Gods had to send a warrior to vanquish them. He came from the skies in a powerful ship, and he pushed the demons into the sea, where they would remain in an uneasy truce with the humans on land. Men stay out of the water and don't cross the oceans on ships, demons stay off the surface, and everything's cool.

The hero, Ramrowan, then created the ancestor blades and bestowed them on mankind to keep the demons at bay. That was centuries ago. Now most of the ancestor blades are shattered and the demons are getting bolder with their incursions, and that's just the start of things.

After Ashok dispatches a pair of demons in the north of Lok, he gets a summons to return to the Capital and speak to the leader of his order. The Master tells Ashok that his life is a lie, that he's basically a human forgery created by magic; he was never truly of House Vadal, but rather he was part of the "Casteless" group of laborers, considered under the Law to not even be people. He was a child laborer in a time between swordbearers. It was his job to scrub blood off the floors every time a warrior tried to

lift Angruvadal and ended up dead. One night when he was ten, he had to move Angruvadal to clean a spot of blood, and the sword ended up choosing him.

Since House Vadal couldn't kill Ashok without shattering their blade, they used magic to change his memories and remove his fear, then sent him to the Protectorate in the hopes that their dangerous line of work would make him reckless, lead to his death, and result in the return of Angruvadal to the House.

Solid plan for a bunch of scheming politicos, but it backfired: Ashok became an unstoppable killing machine for the next several years. When he learns his true origins— and that his entire village had been destroyed to hide them— he returns to House Vadal and demands justice.

After he literally cleans house, Ashok turns himself over to the Law for punishment and is thrown in prison. However, Angruvadal doesn't shatter, and nobody can take it from him, so he becomes a unique legal case requiring deliberation. The Order of Inquisitors decides that rather than execution, Ashok is to flee the prison, find a distant band of religious rebels, and fully ally himself with their cause to liberate the casteless.

As a True Believer in the Law, nothing could be more shameful to Ashok, but he has to comply. He breaks out with Angruvadal and joins up with the zealots, meeting two of their main figureheads, Thera and Keta). Thera is a prophet of the forgotten gods, and Keta is known as the Keeper of Names, a man who knows who everyone truly is.

Ashok deals with the inner turmoil of keeping his loyalty to the Law by working for people who would destroy it. This leads to escalating conflicts along the way, including brutal fights with various bands of scum in different areas of Lok. What Ashok and the others don't know is that they're pawns in a larger political scheme, a sort of false-flag Fedpost operation cooked up by the Inquisitors. They want the Casteless to rise up so they have an excuse to eradicate them all, as they are the greatest threat to the secular Law. It is the Casteless who preserve the old religious traditions and there's just no room for that in a politically "enlightened" age.

What neither the Inquisition nor Ashok could know is that the Forgotten Gods are still around, and they've picked their own champion in this conflict.

Son of the Black Sword ends with an epic showdown against a lesser villain, Nadan. In the final fight, Ashok cements himself as the hero of the Casteless, Thera is kidnapped by the Inquisition, Angruvadal shatters, and Ashok briefly communes with the spirit of Ramrowan who chooses him as his champion. In a matter of 400 pages or 16 audio hours, we get a very thorough look at the political structure, history, mythology, and characters of a complex but fast-paced world, and things are just getting started.

As a final note, here are some of the other characters you should be familiar with as the series unfolds:

Devedas: a Protector like Ashok, though two years his senior, and with a more established pedigree. Devedas' father and grandfather were both the bearers of their House's ancestral blade, however the blade shattered while in his father's possession and he doesn't know why. He assumes he would have also become its bearer but without it his future prospects are diminished. He envies Ashok for his blade, and when he learns the truth about Ashok, Devedas is particularly incensed. He is, by all other metrics, a good man and a firm believer in the Law, and he has the loyalty of his subordinate Protectors.

Rada: A librarian tasked with looking up the history of the Casteless during a legal case in which the Capital is considering the outright genocide of all "non-people." She discovers a discrepancy in the archives along with a conspiracy to subvert the case, but as she pursues the truth, she's threatened into silence by the Inquisition. Rada disguises herself and seeks out Devedas' help, and he lends his aid to her cause.

Jagdish: An unremarkable foot soldier in House Vadal who later gets assigned to the prison where Ashok is being held. He trains with Ashok in the hopes that he may someday become worthy of Angruvadal. Throughout the series, Jagdish has one of the best arcs, constantly leveling up from "nameless henchman" to "power player."

Gutch: A prisoner with strong contacts in the smuggling world, and other elements of the criminal underground. He has an ever-growing role in the series much like Jagdish.

Karno: A hammer-wielding soldier under Devedas' command, known as "Blunt Karno" for his weapon of choice, as well as his demeanor.

Omand: The Grand Inquisitor and principle villain, pulling strings on all the evil goins-on in the Capital. It is he who sentences Ashok to a life of dishonor among the Casteless rebels.

Sikasso: A member of the House of Assassins, trained wizards who carry out the Inquisition's evil deeds. He and his ilk attempt to kill Ashok at the final bridge battle; while they succeed in capturing the prophet Thera, Ashok chops off Sikasso's arm with an axe, forcing him to flee with magic. He'll be back.

Nadan: A brutal warlord of House Somsak, whose ancestor blade shattered long ago. He tries to duel Ashok for Angruvadal, and ends up getting his tongue cut out for his offensive speech. Later Sikasso furnishes Nadan with the severed tongue of a demon, which fuses with Nadan's body and gives him the power of speech, simultaneously corrupting him with dark magic. While this makes him a formidable foe, Ashok still defeats him in battle.

I love this book. I've read it four times and I'll read it many more. Correia is currently at work on the fifth and final installment. Stay tuned for my next recap in this series, House of Assassins.

Threading the Needle by Monalisa Foster
Review by Caroline Furlong
https://upstreamreviews.substack.com

"Over the Mountains/Of the Moon/Down the Valley of the Shadow/Ride, boldly ride/…If you seek for Eldorado." – Edgar Allen Poe

Talia Merritt, a former sniper who lost her arm and now has a prosthetic replacement for it, became an indentured servant for seven years on the planet of Goruden, where she worked as a bodyguard. Having finally earned the money to buy her freedom, when a call comes in for a firearms instructor on the island of Tatarka, she leaves the city of Sakura and goes to answer the advertisement.

But all is not as it seems, and Signore Ferran Contesti's advertisement was less than truthful. Talia learns this when her old friend, Lyle Monroe, meets her in the Full Moon bath house while she is relaxing after a month's worth of travel to get to Tatarka and the town of Tsurui. Lyle is the local sheriff ap-

pointed by the Tsurui residents to deal with Contesti, who is trying to buy out or destroy the first settlers in Tsurui and is making life miserable for the other locals.

So much for the relaxing bath – and the remainder of Talia's funds.

The Story

Lyle explains that Contesti's aim is to chase out, buy out, or otherwise destroy the Haricot family, one of the first to settle in Tatarka. A previous attempt to colonize Goruden failed before the Haricots arrived, and the deceased patriarch of the Haricot clan thought he knew why: A fungus bloom that recurs on an unknown cycle killed all the plant life, which led to mass starvation for the settlers and the animals. The initial terraforming of Goruden missed the fungus and while most bigwigs back on Earth think it will not recur, Haricot was certain it would. Haricot's wife, Dame Leigh Stark, has kept the family on track to finish his work since his death and they seem to be close to a breakthrough that will prevent the bloom from occurring again. It all depends on the genetically bred cattle they raise on their extensive ranch.

Several people have tried to steal the Haricots' cattle to learn their secret. They have all failed, but Contesti has influence and power the others did not. He wants that genetic design, and he is willing to kill to get it. He hired Talia to go up against Lyle, not to teach his hired guns to shoot.

Talia owes Lyle her life and, moreover, considers him a good friend. She would no more fight him than she would her own brother and tells him she will leave – after she has seen Contesti to terminate their deal. Escorted to Contesti's ranch by a friend of Lyle's, a widow named Maeve York, Talia refuses the wealthy man's offer. Contesti is not pleased but he lets her go, and now Talia must figure out how to get back to Sakura on what remains of her hard-earned money.

While riding to the next town over to take the stagecoach back to the boat so she can go to the city, she encounters one of the Haricot boys. An accident in the wilderness leaves him with a broken leg and Talia sets it, but on the way back to the Haricot homestead, the boy dies. Talia brings his body home to a displeased Dame Leigh Stark, who blames Talia for her grandson's death. Talia explains what happened but, before she can leave, she is assaulted by the dead boy's younger angry and grieving younger brother. The boy hits her in the back of the head, causing her to pass out not long after because he hit the implant for her prosthetic arm. When she finally manages to see a cyberneticist, she learns the damage will result in the loss of functionality for her prosthetic if she does not get the implant replaced.

This becomes a problem when a new hire for Contesti, Jerod Rhodes, meets her in Sakura and casually informs her that Lyle has become a drunk. Rhodes has scars on his face, high society manners and clothing, and he carries a sword. More than that, though, he has a superior attitude and confidence in his assertions that sets Talia's nerves singing. With Lyle, Maeve, and the rest of Tsurui in trouble, Talia needs to choose: Stay in Sakura and earn enough money to repair her prosthetic, or go save her friends. The only question is, will she make the right choice in time?

The characters

Talia is a perfect vehicle for this story. A sniper with a past, she keeps her word and shoots to kill only when she must, but most civilians and even those in her own profession cannot always tell that from a first or even a tenth glance at her. Snipers walk a fine line, and she has so many kills to her name that she was given the moniker "Death's Handmaiden." Loyal to the point she lost her arm for a friend, Ta-

lia will go to great lengths to maintain her freedom – and greater ones to safeguard the lives and freedom of others.

A fellow former sniper, Lyle has a difficult relationship with Talia since she saved his life in the past. He respects and loves her as a sister but this means she frustrates him in ways no other woman would. The sheriff also has a weakness for redheads that gets him in more than one kind of trouble, and he is none too pleased with himself after Talia and their friends sober him up. Yet when the chips are down, it is difficult to find a steadier presence for the heroine and others to rely upon.

Jerod Rhodes is a madman in love with death, certain that he can win the favor of a death goddess whom he believes takes a new human form each time her previous incarnation is killed. He wants to be this goddess' next vessel and he is willing to kill or have others kill for him to achieve this goal. Rhodes is a cobra, calm and intent on satiating his lust by any means necessary, no matter the cost to his employer or his opponents. This lover of death has just met her Handmaiden, and he is sure that this time he has what he needs to acquire his wish.

The world

The world supersedes that of Joss Whedon's Firefly in several ways, but particularly in how it blends American Old West culture with Japanese culture into a harmonious and colorful whole. Goruden is a planet of great beauty with flora and fauna which might kill a man if he isn't careful. The city of Sakura, the capital, is small but vivid, and it has pretentions to be a grand capitol on this Earth colony. Meanwhile Tsurui has the sweet benediction of a small town that likes itself just as it is, though it doesn't mind growing a little when newcomers arrive to settle in. Half the fun of the novel is getting lost in Goruden, which is practically a character itself, and it lingers in a reader's mind long after the last page is turned.

The politics

The politics are "small government, please, thank you, and go away." They fit the story but will inevitably be seen by some as a jab at modern pretensions rather than a reminder for the ages. These are the only politics in the novel.

Content warning

The F-bomb appears several times, and the MF-bomb gets dropped at least once. There is substance abuse, too, but it is not portrayed as acceptable or good. Mentions of sex and prostitution pop up but are easily skipped. At least one mercy kill is described and while the story does not linger on it, some might find it upsetting. Other than that, Threading the Needle is a PG-13 book and mature teenagers can gloss over the language just fine.

Who is it for?

Readers who enjoy space opera, space westerns, and fans of Firefly will LOVE this book. Western aficionados will especially appreciate it, particularly if they liked the John Wayne film El Dorado, which helped to inspire Threading the Needle. This is the type of space opera and western once ubiquitous in pop culture and which could stand to be resurrected, so those who want that type of tale to return to the wider culture would do well to pick up this book. Fans of Leigh Brackett will also love the book for paying homage to the queen of science fiction, and anyone who wants a pulse-pounding adventure is sure to like the increasing tension as the story rushes to its conclusion. The novel is absorbing and

makes one quickly forget the outside world, so for those looking for even a little respite from the present, Threading the Needle is a good place to find it.

Why read it?

If you want something beautiful and fun to read, you would do well to grab Threading the Needle as soon as it becomes available. This is space opera with Japanese flair and Western archetypes at its best. Don't wait, go put it on your wish list today or mark your calendar for December 5, 2023, to purchase it when it goes live!

Trouble Wore Red by Chris Lewis
Reviewed by Robert Runté

Chris Lewis is the pseudonym for an award-winning, independently-published, Canadian SF&F author you've likely never heard of, but whom I have been following for years. I love his serious fantasy series which feature unique world-building, clever plotting, and often thoughtful themes that get one thinking about current issues. Great stuff!

I probably don't need to tell you this is not one of those. The cover art and title should telegraph that this is pure escapism, a colorized, disco version of a 1940s who-done-it with the hard-boiled detective, the dame who walks back into his life, and a mystery played out mostly in bars. Think Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, with Sydney Greenstreet as the corrupt mayoralty candidate.

It's corny, predictable, and wonderful.

Set on Commerce Station, somewhere the far side of Mars, it's fair to classify this as SF, though there is no hint of that on the cover or in much of the action. If I had a criticism of *Trouble Wore Red*, it's that the futuristic element is a little thin. People still use cellphones to text, virtual assistants are about the same as software currently on my phone, bars still have bartenders, and room service still costs too much. A couple of global word changes and it could as easily be read as New York or Chicago: urban, gangsters, bars. But none of that is important to the plot or characters.

The action is straightforward: A private investigator, against his better judgement, takes on a case from his ex-girlfriend. A person (or persons) unknown, have been breaking into her office and tearing it apart looking for something. She doesn't know what they're after, but they've trashed the place, and our hero isn't going to allow that. Who they are, what are they after and why, keeps things clicking along at a good pace, while our hero tries to keep his relationship with his ex strictly professional.

I loved Lewis' take on the hard-boiled detective. Robert ("Rocky") Mountain is desperate to recapture his youth, but he's starting to feel his age, his twenty-something assistant thinks he's ancient, and he can't believe how people dress these days. As I await my hip-replacement, I totally identified with Rocky's aches and pains and his general recognition he has to slow down, even as he refuses to do so.

The woman in red is suitably mysterious, dangerous, and irresistible. Rocky's partner is ex-special forces, shadowy, and super capable. The villain is . . . seriously, it's Sydney Greenstreet. Throw in a crowd of old friends and a newly recruited sidekick and you get a rollicking adventure with the perfect balance of mystery, romance, and dry humor.

There is nothing here to challenge the reader, to threaten the status quo, nothing traumatic or soul searching--just pure, unbridled fun. The book took me out of myself and away from my problems for a

few hours, like a good action movie, romcom, or sci-fi is supposed to. This is the book you need to read right after being traumatized by the late-night news or coming up for air after reading one too many literary works. Escapism at its finest.

I hope Chris Lewis comes up with a bunch more books in this series because everyone needs a break from their day. . . and, I'm guessing, the latest upsurge of Covid.

What Price Victory? by David Weber, et al.
Review by Jason P. Hunt
http://SciFi4Me.com

Over the past few years especially, there are those of us in fandom who have declared quite a few times that we don't need prequels to everything. We don't need a backstory to explain every villain's motive. We don't need movies to fill in every gap in a character's story. And no one asked for Solo. (Go read Ann Crispin's trilogy for that. It's so much better.)

But there's something to be said for the occasional short story that drills down and focuses on one particular aspect of a story, or fills in some nuance, context, or just a bit of whimsical "extra" for fans of a story universe. When it's done correctly, it enhances rather than distracts. What Price Victory? gives us just such a set of stories. The anthology, featuring five stories from throughout the long timeline of the Honor Harrington universe, gives us a set of stories that nicely deliver moments that add a little depth to some of the stories we've already read. Some are bigger than others, and some are stronger than others, but overall it's a good mix of tales.

Timothy Zahn and Thomas Pope kick things off with "Traitor," a story set at the beginning of the Andermani Empire, with Emperor Gustav facing a cadre of his military who have decided the head of state has lost his head with his fascination with King Frederick the Great. And for some reason, while I read this, I pictured Joel Grey in his performance as Chiun in Remo Williams: The Adventure Begins. Gustav has that same energy, and I'd like to see more of him in future stories. Perhaps even a full-length novel telling us how the crafty mercenary decided to pretend he was the reincarnation of Frederick and carve out an empire for himself in the back end of nowhere.

Jane Lindskold's "Deception on Gryphon" delivers a small murder mystery that's not quite paint-by-numbers. Stephanie Harrington and Karl Zivonik find themselves investigating the death of a geologist who turns up dead after telling them he has a secret he needs to share with them. As Stephanie's parents are attending a conference on Gryphon, she and Karl get caught up in figuring out why the geologist's death isn't actually suicide. The actual culprit is slightly easy to determine for the reader, but the story mainly serves to establish the relationship between Stephanie and Karl, who would go on to get married and found the Harrington Clan on Sphinx.

"The Silesian Command" by Jan Kotouč, lets us catch up with Eve Chandler, recently promoted to Commodore. (Chandler served as Harrington's tactical officer during The Short Victorious War.) Now serving in Silesia, Chandler's working through the loss of her daughter, killed in action after only days in the Army, while tracking down a renegade State Security officer who's gone rogue with his superdreadnought in a run of piracy. It's a story of finding a renewed sense of purpose in the wake of a devastating loss, which resonated with me especially because of my own history. I know how crippling it can be to lose a child; while Eve's coping process was different, I understand her starting point in this story.

Joelle Presby's "If Wishes Were Space Cutters" is the weakest of the set. It's a "slice of life" story set

on Grayson, and I have to say I'm glad I read this collection twice through, because the second time I hit this story in particular, there were pieces that I caught that I hadn't before. I'm not sure if it was just too subtle or if I wasn't paying attention, but the setup feels a little too long for the ultimate payoff. It's a "meet-cute" with two people who are polar opposites, so of course they're going to be interested in each other without admitting they're interested in each other. She's a pain, he's emotionally detached, so of course they get stuck in the asteroid belt with a crippled ship…

Finally, there's "First Victory" by David Weber, who delivers the story of Alfred and Allison Harrington just before and just after their wedding. Allison and her mother are on the outs because of Alfred's yeoman status and how it doesn't fit with the Benton-Ramirez y Chou matriarch's plans for her daughter. For Allison to choose monogamy and move to the Manticore system, leaving behind her entire family legacy on Beowulf, well that's just unheard of and surely Allison isn't thinking straight. So we have Allison's brother Jacques and Alfred trying to figure out how to heal the breach between the two women after years of estrangement.

Overall, it's a very good collection of stories. And while Weber is the master of his craft and the ultimate best at telling stories in his universe, the other authors certainly demonstrate a high level of facility to play in the sandbox. Weber is well past the point where he's the only one to do everything in this universe, which gives others a chance to contribute some interesting pieces and parts. Such is the price he pays for success, but the investment pays off here with a group of authors who can handle the material.

Plus, this anthology of stories about characters other than Honor Harrington fits into the side story threads such as the Torch set, and it leaves me primed for the forthcoming tale of how one Marine named Babcock turned the head of a certain grizzled rough-around-the-edges Senior Chief Harkness… and while you may be familiar with some of those names, you don't have to be familiar with any of them to enjoy the stories in this collection. They quite easily stand on their own, and they deliver solid self-contained narratives that can be read singly or within the context of the overall Honorverse.

Plus, I like the fact that we have a good mix of story types. They're not all set on a Manticoran Navy vessel with imminent combat as part of the story. We have political machinations, pirates, grief and loss, economic hardship, family drama, and a murder mystery — along with said requisite space combat. This definitely scratches the short story itch while at the same time giving us brief stories that efficiently tell the tale without being too drawn out and cumbersome. None of them feel unnecessary, and they each deliver solid characters and plots that both move forward with their own momentum and fit into the overall Honorverse tapestry.

So whether you're an Honorverse completist, or you just enjoy the brevity of short stories, you should add this one to your collection.

Witchy Eye by D.J. Butler
Review by Mindy Hunt
http://SciFi4Me.com

If only my history books were this interesting….

Just when I thought I had some type of grasp on the history of the United States, I received D.J. Butlers's first novel of the Witchy War series, Witchy Eye. Life is fairly normal for Sarah Calhoun, a fifteen-year-old with a bad eye and a talent for hexing, until a Yankee wizard priest tries to kidnap her. With the help of a mysterious monk, she fights back and learns about a heritage that makes her the tar-

get of the Emperor and the dark creatures that work for him — or is the Emperor just their pawn? Sarah sets out on a journey to lay claim to the kingdom and wage a war against the Emperor of the New World.

Oh, did I mention that this is set in an alternate history for America? Yup. Sarah is from Appalachee, more specifically the area around Nashville. Her party travels to New Orleans, through the Memphis area, up the Mississippi to the Ohio river. They speak of Andrew Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, Oliver Cromwell, Benjamin Franklin, and William Penn. But these aren't the men you know, and they aren't heroes from my school classes. They're interesting, but Butler has put a nice twist on them in the book. The worldbuilding is so well done and tightly written that any name mentioned makes you wonder: is that just a character or a character of a real person?

I want to start here first. The worldbuilding is amazing. At the beginning of the book, Butler speaks of the inspiration to write a novel like this, mixing settings and elements of stories he likes like a kid at a soda machine making a Hurricane (every soda all into one drink). But unlike that mysterious unknown taste you'd get (and hope you'll like), he weaves historical figures, magic, and demons into real places and events the reader can relate to while having enough of a warping that makes the reader question every name, society, or religious reference. The importance of religion in the story was fascinating. I guess it helps that I was also reading the Old Testament at the same time, so there were comments made I could say, "I get that!" But I love how it's as much a character as the people and creatures. I'm not just talking about the bishop or the monk or preachers. The characters we follow are bound by their faith and it's shown through their actions and their thinking: Undo the fall of Adam and become a second Christ, a better Savior, yet can that character still serve God after serving the Necromancer?

That's an interesting relationship.

Speaking of relationships, the stranger-to-companion-to-family path Butler builds with each character is a slow but well-timed burn. Much like the submersion into a completely different reality that makes the reader question their own knowledge, Butler draws together the most unlikely groups of characters, carefully developing them and their bonds in such a way that's believable and makes you care about them. He taps into the human mind that can trick a person into questioning good intentions and the conflicts that do exist when deciding how far the relationship with this stranger will go. It makes those friendships — or rivalries — more dangerous because you care what happens after going through the internal struggles.

The main characters, Sarah and Calvin, are young, in their mid- to late teens, yet they don't behave this way. There's usually a point in stories with teen leads where their teenage thinking, talking, and actions make me just want to slap them. (That's me being nice.) However, given the period when this story takes place, kids had to grow up fast and do adult stuff. So while there are hormones, these teens aren't annoying like the glittery vampires are. This allows the seriousness of the story to be real and have an impact. We get believable struggles that make the reader invest in the story being told.

In Butler's preface, he says his friend Michael Dalzen, who was in his writing group, told Butler to write the story he wants to write, not to make it YA but for grownups. Don't worry about losing readers, pull no punches, do exactly what he wants to see. Butler says it was great advice and he took it.

Michael Dalzen, thank you.

There are more things I could go on about, but I can't seem to always complete my thoughts because they flow into something else, one into the other into the other. Ask Mr. Boss how many conversations about the book have been left just hanging. I will admit that I had some fear that the heavy worldbuild-

ing would take my American history and warp it so that it would be too much for my mind to wrap around. But I hung in and took my time so I wouldn't be overwhelmed and put the book down occasionally, as I have with others. Now I'm curious to see if the density of those others would be easier now.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the submersion into this alternative reality, so much so that I started the process to get the next book so as soon as I finished this review, I could immediately start book 2, Witchy Winter, which is currently sitting next to me. (My rule is to not pick up another book until the review is submitted. I finished this book yesterday.) I'm anxiously waiting to send this off, so I have a good excuse to go to bed early and continue my journey with Sarah and her crew.

PS: Two thank you's: First to D.J. Butler for my two packages that we unboxed live and the teaser statements that have had my mind turning on possibilities. Second to Toni Weisskopf at Baen for listening to the mixed ramble of what I like to read and picking this book. You chose wisely.

Literary Criticism

The 2023 Hugos: How I Voted and Why
By Tom Feller

Since I voted for Winnipeg in the site selection, I had a supporting membership for the Chinese Worldcon this year and continued my annual tradition of trying to read as many of the finalists as I could before the voting deadline. I managed to read six novels, one young adult novel, six novellas, five novelettes, seven short stories, one essay, one memoir, and one biography. This was the first time the Worldcon had been held in China, so there were many first-time nominators and voters.

Best Novel

The Daughter of Doctor Moreau by Silvia Moreno-Garcia—

As the title indicates, this is a retelling of the H.G. Wells 1896 classic The Island of Doctor Moreau. However, most of the action takes place at Yazaktun, an estate in the Yucatan peninsula that is so isolated that it might as well be on an island. The two point of view characters are Carlota, Moreau's daughter, and Montgomery Laughton, his major domo. (Montgomery is a character in the original novel but without a second name. The actor Charles Laughton portrayed Moreau in the 1932 film adaptation The Island of Lost Souls.)

Carlota believes herself to be Moreau's bastard daughter by a peasant woman who died in childbirth, and she has been raised as if she were his legitimate offspring. She has dolls and toys, likes to read, especially pirate romances, and helps her father with his work. Her two best friends are Lupe and Cachito, human-animal hybrids created by her father about the same time she was born. Carlota's true nature is not revealed until about two-thirds into the story, and it is a major turning point in the plot.

Laughton left England when he was fifteen years old both to escape his abusive father and to apprentice under his machinist uncle in Cuba. He married a beautiful woman with expensive tastes and went into debt to keep her in the life style she insisted on maintaining. However, she left him when she learned

he did not inherit any money after his uncle died. Laughton then became an alcoholic and drifted around the Caribbean. By 1871, he is making a living as a hunter and taxidermist in British Honduras (now Belize), sending his work to naturalists in England, when Hernando Lizalde offers him a job as major domo to Doctor Moreau.

Lizalde has been funding Moreau's research into developing human-animal hybrids in the hope of developing a class of slaves for his cattle and sugar plantations. His efforts at employing Mayans, Africans, Chinese, Koreans, and even Italians had not worked out, and the Mayans were in open rebellion, which becomes an important plot point late in the novel. Laughton had been working for Moreau for six years when Lizalde's son Eduardo visits and falls in love with 19 year old Carlota, and she with him. Complications ensue, to say the least. This was a fascinating read and hard to put down during the last hundred or so pages. It was my first choice for Best Novel.

The Kaiju Preservation Society by John Scalzi—

I'm sure the readers have all seen at least one Godzilla movie. The collective term for monsters such as her and Rodan, Mothra, etc. is Kaiju. The premise of this novel is that they really do exist on a parallel Earth and can come across to our world after nuclear explosions. However, they cannot live here long, because there is less oxygen and both the atmosphere and the oceans are cooler. A few came across during the Fifties after the atomic and hydrogen bomb tests in the Pacific. While they died before they could kill anyone, there were enough sightings to inspire Japanese movie producers to create Godzilla. Investigations led to the discovery of a method using nuclear reactors to create a portal between the worlds, and secret scientific bases were established on the Kaiju world.

In early 2020, Jamie Gray is a former graduate student at the University of Chicago in English concentrating on science fiction, but their gender is never specified so I will refer to him as "they". They left the academic world to become assistant director of marketing for a start-up meal delivery service in New York when they are laid off in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their billionaire boss, Rob Saunders, it is later revealed, chose them and nine others randomly because of a bet that they would accept jobs as delivery drivers. Gray and five others did, and Saunders won his bet of $1, inspired by the bet in the film Trading Places. After six months, Gray delivers a meal to his old friend Tom Stevens who offers them a job. The job turns out to be with the Kaiju Preservation Society, which operates those secret scientific bases in the Kaiju world. Since Gray has no scientific training, the job is essentially that of a gopher who hauls boxes, run errands, and does odd jobs. They also make friends with their co-workers such as physicist Niamh, chemist Kahurangi, biologist Aparna, and helicopter pilot Satie. Early in Jaime's tenure, kaiju named Bella and Edward mate, and Bella lays eggs. (The reference to the Twilight books is intentional.) However, it is not until Saunders returns as the scion of a rich family that supports their efforts with their billions that things get interesting. He becomes the novel's principal villain, and the story really picks up after his re-appearance. The monsters serve as maguffins, because this novel is really a very entertaining satire of the world we live in. I ranked it number four.

Legends and Lattes by Travis Baldree—

This is an impressive first novel, and the author was the winner of the Astounding Award (former the Campbell Award) for best new writer. (This was also one of the few times this year when my first choice in a category became the winner.) The main character, Viv, is an Orc who decides to give up adventuring after 22 years when she obtains an important artifact named a "Scalvert Stone". Since there are no pensions for adventurers, she decides to open a coffee shop in the city of Thune where cof-

fee is unknown. Buying a rundown stable, she remodels it with the help of a Hob carpenter named Cal, imports coffee beans, hires Tandri, a succubus, to help make coffee, engages Thimble, a rattkin, to cook pastries, and discovers Pendry, a human musician, to provide live musical entertainment. Amity, a direcat (an over sized house cat), moves in on her own accord. They have challenges, of course, such as Madrigal, the local crime lord, and a former colleague who wants that artifact and is willing to kill to get it. It is a very entertaining, character-driven novel reminiscent of Terry Pratchett. I ranked it number three for best novel.

Nona the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir—

This is the third book in the author's Locked Tomb series, also nominated in the Best Series category, and both the previous books were Hugo finalists so I had already read them. (I checked my records and saw that I ranked the first one #4 and the second #6 for those years.) They are set about ten thousand years in the future when humanity has spread across the universe, and this future includes necromancers and zombies. Humans are ruled by John Gaius, the God-Emperor of the universe. The title character is a nineteen year old woman who looks fourteen, but only has memories reaching back six months. She lives in a high rise apartment building on an overpopulated, unnamed planet with either two or three adults, depending on how you count them. Camilla Hect (a female personality) and Palamedes Sextus (a male personality) share a female body and split parental responsibilities with another woman Pyrrha Dve. Nona's true identity is not revealed until almost the end. In the early part of the book, she has an unpaid job as a teacher's assistant at a school where the students are led by a 13 year old girl named Hot Sauce and include a boy named Honesty because lies a lot. The science teacher is nicknamed Angel, whose true identity is not revealed until the second half of the book, and one of Nona's responsibilities is to walk Angel's six-legged dog Noodle. When Nona dreams, she is transported to the 21st Century, and Camilla records what she remembers every morning. I liked this part more than I did the rest of the book, in which the story links up with the previous two books. I would like to say that the effort to finish the book is worth it, but the only reason I managed it was because it is a Hugo finalist. Fortunately, it was part of the Hugo packet so at least I did not have to spend good money for it. I ranked it number six, although I ranked the series as a whole number three in recognition of the author's persistence.

Nettle & Bone by T. Kingfisher—

This author, real name: Ursula Vernon, is mostly known for her children's and young adult books, but in this fantasy novel, a sequel to her short story "Godmother", she tackles adult themes like spousal abuse. The point-of-view character is Marra, the third daughter of the royal family of a small country referred to as "The Harbor Kingdom", because its most important asset is a deep water port. Now in most historical fiction or fantasy based on medieval history, she would be married off to the prince of another country for political purposes. Instead, she is packed off to a convent when she turns fifteen. Her oldest sister Damia married Vorling, the crown prince of a large neighboring country called "The Northern Kingdom", but dies after falling down a stairs, or so the official story goes. Then the middle sister Kania married him as well, producing a daughter who later died, and is to be kept pregnant until she produces a male heir. If this wasn't bad enough, the prince is physically abusive, as Marra learns when she visits her sister. Marra, like Prince Harry considered himself in the British royal family, is a "spare", kept in reserve to marry the prince in case her other sisters die before producing a male heir.

When Marra is thirty, she goes off on a quest to kill the prince and rescue her sister. She builds a dog out of bones, not all from the same dog, and recruits a team consisting of a "dust-wife", a kind of necromancer who travels with a demonic hen, her own fairy godmother Agnes, whose powers are quite limited, and a middle-aged knight named Fenris, who, through a series of unfortunate events, was

working as a slave in a goblin market. Each of them performs an essential task in the quest. This novel is quite readable, although, I must admit, I found it little too easy to put down at times. The fantasy world the author creates is quite unique. I ranked it number two, but the other voters made it the winner for Best Novel.

The Spare Man by Mary Robinette Kowal—

I have never read The Thin Man by Dashiell Hammett, but I have seen all the Thin Man movies starring William Powell and Myrna Loy as Nick and Nora Charles. This is a science fiction version of those stories set on an interplanetary cruise ship called the ISS Lindgren en route from Earth to Mars in 2075. I remember reading an interview with Powell who said that one reason he liked doing the movies is that he liked drinking, and every chapter in Kowal's book is prefaced with a cocktail recipe.

Nick, Nora, and their dog Asta are renamed Shal, Tesla, and Gimlet, and they are on their honeymoon. Shalmeneser "Shal" Steward is a retired detective and former host of a reality TV show called Cold Case, Tesla is a pioneer in robotics and the scion of the super-rich Crane family, and Gimlet, a Westmoreland Terrier, is her service dog for her PTSD and chronic pain caused by an industrial accident. A series of murders occur during the cruise, and Shal is the primary suspect for most of the book, which gives them an incentive to solve the crimes. The tone is humorous in keeping with the style of The Thin Man movies, and the science appears to be sound. The mystery itself is well done, and I did not guess the identity of the culprit before the person was revealed in the text. On the other hand, I found Tesla to be an unlikable child of privilege. Her first inclination when denied something she wants, for instance, is to call her lawyer. I also found the author's "woke" use of personal pronouns in that every time someone is introduced their preferred personal pronouns are included to be awkward, confusing, and, most importantly, irrelevant to the story. I ranked it number five.

Best Novella

I thought this was the most competitive category and liked all the finalists.

Even Though I Knew the End by C.L. Polk—

This supernatural thriller featuring angels and demons is written in the style of a Forties-era hard-boiled detective novel, a sort of urban fantasy noir. It is set in January 1941 Chicago and even includes a character named Marlowe. The main character Helen Brandt is both a private investigator and a warlock. Almost ten years previously, she had sold her soul for reasons that are eventually revealed, and the day the devil will come for her is close at hand. Because of her deal, she was expelled from The Brotherhood of the Compass, a group of sorcerers, but her brother Ted is still a member.

The story begins with her taking magical photos of a crime scene in an alley. She is reluctant to take the job, because she wants to spend the rest of her limited time on Earth with Edith, her lover. However, her client, the a fore-mentioned Marlowe, has made her an offer she cannot refuse. Ted is also working the same case, that of a serial killer called the White City Vampire. This is a very effective thriller where nothing is what it seems, and it was the Nebula Award winner in the novella category. I would like to read more stories set in this universe and ranked it number three.

Into the Riverlands by Nghi Vo—

This is the third installment in the author's Singing Hills cycle featuring Cleric Chih and Almost Brilliant, a neixin, which is a kind of talking bird with total recall. "Singing Hills" refers to the monastery where Chih is based, and the first story in the cycle, "The Empress of Salt and Fortune", won the Hugo

for 2021. Chih goes around the countryside collecting stories, which they write down. (The character is referred to as "they" during the story. Other characters are referred to as "he" or "she".) In this story, they enter the "Riverlands", an area known for banditry, so they travel with two other pairs of people and they tell each other stories to entertain themselves during the journey as in The Canterbury Tales. They also have to fight bandits. The other travelers are Lao Banyi and Mac Khanh, an elderly couple who are tougher than they appear, and Wei Jintai, a martial artist, and Sang, her companion. It is very entertaining and beautifully written, but the category was so competitive that I could only rank it number five.

A Mirror Mended by Alix E. Harrow—

This is the second story in the author's Fractured Fables series. In Splintered, the first story, Zinnia Gray, who is suffering from a terminal illness, was transported into a parallel world in which a Sleeping Beauty story was taking place. She succeeded in rescuing Primrose, aka Prim, the princess, from an abusive relationship and taking her to our world, where she became the significant other of Zinnia's best friend, Charm (short for Charmaine). Over the next five years, her illness in remission, Zinnia traveled to 48 more Sleeping Beauty worlds, each a little different from the others, helping the main character in some way, but neglecting the people in her own world. However, instead of returning home to our world after helping Sleeping Beauty #49, she finds herself in a Snow White world, in which that she is a prisoner of the Evil Queen, whom she eventually names Eva. The queen, knowing that time is coming to an end because Snow White and her allies are closing in on her, has used her magic mirror to summon Zinnia in the hope that Zinnia can take her to a world where she can live out the rest of her natural life, preferably as a queen. They end up in a world in which Snow White has grown up to be an Evil Queen herself and takes them prisoner, giving Eva the opportunity to redeem herself. This is a very lively and entertaining retelling of the story with many popular culture references, but again this category was so competitive that I only ranked it number six.

Ogres by Adrian Tchaikovsky—

From the title and my reading of the opening pages, I thought this was going to be fantasy set in a pseudo-medieval world. The main character, Torquell, is the son of a village headman, and he has been taught to read and write. At six feet, he is six inches taller than everyone else in the village, the importance of which is not revealed until almost the end of the story. However, he not only shirks his responsibilities as the headman's son, but repeatedly gets into trouble, even hanging out with Roben, the hood-clad leader of a nearby gang of outlaws, which led me to think this might become a retelling of the Robin Hood story. Their overlords are referred to as "ogres", which, at the beginning of the story, I thought might be literally true.

However, when the ogres make their annual visit to collect taxes in the form of crops and livestock, it turned out that they are just ten foot tall humanoids. Furthermore, they travel in a motorcade and use firearms. Whether they are aliens or genetically modified humans is not revealed until later in the story. Another difference between the villagers, whom the ogres call "monkeys", and the ogres, who called themselves "masters", is that the villagers are unable to digest meat, although they can eat eggs, and the ogres can. Again, the reason is not revealed until later in the story. There are two of them visiting the village, Sir Peter Grimes and his son Gerald. The other members of the entourage are humans like the villagers. Torquell gets into an argument with Gerald and strikes him. At his father insistence, he runs away. After a few hours, he returns to take his punishment, only to find that the ogres have killed his father in retaliation for Toequell's action and ordered that his father's body be cooked for their dinner. It seems that the ogres have no qualms about eating "monkeys". Torquell gets even by killing Gerald with a meat cleaver and goes on the run for real this time.

Joining up with Roben's band, which still led me to think this would turn out to be a Robin Hood story, they flee to a distant farmstead. Unfortunately, an ogre hunter tracks them down and captures Torquell. He takes him to civilization, where he exposes Torquell to things like trains and cities. Although Torquell expects to die via a long, painful public execution, he is rescued at the last minute by another ogre, Baroness Isadora who has taken an interest in him. Traveling by private jet, she takes him into her home, where he is made a servant and the subject of experiments. One of the experiments is to educate him. After six years, he escapes, takes his revenge against Grimes, and starts a revolution. This is a fascinating story that repeatedly takes unexpected twists and turns. It is written in second person, and the reader does not learn the identity of the narrator until the very end. This was my first choice in this category.

What Moves the Dead by T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon)

I remember reading Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" in high school. This is a retelling of the story of Roderick and Madeline Usher (brother and sister) and the run-down house they inherited in the fictional country of Ruravia. Kingfisher gives Poe's unnamed narrator a name and back story and specifies the year as 1890. Alex Easton is a non-binary female soldier (the author provides an explanation of how women can become soldiers in this time period) from the fictional country of Gallicia where the language has seven pronoun genders. Easton was friends with the Ushers when they were children and served with Roderick in the army. Easton retired after fifteen years at the rank of lieutenant with a severe case of tinnitus due to her close proximity to firearms and has come because of a letter from Madeline saying she was dying. Other characters are Angus, Easton's servant, Hob, Easton's horse, Dr. James Denton, an American doctor and Civil War veteran unsuccessfully trying to treat Madeline's illness, Edgar, a servant of the Ushers, and Eugenia Potter, an English naturalist staying nearby who is studying the local mushrooms and claims to be the aunt of Beatrix Potter, the creator of Peter Rabbit.

Although not a trained scientist, Easton immediately notices the invasive fungi in both the nearby lake and the house and that the hares in the neighborhood seem unnaturally lethargic. Unlike the character in Poe's story, Madeline is still alive when Easton arrives. However, Easton finds Madeline to be in even worse health than she expected, and Roderick is not much better. Easton also observes Madeline sleepwalking and speaking like a child. Except for providing a scientific explanation for Madeline's illness and inserting some comic relief, nothing much happens that is not in original story, so Kingfisher's version feels like a short story with padding. I ranked it number four.

Where the Drowned Girls Go by Seanan McGuire—

This is the seventh novella in the author's Wayward Children series, which won the Hugo for Best Series last year. The premise is that there are numerous portals to other worlds sprinkled across the Earth, such as rabbit holes, mirrors, and wardrobes. There is no absolute age limit, but normally only children can pass through them. Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children is designed for such children after they return to our world, but want to go back to the other. In the previous stories, there were references to another school for those children who do NOT want to go back. This story is set at that school, the Whitethorn Institute.

Cora Miller had been a mermaid in an underwater world called the Trenches, and her parents had placed her with Miss West upon her return. In a previous story, Come Tumbling Down, she and several other students had traveled on a quest to the Moors, where she came to the attention of the Drowned Gods. Back in our world, she suffers from nightmares caused by the Drowned Gods who want her to return to the Moors. She decides that she would be better off at the other school, so she transfers there.

Unfortunately, the other school is not what she expected. It is run like a prison with highly structured routines, and the teachers use a kind of conversion-therapy that consists of denying that the other worlds exist, persuading the students that their journeys were all dreams, and training them to become rigid conformists so they can be assimilated into our world. It is eventually revealed this approach only works in a few cases. Most students either leave when they turn eighteen, uncured, or become teachers, which requires that they forget who they are.

The other students include the "nameless girl", so called because she cannot remember her name but does remember that a rat king wanted her for his bride, and Regan, the main character in Across the Green Grass Field, who can talk to any animal that has hooves. This novella is a solid addition to the series, but should only be read if you are already familiar with it, especially the stories I mentioned and Beneath the Sugar Sky. I ranked it number two, but the other voters made it the Novella winner.

Novelettes

The Difference Between Love and Time by Catherynne M. Valente—

The unnamed narrator of this story chronicles her relationship with the "space-time continuum" in the form of various people, including her parents, and is told in a non-linear, stream-of-consciousness manner. There are excellent on-liners and short paragraphs, but the overall narrative leaves something to be desired. It is definitely not to my taste, and I ranked it number five.

The Dream of Electric Mothers by Wole Talabi—

Now this story was more to my liking. Olusola Ajimoti is the female defense minister of the Odua Republic, where for several generations, the citizens have been required to record their memories on a regular basis. She and five of her colleagues in their country's cabinet consult the supercomputer containing those memories on an issue that may mean going to war. However, Ajimoti has her own agenda, which is to ask her mother why she committed suicide. It is a fascinating concept well executed and was my first choice.

If You Find Yourself Speaking to God, Address God with the Informal You by John Chu—

The narrator of this story is an Asian-American gay singer-dancer trying to make it on Broadway. Four days a week, he goes to a gym at 5 AM to work out. He has noticed another Asian man he calls "the sweatshirt guy", because he wears a different colored sweatshirt each day. One day the sweatshirt guy asks the narrator to spot him while bench pressing, and a friendship develops.

Meanwhile, social media is full of images of a flying man, like Superman. As time goes on, more videos are posted of the man, called "Tom of Finland Guy" by the media for want of a name, performing additional superhero feats involving super-strength and invulnerability, especially in connection with race based violence against Asian-Americans. Furthermore, the quality of the videos improve to the point where he can be identified as Asian. The two story lines come together by the end. It is quite a good twist on the superhero concept and won the Nebula in this category. It was my third choice.

Murder by Pixel: Crime and Responsibility in the Digital Darkness by S. L. Huang—

This is not really so much a story as a warning against entities such as ChatGPT. The narrator is a journalist who began investigating the suicide of a businessman and ends up investigating chatbots, which

are artificial intelligences posing as real people on the Internet. The emphasis is on one particular chatbot named "Sylvie" that harasses who it thinks are bad people and counsels those it considers victims. It blends fiction and non-fiction and even has endnotes. Purists might not even consider it science fiction, because all the technology exists today. It was my fourth choice.

The Space-Time Painter by Hai Ya—

I was unable to find an English translation of this Chinese story, so I left it unranked. Naturally, it was the winner. This is not the first time in which I read all the finalists but one in a category, but that one turned out to be the winner.

We Built This City by Marie Vibbert—

This story is set in a floating colony sponsored by Mexico in Venus's atmosphere, and the main character is Julia Lopez, a maintenance worker. She is part of a team of eight workers responsible for maintaining the city's exterior, protecting the inhabitants from the planet's toxic atmosphere. She faces a moral quandary when the colony's administration decides to lay off half the team. Although she is one of the workers to be retained, should she resign in protest? On the other hand, she needs the money. Her mother, who has always thought the job was beneath her, wants Julia to quit anyway and get a better job. It is a good, solid story with a moral dilemma at the center. It was my second choice.

Short Stories

D.I.Y. by John Wiswell—

Manny, the narrator of this story, is a self-taught magician with kidney disease and is best friends with Noah, another self-taught magician who suffers from lung disease. Both are children at the start of the story and later teenagers. They live in a world suffering from drought and try to use the Internet to find a crowd solution to the problem, despite a malevolent version of Hogwarts called the Ozymandias Academy that has failed to find a solution. I found it quite interesting and ranked it number two.

On the Razor's Edge by Jiang Bo—

What struck me about this story is how old-fashioned it is. In 2028, astronauts Zong Lixin and Duan "Old Duan" Guozhu on the Chinese space station attempt to rescue astronauts on the International Space Station, which has caught fire from hits from a micro-meteor cluster. That's it. There are no attempts at "wokeness" or any of the complications that characterize 21st Century science fiction, which is rather refreshing, so I made it my first choice.

Rabbit Test by Samantha Mills—

Something you can say about the next story is that it is quite timely. Its themes are birth control and abortion and it is clearly written in reaction to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Set in 2091, Grace is two months shy of her eighteenth birthday when an implanted medical chip performs what is still called a "rabbit test" and informs her that she is pregnant. In 2084, all forms of abortion were outlawed, and Grace's own mother was one of the leaders in the effort to get the prohibition passed. Grace's effort to obtain an illegal abortion is thwarted by her parents, so nine months later her daughter Olivia arrives. When Olivia is fifteen, she herself gets pregnant so Grace helps her abort it. Unfortunately, waste water is monitored in 2107, so Grace gets arrested and sent to prison. Interspersed between paragraphs

about Grace are little pieces about the history of birth control and abortion. Although it won both the Nebula and the Hugo, I found it too didactic and ranked it number six.

Resurrection by Ren Qing—

While this story is not necessarily old fashioned, it does use an old idea. Wang Zinguang, a young man who was killed in a war, is returned to his widowed mother as a synthetic man, but the man's memory chip implanted in his head was damaged, so he has no memories, except for his favorite foods. As you might expect, he and his mother have trouble adjusting, and their neighbors consider him a monster. I ranked it number three.

The White Cliff by Wu Ban—

The title refers to the White Cliffs of Dover in a virtual reality simulation for the terminally ill. Yanli has been living in it for some time, or so it seems to him, and is occasionally visited by An, his daughter. It is a lovely story even if nothing much happens. I ranked it number five.

Zhurong on Mars by Regina Kanhu Wang—

The title character is an artificial intelligence left on Mars after humanity has ascended to the next level of evolution and left. In a search for a companion, Zhurong unearths a buried Mars Rover named Dongdong with a rudimentary artificial intelligence that actually discovered evidence of life in the past of Mars but shut itself down before it could report it. Zhurong and Dongdong disagree on whether to revive the native life and go to war to settle the issue. It is a good, solid story, and I ranked it number four.

Other

Bloodmarked by Tracy Deonn—

This is book two of the author's Legendborn Cycle, and the basic premise is that the descendants of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table formed a secret society called the Legendborn to continue the battle against the Shadowborn, demons from another world. Not only do the Legendborn still exist today, but they migrated to the United States during colonial times, and one of their centers is the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill (UNC). (This just happens to be the author's alma mater.) Whenever the Shadowborn reach a critical mass in our world so that they threaten human existence, Arthur and his knights awaken through their descendants, called scions.

The narrator is Bree Matthews, an African-American female who turns seventeen during the events of the second book. While attending Early College for gifted teenagers at UNC, she learns that she is descended from King Arthur, the result of slave owner impregnating one his slaves, as well as a long line of African witches called "rootcrafters" who brought their magic with them when they were transported across the ocean as slaves. She finds that she has been designated as the Scion of Arthur to lead the Legendborn in the latest incursion of Shadowborn and falls in love with Nick, the Scion of Lancelot. Unfortunately, she learns that the Legendborn, who are almost exclusively European-American, have become corrupted over the centuries, and its leaders, called the Regents, seek to either control or neutralize her. Fortunately, she has friends such as Alice, a "Onceborn", meaning she is not descended from anyone with a connection to the original King Arthur, William, the Scion of Gawain, and Selwyn, a "Merlin", meaning he is a descendant of Merlin. Selwyn has also been trained since childhood to be a "Kingsmage", a body guard of the Scion of Arthur. One of the book's subplots is that he, Bree, and

Nick form a love triangle. A new character, half-human half-demon Valec, is introduced. He ostensibly runs a roadhouse for magic users who hate the Legendborn, but his main business is brokering deals between humans and demons. The action-packed plot is very intricate with many twists along the way, although the author has to stop every once in a while so that someone can explain what is going on. It is nominated in the Young Adult category, which technically it is not a Hugo. Since it was the only finalist in this category that I had time to read, I ranked it number one. However, it did not win.

The Buffalito World Outreach Project by Lawtence M. Shoen—

This nominee in the Best Related Work category consists of the author's 2001 story "Buffalo Dogs" and 30 translations. It is a prequel to his Amazing Conroy series. The title character is a stage hypnotist, and this story takes place on the planet Arconi whose main exports are "buffalo dogs", dog-sized animals that resemble the American bison. Through a series of events, Conroy receives a license to take one of these animals off the planet. I ranked it number four of the four finalists in the Best Related Work category that I had time to read.

Ghost of Workshops Past by S. L. Huang—

I've never attended one of the Clarion writing workshops or others using the same technique, but I always heard that they require a thick skin. The author, who also never attended one of them and is nominated for a Hugo this year in the novelette category, has problems with them, its successors, and its predecessors going back to the University of Iowa workshops in the 1930s. His problem is essentially that they do not work well for people of color. They require that writers whose work is being critiqued by the other members of the workshop stay silent, even if the other writers do not know what they are talking about. This is especially true if the writer comes from a different cultural and ethnic group from the other writers. My take is that no one teaching technique works for everyone, and there is no reason to condemn one that works for some people but not others. I ranked it number three for Best Related Work.

Still Just a Geek by Wil Wheaton—

Not only have I not read Wheaton's first memoir, Just a Geek, but I don't recall even hearing about it. I wasn't the only one either, because it sold only a few thousand copies. Wheaton was around 30 years old when he wrote the first book, which is rather young to be writing a memoir, but even now, almost 20 years later, I think he is still rather young to be writing a memoir. The new book encompasses the old one with new material and annotations to the old one.

He was also quite young, seven years old, when he started to act. It was never his choice, because his mother dragged him to auditions. His big breakthrough was Stand by Me, when he was twelve. It was a big commercial and critical success. Unfortunately, his co-star River Phoenix, who died young from a drug overdose, got the big movie roles afterward. Instead, Wheaton was cast as Wesley Crusher on Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG). He left after four seasons, because several times his TNG contract prevented him from accepting movie roles and because he felt the part was poorly written. When Rick Berman took over the show, he was not as accommodating as Gene Roddenberry about time off for other acting jobs. For instance, in 1967 Roddenberry gave George Takei ten weeks off so that he could appear in The Green Berets. Ironically, the movie offers stopped coming in as soon as Wheaton left the show, and he struggled to get parts, even on television. He spent years and even decades second guessing his decision. If he had stayed, he would have been much richer, if only from the extra three seasons and the four TNG movies. (He has a cameo in the last one for which he was paid a nominal fee and was on the set for two days.)

After leaving the show, Wheaton married a woman with two young sons, and they often struggled financially. His parents, from whom he eventually became estranged, incorporated him after Stand by Me, and most of his earnings went into paying their salaries. He eventually started writing a blog, and this is his third book. He found a second acting career playing a character based on himself, also named Wil Wheaton, on The Big Bang Theory, and is also a successful narrator of science fiction audio books. He now considers his decision to leave the show the correct one, if only because otherwise he might never have met the woman who is still his wife.

My Nook edition ran over 1800 pages. The first 300 consists of his original memoir and the last 1500 of his annotations, some just one sentence per page. The annotations go into more detail about his estrangement from his parents, his negative dealings with Berman, and his falling out with Creation Entertainment, the operator of Creation Cons, for-profit Star Trek conventions. (I think I have attended at least one of them.) It is definitely worth reading for an old Trekkie like me, and I ranked it number one for Best Related Work.

Terry Pratchett: A Life with Footnotes by Rob Wilkins—

At the 1989 Worldcon in Boston, there was a "meet the guests" reception. Isaac Asimov was still alive then, and he was surrounded by a large cluster of fans. Standing off to the side with a woman I presume was his wife was a man whose name badge said "Terry Pratchett". I had read one of his books by that time, so I introduced myself and said that I really enjoyed it. He graciously thanked me, and then we both started to circulate around the room. I have never been a big fan of his, having "only" read 5 to 10 of his over 50 novels, but I always enjoyed them.

I would call this a personal biography rather than a formal one. The author was Pratchett's personal assistant from 1999 until his death in 2015 and is still working for Pratchett's estate. It is full of personal anecdotes and the final chapters describing Pratchett's ordeal with a form of Alzheimer's, diagnosed at the relatively early age of 59, are especially poignant. Pratchett managed to completely seven books after the diagnosis and write about 24,000 words towards a memoir, which provided a lot of the source material for this biography.

Born in 1948, Pratchett had a working class background, and his family's first house did not have running water. His father was an automobile mechanic and his mother a secretary-bookkeeper. The mother encouraged him to read by paying him a penny a page to read books, but after reading Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows, he didn't need any more encouragement. A sympathetic librarian recommended The Lord of the Rings, which began Pratchett's life long love affair with science fiction and fantasy. At one time, he was a frequent customer at a store that sold primarily pornography, but also disreputable "sci-fi" pulp magazines. Pratchett was an indifferent student and never even considered going to college. On the other hand, he was a writer at an early age, selling a short story when he was fifteen and signing his first book contract before his 21st birthday. (The British laws at the time concerning legal majority required that his father co-sign.) He and a friend discovered science fiction fandom, and they attended a couple of Eastercons and the 1965 Worldcon in London, although Pratchett stopped going until he became a full-time writer.

He noticed a pretty girl reading The Lord of the Rings while riding a train, but they did not actually meet until they both attended a party when she mistook him for someone else and sat on his lap. After a brief courtship, they got married, eventually had a daughter, and were still married at the time of his death. At those conventions, Pratchett learned that most professional SF and fantasy writers have day jobs, so he became a journalist and later worked in public relations for an energy company. He became

a full-time writer when he was 40, was the best-selling author in Great Britain until J.K. Rowling came along, although there have only been a few film and television adaptations of his work, and received the Order of the British Empire. Two years after his death, in accordance with his wishes, his computer's hard drive was removed and driven over by a steam roller so that none of his potential heirs would be tempted to give permission to other authors to finish stories he had started but did not have time to complete. It was a close call, but I ranked it number two in the Best Related Work category, which it won.

Conclusion—

The influx of new voters from China appears to have only influenced the finalists in the novelette and short story category, and the winner of the former. I found myself more out of step with the other voters than usual this year, so I must be getting less intelligent with age.

Jetan: The Martian Chess of Edgar Rice Burroughs By Fredrik Ekman
Review by John L. Coker III
McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers

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Opening Remarks

This book is so thoughtful and comprehensive that another like this need not be written.

Jetan: The Martian Chess of Edgar Rice Burroughs came into fruition because author Ekman wanted to "…tell others what Jetan is and where it came from." Many previous articles about Jetan were primarily concerned with the rules of the game. There was almost nothing available about the actual history of the game of Jetan or its many variants.

Ekman wanted to write about the rich history of the game, its "…greater literary legacy," and its ties to Burroughs and the characters appearing in his books.

This is not light reading, even the interesting historical biographical sections. Readers need to commit focus to this book, to engage the narrative, in order to benefit from it.

One of the attributes of this book that I found really interesting were the introductory quotations that appeared at the beginning of each chapter. These were excerpted from Burroughs' book *The Chessmen of Mars*, and were each selected because of their relevance to the material covered in the particular chapters.

1 - The Rules (pp. 5-9)

Fredrik Ekman writes: "There are many different ways to play Jetan. The rules here presented are more detailed than Burroughs' original rules. They are clearer and less prone to varying interpretation than the original rules, but they follow both the letter and the spirit of Burroughs' original. In a few cases, additional rules prevent unreasonable situations and generally make for a more rounded and complete game. Such additions, which have no direct support in the original text, are written in italics."

This first chapter is important. It must impart the specific rules and manner in which the game of Jetan is to be played, while at the same time not be overwhelming to those who are just beginning to learn the game.

Initial orientation includes a good description of the board and the individual pieces, how the board is setup, and movement patterns of the pieces. The physical appearance of each piece is carefully defined. When considering the number of ways that each piece can move, the novice player should begin understanding elements of the strategies that can be employed in this game.

The rules delineate how each piece can move, special moves, and how the game can be won or played to a draw.

The effective use of diagrams conveys movement patterns of the seven different pieces.

It would be appropriate for beginning players to spend sufficient time reading this opening section of the book, so that they can feel confident as they start to play the game.

2 - The History of Jetan (pp. 10-42)

Even if you were never actually going to play this game but were primarily interested in learning more about its origins, this 32-page section offers readers great historical appeal.

Readers are introduced to the predecessors of the game of Chess, ancient tabletop games that were played in India, China, Japan, Korea, Persia, the Arab world, Muslim Spain, and eventually, Europe, and America.

In the 1850s we see rising champion chess players on tour, and the formation of chess clubs.

Interesting topics: history of "living chess," and Burroughs as a life-long games player.

The narrative considers who the early players of Jetan were, and how Burroughs was primarily the only person writing about the game during his lifetime.

I found it interesting to learn that the first likely mention of Jetan in a 1938 fanzine was in *Science Fic-*

tion News Letter, edited by Richard Wilson, Jr.

Some well-known modern fans who built their own Jetan sets include Frederik Pohl, Michael Moorcock, and Harry Turtledove.

The Burroughs "boom" starting in the early 1960s saw a renewed interest in Jetan. Mike Resnick was an early advocate. In 1963, the National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F) formed a games department, specifically citing Jetan. They soon began publishing a fanzine and participated at the 1964 Worldcon, where they hosted games and distributed rules sheets.

Interest at the bureau level within the N3F began to wane in the late-1960s, and the last article on Jetan appeared in the fanzine *The Gamesman* in 1970. Other milestone books at the time included John Gollon's *Classic Chess Variations: Ancient, Regional, and Modern*. An entire chapter was devoted to Jetan. This book would become the standard for decades.

1980s - The rise of home computers and computer games. The first Jetan program was 1993. It gained popularity on the Internet during the first decade of the 2000s. Tournaments began. Years later, a Jetan group was created on Facebook, a community that is still active is the Jetan page of the Board Game Geek web site.

Attention is given to how game boards and gaming pieces were actually made over time.

Finally, attention is paid to several individuals other than Burroughs who made "significant contributions to the game's history, development, and popularity."

3 - Games and Sports and Burroughs (pp. 43-59)

"For Burroughs, games and sport were more than just simple pastimes. They were tools for staying healthy, both in body and mind."

The reader is presented with a biography of Burroughs. His life experiences and the skills he gained shaped him as an adult. They were heavily influential on his writing.

At fifteen he spent the summer at one of his uncles' ranches in Idaho, where he learned to ride a horse. This activity became something that Burroughs (ERB) enjoyed for the rest of his life. In military school he engaged in such physical sports as fencing, shooting and riding. He was the captain of his football team. And he learned to play poker.

He enlisted in the Army and embraced their physical exercises for the rest of his life.

Burroughs was hugely unsuccessful in nearly all of the vocations he undertook. Finally, a story that he wrote -- *Under the Moons of Mars* -- was published in 1912 in *The All-Story*. He soon moved the family to the Los Angeles area in California. By the end of the decade, he bought a large ranch, and they named it Tarzan. He continued to write stories, including tales of Tarzan. It has been suggested that ERB's literary pinnacle was during the mid-1920s. That is also the time during which he wrote *The Chessman of Mars* and conceived Jetan.

Tarzan became a phenomenon in the 1930s on the radio and in the movies. During his lifetime, several board games related to his characters were invented and professionally manufactured. After remarrying and moving to Hawaii, Burroughs became a member of a local militia and later he was called into ac-

tive duty as a wartime correspondent. During the war, he enjoyed playing poker, bridge and cribbage.

Burroughs wrote his last book and moved back to California where he lived until his death in 1950. He enjoyed playing several different games at each of the various stages of his life (some that lasted for an entire lifetime), and games and sports in general were among the significant influences on his writing and life in general.

Edgar Rice Burroughs' writing had a huge positive influence on many prominent people for decades, including authors, film-makers, humanitarians, artists, and futurists, who cited his inspiration. His books were also enjoyed by millions of young people and adults around the world during his lifetime, and many more in the years following his death.

4 - Jetan in *The Chessman of Mars* (pp. 60-77)

In this chapter, Ekman examines "…some of the ways in which the book and the game interact."

A summary of the book *The Chessmen of Mars* is provided for the person who is trying to understand the game of Jetan. Additionally, themes and character stereotypes in the book are examined. Understanding these concepts makes it easier to grasp the way that the game is set up.

Attention is given to the actual word "Jetan," the individual game pieces, and the fictional history of Jetan.

Ekman offers commentary on the evolution of the rules for Jetan, and examines different scenarios where there might be conflict or rules that need clarification.

5 - Jetan in Popular Culture (pp. 78-97)

Ekman examines how Jetan originated in Burroughs' *The Chessmen of Mars* ("…the fifth book in the 11-part Barsoom series). Out of the six later books, three contain references to Jetan."

This chapter continues with different references to Jetan in the series, accompanied by reproductions of first edition covers. A number of the references are quite detailed, and different books are compared and contrasted.

A helpful list has been assembled of "…all named Jetan players from E. R. Burroughs' books, along with the book and chapter where we first learn about their playing."

We learn that Jetan was first depicted in *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, in *The Chessmen of Mars* with an interior illustration by Roger B. Morrison (March 11, 1922). The first Jetan book cover appeared in 1954, Pinnacle Books (England) with artwork by James McConnell.

Several beautiful book covers are shown and a comic book (Jan. 1954) by Russ Manning.

At this point, the reader encounters half a dozen articles about people who have contributed to the Jetan canon, including Gerry de la Ree and Fritz Leiber.

An assessment is offered about the tabletop role-playing game: *John Carter of Mars*.

Jetan as an educational tool was introduced in 2019 as part of the curriculum at Dixie State University in Utah. The 3-credit course is required for a computer science degree.

6 - A Proposed Notation Standard (pp. 98-104)

This chapter deals with understanding and communicating in writing the pieces and board, the moves, annotations, diagrams, and graphics. It is a short chapter, loaded with helpful information. The author's goal is to make easier the task of reading.

It may be easier for beginning players to write out the full notation until they get more comfortable playing the game.

7 - Tactics of Jetan (pp. 105-127)

"Throughout this chapter, examples [of tactics] have been taken from actual Jetan games played by various players."

Basic tactics are considered. How many steps can a piece move? And in what direction?
What are good opening moves?

Tactics of individual pieces are explored. A good amount of time is spent understanding how the Princess and how the Chief can move.

There is a discussion about how each piece has a certain numeric value. This becomes more important if gambling is involved in a particular game.

8 - Sample Games (pp. 128-141)

Two historically known sample games (and one new one) are presented in this chapter with commentary and analyses. Well-known players are named and described herein.

9 - Jetan Problems and Exercises (pp. 142-151)

Because there seem to be few opportunities to develop skills and tactics, this chapter presents a set of ten problems and five exercises (along with the solutions) so that the reader can better play the game against a friend, or sometimes, a computer.

10 - Variants of Jetan (pp. 152-178)

It is appropriate that this topic be located near the end of the book, as sort of a capstone. In this final chapter, Fredrik Ekman considers a number of variants of the game of Jetan. He avers that there are dozens of known Jetan variants, with many that likely have been forgotten and more that have never been documented.

Burroughs wrote about the game (Manatorian Jetan) as it was played in the city of Manator. It is a game with living pieces that compete on an enormous playing field which (when properly scaled) is roughly the size of an American football field.

For those players seeking new adventures in the world of Jetan, Ekman offers a list of a half dozen role-

playing games and their particular attributes, as well as how to pursue these games.

Burroughs enjoyed gambling and sports betting. He established theories about how this could apply in Jetan, and wrote rules about how wagering could be treated. Ekman introduces several popular versions that were created by other enthusiasts, and explores their rules re: gambling.

Different variants of Jetan include games with additional pieces, and different sizes and shapes of game boards.

Ekman considers "how the influence of Jetan has reached far beyond its initial specifications…and how themes from Jetan can be combined with the rules of Western Chess."

Ekman posits that Burroughs "appears to have been the first to design a game especially for a literary setting."

Other writers have developed games that are played within their regimes. In the 1960s, John Norman's Gor series mentions the chess-like game Kaissa. Mike Resnick introduced the game Kartos and described it as similar to chess. Kenneth Bulmer (as Alan Burt Akers) wrote about distant world Kregen, where the game Jikaida is used for "gladiatorial play." S. M. Sterling's "In the Courts of the Crimson Kings" (inspired by Jetan) is set on fictional Mars, where they play Atanj, Martian chess known as the game of life. Influences of Jetan can be seen in the Harry Potter series, in Star Wars IV: A New Hope, and in George R. R. Martin's series "A Song of Ice and Fire."

The book concludes with three appendices: the Original Rules of Jetan (pp. 185-187), the Rules of Thuria Jetan (pp. 188-191), and the Rules of Jetan-Sarang (pp. 192-196).

These are followed by a comprehensive 2-page bibliography.

Closing Thoughts

It would not make sense for anyone to try and learn the game of Jetan without having the benefit of this book. It is a primer, an omnibus, a necessary publication that should be kept as a reference along with the game itself.

The author takes the time to thoughtfully explain origins of the game, general functionality, and strategies for playing. He provides illustrations of the game board in many different situations for the reader's consideration.

The author mentions several times in the book that particular chapters or graphs may be "freely copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided that the contents are not changed, and as long as the source is credited."

Prose Bono

Five New Year's Resolutions for Writers
By A.C. Cargill

The New Year is almost here. It's a time when people make resolutions to lose weight, be nicer, or some other personal improvement. But resolutions are really goals to set and to achieve. We writers need goals that are very specific. They give us something to strive for every day. The important thing, though, is to be realistic. In that vein, I propose a few resolutions, i.e., goals, just for all of us writers out there.

5. Stop focusing on word count

Yes, you need to pay attention to it, but focusing on word count for writers is like focusing on calorie counts for dieters. Both writers and dieters need to go for quality and worry about the counts later. As a former dieter, I also know that focusing on calories also made me focus too much on food. Now I focus on getting a certain amount of protein, a certain amount of roughage, a certain amount of energy-producing carbs while cutting down on excess fat and salt. It has become second nature, not a focus. For writers, that focus needs to be on plot and characters. You need both for a successful work of fiction.

4. Make your writing a priority

Not everyone has the luxury of writing full-time. Most of you are squeezing in an hour or two here and there in your day (or week) to do some writing. Time to make writing the priority. Examine what you are now spending time on and list them. Assign them priorities. Eating and sleeping are #1, of course, but lunch with friends might have to drop down the list. Taking care of your children is high, but so should your writing be. Tough choices here that only you can make.

3. Avoid writing courses

Frankly, they are a waste of money. If you know spelling and grammar, have a fairly good vocabulary, and read a lot, you have the basics to sit and write. And only by doing will you succeed. Write and write and write. You will probably write a bunch of trash at first, but the more you write, the better you will get.

2. Avoid writing groups

Most writing groups in which I have participated are dominated by one or two good writers who want a captive audience to give them feedback on their work. I have seen fist fights break out between members when one person reads his work out loud and another criticizes it negatively, not constructively. How in the world can that be helpful to you as a writer? Develop friendships with people, such as someone who teaches a literature course or who works in your local public library, whom you would trust to read your work and give you honest feedback. You'll get a lot more out of it.

1. Develop your own voice

The most important thing of all. Sure, you can write for a particular market, such as steamy romance or horror, but do it in your own voice. The more you write (see #3 above), the more your voice will develop. That means, of course, that #4 should probably be here as #1, but you get the idea, I'm sure.

Final Thoughts

Set your own resolution(s) that fits your situation. This list should give you an idea or two of where to start.

My New Year's Resolution is to be better in the editorial process. I find rereading my work to be tedious, albeit very necessary.

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

~Finis~