

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

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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 <billmescifi@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

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Novels

Apprentice to the Gods by D.T. Read

Review by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

So I'm totally going to review D.T. Read's Apprentice to the Gods without every third word being a spoiler.

Totes.

Watch me go.

I'm all over this.

Well, at least "all over."

Seriously, this is a REALLY good book but how do you not spoil too much?

Okay so I've reviewed the first three books. For purposes of this review, I'm going to assume you've read the first three. If you haven't, hie thee off to the two links listed above and then go read the books. I'll wait.

Okay. ARE YOU DONE YET? Sheesh. I gave you at least five seconds there.

And I never, and I mean ever, put this this early in the review but don't read Apprentice to the Gods as a standalone. This book is part of a series and it really only works that way. That's not to say it's not a good book, because it's amazeballs, It is to say that ATTG is awesome in large part because of how well it connects with what has come before. It also works (at least it feels like it does) as a bridge to the rest of the series.

There are certain moments in certain series where the entire story turns on that one moment. The death of Sturm Brightblade in The Dragonlance Chronicles comes to mind. So does "No Luke, I am your father." for the original Star Wars trilogy. Apprentice to the Gods contains that moment for this series, I think. I mean, the last three (at least! WHO ELSE IS EXCITED?!?!?!?!?) books of the Seventh Shaman haven't come out yet and I could be dead wrong, but it was definitely a turning point even if it wasn't the turning point.

Something big happens though, and it changes the trajectory of Ku's life. Maybe for the better, maybe for the worse, but it'll never be the same. It's definitely not all bad though. Ku is a man with a destiny, and he knows it. Ku needs training outside of what he received from the military, and he gets it but I'm damn sure that not everything he needed to know and learned can be termed as "training."

Ku, like many other men throughout history, became a father for the first time while serving a combat deployment. He ends up at home for his first extended period of time since that happen in Apprentice to the Gods. He honestly hadn't been married for all that long before he deployed either. What this translates into is a man who needs to learn how to live in a family as a husband and father. And the military, or so I've been told, doesn't do much to prepare its troops to deal with these kinds of tasks. He does

about as well with his first diaper as I did though. I'll give him that much. Then again, there's a reason why my oldest daughter had the nicknames Stink and Poops while she was a baby.

She'll kill me if she reads that.

Pray for me.

For what it's worth though, Ku is a good dad and does as much of the stuff that I've been told multiple times that men don't do as I did when I was married and lived with my kids. Well, except that we had disposable diapers. Thankfully, I didn't have to deal with THAT.

Things are going well for Ku in the sense of his immediate family, but not on the macro scale. There is a lot going on that may very well end up requiring his military skills. I'm only seventy percent sure of that at this point, but I'd be shocked if I'm wrong. There is a fight brewing and I'm not sure how big it's going to be, but I'm guessing somewhere between huge and gigundus. And yes, gigundus is a word. I just made it up.

And it's serious because Ku has some serious religious obligations coming up too, and they're likely to require a whole bunch of his family and military skills. There are shades of prophecy involved here and it's not always clear what is literal and what isn't. Ku has a lot riding on his shoulders. I don't think I'd want some of his responsibilities. I'm not sure he does. What he does have though is guts and to spare. He's a man that is stuck in a situation he can't get out of and does what is required of him BECAUSE it is required of him. That's all anyone can ask I guess, and I find it utterly realistic and understandable.

I'm thinking his religious training benefits from his military training in ways that may not be apparent until you think about it, but it makes sense. As a matter of fact, I think it might be the only way to make some of it make sense. Military training is conducted at a high rate of speed and things are condensed into the smallest amount of time they can take up and still be useful. Ku, and his wife Derry, get a lot of that in Apprentice to the Gods. That makes sense because she's military too, but they have to learn a lot in a short amount of time. Anyone who has been through Basic Training knows how that feels.

And Ku also ends up being an imperfect human being. He makes one very serious mistake in the book that almost costs him one of the most important things in his life and it hurts him. It hurts him bad and it makes him do what he should have done previously. He learns from it though, and I'm thinking that will stand him as well in books to come as it does in this one.

If you're annoyed by the fact that I keep bringing up future books in The Seventh Shaman just know that it doesn't annoy me at all. That's because I'm geeked up on this series and can't wait to find out what's next. Unfortunately, I may have to wait longer for the next one as I'm told that it may be up to a year before it's out.

Don't worry about me though. I won't cry about it. Much. Probably.

Or at least not in public.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Chants

Black Amazon of Mars by Leigh Brackett

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A journey to pay a dying man's debt may unleash ancient horrors on the unsuspecting people of Mars!

Sequel to *Queen of the Martian Catacombs* (reviewed here), Eric John Stark returns to the Red Planet in *Black Amazon of Mars*. In his wandering mercenary life, Stark has made many friends, some he never meets again. Others he knows only a short time before they part.

That is the case now, as his latest friend forged in the heat of battle lies dying beside their campfire while a Martian snowstorm rages outside. A native of the decrepit city-state of Kushat, which is said to guard “the Gates of Death,” Stark's companion bears a relic he stole from the municipality long before they met. He had hoped to return it as atonement for his sin before he expired but that will not happen now. His wound is too deep, the cold too close, and death has finally come to claim him.

He asks the Earthman to return the relic in his place, and Stark agrees. Anything for a friend, right? But maybe he should have been a touch more circumspect before striking such a dangerous bargain....

The Story

Stark inspects the relic, the Talisman of Ban Cruach, in the firelight after his friend dies. His companion made him vow not to lose it nor to give it to anyone else, claiming it would be disastrous in the wrong hands. Granted, the legends about the Talisman are enough to make admitting to possessing it dangerous. Stealing the relic in the first place carried a death sentence, one which Stark's friend has paid, albeit not in the manner that Kushat would have preferred he did.

But in the dim night Stark cannot help himself. He succumbs to his natural curiosity and puts the Talisman to his forehead. A short time later, he recoils from it in horror. Ban Cruach's Talisman is indeed a device of power and forebodes fell things for Mars. It shows what lies beyond the Gates of Death – what Ban Cruach died to stop!

Unfortunately, Stark's vigil with the Talisman leaves him open to discovery. A war party from the Northern tribes has seen his fire. Coming out of the unconscious state induced by the Talisman, Stark is too late to escape and can only watch them arrive. They pilfer from the dead and take him captive to their warlord, who wears black armor and carries a great black war axe.

The warlord goes by the name Ciaran and desires to bargain with Stark, hoping that he will take part in the upcoming attack planned for Kushat so that the warlord may take the city and then seize the treasure which lies beyond the fabled Gates. For the warlord would rule all of Mars and to do that, one requires power, which the Gates of Death are whispered to promise to those willing to seize them. The Earth man refuses this offer, and the warlord reluctantly orders his execution. But Stark escapes and, after a desperate race, arrives at Kushat just ahead of Ciaran's army.

Having leapt from the frying pan into the fire, Stark's only hope is to survive the siege, continue to protect the Talisman, and to prevent anyone from opening the Gates. For if those fell doors are opened, all of Mars may succumb to a fate worse than death!

The Characters

Once again, Stark impresses a reader with his tenacious refusal to give up. He is quite civilized until the fighting starts, and even then, he mostly manages to contain his savage nature. But when his survival instincts take over completely, he shows that he is as dangerous as a cornered panther, and he can kill more soldiers than any single man ought to be able to handle in this wild state. Yet for all his barbarity Stark is a man, first and foremost. Though he may forget himself in battle he never loses sight of that fact otherwise.

Ciaran – real name Ciara – is a barbarian queen to rival all others. Determined to have her own kingdom, she leads her Martian warriors against Kushat in the guise of a man to win control of the city and the Gates. When her true sex is discovered, she overcomes the complaints of any who stand before her by proving very capable of handling her enormous battle axe and her warriors. Even she, however, is not so hungry for power that she would see Mars destroyed, particularly given her desire to rule it!

The World

Last time Leigh Brackett introduced readers to the southern tribes and deserts of Mars. This time she brings them to the cold, snowy northern reaches of the planet and the secrets they keep. Kushat is a crumbling city-state divided between the poor in the slums and the decadent nobles in the upper-class palaces, while the northern territory is described in vividly harsh, chilling detail. This is Mars at her most unforgiving, and Brackett spares neither her characters nor her readers the trials of the deep winter cold.

Politics

Leigh Brackett kept her politics in the voting booth, where they belonged. There is nothing political in or about *Black Amazon of Mars*.

Content Warning

Stark is implied to sleep with at least two women in the narrative, and the horror that may destroy Mars is chilling. But the implications are not explicit nor spelled out, and the horror is quite mild. Immature as well as mature youngsters can enjoy this book and not be scandalized in the least.

Who is it for?

Anyone who loves science fiction, lost realms, and horror will like this book. It is a novel for all children and adults who want a rollicking good story full of adventure and daring escapades. Those who love exploring new worlds that are in fact quite old will find *Black Amazon of Mars* scratches that itch ably, while anyone who wants a good, implicit romance will have a fine time reading this novel.

Why buy it?

It is classic sci-fi written by one of the best names in the business. Who can turn that down?

The Books of Alexandria: The Library by J.H. Nadler
Review by Jason P. Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

The end is nigh, and I have to say I've enjoyed the journey, for the most part.

Jason Nadler finishes out the trilogy with a sweeping epic-size tale that brings the whole story together into a rather satisfying conclusion, even though along the way there are points at which I'd like to take issue with his editor, Julie Perry. And yes, I'm calling her out by name because she's done Nadler a disservice. More on that in a moment.

First, the good: the book delivers a pretty solid conclusion to Alexandria's story, and while it takes a bit of time to get there, the final confrontation feels like the stakes are high enough that maybe it doesn't all turn out for the best. And I'm very glad that as Alex's "Chosen One" narrative plays out over the course of the three books, she's not ever once portrayed as a Mary Sue. She suffers a lot for her growth, both as a person and as a witch, and that's good to see because she's got to earn her place. She's even reluctant about having that place. She doesn't particularly want what destiny is serving up, and that gives her arc some weight that it might not otherwise have had it all come easy for her.

Now, the not so good: There's a lot of side questing in this one, something that we didn't get as much in the first two books. Granted, there are a lot of threads to tie up, but there are a few that are introduced in this book, and they don't necessarily add a lot. There are several points in the story where it felt like we're about to have that final confrontation between Alex and Jeremiah, but then I'd realize I have another 60-80 pages to go, so we're not there yet. That's not to say it ever got boring — it doesn't ever do that — but I think a few scenes could probably have been trimmed to let things flow a little more smoothly.

And that gets me to editor Julie Perry and Nadler's beta readers. There are quite a few homophones in this book — feted instead of fetid, for example — words that are actual words, but the usage is wrong. And it got distracting because as I'm reading the story, I'm chewing out the copy editor. If there's a second edition of this book, someone needs to take a red pen to every one of those. Does it diminish the story? No. But my goodness, is it distracting.

There's also a couple of points where Alex takes an action that leads to a "shared experience" type of moment, and I must admit I had to go back a few pages to figure out what I was reading because 1) there's a chapter break, and b) there's no real set-up/explanation for what I was reading. I finally got it from the context clues, but the first one of these could probably have been given a better beginning. Again, that's on Julie Perry.

Back to some good: I thought it was really interesting what Nadler did with Marta. Without giving too much away, her new status felt like a logical progression for her, and I think her relationship with Alex in this book gives us an added layer both in terms of the dynamics between the two and how much it impacts the stakes that are in play. And it's a clever use of Oblivion and the Between here, too.

Rose's character arc comes to a point where I don't want to slap her. Yes, she's still angry and tends to go off half-cocked with no plan, but she's not sounding one-note here. She has some things to do besides stand around petulantly huffing because Alex has insecurities about being a leader and facing her Chosen One status. In fact, most of the Coven gets something to do here as they mount a mission to rescue the women being held prisoner at the Farm.

The Farm is an interesting locale as well. The idea of being a prisoner of your own imagined pleasures is a somewhat fresher perspective on how Hell would work, and I wish we'd gotten more there after the reveal of what it actually is and how it exists in the Between. The way this prison functioned, there was a lot of potential to see the horror that could come from “be careful what you wish for” scenarios.

Structurally, the story fits neatly into the “heroine prepares for the final showdown” pattern, with plenty of moments that keep raising the stakes along the way. Jeremiah is the ever-present Boogeyman who appears sporadically throughout, and while I think Nadler could have given Jeremiah another layer or two of menace, I'm also glad he's not overplayed. He waits in the wings, a constant threat looming in the darkness. And when he finally takes the stage in this story, it's at a point where there's a question as to whether Alex and her Coven can defeat him. What happens to magic if he wins? What happens to humanity? What happens to the Coven and the Books and the Library?

Overall, it's a satisfying conclusion to the trilogy in spite of the pieces and parts that need another pass with an editor. The notion of the Between is an intriguing one, that place that exists in dreams, but here also serves to connect anyone who's able to use magic. As Alex gets to know it better, learns how to use her magic there in different ways, I could see another story playing out in this world, with a more in-depth look at the world-building that led to the “Dream Land” environment that gives dreaming souls a place to visit.

Despite the quibbles, I enjoyed the journey to the end. And it is an end, as we discussed when Jason was on Live From The Bunker back in September. I'm looking forward to seeing what new tale he tells with *Shadows at Dawn* in 2024. In the meantime, *The Books of Alexandria* will stay in my Library for additional reading.

Seriously, though, it will draw you in, and you'll lose a few hours as you pass the time with Hanuvar and his allies (and enemies) during *The City of Marble and Bone*, which I recommend you add to your collection post haste and read it before David Weber's next Honor Harrington book comes out from Baen, because you'll have to read that, too.

The City of Marble and Bone by Howard Andrew Jones
Review by Jason P. Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

In my review of the first entry in *The Chronicles of Hanuvar, Lord of a Shattered Land*, I made the observation that General Hanuvar Cabera of Volanus was akin to an “intellectual Conan” because of his strategist way of thinking, being a soldier and all, but I've since revised that estimation. Hanuvar is more “Conan the Cimmerian in the Roman Empire” with this new story, and while it feels just slightly less like Robert E. Howard, it still fits nicely within the sword-and-sandal milieu that was Howard's stomping ground.

Marble and Bone picks up with Hanuvar and Antires working to acquire a piece of land on which to build a port village from which they can transport the Volani citizens they recover from enslavement. In the process, they encounter a sorcerer with less than noble motivations, leading to a rather unique situation for Hanuvar, one that sets up an interesting scenario and resolution toward the end of the book — and for any of you who have been complaining about a certain story trope being used over and over and over and over.... Well, let's just say this is woven into the story in a way that is justified in the story logic, and it's just long enough to do what needs to be done and we're out.

That early encounter is also the source for the cover art, again as with the first book. So you're not getting much in the way of spoilers with Dave Seely's work — but it does lean more heavily into the Roman Empire aspects of Hanuvar's world, something Jones confirmed was a deliberate part of the world-building during his appearance on Live From The Bunker.

This book spends a lot more time with Hanuvar maneuvering within the imperial capital city of Derva, where no one recognizes him because of that said early encounter with the sorcerer. And Hanuvar takes the opportunity to re-establish contact with his network of spies, those who delivered intelligence to him when he was a general in the Volani military. Now, for some reason, I picture Carthalo played by Robbie Coltrane, which is unfortunate since he's no longer with us. There's a character that would have been perfect for Andre the Giant, too... Perhaps the next Hanuvar book needs to include a few nods to Morgenstern....

Meanwhile, Hanuvar also picks up some unexpected allies, some for whom he had more than a little animosity for their actions prior to the final war with Derva, and some for whom he finds he has more respect than he thought he might. These allies prove key to uncovering information about various Volani citizens who were captured and sold into slavery, and along the way Hanuvar gets caught up in a murder investigation when it seems that just maybe his daughter is killing Dervan children.

Like the first book, the second is structured in episodic chapters, also a deliberate choice by Jones, as he sees these books as akin to seasons of a television series, with each chapter playing out as an episode of the show. This also plays into the structure of many Conan stories, as does the inclusion of the infrequent appearance of magic and dark arts woven into the story.

Again, as I've said before, I appreciate how Jones has given us a protagonist who's not on the typical “hero's journey” with the usual tropes that come therewith. Hanuvar is a seasoned soldier who lost the one war he couldn't afford to lose, and that colors his perception of everything he encounters. It also informs his plans for rescuing his people, as he frequently has to disabuse others of the notion that he's out for revenge. Although despite this, he still gets into plenty of scrapes where blood must be spilled, but even then it's something that's necessary for that particular circumstance, not something that displays Hanuvar as a bloodthirsty wanna-be warlord with plans for world domination. He just wants to free his people and take them away to a new home. Nothing more than that, and as he convinces more people of his motivations, he's starting to assemble a team of ... let's say “non-avengers” who have skills that can be combined together as they work toward Hanuvar's end goal. Even if he ultimately doesn't survive the effort — remember, blood gets spilled quite frequently — Hanuvar is setting things up so that the rescue effort can continue without him.

Overall, it's another excellent work. And I only found two misspelled words.

Eyes in the Walls by David V. Stewart

Review by Chris DiNote

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Stewart starts with a Stephen King-esque premise but finishes with an ending more satisfying than King would have given us.

David. V. Stewart is an essayist, author, musician, podcaster, and YouTuber whose work I've enjoyed, especially his commentary on music, literature, video gaming and pop culture. With that said, I haven't read his fiction until now. I fixed this severe oversight with one of his short novels, the 2019 horror tale

Eyes in the Walls, which fit nicely into a two-hour train ride from Kaiserslautern to Trier, Germany. It was time well spent, as this is an intense story of nostalgic adolescent horror that captures both supernatural fear and the everyday life fears of the divorce generation.

Stewart starts with a Stephen King-esque premise but finishes with an ending more satisfying than King would have given us. There is also something of *The Exorcist* in this, along with nods to horror writers, films, and TV shows popular in the 1980s and early nineties. To apply some veteran's (very) dark humor, think of it as an "After School Special gone horribly wrong."

Justice is done and evil defeated, not without cost but also not without reward. This stands in stark contrast to much of present-day horror which seems absorbed by hopelessness, nihilism, and tiresome torture porn. The evils described by Stewart are overcome by a mix of grit, trust, a tiny spark of love, and hesitant faith, which grow even while the protagonist's life and sanity crumble around him.

The Story

It's bad enough that Billy Smith is in middle school. It's worse that his mom and dad are divorced, and worse yet that he's caught like a pawn between them and their shattered lives. It's even worse that his mom is a mortician, and they live together in an old funeral home. It's worst of all that something evil is alive and well in the basement of that funeral home, and no one will believe him. It gets even worse when something evil starts to haunt him at night after his friends goad him into playing "Scooby Doo" to see if some urban legends surrounding the funeral home are true.

When Billy asks for help from the adults in his life, insisting that the monster and its attacks are real, Billy gets rewarded with a diagnosis of schizophrenia and psychotropic medication. Meanwhile, the nightly attacks get worse along with Billy's mental health, and the evil seems poised to spread. Can Billy save himself, his family, and rebuild his life? A strange girl named Anna believes him and seems even to want to help him.

The Characters

Billy Smith is an ordinary but already jaded middle-schooler. He deals as best he can with divorced parents and the unpopularity one might expect would come from living in a funeral home with a basement morgue, especially one surrounded by legends of murder and witchcraft. His relationship with his mother is under incredible strain, and he doesn't care for her latest boyfriend. He prefers to stay with his dad, exiled to a city apartment on the wrong side of town.

Billy escapes into video games, comic books and has started to run with a bad crowd, his miscreant cousin Jeff, and Jeff's friends.

Anna goes to Billy's school, and her older brother goes to high school with "Mikey," one of the hoodlums-in-training. She heard about the incident at the funeral home from her brother and takes an interest in Billy. She believes him, and wants to help him, urging him to go to her church and meet Father James, the priest.

We'll stop here because any more character discussion will just give away too much.

The World

It's our world, no earlier than 1989, thanks to the in-text reference to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Arcade beat-'em-up and its Nintendo Entertainment System home port (awesome game, I had it too). The Gameboy is the latest and greatest toy, but batteries rapidly run down. The Super NES hasn't arrived yet or no one in the story can afford it. Cordless house phones exist, but there's not a cell phone in sight. Homework is done entirely by hand. The one computer in the story is used only by Billy's mom for work. There's no surveillance cameras or hardened security features in the school.

It's very pre-Columbine. No one mentions the World Wide Web, Kurt Cobain, Seattle, or grunge. Underage teens score cigarettes and beer (even though it's Keystone, eww). The use of DNA profiling in police work is still uncommon and innovative. Buying comic books at a corner convenience store is still a normal thing to do, and the X-Men are riding high. This is the generation living an analog childhood but headed unknowingly toward a digital adulthood, and future shock.

Politics

Here's the bottom-line up front: one can read the book as a harsh critique of Baby Boomers as parents and adults. If you're a Boomer who bristles at even the slightest hint of generational criticism, even by implication only, this book isn't for you.

As parents, Boomers come across as self-absorbed and completely lacking self-awareness. Stewart presents a reality that I think many of my generation saw play out in real life: the aftermath suggests the Sixties and Seventies weren't all they were cracked up to be, but few want to openly admit it. They're still too busy "finding themselves." But boy, will they make sure their kids get the latest and greatest toys to make up for it! They've rejected God, but everything they attempt to replace God with sucks. The kids aren't all right. But there's hope that some will make it out alive.

Beyond their failure as parents, they also fail as institutional authority figures, as teachers, medical professionals, and law enforcement. They condescend to Billy and the rest of the ersatz Scooby Gang, and quick to whip out credentialed checklist solutions to any sort of trouble, which usually involves medications, therapy, and foster care, anything other than challenging their own biases.

Older adults, including a veteran police detective and a Catholic priest, tend to come off much better.

Content Warning

There's no sugar coating it: the story deals with child abuse, including the worst kind you can imagine. However, it does end with a ray of hope.

Much of the action takes place at a funeral home with a basement morgue. There are many references to autopsies. There's supernatural horror and spiritual warfare in the distinctly Catholic sense of the idea. There's a demonic monster described in explicit up-close detail. Acts of necrophagy are described, and young people get injured. Make no mistake, this is a violent story. Rumors and urban legends of lurid crimes form much of the backdrop.

The mental illness aspect is superbly detailed, from Billy's terrifying dreams and horrific nighttime encounters, to sleep paralysis and the effects of psychotropic medications, to grinding therapy sessions. If you have personal memories of just how badly the "system" can treat kids, you might want to skip this.

The story tackles the trauma of divorce, parental neglect, and indifference head-on with no filters. Some may find that horrifying enough, but the second monster Billy confronts bluntly addresses a subject that some readers may find too painful to read about because of their own past trauma, or that of

someone they love. While it's clear that at the end of the story Billy not only survives but has a path forward, it's also clear that the road will be a hard one. He's not out of the woods by any means, although we have cause to hope for him.

Who is it for?

This book isn't for teenagers, it's for adults who were new teenagers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For adults, it might be tempting to pass on this story as just a horror "period piece," but they may find some new insight into their own lives, or those of their grown children.

The Generations X and Y nostalgia factor is enormous, and at first, you're lulled into thinking it's an episode of Goosebumps, Are You Afraid of the Dark, or even Tales from the Darkside. This makes the jump headlong into real-life horror shocking, but Stewart thankfully doesn't turn that shock into exploitation.

I recommend the book for people who enjoy King's work but reject his metaphysics. In contrast, Stewart presents King-like ideas in an unapologetically Christocentric reality informed by Catholic doctrine regarding spiritual warfare. The Devil and his minions are very real, but so is God and the power of his Church, albeit shown through a trial that would give Peter Blatty a start.

Why buy it

Eyes in the Walls is a tight and intense read. Short but filling, terrifying but hopeful. In that aspect alone, lacking the nihilism, snark, and too-clever-for-its-own-good approach which characterizes much of contemporary horror, it stands out from the pack. The good guys win but do not come through unscathed. The nostalgic setting shows a decaying world and a battle for everyday survival, a world all too real to many. Most importantly the book gives a wounded young man the chance to be a hero.

Fathomless Pursuit by Eric Kercher
Review by Michael Gallagher
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The first of a five-part series offers a quick-reading fantastical seafaring adventure

Fathomless Pursuit is the debut novel of Eric Kercher, a navy veteran who's an engineer by trade but possessing the restless and wistful heart of an artist. The About page on his website (which I suggest you check out) reads like a Superservice manifesto. Disenchanted as we all are by mainstream slop, he put his technical know-how, naval submarine experience and writing chops to work creating a quick, exciting story of high adventure, and holy cow does he deliver.

Fathomless Pursuit on Amazon

The Story

This novel is short, and as such Kercher had no time to waste getting off the ground. Thankfully, he's cut from the same cloth as many others in pulp and superservice are, and knows how to keep a reader's attention.

The book begins with our protagonist Christos, the First Mate of the Alopias, a submarine powered by quasi-mystical methods, being jolted out of bed with his crew frantic and alerting him to flooding. By

the end of the first chapter, his captain is dead, run through by the dread pirate Diomedes, whose crew proceeds to board and loot the ship of most of its food stores. Christos, relatively young and inexperienced as a leader, must now rally his men to attempt to salvage their ship's damaged power core and avoid starvation out at sea while trying not to let his lust for revenge blind him.

The Characters

At a mere 214 pages, I was impressed at how well and quickly Kercheck established his characters. Christos' humiliation during the opening onboarding at the hands of Diomedes' men quickly inlays him with several deep personal challenges to overcome; the shame of his inability to rise to the task in the moment, as well as his desire to exact revenge against the pirate brigands who ransacked his ship. His best friend Andonis, the ship's navigator, comes across as a close and trusted confidant. Avina, the ship's nurse, is likeable and tender and one could scarcely write a better introduction for a villain than Kercher does here. Diomedes is introduced in a way that instantly establishes him as a dangerous and ruthless—yet charismatic—threat.

The World

Given Kercher's past naval service and wistfulness for the return of golden age adventure fiction, it's no surprise that the world in *Fathomless* blends equal parts Jules Verne, and Robert Louis Stevenson with a healthy dose of steampunk tech. Submarines are powered by otherworldly energy sources that power consoles with light up displays; gilded pirate subs board using cannon-fired grappling hooks with massive chains. Desolate islands with treacherously jagged coasts hide tunnels that allow for dangerous but quick travel, and the glittering blue seas' depths hide ancient behemoth dangers that blindly stalk for prey. The vividness of Kercher's wild seas are only matched by the word economy he uses to bring them to life.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Being a seafaring adventure that contains a revenge subplot, expect some PG violence concerning the swordplay.

Who is it for?

While I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this book for adults, this entry can be great for YA reader hungering for adventure with a bit more weight than many mainstream offerings awash in brightly colored, low-stakes cotton candy on most library shelves. **THIS** story is a serving of hard tack and beans, sure to kindle the imaginations of boys especially.

Why buy it?

You won't often find a five-book series whose entries aren't so big as to make one shy away from starting it; these are fun, short adventures brimming with danger and beauty.

Lord of a Shattered Land by Howard Andrew Jones

Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Legendary general Hanuvar Cabera's city, family, and life was destroyed by the Dervan Empire. He spends his days in hiding, relying on the fact that most Dervans believe he fell when his beloved Volanis was finally razed. Hanuvar has every right to yearn for revenge. But what he really wants is to deliver his surviving countrymen out of bondage. Defeated but not broken, Hanuvar travels the known world and beyond, his life given new meaning with this one final campaign.

Each chapter of Lord of a Shattered Land is its own self-contained story, but those individual stories build upon each other to recount Hanuvar's quest to free his people. Framed with historical commentary and asides, Hanuvar travels across the Dervan Empire as spy, assassin, and rescuer.

I found the structure refreshing - each chapter introduced a conflict and resolved it with a satisfying conclusion, and while Hanuvar's quest to free his people underlies the whole of the novel, each individual chapter in that quest brings new exotic locales, strange creatures, plucky heroes and depraved villains. This structure makes chapters longer than I am used to, but subchapters help to break up the action, and the pacing never suffered for it.

The characters

Lord of a Shattered Land revolves around Hanuvar Cabera, famed Volani general and scourge of the Dervan Empire. Hanuvar has seemingly lost everything - his armies, his city, and his family. But despite his desperate circumstances, he has not lost his honor, his sense of justice, or his humanity.

Hanuvar could easily blame all Dervans for his plight, but time and again he treats the people he comes across as individuals to be judged on their own merit, even coming into conflict with fellow Volani refugees at times. Hanuvar is a skilled warrior who makes good use of his falcata. But just as often, he must use his wits to overcome the obstacles in his way.

While Hanuvar is clearly the focus, Lord of a Shattered Land features an expansive cast of characters. I was consistently impressed with Howard Andrew Jones' ability to keep my interest introducing new characters with each new chapter and for the most part ushering them offstage as the chapter ends. His characters are well-drawn and interesting if not always sympathetic, and each takes center stage in their own chapter (beside Hanuvar, of course.) Whether it is the young chariot racer that Hanuvar takes under his wing, the retired Dervan general who needs Hanuvar's help to save his family, or the grizzled one-armed warrior joining Hanuvar for one last battle in the mountains, the characters come to life in their own.

The world

Jones is not shy about where he draws his inspiration for Lord of a Shattered Land - He clearly states upfront that Hanuvar is a fantasy hero version of the great Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, and the Dervan Empire is a stand-in for the Ancient Roman Republic. The world of Lord of a Shattered Land reflects that, there is a fantasy version of the Mediterranean, the Alps, of Carthage, Egypt, Gaul and so forth. If you are a student of history, you will notice plenty of echoes from our own world - the fantasy analogues to Scipio and Cato, references to "Carthago Delenda Est" and even the catapulting of Hasdrubal Barca's severed head into his brother's camp.

Much like Robert E. Howard's Hyperborean Age world, however, this version of the Classical Roman world features hideous monsters, scheming sorcerers, terrible curses and even rifts to other worlds beyond understanding. The weird and strange entities filling this book are too many to count, but some notables are skin-stealing shapeshifters, pain-devouring demons, and blood-drinking telepaths, all fitting into their own well-developed niches in the world of the novel.

The politics

Real-world politics are almost nonexistent. The only thing that comes close is that Volanus is more egalitarian in regards to the sexes than the Dervan Empire. The Dervans see Volanus' use of female troops as an oddity while the Volani see it as utterly unremarkable.

Content warning

There is plenty of violence and gore in these tales, although rarely does it get graphic. Sexual content is minimal.

Who is it for?

If you are a history buff and love Sword and Sorcery, Lord of a Shattered Land is for you!

Metalsaurus by NR LaPoint
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Back to Jurassic warfare.

In Death Planet, Ambrose Weaver and his refugees have tamed elements of a Jurassic hellscape, wiped out a tribe of human sacrificing monsters, and saved an alien princess. What could they possibly do now?

Time to do it again, only with more on the line, with even greater odds.

Again, this is something that only NR LaPoint can pull off.

The Story

A week after our plucky band of survivors took on human sacrificing cultists, and saved the warrior princess Xenia, she's settling in nicely.

Unfortunately, the alien Vidarians have also landed on the planet. And they have their own allies—a collection of mad scientist barbarians.

A lot of Metalsaurus is the follow-up for Death Planet. Ambrose Weaver and his crew delve into the origins of the monsters they wiped out in book one, as well as putting together the pieces of how this planet had evolved as an attempted utopia, and how it devolved.

LaPoint's writing is efficient and quick, letting readers catch up to the events of the previous novel while also trotting along this one at high speed. Seriously, Metalsaurus opens with gunshots and doesn't

slow down. LaPoint is shooting for John Ringo-level action, pacing two fight scenes at once. In fact, as I read it, I had flashbacks to the March Upcountry series by Ringo and Weber. And like that series, ever shootout feels like the end of Gunga Din.

The Characters

No one here is entirely what they seem, surprisingly enough. There's the heavy metal Russian, Raum Borg. We have Leonidas Makris, father of two, who will go all Taken on anyone messing with his children. Yui is the cute redhead comm officer who adopted a pack of velociraptors.

The crew is quirky and odd, and they know it. ("Your job will be to make the rest of us seem sane." "I am not sure I'm up to the difficulty level of this particular assignment, Captain Weaver.")

And then we get more of the story from the POV of the dinosaurs themselves.

The World

LaPoint continues his world building here. Not only does he elaborate on the evolution of the bugmen of Death Planet, he expands on the Vidarian threat, as well as the history and background of two other local tribes.

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.

Content Warning

As I said in the last review

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 *Jurassic Park*, mix it together with *March Upcountry*, and stir thoroughly.

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 series.

Why buy it

Metalsaurus has superb world-building, entertaining characters, a little romance, and enough action for a Baen novel.

Why wouldn't you buy it?

Monster Hunter Memoirs: Fever
by Larry Correia and Jason Cordova
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Someone new gets to play in Correia's Monster Hunter sandbox.

When a series gets big enough, it only makes sense to let other people play in the sandbox. The Monster Hunter International world started expanding with the Monster Hunter Files anthology, then with John Ringo creating a history from the 1980s into the 90s.

And now, it's time to go to the seventies, and watch LA, and disco, burn.

The Story

After a mission goes bad in Israel, Chloe Mendoza needs a new job. Or she can go and reapply to an old job back in Cazador, the home base of Monster Hunter International. Chloe is one of many monsters (or half monsters) who has served her time working for the government and is on the no-kill list. She is a nagualii, an Aztec monster, and her father is an Aztec god of bloodshed. There are few places she can call home.

Unfortunately, when she's assigned a team, half of them are rookies, the leader of the team has never taken lead before, and she's expected to be the diplomat between the MHI teams and locals—including a particularly mean group of Feds.

Soon, it's apparent that evil is rising in Los Angeles, and it has nothing to do with the gangbangers, or the disco.

This was a solid entry in the Monster Hunter Memoirs, and the writing was much more consistent and smoother than Guardian was. There is to some extent that Fever pulled off at least one trick that John Ringo tried to do in Grunge, but that is a spoiler.

One of the aspects I like about Cordova's writing is that he uses a lot of the right terminology ... in some cases, it's the wrong terminology, but it makes perfect sense, given the history on these characters. The opening chapters showing Chloe Mendoza as an academic in the world of monster hunting are fun, using academic tricks I've seen personally.

There are nice little tidbits along the way. (“[He] politely raised his hand, like this was an actual respectable school setting, and not the Shackelford Home for Wayward Homicidal Maniacs.” Or “Ignorance killed the cat. Curiosity was framed.”)

The pacing on Fever is interesting, because it's more of a mystery and a slow build, as several missions and set piece battles tie together into an overall whole. There are no random encounters here.

And I must admit, a Hispanic working for Mossad made me want to cast Chloe as Cote de Pablo.

The conclusion of Fever is clear that this is the start of a new series, be it a trilogy or otherwise.

The Characters

We have an interesting team here.

A nerd from the navy, Alex Wigan is the bookworm of the team, who really enjoys research.

There's the California blonde Melanie, who has an almost supernatural ability to find her way around. Also, she's smarter than she looks.

There's the black marine from Chicago, and a veteran from Vietnam.

The team leader who is basically a hairless bear and has the delicacy of Godzilla in a china shop.

There's a veteran MHI lady sniper.

And then there's Chole.

Yes, I made certain to count that they are the Magnificent Seven.

Though one of the questions for the future is simple: how many are going to make it out alive?

Even some of the side characters are fun, from the local Deputy to some of the Feds involved. No one here is stupid, and it's always enjoyable.

The World

The worldbuilding here is a collection of details that fleshes out the LA of the 70s. Also, some of the cryptozoological aspects expand the MHI world even more, especially when the newly formed EPA comes into the plot— I almost expected a visit from Chad's mom (from Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge). Like the God of War franchise, it looks like no mythos or pantheon will be safe by the end of the series.

Politics

The politics of the entire Monster Hunter universe are that of Ghostbusters: private industry can do what government can only screw up.

Content Warning

I believe TV ratings would call it: “Fantasy violence,” up to and including people getting torn apart by monsters. There's the odd profanity, but nothing on par with Die Hard or an Eddie Murphy film.

Who is it for?

This is a straight-up Urban Fantasy novel for anyone who likes the genre and prefers action films.

Why buy it?

This is a solid, fun entry in an entertaining series. Unlike previous Memoirs, this is more plot than character focused. But it has a nice balance of characters, better balanced than Ringo's Chad would allow. Team Jesus and you also like paranormal or urban fantasy, *Shoot the Devil* is at your crossroads.

Why buy it?

Stuff like this exists when people show that they want it. Grab a copy and see what you think!

The Piney That Killed Thomas Edison
Review by Michael Gallagher
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Tony DiGeralamo's New Jersey-based series delivers fun, quick action horror.

Tony DiGeralamo's resume is, in a word, impressive. With experience in comics (*The Simpsons*), script-writing (*Space Ghost Coast to Coast*), and joke writing (*Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*) among quite a few others. While his comedy chops are evident, he's also got a knack for action-horror. His original series of novellas, *The Pineys*, is currently on its twelfth entry. We recently received the eleventh, and I was pleasantly surprised that despite having never read any of the previous books, it was easy to get into.

The Story

The *Pineys* series focuses on the Galloway family, a clan of monster hunters. They've been in the business for a long time, keeping a lid on supernatural shenanigans in and around the pine barrens of southern New Jersey. The prologue sees a bitter and vengeful Nikola Tesla (sorry nerds, he was overrated) unleash a formidable demonic force to wreak havoc on Edison's compound in West Orange; luckily the Galloway clan of the day, led by "Professor" Morrison Galloway, are there to deal with the fiend and ably do so, though Edison's facility is destroyed by the resulting chemical fire. After initially fearing Edison was killed in the fire, he emerges from the structure out of a plume of choking black smoke. Furious, he abruptly sends the Galloways away.

And while he's unable to prove it, Morrison Galloway feels something is off about him. Of course, he's right. Edison's body has been hijacked by an ancient demonic entity. And generations later, the current crop of Galloways finds themselves in a race to discover the being's plans and put a stop to them.

The Characters

The characters (of which there are many), mainly focus on the aforementioned Galloway family members, both past and present. Each more or less tends to fall into some trope of team-member-with-a-specialized-talent/ability/personality common to ensemble action stories. The Galloways are a tight-knit bunch, and have spent decades patrolling the darkest corners of the New Jersey pine barrens, getting up to their elbows in blood guts and ectoplasm hunting otherworldly fiends they euphemistically refer to as "deer". They're a rough around the edges bunch, and the dialogue between tends towards near-constant ribbing tinged with familial affection.

Patriarch Hemmingway Galloway leads the group, as much for his hunting ability as for his ability to keep order and lead. He's well-rounded, able as both a gunman and getaway driver. He chugs a beer just to get through one instance of having to contact a hated long-dead relative (and witch), Aunt Chris-

tie, which devolves into the two simply yelling at each other. His wife Darla assists, emotionally, organizationally and via crossbow. They are further assisted by Milton, an Instagram-model dating martial artist and Lewis, a gambler with an odd penchant to fall for scams, whose psychic ability allows him to see into the past of an object he touches, something that does some rather heavy lifting plotwise. He's not blood, but is dating Shelly, the Smith & Wesson-toting Galloway girl.

Other Galloways and even other hunting families make brief appearances, which is understandable given that by this point the book has had eleven entries to gradually grow its cast. It's not something that derailed the reading experience, but might throw off someone jumping in at a later point in the series, just be warned.

Also crossing paths with the core members of the family are feds, other hunters and a shadowy group known as the Blueberry Millionaires . . . getting into depth on them would spoil the fun, so I'll just say that they're as fun and intriguing as they sound.

The World

The world is modern day southern New Jersey, but as much of the action tends to happen out of the public eye (barring the occasional high-speed chase along the highway or unintentional building explosion), much of the action takes place in deep woods or forlorn and hidden places, away from the human eyes and the light of God's sun.

Politics

Nope.

Content Warning

There's plenty of gunplay and describes the resulting bodily trauma from said bullets very well, and features plenty of ribald wisecracks between family members. Some of the dialogue and humor can be raunchy at times, and given the temperament of the various protagonists, there's quite a bit of profanity (They're New Jerseyans. Remember Jersey Shore? Remember how often they had to bleep stuff out? Stereotypes exist for a reason).

Who is it for?

The author frequently describes this series as “Supernatural, if Sam and Dean were from South Jersey”, and I'd say that was about right. It's drenched in occult trappings, dark myths, mysticism and historical lore, but, like Supernatural, there's a CW-ness to it that keeps it from veering into grimderp. The Pineys series delivers fun, solid action with some refreshing twists.

Why buy it?

The paperback weighs in at a mere 122 pages — these books are perfect quick, fun adventures in between heavier, more serious fare, and are frankly easy to breeze through in a dark, windy night or two when tree branches are scraping against the window.

Those are tree branches.

Right?

Ridiculum edited by J. Ishiro Finney
Review by Michael Gallagher
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Publishing gathers a series of humorous pulp gems in a collection that's part entertainment, part historical restoration.

Ridiculum is a labor of love from J. Ishiro Finney, author of the Casefile Arkham series and co-host of the Wordcraft podcast. It's an easily-read collection of 14 short stories from the lighter side of pulp's golden age featuring works from the likes of H.L. Gold, Harry Harrison and Phillip K. Dick.

But what elevates this from a mere anthology of public domain works is exquisite care taken by Finney to restore the stories from their (often badly) archived states and the wonderful history lessons behind each tale that precede each entry.

It's not only a wonderful introduction for those curious about golden era pulp, it's a thoughtfully fleshed-out work of preservation that longtime fans will appreciate as well.

The Story

Before diving into the treasures contained within the covers of Ridiculum, I really must laud the efforts of Finney here. Looking to give a good introductory collection for newcomers to pulp, he dug through the offerings on Archive.org and Project Gutenberg on the hunt for stories.

However, in many cases, what Finney found were corrupted text files that read like barely discernible gibberish, or had to transcribe stories verbatim when the only records available were scanned pages. Despite these hurdles, he made the effort to reproduce the work faithfully for 01's Immortal Classics Line, which will be publishing other themed collections of classic pulp work. The book is truly a delight. Finney's choices of entries are superb, with stories whose humor holds up nearly a century later.

The Characters

The stories chosen by Finney brilliantly display how the imaginations of the Old Masters truly were on another level; among some of my personal favorites:

Robert Sheckley's *Bad Medicine* is the story of a man on the verge of a manic burst of murderous rage who seeks the help of psychotherapeutic home appliances—but accidentally is sold a model meant for Martian minds—is both a gripping story with a madcap pace that's also a scorching critique of ubiquitous “cure-alls” being hawked whose treatments were worse than the problems they purported to cure.

Phillip K. Dick's *The Eyes Have It* features a man who believes he's discovered an alien plot after reading a paperback book he found on a bus. Upon reading such seemingly benign lines as “...outside the movie theatre, we split up. Part of us went inside, part of us went to the cafe for dinner,” the MC has an almost schizophrenically literal interpretation of people who split themselves in parts and go separate ways independently. Fairly short, but a brilliant display of wordplay one doesn't usually get to see in Dick's work.

Mari Wolf's *Robots of the World! Arise!* tells the tale of a future in which a city dependent upon its robot workforce for virtually everything finds itself dealing with a Communist-style labor revolt. The

more sentient models become aware of their 'exploitation' at the hands of the "flesh-men" and begin convincing the rank-and-file bots to abandon their posts. The CEO of the company that made them must then try to figure out a solution to not only thousands of robots leaving their duties in the city, but the subsequent logistical nightmare to follow since they did everything from picking crops to mining uranium. Told in a none too serious tone, it's a tale that critiques the futility of the ideals of the Marxist worker's paradise that could never exist beyond a pamphlet and the necessity for capitalist endeavor and production. However even here, Wolf manages to weave in some incredible character moments, like when the CEO's valet-bot, having left for weeks, shows up unannounced one evening to check in on his old master:

The World(s)

The worlds are, as one might expect, varied for this being a collection. The settings range from modern and mundane to a 20-minutes-into-the-future New York City, familiar worlds where time travel is possible, AI that goes amok once it's in the hands of a child and attempts to take a gamble colonizing other planets are all included.

Politics

While the book contains nothing that derails the readers' enjoyment (again making the noticeable mastery of the art of subtlety these writers shared), some stories do have certain themes within: aside from the aforementioned Robots of the World! Arise!, several stories like H.L. Gold's At the Post and Stephen Arr's Chain of Command feature plenty of Cold War era nuclear paranoia, William T. Power's Allegory is a stinging critique of the absurdity prevalent in Ivory Tower Science and Academia and William Tenn's Venus is a Man's World, which tells the story of a female-ruled Earth in which men are treated so badly as second class citizens many of them escape to try their luck colonizing Venus, is sure to set any feminist's hair on fire. Have fun!

Content Warning

Political issues aside, it's tame. All the stories are from the late-40s to late-50s, and pretty lighthearted. Bloody bare-knuckled pulp this ain't.

Who is it for?

This is a great entry point for anyone looking to get a taste of the wonderful talents of some of pulp's golden era heroes, especially if the darker or more violent tales from the Gibson or Howard.

Why buy it?

If anyone out there wants to see true talent on display, lovingly restored and preserved by people who clearly have a love for works of great American fiction that otherwise might have been forgotten, the Immortal Classics Line is one that deserves support. I'm looking very forward to the other themed collections they put out.

The Serpent by David Drake
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Arthurian Legend arrives in the far future, with new players and no magic! Wait, no magic...?

Based on the Legends of King Arthur and other romantic tales of chivalry, the world of The Serpent is a shattered futuristic cosmos. The universe exists between two planes – Here and Not-Here. The Road connects nodes or locations of safety but creatures from the Waste outside these places will attack anyone at any time or come into Here from Not-Here if something is attracting them. Finding Ancient technology to make life easier and rebuild civilization takes specific skills, and only a Maker can restore or retool Ancient machinery for modern use.

Into this broken world strides Lord Pal, a Champion of Mankind and follower of the Leader of the Commonwealth. Pal is a Maker as well as a warrior, a man able to go into a trance to rediscover and refurbish lost technologies. But finding those things and keeping them from the monsters – human or otherwise – which prowl his world takes more than one type of skill. It takes courage, honor, loyalty, and a strong sense of justice!

The story

Two weeks on the Road from the capital of the Commonwealth, Dun Add, Pal is on patrol with his faithful dog Sam and his servant, Baga. They need to make sure all is well in the nodes which are under the Leader's dominion, and if he can convince a new one to join them, that is all the better. If justice needs to be meted out, then he has the authority to negotiate as well – with weapons or with words.

Starting in Boyd's Node, Pal learns about the body of a prospector from the Waste that has been put on display in the center of town. People can come to look at it if they pay the owner a price. Once a prospector himself, Pal is offended on behalf of the dead and bursts into the saloon to demand that the owner see to it the deceased is buried in a timely fashion. Looking over the corpse in sympathy, something catches Pal's eye. Pulling the item from the desiccated and shrunken body's hand, Pal finds it is an Ancient artefact of some kind and tucks it away for further study later.

However, restoring civilization isn't easy. Soon, Pal all but forgets the artefact as adventure calls him to rescue a damsel in distress – one who has a reputation for despising men. If Pal hopes to rescue her then he must put aside all thoughts of the Ancient device to do it!

Unlike most novels but very true to the legends from which it draws, The Serpent has no unifying plot. Instead, Pal's adventures follow a meandering path as he deals with various situations that crop up unexpectedly. One adventure leads to another for the young Champion who prefers being on the road exploring to spending time at court.

The characters

Pal is the point-of-view character and a worthy heir to Sir Percival and Sir Gareth of the Round Table. While he insists that he is not the smartest Champion or Maker but a simple man, his years in Dun Add have added polish to his humble attitude without removing it or making him unpleasant. He is also quite skilled at fighting, despite his protests, but by far his most impressive characteristic is his strong moral compass. Pal does not want or like to kill, yet if someone offers a fight he will give it to them – with interest.

Lady Irene, a noblewoman who meets Pal early in the novel, makes a perfect Lady Savage or Lady Linnet to his Fair Unknown (the name often used for knights like Gareth in the original legends). Raised by a Maker who created sex dolls for her noble father, when that Maker died Lady Irene's dad decided to marry her off. But unknown to him she is a Maker – the first woman to become one – and she slips away from her escort, whereupon Pal needs to find her.

The rest of the characters take a little more time to develop, and some are only names at the start of *The Serpent*. When they reappear later in the flesh, however, they more than make up for their previous lack of presence. They become living, breathing people who leave a very apt impression on a reader.

The world

Dun Add and the rest of the shattered universe are something like an open world video game translated into writing; the Waste is the part of the world a reader (or gamer) does not get to explore, in part because the characters know better than to enter it. If they run out of water in the Waste, they will die and mummify. Furthermore, the Waste is populated by monsters such as giants and witches, so entering it for no good reason or no sure way back is pretty much suicide. Nodes are generally safe but if one wishes to travel between them, he needs a telepathic rapport with a dog to keep to the Road. Or he needs an Ancient “boat” to ride over the broken landscape as he and other people struggle to rebuild civilization while still making a living.

The politics

There are no politics in this novel.

Content warning

As noted above, there are discussions of sex dolls and much ado about who is sleeping with whom, though nothing explicit is described or mentioned. Pal has an afternoon with his ladylove, too, but what happens is not described and is left up to the imagination of the reader. The battle scenes are intense without being gory and the monsters – human or otherwise – are well within PG-13 bounds.

Who is it for?

Fans of Arthurian Legend and open world video games such as *Knights of the Old Republic* will enjoy this book. Those who have read some of the chansons de geste of old will also like it, as it puts a new and science fiction spin on Medieval tales. Anyone who wants a relaxing read which they can pick up and put down, to then take it up again and begin from where they left off without worrying about forgetting any details will also like this novel.

Why read it?

It is a good book that does homage to some of the greatest tales which mankind has told. Why not buy it and give it a read?

Shoot the Devil edited by Eric Postma

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The righteous Christian urge to hunt demons and kill them to death.

It's October. Time for some horror.

I'm not an anthology guy, I have learned this after many attempts over many years. For some reason, sitting down and reading a dozen partial stories just doesn't do it for me. (I'm perfectly content to get paid for writing in one though, let's not misunderstand.)

Still, every once in a while I'll come across one that catches my eye, and Shoot the Devil checks all the right boxes. I struggle to stay on board with overly long epic fantasies, and if a story is too short, I almost don't want to get invested. This anthology, though, feels like a team of loosely connected Christian warriors who operate across time and all over the map, dealing with different versions of the same overall threat: Hell's legions.

Shoot the Devil: Ten Tales of Humans Defeating the Demonic by [N.R. LaPoint, Steven G. Johnson, James Pyles, L. Jagi Lamplighter, Daniel Humphreys, Declan Finn, Russell Newquist, John C. Wright, Corey Comstock, Michael Gallagher]

The Story

Shoot the Devil offers up plenty of variety; it's not pious do-gooders thumping Beelzebub over the head with a 16th-century family Bible.

In one story you've got a husband-and-wife team slinging bullets and slaying demons so they can get back home to the kids.

In another, you've got Paxton Locke (Daniel Humphrey's serialized character) forced to think his way out of a trap, so as not to rely on his supernatural gifts too much.

There are mysterious hauntings, infiltration of dark councils, and behind-the-curtain explanations for common evils in the world as we know it. For the reader familiar with Christian doctrine or Biblical lore, the stories are faith-affirming and entertaining in equal measure.

The Characters

All I want to say here is that this cast was refreshing to read. I grew up in a house full of Christian fiction that was so sappy it'd make the Lifetime Channel cringe, but God bless my mom, she was trying to keep the local bookstore in business singlehandedly. Thus, I've gained a healthy skepticism for anything branding itself as Gospel-centric entertainment.

Perhaps it was Shoot the Devil's roster of realistic and relatable heroes that got me over my hesitancy with anthologies. You don't have to be Ned Flanders to fight evil and the authors made characters that live by that principle.

The World

Ours, with secret goings-on revealed.

The Politics

To the extent that Christianity and “right-wing” politics overlap, you'll get some of that. It's not a political book, though. These elements are based on Christian doctrine.

Content Warning

Some scary demon stuff, gunplay against said demons, and a couple of swears here and there (one or two S-bombs and B-words).

Who's it for?

Have I mentioned this is Christian-centric?

The Spider vs. The Empire State by Grant Stockbridge
Review by Trevor Denning
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A Long-Forgotten Allegory from 1938 That's Weirdly Prescient - And A Pulpy Good Time

Before Siegel and Shuster's Kryptonian took to the skies and introduced heroes with god-like powers, there was another kind of crimefighter. Like the comic book characters everyone knows now, these once-popular, now largely forgotten, men (it was always men) had secret identities that put them at odds with the criminals and the authorities alike. Their supernatural powers were limited to psychic abilities, though their physical and mental abilities were close to that. Among them was Richard Wentworth, aka: The Spider, a rich man who returned from WWI with a taste for dispatching justice.

That's it. No tragic backstory. No reason for him donning a nightmarish disguise and giving up a normal life to fight crime. Wentworth becomes The Spider because he thinks it's the right thing to do.

Under the house name Grant Stockbridge many authors penned his adventures, but most were written by Norvell Page. In throes of the Great Depression, there was a growing sense that the republican form of government wasn't adequate to solving the nation's problems. Some suggested a dictator might be just what we needed. At the same time, Americans were wondering how someone as evil as Hitler could rise to power in Germany, while in their own backyard Louisiana governor Huey Long was setting up his own fiefdom. Page was aghast.

So in 1938 he wrote a trilogy of novels, collected in *The Spider vs The Empire State*, where he imagines in Wentworth's New York the rise and inevitable outcome of an American dictator. The books first hit my radar when I heard that Christopher Nolan may have used them as inspiration for *The Dark Knight Rises*, but what I found is that it's eerily prescient of our last three years.

The Story

A new political party, “The Party of Justice,” swept the last election. While the branding is good, Richard Wentworth knows that it's just a façade for organized crime. He perceives that the new governor is just a puppet and quickly finds out that a shadow figure known only as The Master is pulling the

strings. The Master, seen only as a figure in a white hood, communicates through what's basically a video screen. But since this is 1938 it's a mirror, a projector, and a record player.

One of the first things The Master does is empty the prisons and enlist the inmates as his Black Police (which could only happen in Russia, right?), who collect taxes like mobsters take protection money. As The Spider (it's always italicized in the book, so why not here?) Wentworth starts a resistance movement with the help of his fiancée Nita van Sloan, manservant Ram Singh, and police commissioner Stanley Kirkpatrick. Soon, like Robin Hood, they have a small band of guerilla fighters in various mountain camps throughout the state.

While they manage to blacken The Master's eye and take some ground, unmasking him eludes them. For his next trick, The Master unleashes a plague (I promise, I'm not making this up!) to discourage any who opposes him. Wentworth goes to Washington and breaks into the White House(!) to ask the president for help, and even runs for governor in the next election. But it's stolen from him, and a warrant is put out for his arrest. Naturally, the federal government is unable to get involved because this is what the people voted for in a fair and honest election.

As things continue to deteriorate in New York, what with the public executions, internment camps, mandatory social credit system, and so forth, The Master decides a distraction is required. At this point he could have wrecked a train full of toxic chemicals in Ohio and I wouldn't have been surprised, but instead he bombs a dam in neighboring Pennsylvania to the same effect.

The whole story is breathlessly told, with lots of unconventional punctuation and adverbs filling the gaps between gunfights, chases, escapes, and Shakespearian pre-battle rallies. Though Page's intent may have been to send a message, he never lets the allegory supersede the spectacle. I just wish there was an audiobook available so more people could experience it.

The Characters

Richard Wentworth/The Spider is the proto-Batman. Rich, intelligent, physically durable but not indestructible, he even has a scary costume and a utility belt (though just for things like ammo, screwdrivers, and flashlights). Unlike Batman, he guns down hundreds of people and brands their corpses with the mark of The Spider, but only evildoers, never the National Guard or honest cops just doing their job. The way Page writes him, Wentworth is prone to be sick with worry when his friends are in danger and can be moved to tears by loyalty. Conversely, he's no sap and will put the mission first, even if it means his loved one's suffering is prolonged.

Nita van Sloan adores Wentworth and is completely devoted to him though she knows that they can never marry. To do so would put both their lives at risk if his secret identity were ever revealed. But she also knows how to take care of his home (when it's time to run, pack the guns and money first), and can handle a machine gun.

Though not featured heavily in these stories, Ram Singh is Wentworth's loyal Sikh bodyguard. Yes, this is definitely a story from another time. Deal with it.

Police commissioner Stanley Kirkpatrick has been hunting The Spider for years, willfully blind to the fact that it's his friend and ally Wentworth. At first, he tries to maintain his official position, but when that becomes impossible he joins the resistance.

The World

It's New York in 1938, so horses are still as common as cars, motorcycles, and open cockpit planes. There's nothing particularly sci-fi about any of it, as The Spider mostly relies on disguises and his twin automatics to dish out justice against his human foes.

The Politics

It shouldn't have to be said that this is about as "America! F-Yeah!" as Norvell Page could get at the time. Guns are essential. Liberty is everything. There's an amazing scene where The Spider leads a town into the fray and they spontaneously burst into "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Content Warning

The body count is astronomical, and some mild profanity slips through, there's torture and the aforementioned plague. While some of the other house writers for The Spider were quite mean-spirited, kill-puppies for effect, there's none of that here.

Who is it for?

Originally written for adolescent boys, now it's probably most appealing to pulp enthusiasts. You can't take it too seriously, with its leaps of logic and slam-bang action, but if you think you're even a little ADHD, this is for you. If you wish Batman was a little more Braveheart in the Great Depression, I think you're gonna have a good time.

Why read it?

Ironic present-day parallels aside, The Spider vs The Empire State is a fun romp.

Literary Criticism

A New Take On A Well Established Premise
Literary Proposal by James McCoy
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Listen folks, I know some of you are going to point fingers and scream about the physical impossibility of real world Faster Than Light travel. I'm not convinced that you're right, because, although science says it can't be done, science screws up all the time. Seriously, it was scientifically proven that woman couldn't travel on trains because their wombs would come flying out of their body and that no human being could travel faster than the speed of sound without suffocating.

And anyway, who cares, we're talking about Science Fiction here! FTL travel happens all the time!

So listen, here's what I'm thinking:

Yes, Star Trek has Warp Drive. Yes, Star Wars has Lightspeed. Honor Harrington has hyper. I'm told that Warhammer 40K burns psychics, but I haven't read the books. I need to start. Event Horizon had that spiky, ball thing. Stargate has the star gate. Battlestar Galactica has a jump drive, as does Battle-

tech. The Four Horsemen Universe has a pretty unique take on both gate technology, similar to the gates in Babylon 5, and hyperspace that has to be seen to be believed.

I could go on for days. Honestly, I'm still debating whether Stargate really counts or not, too but that's not the point.

The point is that we need one concrete thing we can ask about. One all-powerful, overarching concept that can get us into the nitty-gritty of what we love. Because, honestly, if all we wanted was action and cool characters, we'd be reading Tom Clancy instead of David Weber. (That's not a slam against Tom Clancy. Dude can flat out write. I'm just saying that he doesn't have the fancy window dressing we're used to as fans of SF/F.) What we need is the Fwoosh button.

Yep, I said it. The Fwoosh button.

Think about it this way:

When Sulu, takes the ship to warp, he's pressing the Fwoosh Button. When Ivanova orders the White Star Fleet through a gate, she's pushing the Fwoosh Button. When Jim Carthwright takes the Cavaliers through the gate and into hyperspace, he's pressing the Fwoosh Button. When Han Solo takes the Millennium Falcon to Lightspeed, he's hitting the Fwoosh Button, Well, probably. I mean, it's the Falcon and it kinda only works when it wants to, but you know what I mean. Actually, he's hitting the Fwoosh Button either way. Sometimes it just doesn't work. The bottom line here is that when your favorite character does whatever they do to get things moving quickly, they're hitting the Fwoosh Button.

Instead of referring to FTL travel as FTL travel, and having to ask, "How do they do Faster Than Light?" every time somebody tells you about a new series, you just say, "How does the Fwoosh button work?" or "Describe the Fwoosh Button."

Your life will thus have been greatly enhanced and simplified by the saving of several seconds that you would otherwise have spent speaking a longer phrase that you no longer need to speak because I have provided you with a way to shorten your sentences, save your breath and eschew obfuscation by using a singularly concise term with which I have provided you free of charge and with no hope of recompense simply out of my magnanimity as a human being and through my deep and abiding care for the well-being of all around me combined with my confirmed affection for brevity and all of its benefits.

Seriously folks, keep it short if you can. It is of utmost importance to express your meaning in as few words as possible as this will allow your audience to understand the maximum amount of words that you have spoken because you have refused to confuse them with an overabundance of verbiage. This is desirable for many reasons.

So...

The Fwoosh Button is important. It will save you time.

I like this concept, because, at least among stories that involve faster than light travel, it's all encompassing. When you're describing a new book/show/movie/series to a friend you can just say, "Then he hit the Fwoosh Button" when describing what happened in the book instead of trying to walk some goofball through the 9780768768687687968976789689768968976789698768969876986987696 steps behind engaging a Warshawski Sail and setting off into hyper. There will also be no need to explain military compensators, Alpha nodes, Beta nodes, hyperspace bands, hyper limits...

Yeah, Fwoosh button that stuff and you're good.

Okay, so Honorverse fans are either laughing or offended right now. The rest of you are confused. I'm trying to help avoid all of the confusion by moving everything forward in a conversation using the Fwoosh Button. Seriously. Try it.

Prose Bono

Do You Need Social Media?

by A.C. Cargill

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

We authors need to be seen “out there,” i.e., on the internet, particularly on social media, or do we? What seemed to be a no-brainer a month or so ago is now, at least to me, appearing to be a bit of a puzzle. Frustrated at the very low and staid response I'm currently getting from my social media postings, I decided to see if there was somewhere to be that would generate more interest. Sadly, every article touted the same list of “usual suspects”:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram (owned by Facebook)
- Pinterest
- LinkedIn
- Goodreads (owned by Amazon)

Frankly, I avoid most of these, so I moved on in my research and came across a couple of interesting articles that seemed to be two sides of a coin but in reality said the same thing: stop wasting time on social media tweeting and posting for hours a day and instead have a presence.

Article 1: Why Authors Should Not Use Social Media – TCK Publishing

This article is from a publisher's point of view and admittedly is therefore a bit skewed. The publisher's vested interest is in keeping you writing. Nevertheless, I found the reasoning sound.

The three reasons the author gives are (and my thoughts on each):

Organic reach falling. Facebook puts the squeeze on your group, page, and even timeline posts. As few as one person in 100 fans will see your posts, and many don't see it then unless they make an effort. At the same time, competition on the site is fierce, so your chances of being seen by all but the most devoted is even less. Other social media is little better.

Spend your time writing. Makes sense and considering that the average user spends almost 2.5 hours on social media every day, that's time lost from writing, unless, of course, you draw inspiration from the inanities often posted there (especially on Twitter).

Social Media creates anxiety. We're in anxious times. Why add to it? Bullying online is common as is getting nasty responses from people who think they can "let it all out" with no regard for common courtesy.

In light of the above, you probably are thinking of closing your social media accounts, and hunkering down in your writer's space, with your cup of hot coffee, tea, or cocoa, and never emerging until it's time to query publishers. Don't, as the author of the next article points out.

Article 2: Don't quit social media, just quit using it.

The answer is simple. Use your social media accounts as signposts to your author site that details your work (no matter if you're self-published or traditionally published). Create a friendly post that links to your site and pin it to the account. If that link ever changes, be sure to update all your social media accounts. Nothing more frustrating than broken links!

My experience shows, though, that what you post is more important than posting a lot. For example, posting a casual thought with links to my site generates hits, whereas just posting some casual thought does not. Makes perfect sense. So I have to advise this:

Log in 2 or 3 times a week and post something relevant to your writing and a link to your site. Also, comment on other posts and reply to their comments to you.

The key, it seems, is to keep it relevant to your writing and not get into side issues.

Additional Uses

Also use your social media for special postings, such as:

- Cover design reveals
- Launch dates
- Public appearances (readings, book signings)
- Awards

And if you've been published, use it to engage a bit with your readers.

A Platform for Authors

During my research, I came across this article:

This Founder Created A Social Media Platform For Authors – Forbes

I'll save you a bit of hassle and tell you that the platform is called Copper. The site appears to be in the Beta stage still, but you can sign up in advance to be ready to go for when they are.

Final Thoughts

Sharing a blog post or two with you during the month gives me a bit of a break and in a way refreshes me for my writing. Also, I already have the discipline to limit my time on social media, but now the lack of hits back to my site isn't so frustrating. I just need to do this social media thing right. You'll need to examine your own writing habits and see if you're spending too much time on social media

posting the wrong things and not enough on the writing. Life has enough interruptions in that process. No need to add more.

By the way, where I spend a bit of time:

MeWe — My page (actually a group since it's free) where I post updates on my writing and interact with other writers.

Twitter — My poignant author observations and wisecracks, and some actually useful tips.

LinkedIn — I occasionally post articles about writing here as well as other places.

Parler — Just an account. Not really posting there.

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~