

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

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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.

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The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

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The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

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Not In Our Stars
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Revolt and Rebirth

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with Demons
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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/>

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Editorial

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Fiction

Divided We Fall by Trent Reedy

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Another American Civil War

This book is about the outbreak of another American Civil War. This is something political wonks have talked about since the end of the last outbreak of the last one. Is it possible for another civil conflict to occur? Could it happen again in our lifetime? What circumstances would be needed to create such a rift in our nation that we'd fight ourselves again? I like to think that Trent Reedy is wrong and that another conflict couldn't happen again. What about you, is it possible?

One thing that adds credibility to this series is the pedigree of this author and storyteller. Much like every author I've ever interviewed, he grew up voraciously reading and telling tall tales to anyone who would listen. Then, he went to the University of Iowa to major in English, determined to become a writer. To pay for that education, he joined the Iowa Army National Guard, serving one weekend a month and two weeks a summer as a combat engineer. In the National Guard, he learned about discipline, rifles, machine guns, and all kinds of minutia about explosives.

After graduating from college, his unit was mobilized to serve in the Global War on Terror. His "one weekend a month" became one tour in the heat of Afghanistan. In an instant, years of training and playing soldier became deadly serious. But it was real, and he was committed to honoring his commitment to Uncle Sam. All of that life experience was layered into this book, allowing this YA political thriller to come to life in ways nobody else could.

The Story

Danny Wright never thought he'd be the man to bring down the United States of America. In fact, he enlisted in the Idaho National Guard because he wanted to serve his country the way his father did. So when the Guard is called upon the governor's orders to police a protest in Boise, it seems like a routine crowd-control mission ... but then Danny's gun misfires, spooking the other soldiers and the already fractious crowd, and by the time the smoke clears, twelve people are dead.

The president wants the soldiers arrested. The governor swears to protect them. And as tensions build on both sides, the conflict slowly escalates toward the unthinkable: a second American civil war.

With political questions that are popular in American culture yet rare in YA fiction and a provocative plot that asks what happens when the states are no longer united, *Divided We Fall* is Trent Reedy's very timely YA debut.

This novel was well-written, and the prose was crisp and clear. The author left no room for missteps or misunderstanding without being too purple for its own good. The target audience is young adults, so the author kept to a more workman-like verbiage. That doesn't mean that the plot was watered down, far from it. The author let the political intrigue carry the day, with just the right amount of salty action

from the combat that overshadowed the story. What can I say? He nailed the pacing, which made for an enjoyable reading experience.

The Characters

The main character's name is Danny Wright, and he's a high school kid who enlisted in the National Guard as a way to fund his future plans. When the conflict erupted, he hadn't finished his training and was a high school senior. He shouldn't have been able to be mobilized, but everyone pitches in during an emergency. He's an overall likable character, though he seemed a bit naïve. I don't know how much of that interpretation was from my adult self, looking backward or a fair assessment of the main character.

Throughout this novel, the main character is a leaf on the wind, drifting along as the tides of war. He was pulled ever onward towards the inevitable. Still, I felt it was a reasonable description of a kid with no real-life experience during this time of national strife. Despite having questionable agency, Danny was likeable, and you felt for his circumstances. However, as an adult reading this, I was left wondering how his chain of command and the adults in his life had failed him, letting it get to the point where he was put in the position that he was.

Overall, Danny Wright will make your knife hand twitch and pull at your parental heartstrings. He was the quintessential 'every-man,' well 'every teenager,' who I rooted for from the first page. The character arc over the course of the trilogy was compelling enough that I'll likely re-read this book, which is something that I rarely do.

The World

How was the world-building handled? Was it revealed as the plot went along? Was it just enough to carry the story, data dumps, or was it David Weber ordering a pizza? Was it Tolkien-deep?

Now, let's dive deeper into the world where this story takes place. I had a few major complaints about this novel. First, the constant use of the word "assault rifle" by military personnel who were supposedly highly trained was annoying. That's not a term I've ever heard used by anyone with training in firearms. Mostly, that term is used in political circles and has little to no actual meaning other than to tell you the person isn't literate in firearms.

Secondly, I didn't like the amount of time spent addressing sexual issues by the main character. In my books, I don't mind that, but not when the protagonist isn't a legal adult. This really bugs me, but not enough to stop reading. While I didn't stop reading, this bugged me because the book is supposedly for children, and that is where you find it in Barnes & Noble. This is certainly not a children's book; the amount of swearing and graphic violence is undoubtedly for mature audiences only.

Another one of my complaints about this book was the premise for the flashpoint of the civil war in question. The whole nation is up in arms about a government ID card that could track your movement; however, everyone in this novel has a "comm," which already does that. Writing future-proof stories involving technology is hard, so I cut the author some slack here, but I noticed it. If I hadn't been writing this review and was reading for fun, maybe I would've missed this. Maybe?

Further, the government in this world has already been shown to repeatedly violate civil liberties. How can any character in this book believe that this isn't already happening? Maybe modernity has made me

jaded, so it is worth remembering that this novel was written way back in 2014. The political climate has come at us rapidly, so the author deserves some slack for not predicting the future with his non-existent crystal ball.

Finally, I didn't like how the audiobook was done as a stage play. I prefer the standard read without all of the sound effects. I find those to be annoying, but not enough to turn off the audiobook. I know that my audio complaint is mainly an issue of my own personal taste, but I figured I'd throw it in there!

However, it is worth noting that I didn't hate this book! In fact, I liked it and kept reading it. I am discussing nuance, which requires that a reviewer become a pedantic jerk so he doesn't miss anything. So, what did the author, Trent Reedy, get right? He was strongest in his creation of a narrative that was both compelling and believable. The scenario in this book was so convincing that it was scary. Seriously, it was one of those stories that won't let you stop thinking about it. Sure, there were flaws with the flashpoint, but the author covered some of those with the bland "tensions were high about a lot of things."

The world-building was also top-notch, but that's easy to do when writing in near-future America. We all already have our own cultural images of home that we bring into the story, making the author's job a little easier. The use of news updates as a way to push the narrative was also a fun touch and one that Trent Reedy didn't overuse. At the same time, there are parts of the story that weren't as flushed out as I would've liked, the prose fit within the scope of young adult literature.

Finally, the biggest pro of this book is its emotional resonance. As the main character, Danny Wright, learns to hate his country, both the new one and the old one, taking the reader along with him. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that he was talking about the fictional government in this book and not my America. Seriously, the writing was compelling enough that I had to stop a few times to remember that this wasn't real.

In conclusion, Trent Reedy left me torn on my overall thoughts. I started this novel wanting to like it, and I finished that way. The themes in question were "what if" scenarios that anyone who studied the Civil War or worn the uniform has thought about. However, there were parts that I hated because the characters made stupid decisions, the angst felt overdone, or the military culture seemed off. This is, broadly speaking, why I don't read YA fiction. And yet... in spite of all of that, I couldn't put it down. And now I'm reading book two. The author made you care too much, which is a mixed bag for me. I certainly empathized with the main character, Danny Wright. I learned to hate as he hated, which is my biggest ick factor because the bad guy is an overbearing Federal Government. I hated that he made America the bad guy because that's what we already get too much of on TV. And just because I'm being nitpicky, there was a typo on the Amazon blurb. But in the end, the author's ability to make me keep reading was the deciding factor. When that was combined with a premise that I've spent too much time thinking about throughout the course of my academic studies, you have a recipe for a gripping novel.

Politics

This novel was all about politics, which seemed to lampoon modernity. Or did it predict it? I haven't decided yet, but the premise is a protest turned Boston Massacre Redux. That fateful action ignites a second civil war amidst burgeoning tensions between the Federal governments and state governors. I believe the scenario created by Trent Reedy was plausible and well thought out. The fallout of these larger-than-life personalities blundering through the muck could absolutely happen, which made the novel scarier while being more believable. I have mixed feelings on some of how "the right" side was portrayed, but the author also lambasted "the left" as well. Given the author's status as a combat veter-

an from the Late Unpleasantness in Mesopotamia, I felt like he spoke more from the point of view of the ‘every man’ soldier. This made his take on both sides of the vast chasm that is modern politics easier to stomach, regardless of your personal persuasion.

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 17. This is most certainly not a children's book; the amount of swearing and graphic violence is certainly for mature audiences only. *Divided We Fall* had a few scenes that hinted at physical romance with one of the female secondary characters, but they faded to black. Nothing happened on screen, but the angst surrounding it was something that felt worth mentioning. I know that this can be a sensitive issue for some families. Further, this novel is about a second American Civil War, so there is death and violence in this book. It wasn't overly gory by my standards, but your mileage may vary.

Who is it for?

This book is about what would happen if Tom Clancy, Clive Cussler, Brad Thor, and Dan Brown had an illegitimate love child. If you are a fan of political thrillers peppered with military action and a budding teenage romance, this novel is for you.

Why buy it?

This is the story of the every-man soldier, an underdog warrior who overcomes his lack of training to play an important role in the war nobody really wanted. The concept alone was worth the price of entry. If you love a thrill ride through a worst-case political scenario with a boy warrior at the helm, this is the novel for you!

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? Once you buy and read the book, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

The Dreams Bigger Than Heartbreak by Charlie Jane Anders Review by Tom Feller

In *Star Trek*, there was a species called “The Seeders”, because they seeded the DNA of humans on planets through the galaxy. This was a way of explaining why they encountered so many humanoids in the TV episodes and movies. (The real reason was that they could only rarely afford to show truly-alien aliens.) In this novel, the second in the author's *Unstoppable* trilogy, they have “The Shapers”, a species who intervened in planetary development to promote the rise of humanoids and suppress the rise of non-humanoids, even to the point of genocide. For instance, they were responsible for the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs. By the end of the first book, the main characters learn that the shapers called themselves the Mayt, and that they have no particular affection for humanoids. They were hoping the humanoids would fight their battles for them against another, more powerful enemy they called the Bereavement, whose nature is revealed toward the end of the second book. The Mayt are now extinct, but an interstellar civilization consisting mostly of humanoids called the Firmament, is in the middle of a civil war against the Compassion, humanoids who want to continue the Mayt's program of supporting humanoids and suppressing non-humanoids.

The main characters return from the previous book, which is set about three months after the first: Tina, the clone of a great warrior raised as an Earthling; Rachael, her best Earthling friend and an artist; Mar-

rant, the first book's principal villain, whose background is explored in the second book; Yattoo the Monthaa, a member of the Royal Fleet who becomes their friend; Elza, a Brazilian hacker who becomes Tina's girlfriend; Kez, a physicist from Cambridge; Damini, a gamer from Mumbai, and Yiwei, a Chinese musician who becomes Rachael's boyfriend. At the end of the first book, Rachael saves the day, but at the cost of her ability to draw and paint. Much of her story line in this book consists of her attempts to regain her abilities which lead her to Nyitha, a graffiti artist who, they later learn, has a connection to Marrant; Elza becomes a candidate to become a princess, which would mean becoming one of the rulers of the Firmament; Kez trains to become a diplomat, and Damini, Yiwei, and Tina are enrolled as space cadets, although Tina has taken a vow of non-violence. There is a new villain named Kankakn, the founder of the Compassion. This is a good, solid space opera, and, unlike many second books in a trilogy, advances the overall story arc.

Dungeons & Dragons: Fell's Five by John Rogers Review by Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

They aren't the crew of Leverage but they are pretty close.

Adric Fell and his merry band of misfits – the murder-happy halfling Bree Three-Hands, the ostracized elf Varis, and the dwarf Paladin Khal Khalundurrin – are on a mission to rescue some kidnapped travelers held in the Underdark. When they get there, they meet Tisha Swornheart, a tiefling sorceress who proves quite capable in battle. She also shows she is able and willing to help them with their rescue, even though it threw off her own plans to save everyone. After this successful adventure, they sign Tisha up as part of their group and enjoy a nice evening in a tavern. At least until the zombies show up.

Hey, it's Dungeons and Dragons. The world is an open sandbox so players are free to make their own stories. When is it ever peaceful there?

The Story

The zombies erupt from the tavern floor before the ink on Tisha's signature on the contract is dry. Since the five adventurers are accustomed to being attacked, they naturally hack, shoot, bespell, and stab in defense of themselves and the other unzombified patrons. Unfortunately for them, the zombies were merely possessed innocent villagers from the town of Fallcrest, not true undead. Now the five of them are charged with murder.

...Oops?

When Fell and his crew's trial is interrupted with more weird magic turning the administrators meant to determine their fate into zombies, the group must once again enter the Underdark (the tunnels beneath the world of Dungeons and Dragons) to find the source of this evil and stop it. From there things get crazier as Fell's Five chase after changelings, fight orcs, and otherwise fall or step into more trouble than they can shake their weapons at. And that's before Khal's girlfriend stops sending him love letters!

They are Fell's Five, ordinary blue-collar adventurers trying to make a living in a crazy world. Care to join the party? The volume has the characters' stats and instructions on how to play a D&D game in the back....

The Characters

The volume doesn't give readers every bit of background about the characters, as they are meant to be taken up and played by readers once the book concludes. Thus, bits about Adric's past, Tisha's history, and Varis' background are hinted at but never explored. Even so, what is there is worthwhile and makes the three fun: Adric is a smart fighter who plays dumb and has a heart of gold he doesn't dare show off lest it be stolen, while Tisha is much kinder and nicer than her appearance would suggest. Varis isn't a stock Legolas knock-off but an elf with attitude who likes to quip and make fun of his friends without actually hurting their feelings. (The bad or annoying guys' feelings are fair game.)

Bree is a murder-happy thief who would as soon kill someone as steal from them, though she leans more toward thieving than killing – most of the time. Of the Five, she is perhaps the one whom Adric fears the most, and he spends a lot of his time watching her closely so she doesn't kill anyone who doesn't need it. Khal is, in Adric's own words, "the only genuinely good person" on the crew. He is a lousy liar but a great friend and a solid fighter, and without him, the Five may not have lived this long. Now if only they could settle that kerfuffle around his girlfriend....

The World

Since the world is that of Dungeons and Dragons, it is something of a sandbox. The characters get to visit the Feywild, the Underdark, and the regular world – which is mostly summed up in the little village of Fallcrest. After that, the locations vary enough to be interesting without being the slightest bit boring.

Politics

None. It's Dungeons and Dragons – there's no ROOM for politics. Everything else is too busy grabbing and holding the spotlight!

Content Warning

There is no sex, and while Tisha is the token fan-service character, her outfit is revealing without being blatantly in-the-reader's-face about it. Blood and gore feature prominently but the book never takes it to extremes even with the zombie elves that declare they want to eat livers. So put this on the higher end of the PG-13 rating, depending on the maturity of the reader.

Who is it for?

Dungeons and Dragons' fans, naturally, but if you like comics and fantasy, you will love Fell's Five. Mr. John Rogers states in his introduction that he wanted the story to be about straight heroes and he succeeded admirably. Not only are there no anti-heroes in sight, if you want a story where the characters (with one notable exception in the halfling's case) are unapologetically heroic, this is a book you will love. Heck, even the murder-happy halfling isn't all bad – she likes killing because that is who and what she is, not because she is evil. Not only could the world of D&D use more heroes and heroines like these, but so could the real world. This book is good for both!

Why buy it

If you want an easy-to-read entrance tale for Dungeons and Dragons or to introduce a friend to that franchise, then this volume would be a very good place to start. Those of you looking for a new campaign to start on game night or a soothing romp in a fantasy that doesn't tax your tired mind too much

will like it as well. Join Fell's Five on their adventures today – and then see if you can complete those adventures in your own D&D campaign!

Guards! Guards! by Terry Pratchett Review by Heath Row Faculae and Filigree

We were pleased to find science fiction and fantasy represented among the books at our Airbnb upon arriving in Portugal. The second book I read while outside Braga was Pratchett's eighth Discworld novel, originally published in 1989.

I've not read a lot of Pratchett—perhaps only *Good Omens*, co-written with Neil Gaiman—so I looked forward to finally reading one of his novels. For years, I've thought that I get the gist of Pratchett, that I know what to expect even without having read his work, and for the most part, I wasn't wrong. This was certainly an experience of expectations met—which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Because Pratchett is silly. This is a very silly book. Parts are quite funny, and parts are merely gently humorous. There's very little that's serious within its pages. I don't yet know a lot about Discworld as a whole, or how *Guards! Guards!* fits into it, but I enjoyed this enough to explore further. He'll make a nice punctuation between more serious reading.

While the back cover copy focuses on the character Captain Sam Vimes of Ankh-Morpork's Night Watch—the guards of the book's title—I found Carrot, a tall young man raised by dwarfs more compelling as a character to return to. Indeed, Pratchett did, in *Men at Arms*, *Feet of Clay*, *Jingo*, *The Fifth Elephant*, *Snuff*, and perhaps other Discworld novels. I intend to read the first novel in the series, *The Colour of Magic*, to get oriented, but Carrot will largely determine my reading order. As will the simian Librarian, whom I found quite intriguing.

The book's storyline focuses on a secret cabal or cult that's discovered how to summon dragons, unleashing one in particular on the citizens of Ankh-Morpork. The Night Watch is called on to investigate the arrival of the dragon and to restore order to the community. That pulls Vimes out of his presumed alcoholism and toward responsibility and respectability. Another interesting character arises in Lady Sybil Ramkin, who raises much more diminutive swamp dragons—one of which plays a key role in the book's resolution.

Despite the book's silliness, a couple of aspects of the book interested me. The novel's portrayal of the Elucidated Brethren of the Ebon Night was a smart parody of fraternal orders such as Masonry, as well as more conspiracy-oriented organizations like the Illuminati. And the Librarian's presence offered some thought-provoking musing about the power of literature.

“[Since there were aisles where the shelves were on the outside then there should be other aisles in the space between the books themselves, created out of quantum ripples by the sheer weight of words,”

Pratchett wrote. “Books bend space and time. One reason the owners of ... little rambling, poky second-hand bookshops always seem slightly unearthly is that many of them really are... . . . All libraries everywhere are connected in L-space. All libraries. Everywhere.”

That's a fine idea—L-space—contained by an otherwise almost entirely silly book. Another reason to return to Pratchett's seemingly commendable oeuvre.

The Kitra Saga by Gideon Marcus Review by Tom Feller

The title character of both this series of young adult novels and the first novel in it is a nineteen year old woman who wants to travel to the stars. Living with an uncle, she resides on the planet Vatan in the 30th Century when humanity has spread out across the galaxy, and she is an accomplished glider pilot, which becomes important late in the first novel. Her deceased mother had been an imperial ambassador who took Kitra on trips, but since her mother's death 10 years previously, Kitra has been planet bound. At a used spaceship auction, she acquires an old military vessel that is still equipped with a "jump drive", which uses hydrogen for fuel. Their method of faster-than-light travel is to "jump" from point to point through "hyperspace", and the maximum range is 10 light years. A jump itself takes a little less than seven days whether the distance is 1 or 10 light years. The ship is completely out of communication with the outside world during a jump.

Kitra recruits a group of friends to serve as a crew: Marta, a biologist who also serves as the medic, Peter, an engineer, Fareedh, a computer geek, and Pinky, a blob-like alien who serves as the navigator. Bisexuality appears to be the norm if this sample of Vatanians is representative. I was surprised that there was little romantic conflict or any other for that matter, especially since they are in a confined space for long periods of time. They name the ship the Majera, which is "adventure" in Turkish. During their shakedown cruise, the jump drive engages automatically and takes them to an abandoned military base, presumably where the ship was based during its active service. Much of the story revolves around their efforts to get home before they run out of food, water, and energy, and it is not much of a spoiler to say they succeed, because there are two sequels.

The title character of the second novel, Sirena, is their first paying customer. She is a princess from the planet Atlantida traveling incognito with one servant looking for a planet to colonize and by the end of the book she is almost a crew member. After some upgrades and the departure of the servant, they head to the frontier. The first acceptable world they find has already been colonized by a group of religious fanatics who want to enslave them. They barely escape and make their way to another prospective world only to find it orbited by a damaged hibernation ship. There had been an accident after it emerged from hyperspace which killed all the crew and is gradually killing the 10,000 sleepers as the hibernation units are failing one by one. The second half of the book consisted of their efforts to rescue them.

The third novel gets its title, Hyvilma, from the name from the planet that represents the last outpost of civilization before people leave for the frontier, much like St. Louis in most of the 19th Century. It starts immediately after the end of the previous novel. In the first part, they have a close encounter with a pirate ship while visiting an uninhabited system to refuel, and Pinky is severely injured. Then they jump to Hyvilma, where they find themselves in the middle of a rebellion against the empire. These novels are refreshingly old-fashioned, and I'd like to see what happens to Kitra and her friends next.

Maus I: My Father Bleeds History and Maus II: A Survivors Tale: And Here My Troubles Began by Art Spiegelman Review by Jim McCoy

So, I picked up copies of Art Spiegelman's Maus and Maus II. I've been meaning to read both for years and I finally got around to it. It was weird though, because I went to my Local Comic Shop to get a

copy of Maus right when the controversy hit and the owner of the place had never heard of it. Barnes and Noble, however, was more than willing to provide me with a copy of the first graphic novel and The Zekleman Holocaust Center was more than happy to sell me one from their souvenir store. From here on in, I'll be referring to both collectively as simply Maus.

On an entertainment level, I was impressed. Spiegelman had my attention for the entire time I was reading it. Dude can seriously tell a story. He also told the story of not just the his father surviving through the Holocaust, but of both his and his father's lives as they were working through the writing of the tale. It was masterfully done. Flashback is definitely a strong suit for Spiegelman.

The art was also well done. I'm not usually a big fan of black and white art in comic books/graphic novels in general, but Maus is not exactly your everyday comic fare. The Holocaust itself was both dark and gritty. The art matches it perfectly. Or maybe that's just me.

When I did my Capstone Paper at Oakland University I wrote about the involvement of the Heer, the German Army, in the Holocaust. Over the course of a semester's worth of research, I saw a lot of pictures of the carnage, all of them in black and white. All of those pictures were in black and white and some still haunt me. Either way though, the art in Maus matches with my impressions of the events themselves.

Speigleman's father definitely went through many things that no human being should ever have to endure. Maus is a testament both to the cruelty and depravity of the Germans and to the strength and stamina of those who survived. Vladek Spiegelman is hard core. I don't know if I could survive what he went through but he did.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for Art Spiegelman to have conducted those interviews or for Vladek to have went through them. Once, when I was really young, I asked my great-uncle why his eye didn't move. It turns out that his eye was made of glass and had been forced upon him by an unfriendly member of the Japanese military while he was fighting in the Pacific. I'll never forget the way everyone present looked at me, or the way my Aunt Maisie, who had been married to him for literal decades at that point said that she had never heard him talk about the war before. It was years before I realized how terrible the memories that I had dredged up were.

Art Spiegelman found a way to milk memories that were just as bad or worse from his father. I don't know what it took to get it out of the old man, but it must've been near impossible just to get him to open up. Whatever it was, or whatever it took, Art Spiegelman did it. I've got a lot of respect for that because I know it wasn't easy. What Vladek went through, reliving all of that, was probably even worse, so props to both of them for getting through what they had to get through. The University of Michigan has a program for people to testify to what they lived through and saw during the Holocaust as well.

Maus is a truly realistic look at what happened during the Holocaust. Vladek Spiegelman was a man who did whatever he could do to get through the Holocaust. It didn't matter what it was. It didn't matter what the rules said. He was going to make it if it was at all possible and he was determined not to die trying. I've got more respect for Vladek Spiegelman than probably any other purely human being in history but what he did was frequently against the rules. Granted, they were rules made by the Nazis, but any one of the violations that saved his life could have killed him. That's courage right there, folks, and he had it in spades.

I'm glad something like Maus came along. It's important to show the world what happened, how it happened and what it took to survive the Holocaust. I've also reviewed Marvel's X-Men: Magneto: Testa-

ment. Of course, I'm aware that many people have also seen Schindler's List. I know I've seen it many times. And, while Schindler's List may be the one exception of the three to what I'm about to say, these works should not be in classrooms of students who do not already have an education in the Holocaust.

That's not to say that Maus does not have literary value, because it has immense literary value. A lot of other books do too, and most of them aren't about the Holocaust. I've heard people talk about/seen people write about the importance of Maus and its position as the only way to truly understand the emotional impact of the Holocaust on its victims. With respect, those people need to do more reading. There are many books available that have been written by Holocaust victims, not the least of which is Primo Levi's *Survival In Auschwitz*.

And no, I'm not saying we should ban Maus. I own copies of both books, and I've actually purchased both for my oldest daughter, Riley. The important here being that when I bought her Maus, I also bought her books about the Holocaust in general and Terezin and Ravensbruck. I made sure she had the education to go along with the entertainment because I don't want her to think that the Holocaust is just some bullshit from a fucking comic book.

Students in North America and Europe have both been polled and it has been found that large percentages of young people believe that the Holocaust is either a myth or has been exaggerated. My own niece once asked me why people believe that it happened. I've had conversations with people who believe this way. And, while I will go to my death (hopefully many years from now) confident in my belief that this is the opposite of what Art Spiegelman intended, I believe that Maus, Testament, and other, similar works are a large part of the reason why.

Listen folks, everyone knows that comic books are not factually true. Yes, even those of us who read them for pleasure acknowledge the fact that fiction is fiction. That is precisely why choosing to teach history using graphic novels is the wrong thing to do. If the lessons of the Holocaust are forgotten teaching Maus in classrooms may well be one of the reasons that it does so. I get the fact that it won't be the only reason. Neo-Nazis and other antisemites have their own agenda and love using Holocaust denial as a possible reason to massacre the Jews in Israel. I get that, but there's no reason to help the enemy.

For the record though, my objection has nothing to do with Southern people and their problem with mouse tiddies. That I don't have a problem with.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Celebrated Survivors

Mr. Friday by Graham Bradley
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It is that time of year again. The hour is far-too-early in the morning, the salt has been laid on the pavement, it is bitterly cold, and the sales are on. The sales people wait all year for so that they can fight – and even kill – for that one and only deal on an item that isn't easy to get the other 364 days of the year.

Welcome to a future where Black Friday is a national economic holiday, televised as a gruesome reality show where people wearing gear specially designed to help them hop over the crowd and sometimes kill their competitors fight to remain high in the rankings. Contracted ahead of time to buy items for rich, unnamed patrons, the economy is so bad these competitors often have no choice but to enter this deadly arena every year. Only some are in it for the sport – and the blood....

The Story

Meet Jonathan Rigel Jr., a Friday Fighter who has been at the business for some time now to pay his uncle's medical bills. Friday Fighters are the professionals who race through the store to grab items for their patrons. Jonathan scans the crowd waiting for this particular Black Friday sale to start with an expert eye. Almost all of those at the head of the crowd are newbies or amateurs – nothing he can't handle. He still remembers his first Black Friday and the mistakes he made then, but he has grown and become a professional. Most of the crowd won't be a problem.

His and the other Fighters' patrons mark down the items they want bought well in advance of the big day, so Jonathan has his "shopping list" on his HUD display. Like all Fighters, he also possesses a *nom de guerre*, as the name "Jonathan" won't make him particularly memorable to the people watching online. When he rushes into the store, wearing his get-up, he will be "Mr. Friday" to the online audience watching the blood sport.

The countdown ends, the doors open, and the mad scramble ensues. Jonathan is one of the first people inside, locking down the rushing newbies or amateurs and keeping them out of his way. He manages to bag several of the items on his "shopping list" ahead of the other Fighters but is stymied when one of the products he needs has a digital lock on its case. He doesn't have the code. Jonathan should have the code – the patrons are supposed to provide that sort of thing to the Fighters, not withhold it!

When he calls his patron, the unidentified bigwig tells him one of his professional competitors has the code to open the lock on the inside of his belt. To get it, Mr. Friday will have to fight the other man, a popular killer who goes by the name Jester. Jonathan knows of Jester. He also has a score to settle with him.

If it is a fight to the death that the people watching this "panem et circenses" wish to see – well then....

The Characters

Jonathan Rigel Jr. would not be amiss among 1980s action heroes. He is strong, decisive, and he knows the situation in which he is trapped is wrong. It is morally corrupt and it is going to kill him if he does not get out of it. The problem is finding the moral high ground and path out in a world designed to keep him caged within this barbaric yearly gladiator game.

The supporting characters in this novella are sketched out more briefly than the witty, sarcastic lead but they still make a strong impression. The villains and the heroes all have believable actions and reactions based on credible premises, and best of all? The heroes never give up. They have their down moments, the times when they wonder if it is worth it or if they will succeed. But hope is the deciding factor for Mr. Friday and his compatriots, and they are not letting that go without a fight!

The World

The world is a higher tech version of ours, with many a familiar but streamlined dystopic trope threading through the tale. It is not, however, a blasted landscape where buildings crumble and gangs roam the streets. Like the Purge series, Mr. Friday keeps the violence mostly centered on a single day and a single concept: Black Friday. Though as Black Friday has expanded to Cyber Monday, that is included as well, in the most fantastic manner possible.

Politics

The only politics is “Do not let consumerism consume you.” Beyond that, Mr. Friday is absolutely politics free.

Content Warning

There is no gore, not even when people die. There is some language but it is mild and sparse. Some people get beat up but the descriptions are not overdone. All in all, Mr. Friday is an easy PG-13 book.

Who is it for?

Anyone who liked 1980s action-adventure films, particularly Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *The Last Action Hero* and *Jingle All the Way*. Mr. Friday is a dystopia with heart, so anyone looking for a serious story that snarks while it wears its emotions on its sleeve will definitely want to pick up this book. Those who feel down and out or trapped will also enjoy it, as the whole point of the story is to remind readers that there is hope even in the darkest situations. In contrast to a lot of dystopian fiction that trends toward epic battles that take hundreds of pages to complete, Mr. Friday takes a reader from “everything is broken” to “it cost us, but we won” quickly and neatly. On top of that, it is just plain fun, and there are not enough books that are “just fun” on the market these days.

Why buy it

Seriously, if you are feeling down, do yourself a favor and buy Mr. Friday today. It will lift your spirits and make you feel better. The future is not written in stone and what better reminder of that than a tale of Black Friday taken to extremes, before emphatically being put in its place?

Ocean’s Echo by Everina Maxwell Review by Tom Feller

This is the second book in the author’s Resolution series, set in the far future when humanity has spread out across the galaxy. The Resolution is a kind of galactic governing authority that regulates relations among the various star systems and insists upon control of what they called “remnants”, artifacts from a previous galactic civilization. This novel is set in a different star system called Orshan and uses different characters from the first book *Winter’s Orbit*. The head of Orshan’s quasi-military government is called the “legislator”. She is the aunt of Tennalhin Halkana, the promiscuous black sheep of their family who also has substance abuse issues. His younger sister, on the other hand, is a proper, well-behaved law student. He and his family are all telepaths, a result of experiments with the remnants. Telepaths are divided into “readers” and “architects”. The readers, as the name indicates, are mind readers and make good space pilots, because they can handle the complexities of chaotic space around the “links” that allow faster-than-light travel. Architects, on the other hand, are capable of mind control, depending on the strength of their abilities. Tennalhin is a reader, but, because of his disreputable behavior, is required by his aunt to be conscripted into the military and synched, a process that links minds, with an architect as a way of bringing him under control. Surit Yeni, a lieutenant in Orshan’s military and an architect, is “volunteered” to be his partner. Surit’s mother had been a leader in a rebellion 20 years previously and died in the process. Surit compensates by becoming a by-the-book officer. However, Surit shows a rebellious streak by refusing to complete the synching process when he learns that Tennalhin has not consented. They agree to fake the process until circumstances, a coup against Tennalhin’s aunt, require it, about three-quarters into the novel. By this time, they have fallen in love.

When I finished Winter's Orbit, I wanted to read another book in that universe but with more emphasis on science fiction and less on romance, and the author delivered. This is a rare character-driven space opera/military SF, and it is hard to put down as it races to its conclusion.

Order of the Centurion by Jason Anspach

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When people think about the military, and more specifically, military science fiction, they think of those heroic tales. Let's face it; we wouldn't sit through a book about the twelfth staff meeting of the day and the infamous 'Death by PowerPoint'. Those of us who served hated it when we were in, and now, we'd hate to experience it on the pages of the books we read to escape.

However, we read innumerable tales of battlefield heroics. We salivate at the chance to see another common man doing the impossible with uncommon valor. It's wish fulfillment, allowing us to visualize what we hope are the best parts of ourselves. And for those of us who've been there and maybe got stuck with some survivor's guilt... it allows us to replay those events with hopefully better outcomes.

Despite all of that, very few books are dedicated to one man's path to earning the highest awards for valor for their intergalactic nation-state, very few until the Order of the Centurion Series by Jason Anspach and Nick Cole. This is a series of stand-alone tales, regaling us with how individual legionnaires do impossible deeds, despite the odds. We experience them earning their award, the in-universe equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Order of the Centurion.

The first novel in this series was written by the co-creators of the Galaxy's Edge Universe, Jason Anspach and Nick Cole. Those of us who are fans of their work jokingly call this dynamic duo our 'Co-Emperors' and have built a thriving fan community around this universe. Together they've fixed everything that was broken by the fools ruining the Star Wars Franchise. With Jason's skill-turning prose and Nick's time spent in the US Army, they get the details right and build a compelling story that will surely become one of the classics of science fiction literature in the years to come.

The Story

"The Order of the Centurion is the highest award that can be bestowed upon an individual serving in, or with, the Legion. When such an individual displays exceptional valor in action against an enemy force and uncommon loyalty and devotion to the Legion and its legionnaires, refusing to abandon post, mission, or brothers, even unto death, the Legion dutifully recognizes such courage with this award."

Tired of sitting out the war on Psydon in a mobile office hab, Legion Lieutenant Washam agrees to undertake a covert and unsanctioned mission with a band of Republic Recon Marines. Inserted deep behind enemy lines, the strike force uncovers a surprise key to ending a bitter war. Now they must navigate a hostile jungle teeming with murderous alien rebels, pushing themselves to the limits of their abilities, to get this vital intel to Legion Command – if they can survive that long.

The Order of the Centurion is the first novel in an all-new series of stand-alone military science fiction thrillers set in the Galaxy's Edge Universe, ranging from the early days of the Savage Wars to the arrival of the Black Fleet and the shenanigans that occurred around the execution of Article 13. Each of

these books features the legendary heroes of the Legion who forgot nothing in their earning of the Legion's highest honor.

If you like epic space opera with a side of military science fiction, you should read this series. Plenty of explosions, with authentically gritty combat. If this sounds like your flavor of badassery, then you've come to the right place! This novel is a brilliant continuation of the Galaxy's Edge Universe, where they fix everything that George Lucas and company broke in this Star-Wars-Not-Star-Wars adventure. I wish I could give you an easy comparison. Something like, "If you enjoyed Book X, buy this book," but I really feel like Nick and Jason broke new ground here. Other books followed their example, but theirs was the first in this new round of authors and sci-fi fans fixing the broken properties of their youths. The two have revived that sense of newness and fun that we loved as children, bringing most of us into the science fiction genre! There are new series popping up that follow this vibe; I've heard of them... but until I read them, I can't recommend them. So, until then, I will stick with the belief that there are other military sci-fi books out there, but none quite like this!

Now that I've shown you the world let's talk about the writing itself. One thing that I love about the Galaxy's Edge Universe is how difficult it is to tell where one author begins and the other ends. Their voices flow seamlessly, one into the other, culminating in an enjoyable read. The Order of the Centurion was written with equal parts workmen's prose and literary pageantry. That isn't a bad thing either; it allowed the Dynamic Duo to paint a compelling picture in my head. When I read their stories, I can envision the adventure playing out as a movie in my head, and I love it!

I have to give it to the authors, this novel was chock-full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. They described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells, and even how the world felt. This is extremely important when you're writing and/or reading military science fiction. Combat can't just be seen; it must be experienced, and Anspach and Cole brought that to you. I could almost smell the burnt ozone from the blaster fire and feel the tension in the air from the marines who went on patrol with Major Berlin and Lieutenant Washam. This is how it's done, and I hope to get that good someday.

While I could visualize all of the characters, I would still love it if the authors shared an artist's renderings for all of the things. It's beyond time that this universe gets its own bestiary for the various alien races! I feel like an addict saying that, but meh... I like it when we have the visuals to go along with my novels. While the authors did a great job of describing, they didn't describe every blade of grass. Instead, they gave you the building blocks you needed to see for yourself. One huge plus for me was Nick Cole and Jason Anspach's descriptive use of language. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which added to the world that felt tangible, and I enjoyed it. The author's description of their universe was evocative and enough to please rookies and uber fans alike! This is similar to what I said in the previous books, but their descriptive game has been superb throughout the series, and I can't think of a place I'd like to improve it.

Another part of this book that I absolutely loved was the premise for this universe. The author set out to take the kind of Star Wars stories we used to love, strip out all of the modern political messaging, and tell tales for the sheer enjoyment of it. The whole point was escapism and enjoyment under the banner of intergalactic science fiction. This book launches a new series set in the Galaxy's Edge Universe, telling the stories of legionnaires who won the Order of the Centurion. It's the highest award for valor that can be earned by a leej and is highly coveted. This series, like the main novels, fit squarely within the scope of the military fiction that I love to read. It's an action-packed novel with a defined plot. It was easy to follow, and it never really felt like the story lagged behind or became dull. There was never a point in the novel where I couldn't follow what was going on, so in this aspect of the story; it was a hit!

We get to see a war fought by the Legion's first point officers against the Doros, a humanoid doglike race nicknamed the Dobies. The plot was darkly fun, so much so that I had to sit on this for a few days before I could write this review. Seriously, the ending was just that emotional. It was a good set-up and well-executed premise that held my interest from the first sentence. They built on what came before this novel, allowing the universe to grow and expand, hooking me on their special brand of leej crack!

Further, the plot was compelling and emotional and hit ya in the feels. I really loved the premise, but in full disclosure, I do have a novel written later in this series. I won't be reviewing a novel I wrote, but that was probably a given. Back to the plot of this novel, I enjoyed how the execution. It was especially fun to get some of the backstories of a major character from the main series. In this book, Jason and Nick did it again, the pacing was excellent, and there was never a slow moment. There was never a point where the plot was confusing or that I couldn't figure out what was going on. A map of the terrain would definitely help, but I could still picture things in my head. I couldn't ask for anything more; a compelling premise, perfect execution, and incredible pacing!

The Characters

In this novel, we follow a small group of characters, which is what I like about this universe. We meet a young Lieutenant Washam, Major D'lay Berlin, Sergeant Shotton, Specialist Alistair, and Sergeant Major Subs. All of these characters were a lot of fun to spend time with again and made me want the book to never end (hint, hint)!

Lieutenant Washam (Wash): He's a rich kid from a prominent family on Spilursa who becomes one of the Legion's first 'point (appointed) officers. He was genuinely dedicated to the ideals of the Republic, the House of Reason, and the Legion. Unlike his fellow points, he earned his commission the hard way, and his peers hated him for it. The rest of the Legion? They hated him, too, never giving him a chance. Instead, they relegate him to some backwater supply depot doing work normally reserved for lowly corporals. When the opportunity comes to go on a mission led by Major Berlin, seeking to hunt down the guns terrorizing the Republic forces on Psydon, he reluctantly rises to the situation. He becomes the living embodiment of the Legion mantra, KTF. He kills them first, showing the Legion and the Dobies that he is a force to be reckoned with. He felt real and not one of those stereotypical military killers. He was badass, a consummate professional, and a genuinely good officer for his troops. He's the kind of guy you'd want on your side in a firefight, despite having essentially bribed his way into the Legion. He was my favorite character in this novel; I enjoyed following him! Overall, I really liked him and felt like there was so much more to come from him! I can't wait to see where his arc concludes in Retribution!

Major D'lay Berlin: He's a rich kid from a prominent family on Spilursa who becomes one of the Legion's first 'point officers. He was genuinely dedicated to the ideals of the Republic and the House of Reason, though he was an unashamedly spoiled rotten brat. He takes a lot for granted, learning the true meaning of service... and he does it the hard way. In the end, he proves his mettle under fire during operations on Psydon. I both hated and loved this character throughout the course of the novel, but in the end, he won me over.

Sergeant Major Boyd (Subs): He's a Dark Ops Legionnaire who's on temporary duty at Republic Army Firebase Hitchcock. He was severely wounded on his last Dark Ops mission and was stuck out in the boonies to ride out the last of his service time before he could retire. He was a motivated, gung-ho type of leej who knew how to get things done and passed those skills on to the Repub Army soldiers he was stationed with. When a rogue mission into the Psydon jungle runs into trouble, Subs rushes off towards the sound of the guns to help his fellow legionnaires. I really loved this character and wanted more

from him. He was the sort of operator who had plenty of stories left to his name, stories that deserved to be told.

Specialist Alistair: He's a Repub Army "basic" who's the radio operator for Republic Army Firebase Hitchcock. He's befriended Dark Ops Legionnaire Sergeant Major Boyd (Subs), whom he sees as his mentor. When Subs makes his way into the woods for an impromptu rescue operation, Alistair heeds the call of duty and proves his worth. I really liked this character and wanted to see what happened to him after the events that took place in *The Order of the Centurion*.

Sergeant Shotton: He's a Repub marine sergeant who was in charge of the marine detachment that went on the patrol with Major Berlin and Lieutenant Washam. He was a grizzled old NCO, but no-nonsense kind of guy every rookie wants on their side in a firefight. He was a consummate warfighter, one who showed everyone that the Legion aren't the only bubbas who can KTF! I really enjoyed this character and wouldn't mind seeing more from him. Seriously, I would love to know what happened to him after the SLIC pulled him out of the jungles!

Doros (aka Dobies): These are a doglike race of humanoids that look similar to an Earthlike Doberman, hence their nickname of Dobie. They were a fierce species with a pack mentality and were capable warriors. They are from the planet Psydon and were ultimately forced into the fold of the Republic by the Legion during a period of fierce struggle. These were the enemies from *Tin Man* and *The Order of the Centurion*. I love these aliens and want more from them. I bet they would be fun aliens to explore from their own perspective. (Hint, hint, hint.)

Overall, it was fun to meet one of the important characters from the main series. I liked learning Wash's backstory and how he achieved the peaks he climbed. I can't wait to see where the author takes Wash in the last *Galaxy's Edge* novel, *Retribution*.

The World

This is one of the many spin-off novels in the *Galaxy's Edge* Series. There were nine books in the main series, with about the same number of novels in the other series set in this universe. After all of those books, I still absolutely loved it. Each novel keeps getting better, and I'm more hooked than ever. Can I say that enough? Okay, back to the nitty-gritty of the review. This novel had a very fleshed-out world that was consistent, made sense, and sucked you in. Some of the details that seemed inconsequential in the first eight novels from the main storyline are clarified and proven to be critically important. This novel served to add even more depth to the world at the edge of the galaxy.

While this could be read as a stand-alone novel, without having read any of the other books, it built on to the bedrock that *Tin Man* created about the conflict on Psydon and the brave men and women who fought there for The Republic. I could picture every setting described, easily envisioning myself fighting the Dobies in the Psydon jungles. They described the world with plenty of details, and there wasn't a scene where I couldn't imagine what Anspach and Cole described. By choosing to have the main character fighting in his fatigues, these two authors were able to up their game by adding more sensory input to the mix; sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. There was no climate-controlled leej armor to hide behind, just the legionnaire and his relentless foe. They didn't reinvent the wheel and built on the existing tropes of science fiction. They just made it sexier! Overall, the world-building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Nick Cole and Jason Anspach created. Like most of the stories I read, this one didn't take itself too seriously, which allowed you to focus on the fun, which is why I read it in the first place.

Politics

This novel was apolitical in the sense that it didn't deal with any real-world politics. Instead, it was written in such a way that you could forget the real world and immerse yourself in this novelized one. With that being said, we did see some political struggles from the political parties in this world. The very way that the main character received his commission was a political move, appointing politically connected men and women into roles without training. This is done so that those new officers can check the box on this phase of life before entering the more lucrative private sector as “heroes” of the Republic. In that sense, this novel gave off some Vietnam nostalgia without getting into the politics of our world.

Content Warning

This is a war novel, so there is plenty of violent kinetic action. The violence isn't gratuitous; this isn't ‘war porn™.’ However, the violence and danger are there, so do with that what you will. I would suggest using a PG-13 rating guideline for your younger readers. There is also some cussing in this novel but with expletives unique to this universe. I would say that this makes it a relative non-issue, at least in my family. Finally, there are some references to a higher power. In this world, “God” becomes “Oba,” so if that is an issue for you... you've been warned!

Narration

I've listened to over a hundred hours of stories since becoming a fan of audiobooks. I've had these sweep adventures read to me by awesome narrators like RC Bray, Luke Daniels, Mark Boyett, and Veronica Giguere. I'm confident in what I enjoy and what I dislike. I know that I hate accents that seem too cheesy and despise narrators that sound like robots. With those pesky caveats, I will review the narration quality of this novel. The audiobook was well done, and the accents were consistent. I liked what Mark Boyett did with this novel; his audiobooks are always quality productions. I've listened to several books by this narrator, and I'll keep buying more because he's just that good. I felt like he was the perfect fit to tell Wash's story. He also did an outstanding job with the secondary characters; he had me crying for the tragedy that was the life of Sergeant Major Boyd. I loved how he portrayed Major Berlin, though it left me conflicted. I wasn't sure whether to love him or hate him. I listened to this novel exclusively and only referenced the e-book while writing this review. I don't feel like there is any part of the story I didn't understand, which can sometimes happen when listening rather than reading a novel. His performance didn't feel robotic, like a machine was reading the novel to me. You'll often see that from me because it'll drag me out of a book so fast that I can't listen to it anymore. With Mark Boyett, it felt like I was listening to one of those old-time radio dramas. He did a great job with the various characterizations, and his voices were consistent.

Who is it for?

This novel, and the rest of the books in this universe, are for those who've ever loved the early Star Wars books and hated when they murdered the franchise. It's for fans of military science fiction who want their stories told with a slice of realism. If you want compelling three-dimensional characters without sacrificing the action, this is your book. This book allows you to be a kid again, playing in the dirt with those action figures as you save the galaxy single-handedly.

Why buy it

This novel has everything you love about military science fiction. The combat was gritty and visceral,

sucking you in through the pages and into another world... except someone else has to embrace the suck this time! The Dynamic Duo of Jason Anspach and Nick Cole never took their foot off the gas or let up on the action during this romp through Psydon, and I loved it!

Pro by Gordon R. Dickson

Review by Heath Row

The Stf Amateur

This novel by Gordon R. Dickson is a pleasant item, a bit of an oddity as an Ace illustrated novel. I've only been able to find two items referenced as such, this and Andre Norton's *Zarsthor's Bane* (also 1978), which is labeled on its cover as "an Ace illustrated novel of fantasy adventure." The first pages to this edition refer to this work as the "first fully illustrated Ace novel." I'm not sure whether these illustrated novels were intended to be a series, per se, but it's an intriguing concept that might not have succeeded commercially.

The cover to this paperback edition of *Pro* was drawn by G. Benvenuti, while the interior illustrations were created by James R. Odbert. (I prefer Benvenuti's portrayal of the Homskarters, the alien race, over Odbert's, but that's neither here nor there.) Portions of the novel had previously appeared "in substantially different form" in the September 1975 issue of *Analog*.

Given the ample illustrations throughout—perhaps an illo every couple of pages—the book feels like a shorter read but remains interesting and contains some intriguing ideas. For the most part, it's the story of two opposing points of view considering whether it's appropriate to meddle in alien societies in such a way that their societal and technological development are accelerated. The old guard is represented by Bill Cohone, stationed on world 49381D far from Earth and seemingly satisfied by his slow efforts to introduce agricultural concepts to the aliens populating the planet.

His perhaps idyllic lifestyle is upset by the arrival of a new sector chief, Harb Mallard, "one of the Academy wonders," who's had some success with other alien populations, occasionally using dubious methods with definite success. He goes about pursuing his own line of outreach to the Homskarters, courting a warlike king, joining a hunting party roaming up the coast to attack nearby Homskarter settlements, all the while introducing new ideas, weapons, and technology to the group of plunderers.

The book primarily focuses on Mallard's time with the Homskarters, and just when a reader might begin to wonder whether his successes will supplant the slower, longer work of his predecessor Cohone, the narrative focus returns to him. The plot resolves itself surprisingly quickly but satisfactorily.

With a somewhat strange title for an odd little book that might have been intended to kick off a larger publishing effort that fizzled, *Pro* is worth reading.

Odbert's illustrations sometimes impress, but for the most part they made me liken the Homskarters to my literary memory of L. Ron Hubbard's *Psychlos* or Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tharks*—only with fewer limbs in the case of the latter.

I'm curious: What was the market for such heavily illustrated paperbacks? It can't have been much.

Tunnel in the Sky by Robert Heinlein
Review by George Phillis

I originally read this volume approximately when it came out, probably in nineteen fifty-seven or so. It was at the time an interesting adventure story. Rereading it, it is a much richer tale than I had noticed at the time.

The hero of the work is Rod Walker, a high school student who is taken a course or two in survival on a different planet, who will walk through a hole in space from one world to another. The walk is the practical exam. You go someplace, stay there for a couple of weeks, and are recovered. There is an assumption that a few students will die, but for others their performance during those weeks will be the examination. Unfortunately for Walker, after he arrives at wherever he was going, there is a local supernova, which has some effect on the transport handwavium, leaving him, his fellow students, and students from three other groups, two being university students, trapped as it turns out for three years on a distant planet.

There has recently been significant attention to the volume due to the transparently erroneous hypothesis that the book shows that the hero of the work is a Black. (He may have been Black, but the book reads to the contrary, though Heinlein apparently later said that he was.) The supposed evidence for this claim is that much of the time he is the leader of the expeditionary group, the number of men is somewhat larger than the number of women, but he mysteriously fails to attract a woman and marry her. After all, he is the leader, so according to these hypothecators he must've been very attractive unless there was something anomalous about him, such as his race, since allegedly in period interracial marriage was unthinkable. Note I said marry. This is a nineteen-fifties volume written for young people, so you may correctly assume that nothing improper happens until the knot is tied for a series of couples.

On one hand, there is a significant progressive theme buried in the work, though not the one considered in the previous paragraph. His sister Helen is an Assault Captain in the Corps of Amazons, and spends some time grumbling about her company being in barracks rather than in combat. For the 1950s that's actually quite radical.

On the other hand, Walker does not get married during the volume. In period, high school students getting married were not entirely unthinkable, especially among the lower middle classes, but Walker did not marry. This was claimed to be evidence that he was a Black, and the students around him were all White. Toward the end of the book, Walker and his father have a significant discussion about why he didn't marry. Rod Walker is entirely clear on this. He was in command of the operation, so he could hardly show favoritism by marrying one of the available women, no matter what they thought of his position. For him, marriage was unacceptable. As it happens, his executive officer was a woman, and his father is somewhat concerned that Rod and his executive officer might've had a romantic relationship. Why? The Executive Officer was from Nigeria, which would obviously only be an issue if the marriage were going to be interracial. In her words toward the end of the book, she was willing to follow Rod anywhere.

Heinlein was a former Navy officer. He worked out the obvious consequence of having women and men in the same formation, namely that the commanding officer couldn't carry on with anyone else, not and maintain his authority.

In a variety of ways, Rod Walker is by no means a perfect hero. There is a political skill known as

reading the room, in which there is some sort of election or discussion, and the person who can read the room can tell which way the vote is going to go, well before any votes are counted. Walker doesn't have it. When there is an election, he expects to win, but loses badly. A gate is opened back to Earth. He expects that a considerable number of people will want to stay in their new planet. In fact he is the only person who wants to stay. The colony has a significant difficulty with a few of the older men who take the attitude that they don't have to work. He tells them to leave. With one of them, the dispute resolves to 'let's you and me fight', even though his opponent is significantly larger and heavier than he is, and apparently has more fighting skill. Instead of delegating the task of removing this person to his supporters, he falls for the notion that if he doesn't agree to fight he will lose face and be unable to lead the group. That's another 1950s trope, except when the trope was traditionally used the good guy had absolute script immunity. (Rocky Jones, Space Ranger, had one episode in which the scoundrel showed up with this extremely large person highly capable with fisticuffs, who beats Rocky Jones. That was a unique plot element.)

It is an enjoyable short novel, only two hundred-fifty pages.

Wavelengths Magazine, a Book by Daniel Dickholtz
Review by Jason P. Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Imagine a world where George Lucas was known more for his string of horror movies rather than Star Wars. Imagine Gene Roddenberry with more hit series in the seventies — Planet Earth, maybe The Questor Tapes or Battleground: Earth starring Tom Selleck.

That's just what author and journalist Daniel Dickholtz has done with his new book *Wavelengths*, collecting Starlog-type material in an anthology of stories from alternate universes.

“It's three different alternate histories of science fiction media, but it's told in the form of the articles, the book reviews, the letters pages, the editorials of a magazine that, by sheer coincidence, happens to be just like Starlog, called *Wavelengths*.” And it's not just one alternate universe, it's three. “The contents of the magazine change from one universe to the next. So what we're actually seeing is just like a sampling of the magazine, like if you had gone to the magazine's web site and you wanted to get a taste of what the magazine was like. And what you're seeing is issue 501, which is a Fall issue from 2019, because that's the year I started the real hardcore work on it. In one universe, the magazine might look like this. In another universe, it could look like this. And in still another universe, it looks like this.”

Wavelengths is set up to be a magazine like Starlog, Fangoria, Comics Scene, etc. in that it covers the science fiction and fantasy entertainment industry with articles, reviews, and interviews. There's even a letters column. Dickholtz took his inspiration from his time on the staff of Starlog. “We used to do these things called Starlog Yearbook, and a lot of that would be reprints. We'd also throw in some articles that we couldn't fit in the regular magazine. And one time as I was going through it, it's like you know what? We've got this news item or this portion of an article that was about a project that didn't get made, and I thought it would be pretty interesting if we could just assemble all of them into one alternate universe Starlog Yearbook. But that would have taken a lot of time and effort, and when you're putting out several monthly magazines, there was no way to actually invest the time in it.”

Years after Starlog was cancelled, the idea stuck. Dickholtz kept seeing anthologies and story collections published over the years, and he figured at some point maybe he could “get the old gang back together” to assemble the alternate universe Yearbook. However, faced with the prospect of having to

wade through contracts and other elements of assembling such a project, he figured to make the first one on his own and reduce the stress. “The more I thought about it, and relying just entirely on myself, I thought ‘what do I know about contracts?’ Could I even get everybody back together? Would some of these people even still want to do anything like that? And as I started just jotting down notes, I kept thinking, ‘I’m the one who really has some vision for what I want to do and I’m being very particular about it. Maybe I should just do it myself.’”

Working from notes collected over the years, Dickholtz quickly found himself looking at different possibilities compounding exponentially, as one random element would impact several other items, such as which Roddenberry project between Planet Earth and Genesis II would be the success story.

“Gene Roddenberry had done a pilot for Genesis II. He had very high hopes for it. He had already written out a massive bible for it. He had written up a number of story treatments, and he got to film it in 1973 with Alex Cord in the lead role, and came that close to getting picked up. When it didn’t, he went over to another network the very next year. He picked one of the other story treatments, and they developed that into Planet Earth with John Saxon taking over the Alex Cord role, but essentially it’s the sequel. Planet Earth was the one that I had seen as a kid before I saw Genesis II, and in a way that’s kind of the – that may actually be the whole impetus for this because for whatever reason, I really liked Planet Earth. I could see exactly what he was trying to do with it. But when it came to doing this, it’s like ‘OK, are we having Genesis II become the series, or are we having Planet Earth become the series?’ Because there’s a year of difference that’s going on there, and that means that other things didn’t have opportunities and if I really didn’t want to deal with those. I kept on going back and forth and it came down to actually the ratings. Planet Earth at that time did not get great ratings, and Genesis II did and, like I said, came that close. So I said, ‘ok, I’m sticking with Genesis II and so Planet Earth, that story is just another episode that they do. But that’s the kind of thing that I had to stick with, because if it’s one year, it becomes one set of things. If it’s a different year, it goes off in a whole different direction.’”

Another Roddenberry project that got picked up in this universe in the seventies: *Battleground: Earth*, which in this universe wasn’t produced until after Roddenberry’s death and was re-christened *Earth: Final Conflict*. But at the time Roddenberry originally pitched it, he had become aware of a little-known actor who was making it into pilots that were never picked up. “But he had faith in Tom Selleck. And well, that changes a couple of things because if that show gets on the air, then that means that Tom Selleck isn’t going to be around, he’s not going to be available if it’s a hit show, for another pilot called *Magnum, P.I.* Somebody else gets that part.” According to *Wavelengths*, Selleck went on to become a science fiction icon.

As did Meryl Streep, who auditioned for Dino De Laurentis’ *King Kong*. Dickholtz had discovered in his research, that De Laurentis’ son had brought her in for an audition, and the elder producer called her “ugly” (in Italian), and she ended up telling him off because she understood Italian. Dickholtz had only jokingly thought about creating a new history for Streep when he learned of the audition. “The mere fact that she was knocking around and she was willing to show up for a *King Kong* movie, I said ‘OK, well, I’m doing the 1970s, she’s knocking around. I’m sticking her in this other project.’” Which is how Meryl Streep and Robert Englund ended up in project together.

It’s that later knowledge, the stuff we learn along the way as interviews and tell-all books get published over the years, that sometimes color our perceptions of what went on back in the day. A lot of what we know about *Star Wars*, for example, comes from later chronicles of behind-the-scenes stories, not from media coverage at the time. Who knew that Marcia Lucas or Gary Kurtz (among others) were so instrumental in making the film work as well as it did? How many of us knew *Splinter of the Mind’s Eye*

was originally conceived as a possible lower-budget sequel in the eventuality that Star Wars was a flop?

“As I was doing some of the research for this, particularly with Star Wars, even though I’d much prefer to have one incident send everything off on its unusual way, I quickly found that they had done so much ground work before the movie came out, that I had to knock away a few different support beams before I got to the result where it really all starts to fall apart. Reading a number of interviews with Roy Thomas and Charlie Lippincott and a number of other people, to see they were really banging their heads against the wall trying to get this done and that done. Even trying to get toy deals done. And all of this was being done so that they could prep the audience. Because I didn’t want to have a situation where the audience just went ‘meh’ – there had to be stuff going on before that for that to be a result. And certainly, I wouldn’t have been able to do a lot of that if it wasn’t for everything that’s come out since.” The success of Star Wars had come out of not just a great film, but the preliminary hype surrounding the Kenner action figures and other merchandise.

That success eluded George Lucas in these other dimensions. “I remember hearing one podcast where I think they were quoting Francis Ford Coppola, who said that George doesn’t like to lose. And I kept thinking about that as I was writing it, because my original idea was that he was just going to own a video store. There is a little element of that within there, but in the end, he comes out of that and goes on to more. Because like I said, there is always good in something. There is always something that’s worthwhile, and I just want to – I’m really trying to celebrate everything.”

That “always good in something” is an optimistic viewpoint. Even with TV series and films that don’t quite work right, Dickholtz says we should make the effort to see something good in the project. And that applies to fandom overall, no matter the franchise. “The people who are just hung up on the past are just not as happy as the people who are just nostalgic. Because they’re taking things from the past and doing something fresh and new and they’re inspired by it. Some of that was coming from the fact that I see different fandoms where they suddenly just say, ‘whatever this new thing is, it’s awful, it’s terrible, it’s no damn good! Only the one that was done originally, or maybe the one that went after that, only that is good. No, that’s you being hung up. That day happened. It’s not coming back. Let’s see this new thing.’”

It should be noted that disgruntled fans are not new. This kind of thing has been going on for many, many years. Those of us who were there back in the day will remember the frustration and consternation over the announcement that Paramount was moving forward with Star Trek: The Next Generation. And how many times have Whovians declared that this new Doctor can’t possibly as good as the previous Doctor (by the way, Tom Baker is still the best Doctor...)! “Back in 1989, after Batman came out, we got a letter from somebody – because there was no internet; our letters pages were the internet of the time – and somebody wrote in complaining bitterly that Kim Basinger was playing Vicky Vale as a blonde when she was a redhead in the comics. I just turned to one of the other editors and said, ‘I didn’t realize that her entire character is based on her hair color. I suppose the next thing we’re going to get is a letter complaining that Batman’s costume is all black, which makes sense, as opposed to grey and blue like in the comics.’ The very next day, that’s the letter we got.”

Of course, on the other end of the spectrum are those people who have only a passing, peripheral knowledge about such things. They don’t know Peter Parker from Miles Morales, nor do they know the names of all the Power Rangers, nor do they have the complete history of the planet Yavin in their heads. Dickholtz worked to make sure the book would be accessible for those people as well. “Even though there are time where I get, like, really inside baseball, where you really have to know – like, for example, in one section you really have to know about Charlton Comics and Gold Key Comics, neither

of which have been around for decades. At the same time that I'm doing that for the people who know, I also have to be mindful that there will be people who wouldn't." The casual reader is just as important, which means some things would need a little bit more explanation. "I had to be mindful that there are some things that I would have to either explain more or the theme of it had to be broad enough that it would appeal to anybody even if you didn't know this particular thing."

Even some long-time fans might not get every reference. "I'm figuring most people don't know who Gulliver Jones is. Unless you're really into old, old science fiction, or you're into sword-and-planet novels to begin with, the average person isn't going to know Gulliver Jones, which of course is why I seized upon him. There are a number of different properties that are filtered throughout that most people wouldn't know, so I take an extra step in explaining it. But for me, the important thing is that I give enough detail about everything that you buy into the world, that if you were to just be dropped into this world and you happen to open up this particular issue, you can believe that all of it could exist, that it's at least a plausible sounding world."

It's also good to know that in some universes, John Carter finally got his due, with Tom Cruise producing a series of successful adaptations in the 1990s. (For the real story on why it's never happened, read *John Carter and the Gods of Hollywood* by Michael D. Sellars.) "With just taking Tom Cruise making John Carter back in the 90s, what we mostly follow there is a set visit to a TV mini-series version of Gulliver Jones, which is a book that preceded the John Carter books, finally getting made."

It's the kind of thing we grew up reading in *Starlog*, and that magazine's legacy is stamped onto *Wavelengths*. "We wind up seeing little bits of everything; the books you might have been reading, the comics you might have been collecting, the toys and tchotchkes that you could be picking up at conventions. You hear about other projects that are in the works. Each one of these leads to tremendous changes throughout the industry, throughout the genre, and how fans react to all of these different things."

And the narrative voice is very similar to what you would find in those magazines back in the day. "As I was writing it, I had to keep on thinking of it, 'ok, I can't just be an omniscient narrator. What would the writer who lives in this world, how would he approach it?' because there are certain things that he's going to know about and there are certain things he couldn't possibly know about. Which actually, weirdly, sort of became more and more self-reflective. Because it's like, 'ok, well, how much did we really know about everything that was going on some of these movies?' Were we just being told what they wanted us to hear?"

That time at *Starlog* clearly has influenced the work, and Dickholtz is quick to make that connection more than once. "If you look at the dedication page, the dedication page is really to practically everybody who worked on *Starlog* back in the day, especially the editor Dave McDonnell. Because there's a what if. If he hadn't hired me, I wouldn't have a book today."

Dickholtz also plans to supplement the first book with videos on his YouTube channel as a way of adding more depth to the various alternate universes. "I really want to make a few videos where I discuss the lesser known things. Like even, for example, we mention Gulliver Jones, but in this one, we've got that movie series *Phoenix Five*. That was a real thing. That was a real Australian science fiction TV show from the early seventies. And after I had posted some of the covers, somebody from Australia, 'that would make a great series of movies. How come nobody's doing that?' Well, they did in this universe."

Returning to the idea of future *Wavelength* collections including other *Starlog* alumni, Dickholtz says it would be a "fun idea" for a future volume, and he has ideas for more should the first book be successful enough. "There are a few realities that I've been thinking about, that I just didn't quite find the right

hook, but I keep thinking about them, and I'd certainly like to get into a world where the James Bond movies turned out differently. There's another one that's focused on luchador movies. Because why not? I mean, you've got guys in masks fighting monsters. That's superhero stuff right there.

"I have three strong contenders. It's just a matter of finding the right hooks, what the theme of it is going to be. Because really, each one of these is a story. I mean, as much as I love the world-building, and there's a lot of world-building here, there's still themes that I want to deal with that are going to be meaningful to more than just the casual reader. I want to make sure that I've got something where the subject matter and what I'm doing with it will fit together. And of course, it's also a matter of do I have the timing right, because there was one idea where I was thinking 'ok, so if I have this happen, then the magazine would be covering it in this decade, but what would be happening after?' And it is a challenging thing, doing thirty to fifty years' worth of rewriting pop culture history."

Witchy Kingdom by D.J. Butler Review by Mindy Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

I like to do things that make you think. My day job is solving data problems, to be smarter than a computer. When I put the puzzle pieces in front of me, I can usually figure out the solution, even if I have to get creative and take a risk. A cultural pastime that has emerged in the last few years are these escape rooms. A team is placed in a room with clues and objects to figure it out to get out of the room and to the next level. Eventually you either succeed or run out of time. Why mention an escape room? I feel like we're in one when reading D.J. Butler's third book in his Witchy War series, *Witchy Kingdom*.

In the last book, *Witchy Winter* (next review), Sarah Calhoun and her party had traveled north to Cahokia, the area we know as the Ohio River Valley. She met her father's spirit and sent her loyal servant Jacob and her brother Nathaniel to find their sister Margaret. Sarah remains in her kingdom to protect it from two evils: first, Simon Sword, who embodies the warring half of the Heron King, and his beastfolk who are savagely rampaging through the land of Adam and Eve. Second, there's Thomas Penn and his Imperial Ohio Company from Philadelphia, who has the help from the necromancer Oliver Cromwell and his minions.

As with the other two books, I'll sing praises of Butler for his world building. But I feel with this book we've left the kiddie pool and have moved into the adult playground. Before, he was developing the New World where the story takes place. Readers were taken to locations that they "knew" since this is an alternate America. Now we've moved past the physical world and are playing in different realms. This was introduced in last book when Nathaniel learned how to summon the spirits of the Anishinaabe tribe. We also witnessed Sarah meeting the goddess and becoming the beloved in Eden. This book takes it farther. I think this is a good way to say magic is more in the forefront than it's been before. There were spells and hexes and magical objects before, but now these incantations don't just turn something magical or make something invisible. They transport you between realms or physical locations.

The character relationships continue to grow and are becoming more woven together. The "loose thread characters", ones who are introduced but make you wonder why and how are they're part of the story, are starting show their usefulness. Not just that, but they're being put into small groups and using their unique skills together to drive the story forward. Sarah needs to protect her kingdom and is trying to find the way to ascend to her throne by pleasing the Goddess. She's reaching back to these other characters for their help, which in turn is drawing them more into Sarah's web of believers, who she's slowly woven with her authority as the Queen of Cahokia and of her genuine character.

I have to say there are two story lines in this book that have really caught my attention. The first is more an introduction to a situation that'll be much larger in the next book. The political games are beginning as a battle is drawn against Thomas Penn. We know this will pit several other politicians against him; however, we also know that politicians tend to have cards up their sleeves and will play them at any cost, even for themselves. And we've already learned that Penn has some questionable connections, as I've slowly predicted through my previous reviews.

The second story has been taken to its completion in this book. As I mentioned above, this book gives that feeling of being in one of those escape rooms. The fascinating part is we're able to watch two different sides of the puzzle solving. Two groups, two realms, one person playing telephone between them to reach their common goal of helping Sarah ascend to the Serpent Throne. Butler does an amazing job of keeping the pace and the suspense up on both sides, while being able to fully describe the visuals for the reader to picture in their mind. He keeps the pace moving quickly, because there is a short amount of time to solve this, but he doesn't lose the reader in that race.

Overall, I'm still very satisfied with the series, and with Butler's ability to not lose his reader as he keeps pushing his story through. He has taken his simple world, and made it so complex that it's becoming unrecognizable from where we started. It shows how well thought out his planning has been, to embrace the reader and make them part of his world, rather than simply building it to show off on a stage that the reader can never climb up onto.

In other words, Butler has not only expanded the witchy universe, but he's also keeping a tight grip on it to maintain control of the story, the reader, and himself as the writer so that the creation he's made doesn't turn into a dumpster fire.

I sit next to the next book, Serpent Daughter, and am anxiously waiting to finish my review of Witchy Kingdom, so that I can keep reading. So, until then, I will leave you with this thought that D.J. Butler wrote in the book for me: Death is not the end.

Witchy Winter by D. J. Butler
Review by Mindy Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Just like any other class, you need to have an understanding of a subject's foundation before moving forward. If D.J. Butler's first novel in the Witchy War series, Witchy Eye, is the foundation, then the second book Witchy Winter builds up the structure by introducing the players.

In the first book, we met Sarah Calhoun, who learns she's the daughter of the king and queen of Cahokia in what we know as the Ohio River Valley. She also learns she has two siblings who were also hidden from Thomas Penn, the emperor of the New World — and incidentally, the man who destroyed her family. By the end of the book she and her comrades were leaving the deep south of Louisiana and Appalachia and following the Mississippi to her birthright land.

In Witchy Winter, the gloves come off. We begin to learn more about this alternative America's politics. Sarah and crew come to discover that reclaiming the Serpent Throne won't be as simple as announcing her name. She'll need to defeat other potential candidates and be blessed by a goddess. To add to this, she's having to protect her land and her people with new alliances from an ancient mystical magic that could destroy everything.

Once again, I give Butler credit for his world building. First, I really want to talk about the introduction of the Native American aspects of the New World. One of the storylines follows through with Maiingan, who is Anishinaabe. His wife bore twins, setting him on a journey to find The Healer, who happens to be a very important character in the book. The stories of his tribe and The Healer's change following the beliefs and Spirits of Maiingan's people are fascinating. The detail Butler has for the material shows he did not simply dive into this character but has researched to understand native cultures and how to blend it together with no offense, all the while mixing it with the fantasy of the alternative America. Butler's storytelling is as mesmerizing as learning about real life Native cultures can be, and I'd personally be interested to see more of this from him.

I love Sarah's group's journey north, following the Mississippi to the Ohio River. I can picture this in my head because of numerous trips I've taken there over the years but now the land has beastfolk charging through it. Like the natives, we are more thoroughly introduced to the beastkind, learning the good and the bad of the mixed beings. We see how the beastfolk and the sons of Adam work together through their differences and the challenges of becoming a single functioning unit. There are barriers that need to be worked through, language, culture, and the battle for their souls.

In my review of *Witchy Eye*, I spoke of the importance of religion in the books. We'd seen Christianity and magic, which could be considered being anti-religion. In *Witchy Winter* we continue with a Christianity baseline but are introduced to the native beliefs, Voodoo, other gods, and a bit more of the dark magic. I mentioned the battle for the beastfolk souls. There are theological conversations between beastkind characters and a priest that are interesting and give insight to what the beastfolk believe. I also find it interesting how Sarah has her own Christian beliefs, yet she has to believe in a goddess who's appointing the next person to sit on the Serpent Throne and rule. It makes you wonder if she has any internal struggle since idols and false gods are not permitted. But at the same time, I do realize that the story takes place in an alternative America, so I wonder if it's an alternative Bible (can that be a thing?). Just like the map lines being blurred, the religious lines could also be blurred and creating a strange twist in our mind. I mean, we also have a clergyman working with voodoo magic while praying to God.

Butler continues to build on character relationships from the first while establishing new ones. As the characters' journeys drive them towards a singular location, some unlikely pairs are made. These are as complicated as what was developed in the first book. As we learn more, in my mind I'm trying to see if I can figure out the larger picture for them and how they may affect Sarah's quest for the throne or Cahokia's independence, and the fall of Thomas Penn. But don't think all the new characters are against the Emperor; it appears they're out to help him. But in my experience, you can't always trust the bad guy's friends. Plus, I'm curious just how much Penn is acting on his own and how much he may be a puppet of a larger demon. I've got thoughts on this and I'm sure I'll learn more in the third book.

So does this mean I'm going to read the third book in this series? Duh! Of course. As I sit here writing this, I'm also staring at the next book, *Witchy Kingdom*.

I do recommend the series so far. *Witchy Eye* drew me in, *Witchy Winter* is dropping me into the rabbit hole as I try to figure out where D.J. Butler is taking us. Sometimes a story goes through a growing pain for the second part, but I feel that Butler has managed to keep the story, the characters, and this alternative world fresh and up to par with the first book, which makes me excited to see what he delivers in the third.

Literary Criticism

An Evening With Christopher Paolini
Report by Mindy Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

In my “From the Editor” column in the November issue of FanActivity Gazette, I stated I was going to see Christopher Paolini, here in Kansas City on his current book tour for Murtagh, the next book in The Inheritance Cycle. I went with my friend who introduced me to his work with the promise to never watch the movie Eragon starring Jeremy Irons – regardless how much I like him. I have been faithful to the promise all these years.

This spring, I read and reviewed To Sleep In a Sea of Stars, the online story Unity, and Fractal Noise, the first three books in his new venture into the world of science fiction, The Fractal Universe, and I really enjoyed them. I feel that he found a good new sandbox to play in for a while.

So you can imagine my surprise when it was announced he was going to be releasing a new book tied to The Inheritance Cycle that was about the character of Murtagh. While my friend was reading up on Paolini and the book, she discovered he’d be stopping here in Kansas City and asked me to go with her. Of course I had to say yes.

I know that it’s likely several readers will already know these stories, but this will be new for others. So here’s my evening with Christopher Paolini.

There was a local fencing group entertaining the audience when I arrived. The gentleman running it had been a fencing coach for my friend and her daughter, so they were excited to see him. When they finished, one of the exhibitioners removed his face guard revealing it was none other than Paolini himself.

After welcoming the crowd, he mentioned that it is the 25th anniversary for Eragon. That was a “wow we’re old” moment. He said 850+ people were there that night and jumped right in so it wouldn’t take four hours for everyone to get their books signed.

Paolini started with the story of growing up in a very rural area of Montana, homeschooled by his folks, and how lucky he was that his mother was a Montessori teacher. Like most kids, he hated reading and told his mom, “I hate to read. I’m never going to do anything that uses reading in my life.” He graduated from high school at the age of 15, since he never took summer breaks. However, his sister graduated at 14, because she decided it was a race, but didn’t tell him until it was too late for him to have a chance to win.

After Paolini graduated, he thought he was cool because was done with school; however, he also now had nothing to do, living in middle of nowhere Montana: no car, not able to drive, nothing. So he dug a hole in the ground that was nine feet deep, used an old satellite dish as a roof cover, and another hole and tunnel to get in. He wanted to create a Viking mead bar. Some of his early publicity photos were taken inside the space.

After fighting his mother over reading, Paolini decided he kinda liked it. The first book he took out at the library was based on the cover. He doesn't remember the name of it or the author, just the fact he liked the cover. When he decided to try writing he got books on how to write because anything he had written would only be five or six pages, as he had no clue where he was going. He learned that he needed a plan for his stories before he even started writing. So he drafted his idea, which ended up turning into *The Inheritance Cycle*.

The first draft was awful. Eragon's name was Kevin. But Paolini made changes and had his folks read it. They loved it and encouraged him to try to publish it. They tried, and he understands now just how close they were to having to sell the house and move into a city because his parents put everything they could — both time and money — into backing his dream.

Now I can't remember how he met author Carl Hiaasen, but Paolini gave him a copy of *Eragon* to read. Hiaasen is known for the book, *Hoot*. Anyone not into YA books might recognize his short story "Striptease", which was turned into the feature film starring Demi Moore. Hiaasen gave the book to his kid, who absolutely loved it. So Hiaasen took to Random House and the rest is history.

After his story, Paolini did some short readings from the first four books, *Eragon*, *Eldest*, *Brisingr*, and *Inheritance*. And I do mean short. Each book got one sentence read. The only book that got more than one sentence was *Eldest* when he did brief statements in elfish and in dwarvish. One of his self-claimed best sentences is by a dwarf in *Brisingr*: "Die puny human!" Fun fact: Paolini would ask an audience member for their copy of the book from which he was reading. The copy of *Eragon* that one gentleman offered was an original self-published copy. Paolini was floored because he had not seen this edition in years. It was fun seeing him get excited about his own work like that. He then read a page and a half from Murtagh and then turn the floor over to the audience for some Q&A's.

Now I won't go through every question but I will give you these answers: he has more plans for *Eragon* and *Saphira*, something for *Angela*, this is not the last we've seen of Murtagh, there will be a book six, and he has something from *Arya's* point of view.

Two questions did stick out and are worth mentioning.

The first: How involved is Paolini in the Disney+ adaptation of *Eragon*? Answer: Writing and executive producing. He is excited for the project since *Eragon* has not been adapted before...

The second: How does Paolini do to write his characters? Emotion. He has to feel for this character whether it's sympathy, empathy, hate, something. If we feel for that character, you want to know more and continue to follow them. While he was saying this, it reminded me of the last book of his that I read, *Fractal Noise*, and how mesmerized I was by the main character and what he was going through personally. Paolini explained how the book came to be and between that explanation and the book, I would be interested in being a fly on the wall in his brain — but maybe I don't want to know the magic behind the curtain.

And this brings me to getting my book signed. They were organized like a well-oiled machine and it did not take as long as one might expect. I asked if I could give them a SciFi4Me business card which he took and then signed my book. I did mention I wish he could sign something non-*Inheritance Cycle* related. Now, if you have read my review for *Fractal Noise* you'd know it would be "thump...thump." This comment took him by surprise and his response was "really?" I took the opportunity to tell him that I think *Fractal Noise* is the best work he has done, because of how very different it is from his fantasy writing. It shows great growth in his writing, which is expected over time and experience, but to

make that deep of a turn to me was amazing. Of course he asked if I had read Murtagh yet, I told him I was almost finished. He chuckled. I did promise him I would finish it and review it as I have the other ones and thanked him for retweeting my review of *To Sleep in a Sea of Stars*. I told him to keep writing the science fiction books. He's good at it.

I will admit the next day I did retweet my review of *Fractal Noise* in which I tagged Paolini and SciFi4Me. I stated it was a joy meeting him the previous evening and then “thump thump” (figuring it might trigger his memory) and I stand by my statement that *Fractal Noise* is the best book he's written yet, I will read and review Murtagh. He liked my tweet and he retweeted it.

Prose Bono

When Life Interferes with Your Writing

By A.C. Cargill

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

Not everyone has the luxury of being able to write full time. Even full-time writers can't write full time. Life interferes. The key for you, as a writer, is to make sure you don't let those interferences keep you from writing. I have a couple tips to help you do just that.

1. Prioritize Your Writing

Yes, you need to eat, sleep, take care of your children and your house, and even work at a job. This prioritizing is a matter of mental focus. Keep something handy for jotting down your bits of dialogue, character descriptions, plot ideas, etc. You could use a little notepad and pen, or you could go high-tech and use an app on your smart phone. There are also little hand-held recorders into which you can speak your ideas and type them up later when you have time.

Making your writing a high priority in your life can help you decide whether to go out on the town with friends, take that vacation to Spain, etc., or stay home writing. Once you have decided that writing is more important to you than that other activity, you will be staying home typing up those ideas and coming up with more. Writing can be a lonely business sometimes.

2. Deal with Life's "Issues" as Quickly as Possible

You have to take care of certain things at certain times, such as filing your taxes before the April deadline, making that annual visit to the eye doctor, or seeing your children through their sports activities. And other things pop up unexpectedly, such as getting a notice that your private information was part of a data breach and you now have to scramble to notify your credit card companies and bank, or you and your family coming down with seasonal illnesses (colds, flu, etc.). That's life. But it doesn't have to keep you from writing. It might even be something you can work into your fiction.

Planning helps speed those non-writing things up (and helps with accuracy, too). You can use tax software to simplify preparing your tax return, or go to one of those tax return firms. You can plan for that trip to the eye doctor, staying up a bit later the night before and the night after to get in that extra writing time. As for the kids' sports activities, see the first tip.

Bottom Line

If you want to be a writer, you have to make writing the first priority in your life. Even when life interferes, minimize that impact by getting back to writing as soon as you can. Jot notes, record ideas wherever you can, and keep writing, writing, writing!

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

Motivators
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I am not necessarily talking here about what motivates the writer, although that is part of what I'm thinking about today, as I have an unexpected day off. Well. Day with less planned than I thought. I also have a novella with about two chapters left to write for the finale. Motivation! now, to figure out just how to lay out the climactic scenes...

Which is where the real motivation questions come in. I have two characters who are motivated clearly, and I can follow what they want and therefore how they will try to accomplish that end. I have a third character who is fear-motivated, which may mean that he will not react rationally (also, not human any longer). I have a fourth character who hasn't yet come onstage, and although the story has introduced him, it's been through the lens of one of the first two characters, who didn't know him all that well, and some time before. As I the author prepare to...

First, play fetch with the cat. Toast keeps bringing me her little crumpled bit of paper and I'm supposed to flick it off the desk so she can leap spectacularly after it, chase it noisily around the room, and finally bring it back to me, only slightly damp from kitty spit. Amusements!

The issue with being a pantsner, of course, is that I'm flying through this story by the seat of my pants. I'm feeling my way through a thick fog. Sometimes I can 'see', while other times I cannot, and that's a problem for pacing, as I write about what I know. I hate to spring surprises on my readers. I mean, they got sprung on me, but is that any excuse for inflicting them on the Gentle Readers? I think not.

Ooh, that's the death gurgle of the coffeepot. I'm making mocha this morning. A spoonful of dutch-processed cocoa powder into a clean dry mug, first. Pour the hot coffee in slowly, tilting the mug to make sure the cocoa powder is dissolved into the liquid. Don't put your cream in first, as I usually do when making straight-up coffee, or the cocoa will clump up. Once your cup is as full as you like, a dollop of cream and stir. Dark, rich, slightly-bitter goodness. So chocolately, and no sugar!

The answer to the story conundrum is to write it out, pushing through the awkward uncertainty, until I'm at the end and can look backwards over the plot. Much will become clear at that point, and instead of dithering around I can insert foreshadowing (more than that, that's not enough. No, even more, readers need it thrice hung with a lantern) that will make it seem as though I knew all along what the mystery was, and gave them enough clues to pick it up (even if I didn't, such is the textual sleight of hand) along with a few small red herrings. No, not that many red herrings, do you want the story to smell fishy?

As you might have guessed from the composition of this post, my tendency when faced with the unknown is to dither. At least, in writing. In person, it's instinctive to research, but in it's own way that too becomes dithering if you don't wrap it up eventually and make a decision. I have to wonder sometimes how much is too much. Of both sorts of waffling around!

Oooh, waffles... I could make those for breakfast. I have blackberry syrup...

Not Novel by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

It's the fourth day of November, and I'm already up 6400 words for the month. No, I'm not doing NaNoWriMo. For one thing the organization connected to that once-useful writing challenge has veered from being about writing to being about political connections and that's not what I want when I'm trying to work (or ever, really). For another, I'm not writing a novel (yet) this month. With 6400 words you could have a decent short story to submit for an anthology. By the end of the month you could have several, to farm out in various places and spread your name around. Or you could have a pair of novellas, at 25K each, which could easily be uploaded to Amazon at \$2.99 each, and that might even make you more money than a single short (50K, pulp-length) novel at \$4.99. Math is not my strong suite, but that much I can do.

The point is to write, and that's what I'm doing. I started before November, but didn't really count the last days of October where I was trying to get the Halloween novella finished and ready for publication. I was very pleased with myself for managing it, though, as I'd set my own deadline for Oct 15 and then blew right past it. Still, I have another Groundskeeper Tale out, I have happy fans buying it, leaving ratings, and that's what matters to a writer. I then used the momentum of writing I'd built up to leverage my way into November, where I may not be trying to write a full novel, but I have clear goals, word counters in my chosen word-processing space, and the daily celebration of hitting a goal which then sets me up to do it again the next day. And I'm not counting the nonfiction, like this post or my Substack essays. Hands on keyboard, and writing fiction. I don't say chair, because it's not always a chair, and it's not always my chair, more on that later.

The other thing I'm doing this month, as an early Christmas gift for my sister, is reading a chapter a day of a children's book for her. Because I'm me, I'm also illustrating it, but I'm not insane so I'm using Midjourney AI to render those illustrations and save myself a ton of time. Right now it's the classic by George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*. After I complete that book, I was asked for the *Just So Stories*, by one of my favorite authors, Rudyard Kipling. I'll see how it goes, if there will be more. Reading aloud, storyboarding, and immersing myself in these stories is bringing me a new appreciation for the style and skill of the authors, which is likely to come out in my writing in some way. You are what you read, after all.

On the art front I'm taking part in Huevember at the gentle prompting of friends and fellow artists on Discord. A color a day, which we are using Midjourney to render, as we all have busy lives (see above!) but it's always fun to see what we get, and to see what styles we can incorporate to insert a narrative into the disparate illustrations through the month. I've been working on a loose creation centering on the exploration of unknown worlds, and the explorers who dared beyond the stars or on other planes of existence. I won't write a story for this, though. I have enough fiction planned already!

My next publication will be a collection of a dozen science fiction stories. *The Twelve Days of Strange*, if you will, although none of them are Christmas themed. I've got to sort them into a pleasing arrangement, edit where needed (and have my editor go over them again), create a cover, and finish the last

story I have planned to include, which is the one I was working on yesterday. I got almost a thousand words on it, after finishing another short earlier in the day, which surprised me. They are very different ‘flavors’ of story, with Long Commute being light and fun, while Expedition is Lovecraftian Science Fiction Horror. Which does beg a question as I’m writing that latter tale. Can you have Lovecraftian and a happy ending in the same story? I’m not sure...

I mentioned ‘not my chair’ and it’s part of how I’m working on writing more productively. I’ve opted to use a word counter that is what they call a ‘gamify’ reward-based system. I get a colored bar in the side column next to my manuscript that slowly fills up after I set how many words I want to achieve in a writing session, and shows me once I hit my goal. For me, this works really well, because I’ll think ‘I can do another hundred words, no problem!’ The other thing I’m doing is moving around. Around the house, with my writing laptop, or over to the Blanket Fort where I rent shared office space and can go off to that and have no distractions. I can generally count on an easy thousand words when I go there, versus fighting for a few hundred at home. Some of those being cat words as Toast strolls over the keyboards.

I’ve been out of the game for years, now. Time to be back in it, no matter what the distractions are. I need this for my own peace of mind, not to create a novel. November is about setting up routines, I’ve already done the work of finding what works, now it’s time to apply those tools and tricks to my own brain. The stories are in there, I just need to pull them out.

Amuse-Bouche by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

For the last few years I have been writing snippets of this and that, prompted by the weekly challenge over at More Odds Than Ends. I post these on my blog as a sort of amuse-bouche, the appetizer bite that the chef brings to a patron without charge, to try out their reactions and test his own craft. Recently, I did that with a snippet of a time-travel story, which blew up further than I’d planned, and as a result a week later there’s a second snippet, and lurking unseen in the depths is a full novella I wrote over eight days. It’s not that I don’t write time travel. It’s that I don’t think time travel is possible so other than an amusement of the brain, I don’t approach it as a rational scientist without tongue firmly in cheek.

So it is with this story. What started out as playing around evolved into something else, which one of the beta readers informed me read like “Zelazny’s sci Fi shorts [...]There’s always a trace of the sideways and bizarre in them. Makes them feel like you’re looking into a world you don’t understand, not because you can’t, but because you don’t have all the required lifetime of context. But you know the context is there. It’s a snapshot of a whole other world, understandable and comprehensible if one could just see around the edge of the mirror a little bit better, maybe even peer around and see the backside of it....”

I took that as a high compliment, not just for the comparison to one of the genre greats, but because this is how I try to write. Immersion into a world not-our-own, escape from this one for a time, and there should be a whole world there, not just a cardboard carefully painted scene setting you’re afraid to poke lest it collapse entirely around you. Over the years the highest praise I’ve taken from reviewers of the stories I’ve crafted has been that they feel like there’s a world the story barely touches on. Some stories, I don’t want to delve too deep. Especially when I am writing the snippet scenes, the little amuse-bouche I can hand out for free, and promise more to the reader who goes on to buy my work.

I'm off to an event at the local library, where I shall meet people, talk about books, and hopefully commit a bit of commerce! In-person book sales aren't about making a profit then and there. They are much more about marketing and branding. Some local people will buy your merch because you are local. Some will pass on your name and information to readers they know. At this time of year, some will want to buy gifts for their loved ones. Some readers like to have a friendly face and a voice they can draw from while reading.

And it's good for me to go out and be a little social for a few hours. I enjoy these events. Plus, I'll have friends alongside me with their books as well. I'll report back next week how it went.

~Finis~