

**The R3F**  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor  
January 2024

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## FREE BOOKS

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

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The East Witch

The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmcsifi@gmail.com>

Far Future

The Brittle Riders

Splice: Hit Bit Technology

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Warsprite

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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](mailto:phillies@4liberty.net)>

Minutegirls

The One World

Mistress of the Waves

Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World

Airy Castles All Ablaze

Stand Against the Light

Practical Exercise

Simultaneous Times

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/free-content/>

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

# Editorial

We congratulate contributor A.C. Cargill on turning her essays on writing, including many not seen here, into a book. Alas, that change means that her essays will no longer be seen here.

We have a service for Neffers who are authors. Trade free copies of your books for reviews. See previous page.

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# Fiction

Cast in Time by Ed Nelson  
Review by George Phillis

Nelson has written a four book (so far) series, the books being Baron, Baron of the Middle Counties, Count, Earl. The hero, James Douglas Fletcher, is a retired Major General, Army Corps of Engineers. He has an eidetic memory. After retirement, he decides to accumulate at least undergraduate degrees in a wide range of engineering and related fields, a life path at which he succeeds. At the age of 92 he passes away.

He then wakes up in Cornwall, England, in the body of a young Baron. The previous occupant of the body was almost murdered by the local Abbot; Fletcher remembers a general knowledge of the local language but not details of the locale. He promptly sets about importing modern technology. The author is fond of inserting useful recipes and details of design. Readers may question if the rate of progress would actually be that fast, and some luck is involved, but we are in a period of history where there are larger numbers of competing baronies, tribes, and the like. Each step is presented in some detail; the hero thanks to an eidetic memory has a vast amount of technical information at his fingertips.

The writing style is a bit flat, written in first person and reading as a tale dictated by the hero as events happened to him. Descriptions are a bit terse. Characters are as seen by the hero. The author has actually visited the area, and wisely changed local geography a bit, just enough that no one can complain about his descriptions. The hero has worked out that there is always a larger shark wanting to loot his country, so his only solution is to conquer the world. He expects that this conquering will take a while. The ebooks were in the range that I was happy to keep reading, my regular authors not having a new book available for me to read.

I Am Legend by Richard Matheson  
Review by J.-P. Garnier  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Many of you have probably seen at least one of the three movies adapted from this short novel. All three of the films pale in comparison with the book and leave out its most compelling aspects. I Am Legend is a story about vampires but takes a fresh science fiction interpretation of the classic monster. What struck me as the most important element of this book was the way that emotion was handled, and this is where the films truly lacked.

The situation that the protagonist is in is vividly and accurately expressed, a perfect portrayal of what one might go through under the circumstance of being alone and being surrounded by perceived monsters. I particularly enjoyed the analysis of why vampires are afraid of crosses, Matheson develops a perfectly plausible explanation for all the classic vampire tropes and does so in such a way that pushes the book from the territory of horror into science fiction. I won't give away the ending, but it really brings the horror and existential crisis home in a gruesome way.

Khyven the Unkillable: Legacy of Shadows by Todd Fahnestock  
Review by Jim McCoy  
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I was in the mood for something magicky, something hacky, something slashy, something intriguey, something well...

Something epic fantasy, really.

And then I wandered across Todd Fahnestock's Khyven the Unkillable: Legacy of Shadows (Eldros Legacy Book 1) and my cravings were fulfilled.

Seriously folks, this one got my juices flowing for all the right reasons.

Khyven is a champion of the Night Ring, the fantasy equivalent of an Ancient Roman amphitheater, wherein he has won forty-eight battles. Dude is a fighter's fighter and, unbeknownst to most, has a bit of a mystical ability, even if he won't call it that to see what his opponent is going to do before he does it and where his opponent is vulnerable over and above what a normal human being can do, even one who has won the battles that he has.

Khyven is hard-working, focused and indomitable. He is also absolutely convinced that he knows the one true way to make himself safe in a world full of hostile individuals who would use him for their own gain. I'm not exactly convinced that he's right, but what do I know? I'm just a book reviewer who has a better view of what's going on around him than he does because the author provided me with one. He's probably right. Or not, as the case may be. But he thinks he knows how to get there.

Khyven doesn't really start the series as the kind of man I usually admire. I mean, he's a survivor, and I respect that, but he's not a stand-up guy. Khyven is exactly the guy you would not want to have your back because his main focus is on himself. He lives this out in various parts of the story. Other characters can't always trust him. That makes sense though, from a guy who has been used and abused by every person he has come in contact with. It's not paranoia if they're really all out to get you.

This story really starts when Khyven realizes that the king is using him, and decides to do what the king wants anyway, because it will be good for him if he does what he has been ordered to do. It makes sense. When seeking power (his aforementioned method of protecting himself) it is good to have powerful friends. I get it. When his assignment relies more on his abilities as a spy than as a warrior...

Well...

Good for him, if he can pull it off. It's not an impossible task by any stretch of the imagination.

And THAT'S when things get interesting.

There's a lot more to Khyven the Unkillable than I thought there would be. Honestly, I was using it as a form of brain bleach to clean out my brain because life has been really interesting lately, and I got a really well written, engaging, action packed work of art that I felt like I had to write about.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, I'm just saying that it was better than I expected, and I honestly expected it to be really good.

The world of Eldros is well thought out so far. I haven't read the newer books in the series (although I plan to) so I can't comment on those, but the magic system (what little we get to see of it) makes sense and produces effects both incredibly huge and instantly noticeable and small enough that only one person would notice it. That works if that one person can spread word of what they have seen though. There are costs involved with using certain types of weaponry. The power-hungry king may be a bit of a trope, but it's well known because it works. The hero in the wilderness has been a thing since at least the first telling of Robin Hood, but it works. The city itself and the varying loyalties of those within it are true to real life. The wilderness is just outside the city's boundaries, but it is filled with fantastical beasts. Everyone thinks giants never existed, but then we go on a walk through an abandoned castle built by giants...

It builds on itself nicely. And let's face it, there are as many giants on Krynn as there are dragons.

If you get it, you're laughing right now. If not, go read the Dragonlance Chronicles.

The action in the book is well-paced and easy to follow. It's sword fighting that is informative enough to make the reader understand what's going on, without going the Zelazny route and expecting me to take a fencing class so I can follow it. The consequences are believable too. Some live, some die and others are wounded. It's a fantasy story so magical healing is a thing, but if you read and/or watch fantasy stories that's expected.

The cast of characters outside of Khyven himself are well drawn and believable. Vamreth, the king, is ruthless and cunning, just as he should be. The Queen in Exile is somewhat different and doesn't read as someone who has spent her life in a royal court because she hasn't. Her followers are who they are for their own reasons. And if one belongs to a fantasy race that might be something entirely new or might be an elf that's good too. A little bit of an enigma keeps the intrigue level high. Especially since she has an ability I haven't seen before but that has major ramifications for her when used...

My only complaint here is that I'm not sure if we'll get to see which member of this cast of characters again. It's a shared universe, Fahnestock is only writing some of the stories, most of which are named after only one character, and which may or may not contain the rest of the people from Khyven the Unkillable. I look forward to the other works, both by Fahnestock and the other authors. I'm just wondering how much of this wonderful story is going to be referred to moving forward. It is entirely possible that we could switch locations, people and problems and still be reading the same series. It's got me interested, but I'm usually looking forward to seeing the old crew again and I don't know if I will.

Yes, my friends, after eight years and more than three hundred posts your faithful reviewer has finally gotten smart enough to know how dumb he is. It's an interesting experience to say the least.

The good news is that I totally plan to read more. I just hope they're all this good.

Look To The West by Tom Anderson  
Review by Chris Nuttall  
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Alternate history, like future wars, is a genre that lends itself very well to essay-writing, in which the author writes a manuscript that reads like a history book, rather than a more standard action and adventure novel. There are no characters, in any true sense; the author details vast sweeps of history – and



conflicts – and while he may compose fictional diaries and war reports, the characters are not of any great importance. The important issue is the sweep of (alternate) history itself.

Short essays are very common, but book-length manuscripts are relatively rare and almost always, prior to the internet, published by specialist presses. This is, perhaps, unsurprising. Books like *For Want of a Nail*, *Invasion*, *Gettysburg* and *Disaster at D-Day* have relatively small readerships, certainly when compared to novels written by well-known authors that combine historical scholarship with entertainment (Harry Turtledove, SM Stirling), novels that appeal to a far wider readership that isn't particularly concerned with realism and won't throw the book away in disgust if the Germans deploy Panther tanks in 1940. Put bluntly, book-length essay-manuscripts are very hard sells. It is difficult to convince editors and publishers that they'll see a return on their investment.

The internet, and indie publishing, has changed all that by reducing the publishing costs to the bare minimum. That has given birth to a whole new range of specialist presses, including Sealion Press, which focuses on alternate history books and publications of interest to the AH community. Some of their productions are novels, but others are essentially book-length manuscripts like *For Want of a Nail*, on a much greater scale. The *Look to the West* series is one of the best of them.

History diverges from its planned course, according to Anderson, when Prince Frederick, King George II's firstborn son (who, in the old Hanoverian tradition, was detested by his father) made the mistake of sniggering when his father tripped during his coronation. Instead of dying relatively young, Prince Frederick was exiled to the Americas in the same year George Washington was born. Angry and ambitious, Prince Frederick plotted his return to London with the aid of the colonials, eventually taking the throne after his father died and his brother (the historical George III) was assassinated.

This alone would be an impressive achievement, but the historical outline continues to expand until it sweeps over the entire world. Without the American Revolution, and the Americas remaining part of a very different British Empire, the French Revolution takes a very different course. Different political ideologies are born, some very dangerous; the alternate French Revolutionary Wars, following a different technological development framework, include a French landing in Britain that does immense damage before the French are finally booted out, leading to a dictatorship fully akin to Bad King John before a civil war eventually restores order ... for the moment. The series touches on issues that plagued our own world – slavery in the Americas, serfdom in Russia; neither of which could be avoided – but always puts its own spin on them. It also draws in figures from our world, ranging from the well-known – Napoleon and Nelson, in very different roles – to the more obscure Henry Stuart, brother of Bonnie Prince Charlie, in his declining years.

Wars and politics are not the only issues of interest, as the books touch on social issues as much as everything else. Power shifts lead to different points of view, then to cultural issues intended to shape public opinion. The far greater chaos of the revolutionary wars in Europe leads to reaction, followed by more revolution. The different balance of power in the Americas leads to a different take on slavery and racism, with a far less powerful slavery lobby that responds, at least in part, by doubling down on racism. Others fight back in more subtle ways, pushing people to question their preconceptions. For example, a hooded hero is eventually revealed, after 50-odd pulp adventures, to be black ... causing everyone to either scream in outrage or re-evaluate their positions.

The book also links back to our timeline, or something close to it, by touching on commentary from a cross-time team of explorers studying the alternate world and comparing it to our own. Their insights are very interesting, as – unlike the locals – they have a basis for comparison. They can assess devel-

opments and see how and why things went differently. And this also provides some tension, as the explorers – as of Book IV – to have been discovered by the locals.

It is difficult to exaggerate the sheer level of detail Anderson has worked into the series, although it can be a little overwhelming at times. It can also be hard to follow what's going on, as the borderlines are in very different places. (Anderson deserves credit for not creating the OTL British Empire, plus the United States.) The books do have the downside of being very dry in places, to the point where I skipped some sections and returned to read them later.

If you're looking for an action-adventure novel, *Look to the West* isn't for you. It reads, like I said above, as a history book. It is unashamedly written for the alternate history community, rather than a more general readership; it doesn't try to compromise in hopes of getting more attention from people who might not otherwise be interested. But if you're looking for a outline of an alternate history world, and a study of how one relatively small change can lead to a very different world, *Look to the West* has few equals. I highly recommend it.

**Lurid Dreams by Charles L. Harness (Avon 1990)**

**Review by Heath Row**

**Telegraphs & Tar Pits 93**

This was the second book I read during the flight home from Portugal and Madrid late last week. A friend had mailed it to me, asking that I send it on to another friend of his once finished. Given that I might not have even known about this paperback—or read it otherwise—I was glad to receive it. Because I really enjoyed it. (Thanks, Clark!)

The novel combines several interesting concepts, including out-of-body experiences (OBE, in the book), time travel, and alternate history. It poses the central question of what might have happened had Edgar Allan Poe become a southern soldier and, later, military leader, rather than a writer?

Why not ask the man himself? The main character is hired, effectively, by the leader of an organization seeking the revival of a strong south to do just that—to persuade Poe not to become a writer, but a soldier. The resulting narrative explores the possibilities of each of the concepts mentioned above, as well as the relationship of the protagonist and his girlfriend. He's the OBE practitioner; she's the Poe scholar.

Those who appreciate Poe's work will enjoy this book particularly. The portions in which the Poe scholar applies textual analysis to his stories in order to ascertain personal details, key dates, and other details were fascinating.

Also of interest were the quotes selected by Harness to open each chapter. Each suggests other reading that is worth pursuing and features passages by people such as Albert Einstein, William Faulkner, Horace, Virgil, Horace Walpole, and others. While the title is fun, there's little that's lurid in the book, and lucid dreams don't really come into play.

What else would you recommend by Harness?



On the Beach by Nevil Shute  
Review by J.-P. Garnier  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

This book is a post-apocalyptic tale about waiting for nuclear fallout from a war that was so devastating and quick that no one really knows what happened or why. While the story is bleak it isn't negative. In fact, the main thing that struck me about this book is the human attempt to stay positive and hopeful even when faced with impending doom, even to the point of deluding oneself. While not much really happens in the book the characters type of engagement with each other suggests that while everyone has really lost hope, they do their best to keep it alive as a communal thing. Knowing something to be untrue but believing it anyway because it's easier. In this way the book really speaks to the human condition and I think that is one of the responsibilities of a good novel. However, I'm still on the fence as to whether not I really enjoyed this book. Sad and beautiful at times, it does a great job of expressing the fear in the 1950s surrounding the possibility of nuclear attack.

Rocheworld by Robert L. Forward  
Review by Heath Row  
Telegraphs & Tar Pits 93

I also finished this book on the flight home. I'd previously read perhaps the first 100 pages before setting it down. When I returned to it, I reread the portion I'd forgotten and continued. At 470 pages, it's not an overly long novel, but a cover line claims "At last the complete story!" so I was concerned the book might be overwritten.

"Caveats," which precedes the novel's text, put me off even more:

This book is based on the original 150,000 word manuscript I wrote in 1981. A condensed version of 60,000 was serialized under the title "Rocheworld" in Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact in 1982. A longer version of about 100,000 words was published in hardcover... . This version of 155,000 words ... combines the best features of all the prior versions... . Regardless, it's a good read, and while I think the resulting text could have been more tightly edited, there's a lot to commend. Some of the length can be attributed to the fact that the story is about a near-generation ship (a "mere" 20 years), a very long space journey. Early in the novel, a character is introduced only to be written out to be replaced. In addition to the somewhat sizable ship's crew, there are also composite personal assistants that combine hardware and software, the Christmas Bush and its imps.

Once the very long space flight is over, the crew taking a drug that lessens their intellect in order to help preserve their bodies, the reader arrives at Rocheworld. It's the whole point of the book, like Discworld, Ringworld, or Riverworld. In this case, Rocheworld is a double planet circling Barnard's Star. Their orbit is shared, and the planets are subtly shaped like teardrops, tips 80 kilometers apart. One lobe is without water, or the local equivalent, the other primarily covered by water, or the local equivalent. And on the "Eau" lobe, alien creatures reside.

Forward's ever-extending novel considers the geology and astrophysics of such a planetary system, the discovery of and interaction with the alien creatures, and the crew's efforts to get out of a particularly challenging situation. The aliens' understanding of the relationship between the astronauts and their imps was a clever touch. The book ends with 45 pages of explanatory notes, which are worth reading after, rather than while reading the narrative. That said, I might have benefited from the "Casting" section because the characters largely blended into each other as I read, perhaps because of their mental devolution during the long journey.

All in all, however, while Forward's writing could have been tightened, Rocheworld is well worth reading and highly enjoyable. The scientific ideas explored are intriguing, and the adventure compelling. In fact, I am curious what the more economical versions are like. But there are other books to read before I seek out variant editions.

Rogue Queen by L. Sprague De Camp  
Review by J.-P. Garnier  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

At first it felt like this book had potential. The main culture involved is certainly alien, based somewhat on bees, and for me the more alien the aliens the better. However, it never really got beneath the surface of the culture, focusing mostly on their sexual structures, and barely grazing over their history. To make matters worse this book did something I can't stand, the same mistake made in the Planet of the Apes unnecessary TV show, humans land on the alien planet then spend the rest of the book explaining simple things (known to most humans) to the "primitive" aliens. The old and tired trope of the noble savage just waiting to be brought into adulthood by the "advanced" humans. I often have some tolerance for corny tales like this one but in this case, I found it annoying. Maybe this sort of thing was interesting in 1951, but today it was a dud.

The Sacred Radiance, The Dragon and His Wrath, A Vital Breath  
(Paxton Locke Books 4-6) By Daniel Humphreys  
Review by Jim McCoy  
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Paxton Locke is that one kid from high school who didn't want to come to your after-prom party because he was afraid he'd get in trouble. The twist comes when he decides that it's safer to go rob a bank or sumfin'. Like seriously, Paxton would be so much better off if he had a clue how much trouble he was getting himself into. That seems to be the common theme of The Sacred Radiance, The Dragon and His Wrath, and A Vital Breath, Books Four through Six in the Paxton Locke series.

Seriously, Locke has an issue with authority. Fans of the earlier books will realize that this is probably due to complications in his relationship with his abusive mother, who murdered his father. When your first authority figure is sick, twisted, depraved, deranged and in general not known for worrying about your well-being it kind of makes you a bit less than trusting of the people who are giving you orders. Paxton though, never lets his dislike of taking orders threaten himself or his partners.

No, it seems that he has other ways to do that. Locke is an extremely powerful mage who uses his arcane abilities in ways that aren't quite as safe as some others would prefer. He has a tendency to cast first and ask questions later. In fact, I'm not totally convinced that he has the knowledge to begin asking the right questions just yet, and I find that worrisome, although it doesn't seem to bother him much.

Right from the beginning of Sacred Radiance Paxton seems to be learning a lot about not being a loner anymore, in both his private and professional lives. His career started off driving around the country in a motor home, all alone and never settling in one spot. Now he has a woman who means the world to him and a team that he is part of and accountable to. It makes a big difference in his life and in his job and he's adapting but it's harder than maybe he thought. I like that about the character though.

Paxton Locke is a character that is impulsive, perhaps a bit selfish at times and who quite frequently fails to make the most prudent decision possible given his situation, but he is eminently believable.

Locke makes a list I have of characters that I almost feel like I've sat at a table and had a conversation with, because he's that lifelike and consistent.

Seriously, I've compared the sensation of a new book coming out in one of my favorite series to having an old friend stop by for dinner. Paxton is a guy who could come in, have a glass of pop (Jimbo is not a coffee drinker and I don't own a coffee pot) or something stronger, and hang out for awhile telling me about his latest exploits. I'm sure we could all have a good laugh about the time he pulled all the en...

Yeah, never mind that ginormous spoiler. It sure was fun though.

I'm hoping that, since Book Five is literally named *The Dragon and His Wrath*, I can get away with revealing that it had a dragon in it. I love Humphreys's take on dragons. I've always preferred the intelligent, conniving, ruthless style dragon ala *Dragonlance* or the *Temeraire* series (I hope I spelled that right) over the mindless, crude, animals like the ones depicted in *Harry Potter* or *Harry Turtledove's World at War* series. Kudos to Humphreys for getting it right where two far more famous authors didn't.

And listen, it's not my fault those other two authors are more famous. I'm sitting right here promoting Humphreys's work. Have you left your review on Amazon? If I can knock out a thousand words (my usual minimum) you can knock out twenty. It ain't hard folks. Who doesn't like telling everybody about something they like? And no, it's not your fault personally, but word of mouth worked for Larry Correia (twice, *Monster Hunter International* was originally self-published and *Dead Six* started off on a gun forum. Of course, that helped Mike Kupari get started too.) and Andy Weir (*The Martian* also appeared on a forum site, this one for science nerds I think) so we can make it work for some of these indie authors, too. For the record, I wasn't involved in any of these incidents. I'm just evilly plotting to help good authors sell good books.

But please tell me you're not just noticing that.

No, really PLEASE tell me you've picked up on that at some point.

In *A Vital Breath*, Locke pushes the Fwoosh Button and heads off into the multiverse. I love this book because alternate realities are something I'm really into. I have been since I read my first alt-hist book right after my father passed. Locke does some bouncing, runs into some old friends, and does some things that might not technically be considered a responsible use of magic. It was a lot of fun. I wanna try. I mean, I know magic's not real and that it's not actually possible, but I wanna do that one thing that he does. Of course, the reason he has to do it sucks..

But every story has to have a problem right? And, trust me, at that point he has one. It's not a problem I'd want to deal with, that's for sure. I mean, unless I could do the thing.

Actually, not even then.

And on the way, Locke runs into some old friends and finds some new ones. I was really happy to see another friend in particular, even if it was only for a second. I'm not going to say who it was but if you read this blog and you can't figure it out on your own, you need to work on your reading comprehension skills.

Parts of the story focus more on Agent Valentine as well and I like that. Valentine is a bad ass with a lot going on and I'm not really sure what his story is (and that's intentional on Humphreys' part) but

maybe when Humphreys gets sick of Locke he can do a series of Valentine prequels. That sounds like it would probably be a lot of fun and I'd buy them. I'm just sayin'.

Overall, the only complaint I have about any of these books is that I can never read them again for the first time. I mean, I'm the guy who used to hang out in his grandma's basement watching the Star Wars films every holiday instead of socializing, but there's just something about that first time through and not knowing what's coming next. Speaking of which, there has to be a next book and I can't wait for it.

One last word of warning: These are not stand-alone novels. I highly recommend starting this series at the beginning. It'll make a lot more sense that way and they're all good books.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Frozen Lakes

## The Stars My Destination by Alfred Bester

Review by J.-P. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

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

## Talk Like a Man by Nisi Shawl

Review by Heath Row

This was part of a Radical SF StoryBundle (<https://storybundle.com>) that included 12 different sf works focusing on radical politics—or by radical authors. This book, part of PM Press' Outspoken Authors series, features the work of Nisi Shawl, who's won the Tiptree Award and been nominated for the Nebula and World Fantasy Award.

The volume, which I read as an ebook, includes four stories, an essay, an interview by Terry Bisson, a bibliography, and a profile of the author. The stories selected were previously published in Bahamut, GUD, her collection Something More and More, the anthology An Alphabet of Embers, and the journal Extrapolation.

This was my introduction to Shawl, and her writing focuses on youth culture and dance, psychedelic drugs, gender fluidity and lust, the magic inherent in dolls, the service elements and power dynamics of prostitution, music and death, and healthcare. While there are elements of sf in the stories, I'd largely consider them fantasy, and darn good fantasy. Shawl's writing about music and dance indicated she's had long-standing experience with both.

Her essay, "Ifa: Reverence, Science, and Social Technology," (based on a 2010 speech given at Duke University) explores the role of religion and spirituality—specifically that of the West African religion

Ifa—in science fiction. And Bisson’s interview with Shawl further examines the themes and topics in her writing.

Based on this book alone, I will seek out other writing by Shawl. She’s thoughtful, thought provoking, and a very, very good writer.

## The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum Review by Heath Row

While in Portugal recently, learning about the history of sf and fantasy in that country, the influence of Jules Verne on early such writing struck me. I realized that there are so many formative texts that I’ve not yet read, including so much of Verne, H.G. Wells, and other well-established and widely known fantasy series such as the writing of L. Frank Baum. Yes, I’ve never read The Wonderful Wizard of Oz—or any other Baum—though I’ve seen the 1939 movie The Wizard of Oz many, many times. So I did.

It’s an enjoyable book, and well worth reading if you never have. I enjoyed comparing and contrasting it to the movie, which incorporated several elements not in the original novel—such as the flying monkeys being, well, bad. That surprised me. They’re downright terrifying in the movie, and much less so in the book. And I appreciated the childlike wonder evoked by the descriptions of the world, its populace, and How Things Worked.

I felt like the humbugs maintained by the Wizard to be somewhat silly and perhaps easily seen through (come on: green glasses?), and I was bemused by his political gamesmanship not wanting the people to find out, but I was distraught over the bait and switch of his offering to help Dorothy and her friends only after they perform a task for him. That task pretty much dominates the movie, though the assassination assignment has been replaced.

But mostly, I was struck by the potential for padding that a multi-character work can bring. We have Dorothy, Toto, the Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow, and Tin Man. And it’s not uncommon that when something happens, every single member of the group remarks on it. “Shall we go to the forest?” “Yes, let’s!” “Yes, let’s!” “Yes, let’s!” “Arf!” Not much writing length is gained here in this brief review, but just imagine how that—with additional commentary and description—might play out over the course of an entire book.

Of all the characters, I might have enjoyed the Queen of the Field Mice most, which makes me think there’s plenty of other small treasures to be found in Baum’s subsequent works.

## World in Flames by Jack Strain Review by George Phillis

A repeated theme in Alternative Military History, a war that didn’t go this way but could have, is an early Third World War triggered by Stalin’s paranoia. For whatever reason, the Soviet dictator becomes convinced that the western allies were preparing to attack him, so he attacks first, typically in 1945 or 1946. The trigger for Stalin’s paranoia in these books is very clever, and only revealed indirectly at the very end.

I have read a number of these 1945-epoch post war series, and Strain’s four books, namely Stalin’s War, Truman’s War, Patton’s War, and MacArthur’s War, are the best-written. When the Soviets first attack, the Western Allies are in an extremely difficult position. They are taken by surprise and are outnumbered on the ground by two-to-one or more. Top leaders are shown as men with important emo-

tions, notably shock and depression, that must be overcome before there is a practical response. Both sides make serious military errors.

## A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle Review by Heath Row

Similar to my comments on L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in *Faculae & Filigree* #26, I've also never read Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, one of John Hertz's *Classics of SF* selections for the recent *Loscon*. Originally published in 1962, the book is more recent than I'd expected. I've been aware of it for my entire life.

Despite the book's presence and arguable influence, I enjoyed it, but not overly so. I appreciated that the protagonist was a young woman; that the story explored her relationship with a young man, her younger brother, and her father; and the story's theme of the power of love. I also enjoyed the triumvirate of Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which—and their interactions with Meg and Charles Wallace, as well as the alien characters Aunt Beast and the Happy Medium on the planet in Orion's Belt.

But the narrative never fully engaged me, and I felt somewhat distant as a reader. I'm sure I would've enjoyed it more if I'd read it when I was younger. The sibling and parent-child relationships, alienation at school, and first love aspects would have resonated strongly. And the theme of the dangers of conformity on Camazotz would have offered early caution, highlighting the importance of independent thought and action.

For as long as I've been aware of this book, I've considered L'Engle to be similar to C.S. Lewis, of whom I've also read perilously little. That, too, shall soon be amended.

# Prose Bono

Formatting a Book  
Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

As I was talking to a new author the other day, I realized that it's been some time since the formatting guidelines we've covered here on the MGC have been updated. Since that conversation, I have written, and published, a short story. I thought about this post, which I was planning to write, and looked at the amount of time I had, and didn't do what I should have done. Which is to have formatted manually with screenshots, so I could walk a new author through the process. Instead, short on time and energy, I ran it through Vellum and got a nice manuscript with all the parts you need for an ebook on the other side. Copyright page, frontmatter (in this case, a foreword), table of contents, author bio, 'Also by...' (with live, store-specific links) and last but not least the 'You might also like...' where I promoted books by friends: all of those generate automatically and many of them imported with a single click from prior manuscripts. I love Vellum!

I don't actually recommend Vellum to a new author. Yes, it's the gold standard, it's easy to use, it will give you a fantastic print and ebook version (for novella and longer, naturally) with a single click to generate when you have the manuscript all set up in it. I really love it, and for me the steep entry price was completely worth it and it has paid itself off. But! It is \$250 to buy, and requires a Mac computer



to run – I picked up a used one for about \$300, so that was about a \$600 initial investment after cables and taxes. Which you absolutely do not need to do when you are starting out. If you do decide on it, and have the budget, it is the best. I do suggest looking at their initial import FAQ, as importing a clean document to begin with will eliminate many of the issues I've seen people report while using Vellum. I came to Vellum after getting a quote from an individual for formatting a novel – \$100, if you are curious, about five years ago now – and they told me to set up the manuscript in a certain way before sending it to them. I've followed the guidelines (linked above) while doing my word-processing since and have had no issues.

The simplest way to learn how to format your book is to start with the Kindle Direct Print (kdp) tutorial and walk your way through that. Even if you don't plan on being Amazon-only with your books, this is a clear and thorough method. There is a lot of information in the sidebar on that page. Take some time to go through it, and you'll get a solid start on publishing.

If you are working on a book which has a lot of graphics, special formatting requirements (like poetry), or needs specific considerations for tables as in a textbook, then I recommend Affinity Publisher. This is the buy-once-own-forever software that is the equivalent of Adobe's InDesign, without the steep monthly subscription fees and the ever-present threat that if you can't afford those, you will lose access to all of your files forever (yes, this is what happened to me, after trying a trial of the sub, then deciding I'd rather use my previously-purchased and licensed version. I was locked out of years of work and will never, ever, use Adobe or recommend it again). Where did that soapbox come from?

As I was saying, Affinity Publisher is a great manual layout program. You will not need or want it for most fiction ebooks or print books. There is a steep learning curve to using it, particularly if you aren't already familiar with its more expensive (but no more capable) competitor. There is a great deal of help on their website, and many video tutorials which can assist as well.

If you are going to format in your word-processing program as outlined on the kdp website, then you will also want a free program called Calibre to generate your ebook as an ePub (note that Mobi has been deprecated and is no longer needed for Amazon). You can also use it for other formats if you have a more obscure outlet, but for that I really recommend using a distributor like Draft2Digital (D2D) if you plan to go wide with your book, and they help with ensuring your book is formatted correctly after your initial document.

There are other programs out there for formatting. I know friends who use Atticus, and I haven't tried it myself, but it seems to be a bit more clunky and the results not as modifiable or elegant-looking as Vellum gives me. Vellum will allow for the insertion of images, by the way, but you will have less control than a manual manuscript design which Affinity Publisher gives you.

This may all seem overwhelming to the new author. However, if you take the time to follow the links in the post, read through the guidelines, and write a cleanly set-up manuscript, you'll find that pays off when it comes time to generate the ebook and print versions for publication. Begin as you mean to go on.

Legendary History  
Cedar Sanderson

As I was trying to find audio/video works on the Silk Road, or The South Seas trade, or... something that didn't immediately devolve into modern overlays of ethics onto what was a deeply complex system that shaped that same modern world, I was thinking about travel and its effect on the human.

For long centuries, many people never traveled much at all. It was dangerous, expensive, and took an enormous amount of time. Time that, if it were not your profession, compounded the expense of travel. It was assumed, at one point not that long ago, that trade between distant points of the world was either non-existent or highly restricted. And yet... we keep finding concrete evidence, in the form of durable goods, that trade was far more extensive than those original assumptions allowed for. There was the Silk Road, which was more like a yarn-skein of routes stretching from Asia into Europe, and across India or the northern Steppes. There was a route which has no name that I am aware of, running north-south from one American continent to the other. Later, when the sailing ships rediscovered parts of the globe isolated and forgotten, there were the sea trades, which were largely already well-trodden ground that had lain fallow for whatever reason – humans have short memories and long storied traditions, which may seem like a contradiction until you stop and think about it. Mythology and legend aren't real... are they? How much of them is based on something that happened, and where is that line?

Take, for instance, the cargo cults. Or, as was discussed yesterday over at Alma Boykin's blog, the influences as seen on the armor of the terracotta army of China. Just how far into the North American continent did the Vikings and their kin get? There is room for endless speculation, and some of it is very ripe for story fodder.

What I wanted, though, was something to keep my brain busy during the day job, when my hands are busy, but the mind isn't. Reading time for research is limited, so I thought I'd be able to find a documentary or something on the topics and came up with very little on the South Seas trading (which is my loose basis for the trading ship route in the Tanager series) and a lot on the Silk Road, but most of it very shallow. Sadly, the ruinous influence of Islam in the center of the routes has erased much of the art and architecture that showed the wonderful cultures that used to be there, springing up at caves and strategic points strung out over some of the most forbidding terrain on our globe. What's left is bare rubble and guesses, and those only able to be made by rare archaeological expeditions that are allowed into parts which are nominally safe. It would be fascinating to learn more, and I'm frustrated by the dearth of material.

Which means I'll have to make up my own stories. Only mine are set in space, with planets for the caravanserai. In that, I join the history of travel legends. Those who traveled, making up stories to elide the dust and filth and dangers they had overcome, like Marco Polo. Those who never traveled making up what might be out there, past the far horizon, over the blue hills and out into the realms of draconis.

I should see if some of the antique travelogues have been done up on Librivox. Many of them were outrageous bordering on silly, but they were a blend of fiction with non-fiction, so they might be rich fodder for a fiction writer. Aha! There are a lot of them. This should be fun!

~Finis~