

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
March 2024

FICTION

- 2 ... A Star-Wheeled Sky by Brad R. Torgerson ... Review by Heath Row
2 ... Bookshops & Bonedust by Travis Baldree ... Review by Tom Feller
3 ... Chasing Freedom by Marina Fontaine ... Review by Declan Finn
3 ... Demons Are Forever by Declan Finn ... Review by Caroline Furlong
7 ... Disquiet Gods ... Review by Christopher Ruocchio
9 ... Doris Dances & Fires Rekindled by Julian Hawthorne, edited by P. Alexander,
Michael Tierney, and Robert A. Lupton ... Review by Caroline Furlong
11 ... Dragon Prince by Melanie Rawn ... Review by Tom Feller
12 ... Fae Wars: Futures Past by James Copley and J. F. Holmes ... Review by Jim McCoy
13 ... Fisherman's Hope by David Feintuch ... Review by Heath Row
14 ... Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier
15 ... The Innocent Sleep by Seanan McGuire ... Review by Tom Feller
15 ... The Last Tale of the Flower Bride by Roshani Chokshi ... Review by Bob Jennings
16 ... Mortal Fear by Robin Cook ... Review by Tom Feller
17 ... The New Galveston Duology by Dale Cozort ... Review by Christopher Nuttall
18 ... The Other Time by Mack Reynolds and Dean Ing ... Review by Chris Nuttall
20 ... Pilgrimage by Zenna Henderson ... Review by J.-P. Garnier
20 ... Promises Stronger Than Darkness by Charlie Jane Anders ... Review by Tom Feller
20 ... Scamps & Scoundrels: The Bad Guys, Book One by Eric Umland ... Review by Jim McCoy
22 ... Shock by Robin Cook ... Review by Tom Feller
22 ... Starship Found, Child Missing by Miles Rozak ... Review by Jim McCoy
24 ... The Survivors: Life After War by Angela White ... Review by Jim McCoy
26 ... Triplanetary by E.E. "Doc" Smith ... Review by Heath Row
26 ... The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin by L. Jagi Lamplighter
... Review by Declan Finn
28 ... Wavelengths: Covering Sci Fi in Every Reality by Daniel Dickholtz
... Review by Jason P. Hunt

LITERARY CRITICISM

- 30 ... Interview with Gary Phillips, author of The Unvarnished By Jean-Paul L. Garnier

PROSE BONO

- 32... Asking for It Cedar Sanderson

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.

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

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The Concordat of Archive Books: “Starships and Empires.”

Become the Hunted

Not In Our Stars

The Captive’s Rank

The Universal Prey

The Praesidium of Archive

The Empire’s Legacy

Voyage of the Planetslayer

Revolt and Rebirth

The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy
with Demons

Warsprite

Web of Futures

The Iron Gates of Life

Deserts of Vast Eternity

The Last Age

The Shadowy Road

When Angels Fall

The Computer Ferrets

The Sea Dragon

The Thug Acrostic

What You See

Painterror

Adrift on a Foreign Sea

The Silver Crusade

Each Shining Hour

Gravelight

The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy

The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series

Eye of the Staricane

Capitulation of the Carnivores

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls

The One World

Mistress of the Waves

Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World

Airy Castles All Ablaze

Stand Against the Light

Practical Exercise

Simultaneous Times

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

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

Editorial

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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Books

A Star-Wheeled Sky by Brad R. Torgerson

Review by Heath Row

Telegraphs & Tar Pits #100

I read this novel last October but don't seem to have written about it yet, so my memory might be fuzzy. The 2019 winner of the Dragon Award for Best Science Fiction novel, *A Star-Wheeled Sky* was written during two military deployments. The book is described as hard sf—Torgerson was influenced by Larry Niven—and is a bit of a stretch (admitted in the acknowledgments) for an author who previously focused on short fiction. Regardless, I enjoyed reading the novel—even though it didn't stick with me much. A thousand years after humanity left a devastated Earth, its remains populate worlds within the Waywork, an alien transportation system involving wormholes. The Waywork system has been fully explored, its limits known, but the balance of power is thrown off kilter when a new waypoint is discovered on the border of two factions in conflict. The two vie for the new system and what it might offer.

The ancient Waywork, references to the alien Waymakers, the system's Keys, and “bits and pieces of inert Waymaker technology” and archaeological digs are interesting, as is the experience of traveling along the Waywork and its Slipway crossings. That's what I remember. I don't really remember any of the characters (except, perhaps Zoam Kalbi, an “infotainer”), or anything about the five remaining Star-states in conflict. But there are Prophecies, and the end of the novel considers the exploration of an ark, a discovered wreck—perhaps ruins and a pyramid. The explorers encounter an alien being who animates the corpse of a pilot, and the first contact makes the prospects of a second novel intriguing.

Unfortunately, there hasn't been a sequel, and the only other work in the Waywork universe is a 2018 short story, “Axabrast,” published on the Baen Books Web site. (<https://www.baen.com/axabrast>) *A Star-Wheeled Sky* is a fine novel, and I wish I'd reviewed it sooner after reading.

Bookshops & Bonedust by Travis Baldree

Review by Tom Feller

The author won last year's Astounding (formerly the Campbell) Award for best new writer. This is a prequel to his first novel, the Hugo-nominated *Legends & Lattes*. Viv, a female orc and the main character from the other book, returns, but is working as a mercenary in this book. Because of her inexperience, she is wounded in the opening chapter by Varine the necromancer's skeletal wights and is behind left in Murk, a seaside town, by Rackam, her mercenary commander, to recover while he and his company, the Ravens, are tracking the necromancer. While there, she makes friends with the people she meets. Those friends include Fern, a bookseller who is a poor businesswoman but can recommend exactly the right book to anyone, Gallina, a wannabee mercenary who is also a character in the other book, Satchel, a homunculus who likes to keep busy, and Maylee, a baker who was a mercenary herself before settling down. It feels more like a cozy mystery than a fantasy novel and is an enjoyable read.

Chasing Freedom by Marina Fontaine

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Fighting back against The Spirit of the Age.

I hang out with a lot of political writers. And the most common form of political writing lately is the distopia, or perhaps dystopia, depending on who's writing it.

And dear God, I am sick of them.

Granted, there have been some solid ones.

Daniella Bova's Tears of Paradox, which honestly looked something like it was out of Walker Percy than anything else.

There's Ordinance 93, that was mostly an action thriller with heavy espionage elements than a dystopia.

There's every John Ringo novel, where the world seems to be in danger of being destroyed at some point.

(Reviews forthcoming for the above)

But for every one of those readable, entertaining dystopias, there are easily ten that don't make the cut. Or drive me to tears of frustration. Or drive me insane. I don't even finish them, because I can't. Honestly, it's either the despair, or the writing, and the occasional "Why am I not doing something fun, like having a root canal?"

And then a friend of mine, Marina Fontaine, wanted me to look at Chasing Freedom.

Finally, at long last, something fun.

And this one is a dystopia that's easy to digest, easy to read, and simply enjoyable.

The story

Chasing Freedom begins in the middle of America, the tyranny. The only places of refuge are Amish country and Canada. But this is much like every other dystopia.

The important part of this dystopia is that Chasing Freedom focuses on the counter-revolution fighting the government.

The characters

Our main characters are Julie and Randy, and we follow them from being teenagers rebelling against a Politically Correct system gone amuck, via blogs and rallies, and watch them blossom into resistance fighters against a totalitarian system.

What's that you say? Sounds like a variation on Red Dawn? Sounds like a TEA partier's worse nightmare? Must be written by some redneck in flyover country?

Oops, sorry, no. Marina lived under the USSR. She's been there, done that, got the t-shirt. You want a tyrannical nightmare, she can build one. However, this isn't Tolstoy. You will not want to read this one with a bottle of vodka.

The world

Chasing Freedom is different from all the other dystopias for a number of reasons. The tone is lighter and hopeful, while still retaining an oppressive atmosphere. It's also filled with creative ideas about how to circumvent a dictatorship. For example, Amish country becomes a safe haven for people fleeing the nightmare that is the urban environment (like New Jersey). Also, this is a dystopia that operates on the level of a Tom Clancy novel, following various and sundry people at multiple levels of the resistance and the political hierarchy — from the schlub in the street, to the grunts running the black sites, to smugglers getting people to Canada.

Despite having all of these characters at all of these levels, they're easy to keep track of. They have histories, they have easily traced relationships, and they all connect to each other.

Another difference is that this is not outlandish. This is not a delusion. Much of the tyrannical elements are visible from here. You can see these coming. And when you see the ones at the start of the novel, the ones to follow are easier still to see.

And the best difference? This is one book. Sure, there could be more novels, but this is basically it, one novel, one story — a history of a resistance, encapsulated in a few hundred pages. I honestly can't name you one person who's done that.

The politics

You mean aside from a fight for freedom against the forces of Big Government, Big Tech, and a tyranny that isn't impossible to imagine? That would involve spoilers.

Content warning

It looks like weaponized current events, even though it was written years ago.

Why read it?

A dystopia so easily readable I breezed through it without once feeling like I needed to slit my wrists. I enjoyed this book, much to my surprise.

Demons Are Forever by Declan Finn

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The darkness doesn't like it when you hit back....

Marco Catalano and Amanda Colt put down a vampire army in Honor at Stake, and one would think that would entitle them to a little rest. But if there is no respite for the wicked, how much less is there

for those who hunt said wicked?

A few hours after fixing the vampire army's little red wagon, Amanda gets a call from the NYC-VA: the New York City Vampires Association. Given all the property damage that her "pet human" caused, she now must deal with the fallout of helping him scare, anger, and kill numerous vamps.

In the meantime, Marco has an offer from a strange government agent to consider. Having been impressed by both the threat of vampires — who for some reason have been frequenting the United Nations — and Marco's leadership in fighting said minions of darkness, Merlin "Merle" Kraft is hoping the young man will come to San Francisco to set up a similar group to keep any evil vampires in his home city in line. But just what does he have that Marco may be able to use?

The Story

While Amanda goes to deal with the Vampires Association, Marco handles yet more vamps looking for easy prey. Since no one ever looks up these guys soon learn — permanently — that situational awareness covers the entire area in which one finds oneself. But when one vamp lets slip a familiar phrase Marco is caught by surprise and slightly confused. What kind of vampire would show up saying that?

Above him, something called "Mister Day" watches Marco work. Oh, this angry human is going to be fun to kill. After all, Marco did not look up, either.

But "Mister Day" soon learns that Marco is not so easily taken. He may not look up but that does not mean his own situational awareness is poor. One tiger trap and some dirt later, and it looks like Mister Day is out of commission. Everything is going smoothly...

... until it isn't. Merle Kraft loses one of his vampire hunters on a night patrol in San Francisco and his desperate need brings Marco to the West Coast.

While Marco is gone, Amanda finishes mopping up the leftover troublemakers in NYC but finds she is not happy without him. Additionally, the local vampires have come to despise and fear her, shrinking her social circle to Marco's gangs and his family. The gangs are a bit annoying, too, as they think that her vampirism means she is ready and willing to spend an evening with them whenever they show an interest in intimacy with her. What, do they think that just because she is dead, she doesn't have to worry about STDs?

But Amanda's annoyances are soon superseded by a different problem. Day returns, and he is a creature older and stronger than her. Worse than a vampire, Day sets off a terrorist attack in New York City. Quite apart from the little matter of revenge he has an assignment: kill Marco Catalano. All he needs to do is find him.

Best way to do that? Make him angry.

The Characters

Merle receives more screen time in *Demons Are Forever* than he did in *Honor at Stake*, and he proves a welcome addition to the main cast. No more certain than anyone else just how he does what he does, the reader quickly establishes that he is a good counterpoint to Marco's ferocity and Amanda's cooler head. His bemused and apparently gentle demeanor hides a hardened fighter bent on seeing justice done. It is not wise to cross Merle, as monsters often discover far too late to save themselves.

Both Marco and Amanda return in full form and fine fettle. For their own reasons the two are convinced that a relationship between them is a bad idea even as they find separation driving them crazy. When each has reason to think the other is in danger, though, not even demons can keep them apart. It is refreshing to see in a “will they/won’t they” romance that despite denying their attraction, neither party seeks to “forget” the other. They simply restrain themselves to avoid — they believe — causing one another harm. If only more such romances did the same!

The World

Now this is a novel that gives a masterclass in “how to expand on your worldbuilding without losing what you already have.” Vampire lore takes a bit of a backseat to the expanding lore, but only a bit, as it still comes in handy for a variety of situations. While it is completely useless for stopping Mister Day, there are hints of how a world where the vampire virus is real could lead to plenty of nightmare fuel — such as how mad scientists on the government payroll might “inadvertently” unleash a horde of vampires while studying the virus.

The care and consideration taken to not only make Day a monster that vampires struggle to fight at the same time he can be beaten is unparalleled. Monsters like him would be portrayed as either all powerful and invincible or needing to be brought down by a nuke (or the equivalent) in any other novel. Instead, Mister Day’s limits and strengths remain something that can be worked around, exploited, and even turned against him. It is an original take on the trope for certain.

If only others in the Urban Fantasy genre would be so considerate of the actual facts of vampire lore, demon lore, and lycanthropy....

Politics

There are some politics linking the evil in the book to politicians and movements in the real world. It is not dwelt upon, but some readers may take offense at it.

Content Warning

Demons Are Forever has lots of stabbing, dismemberment, shooting, some foul language, and lots of violence but it is kept at PG-13 levels. There is some sexual tension but nothing too spicy.

All in all, *Demons Are Forever* is a book safe for the majority of audiences and will not leave anyone with nightmares.

Who is it for?

Anyone who wants something meatier than *Twilight* but much less steamy than an Anne Rice novel will love this book.

Fans of Jim Butcher’s *Dresden Files* are likely to enjoy it, too, since it is substantive but also quick.

Those tired of the typical mopey teenage Urban Romances that are high on angst but thin on action and actual thought will definitely enjoy this book.

Someone interested in vampires but hoping for a story with an accurate representation of them from folklore will also like both *Demons Are Forever* and its predecessor.

This is one series that gets more addictive the longer one reads it, so anyone looking for a comfort read to which they can return at need will like it as well.

Why buy it?

No angst, no abuse of the lore, plenty of action, and sensible characters. These things are all missing from far too many novels but *Demons Are Forever* is full to bursting with them. If you are hungry for a tale with all of the above, then why not buy it and enjoy the ride?

Disquiet Gods by Christopher Ruocchio

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

In the age of Martin and Rothfuss, when three-inch-thick fantasy novels have kicked off a series that will never be finished, it's commendable to find an author who runs headlong against the odds and comes off conqueror, selling heaps and heaps of thousand-page tomes. Christopher Ruocchio has not only achieved this, and achieved it at a young age, he has done so consistently since his debut in 2018 with *EMPIRE OF SILENCE*.

Now, six years later, he introduces us to the penultimate installment of *Sun Eater*, a titanic opus with ambitions of reaching Tolkien and Herbert. It's long. It's slow. It's heartbreaking. It drags you across the stars and beyond the centuries as you learn the life story of a man who not only destroyed an entire race, but their homeworld and their sun.

Summarizing a tale of this scope would be either woefully terse or painfully overwrought. Naturally the sixth book in a series that's already over four thousand pages long could only be read after you grasp the first five. For that I refer you to Ruocchio's own YouTube channel, where he has written up summaries of each individual volume.

Sun Eater Summaries

Beyond that, I can only warn you of spoilers, and bid you adieu.

Get your copy!

The Story

After publicly insulting the Emperor at the end of book 5, Hadrian finds himself in exile, cut off from a lifetime of accumulated resources and goodwill, hiding more or less on the Sollan Empire's version of Arrakis without the spice. His one-and-only love interest from the first book, Valka, died tragically in the previous volume, but Hadrian reveals here that he and Valka paid an exorbitant amount of money to have a child together, and now Hadrian is raising Cassandra as a single father.

As happens often in this series, huge spans of time have passed since the last book. Two centuries, in fact. Characters can go into a long fugue state, passing decades in cryosleep, because wormholes and warp speed don't exist here. You want to cross space, you've got to do your time. Hadrian himself has lived around for multiple centuries now, closer than not to a millennium, and almost half of that awake. These are not fast books, and this is not a fast series. There are times when that works against it, but every time I get annoyed by the length and scope of these books, I remind myself that I'm still reading

them, still anxious to see how it all plays out.

And in the case of *DISQUIET GODS*, Hadrian gets a call from the Emperor he insulted two hundred years ago, asking him to go on a specific mission, with a promise of redemption if he succeeds. For his own reasons and for the sake of his daughter, he takes the job.

The Characters

It's got to be a major challenge to write a character of Hadrian's age, experience, wisdom, and burdens, without coming up short. This is where I think the sheer size of the narrative counts as a positive, because a man who has lived that long and seen such cosmic spectacles would definitely carry himself different from you or me.

Personally, I like that he's a man of classical aspirations. He has noble values despite the cruel practicality of the universe he lives in. For someone as long-lived as he, it would be easy to view life as consumable and disposable, yet he's a one-woman man even as a widower. He can live for a thousand years and still be concerned with eternity. He's not given to fits of passion, and when he commits to a certain path, he doesn't waver. Would that those of us who might live to 90 should be the same.

The challenge of fatherhood was new and welcome too. In the blink of an eye Cassandra turns 40. She starts to consider things like courtship and her future, and even for Hadrian this tests his abilities. Ruocchio's wisdom shows through Hadrian's interactions with his daughter.

The World

Other than the vastness of time and space, the worldbuilding is the most difficult aspect of *Sun Eater*. I advise readers to make judicious use of the glossary in the back of each volume, because Ruocchio doesn't hit the brakes to explain every new thing he introduces to you. Much of it can be gleaned from context, and further detail can be found in the minute definitions.

To be very brief, there are cosmic beings in the darkness of space who aren't bound by the same laws of time and physics as we are. Hell, some of them are moving backwards in time. There are alien races who worship these beings, and they're bad news for humanity, not just the structure of the Empire. Hadrian has had contact with them throughout his life, and he's coming to grips with powers they have given him, as well as the responsibility of the knowledge he carries. He's gradually moving down a course of action that will result in utter xenocide, and the hell of it is, the worldbuilding makes it make sense.

This is where the Tolkien/Herbert-level ambition comes into play.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Hard R for language and violence.

Who is it for?

If you've ever wanted Frank Herbert to write a Silmarillion for the entirety of the Dune saga, this is for you.

Why buy it?

Look, if you've bought the first book, you're probably buying this book. Three different publishers haven't been able to keep EMPIRE OF SILENCE in physical print long enough to satisfy readers. There's a reason people keep gobbling up the copies every time a new print run hits the shelves. As for me, I'm excited that we're one book away from seeing how this all comes together. If you decided to read through the spoilers to get here, know that you've got a year to catch up. Get reading.

Get your copy!

**Doris Dances & Fires Rekindled by Julian Hawthorne,
edited by P. Alexander, Michael Tierney, and Robert A. Lupton
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>**

Stop me if you've heard this one. A turn-of-the-century sitcom and a paranormal romance walk into a bar....

A lost pair of tales by Julian Hawthorne reappear for readers' convenience in the modern day, courtesy of Cirsova Publishing. The son of famous American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, Julian's style differs considerably from that of his paternal inspiration. While the two have similar positions on religion and belief, Julian's reflections have outcomes dissimilar from those in his father's tales.

One of the best places to see the divergence is in this volume: Doris Dances & Fires Rekindled. Separately the two tales are fun and intriguing, but together they provide a view of this largely forgotten American writer's mind and musings.

The Story

Doris Dances has all the humor and heart of an early sitcom crossed with the serious recognition that laughter and good fun can still be threatened by darkness. The tale begins with Robert "Bob" McIvor Melrose, the heir to his family's fortune. Raised by his Puritanical relatives, the Calvin Bunyans, Bob soon demonstrates that he is going to be "a problem." Mr. Calvin Bunyan takes the opportunity every Sunday morning to read the Bible and preach upon its meaning to his wife, the house servants, and Bob. The Calvin Bunyans do not attend church services but hold their own in their house every week, and woe unto the one who interrupts Mr. Calvin Bunyan in his position as self-appointed minister.

One Sunday morning, Bob interrupts Mr. Calvin Bunyan's solemn sermon. It happens, as it always does, that the housemaid has two little kittens that are young enough to prefer playing to behaving. Bob isn't much older than the kittens at this point and, mild-mannered and docile, he likes to watch them investigate the room while his guardian talks (and does not notice his ward's lack of attention). When the two felines accidentally set up a commotion that interrupts the sermon, Bob does the unforgivable. He laughs!

Tsk, tsk! No laughing or disturbance amid important functions such as this, young man!

Poor Bob really doesn't change as he grows. A Bohemian spirit with a genial temperament, Bob develops a fascination with human infants as he comes to adulthood – one his new wife does not share. When, while he is on a business trip to New York, Bob buys a baby girl for fifty dollars from the elderly guardian selling her, his wife makes it clear that her husband can have the baby or he can have her. He cannot have them both.

Bob chooses the baby, leaving his fortune to his wife, as he “never had an interest in” business anyway. He names his new infant Doris and the two begin to wander, with Bob playing the banjo while Doris dances. As she dances and grows, Doris becomes a beauty men would die – or do worse – to possess....

Fires Rekindled, meanwhile, is a paranormal romance and a far less lighthearted tale compared to Doris. Lionel Heathcote, an American researching his ancestor of the same name, arrives in England to meet his sister and take up residence in London, so he may continue his academic work. World War I is on the horizon but hardly registers in Lionel's mind as his sister takes him to his apartment. It seems strangely familiar to him, and soon, he realizes he has been here before.

His sister is amused by this. After all, neither of them had been to the country before they reached adulthood; she to marry and live in London, Lionel to read up on their mysterious ancestor. But when her brother accurately describes rooms in the apartment before she opens the doors to show them to him, she is disturbed and asks him to stop.

Lionel appeases his sister but soon finds that the longer he is in the apartment, the more memories that are not his own come to him. Of specific note are the memories of nights and days spent with a beautiful woman of divine appearance who also called this apartment home. Are these mere flights of fancy, or is Lionel tied to the ancestor whom he seeks to learn more of? If so, just what will be the consequences of this strange knowledge? And what is the answer to the riddle of these other-memories in his mind?

The Characters

Bob McIvor is fun and funny without being tedious or cartoonish. He really is a Bohemian spirit, one who needs a reminder every now and then that following impulses isn't good for everything, as some could give scandal to those who should be protected from dishonor and disgrace. His seeming harmlessness is punctuated by his affability at the same time it is accentuated by his daughter's otherworldly beauty and wisdom. Even before she becomes an adult, Doris sees the world through ancient, understanding eyes. She loves her father and his friends as family and would do anything for them, learning from the example which they set.

Lionel Heathcote, in contrast to most protagonists in tales like his, experiences no horror at having another's memories supersede his own. Rather than be shocked and terrified at the potential that he could be losing his mind or his individuality, he becomes absorbed in the memories and dives into this discovery with a will. This is an interesting characteristic not much explored in tales like Fires Rekindled and it makes Lionel fascinating. His eager drive for knowledge is one too many heroes lack, so seeing it in this protagonist made him more intriguing than he might otherwise have been.

The World

The world is the bygone era of the turn of the 20th century. World War I is on the horizon in Fires while Bob McIvor can adopt a baby girl by paying fifty dollars to an immigrant tramp on the street trying to sell her. It is a strange world caught in a variety of interplaying forces and challenges. But there is humor, hope, and beauty that remains amid the shadows and uncertainties all the same.

Politics

The politics, such as they are, are those of the early 20th century. Any resemblance to current politics just goes to prove the old saw true: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

Content Warning

Bob buys a baby from an immigrant in New York City. This might rub some people the wrong way, even though he does love his new daughter, doing everything in his power to make sure she grows up happy and well-educated. Lionel Heathcote remembers several intimate moments between his ancestor and his ancestor’s lover. They are not explicit, but they are not vanilla descriptions, either. Beyond these items, there is nothing objectionable in the stories.

Who is it for?

Doris Dances & Fires Rekindled is for anyone who wants some light reading that illuminates where certain tropes and characters came from. Those who want an academic glimpse into the writing of the early pulp stories created at the turn of the century will also like this book, and readers who found Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* a slog in high school will discover his son’s upbeat, quick-paced tales are a nice alternative to his father’s works. Parents with children currently reading *The Scarlet Letter* may want to pick this volume up as a sympathetic palate cleanser for said young readers as well. For those who actually enjoyed the novel by Julian’s father, Doris and Fires show what he learned at his father’s knee, as well as where he chose to follow his own path as a writer. Also, any paranormal romance fans or fans of Andre Norton’s *Witch World* and other novels will wish to read *Fires Rekindled*. It may have been an influence on some of her later works – or inspired those she liked to read.

Why buy it?

First and foremost, it is a piece of American history that deserves to be preserved. Second, it is a piece of pulp fiction history that needs to be saved for the future. Third and most importantly, it is FUN, light, and enjoyable reading that will fill an hour or two and leave a reader smiling. What more reason can there be to buy such tales as these?

Dragon Prince by Melanie Rawn Review by Tom Feller

It is inevitable that any epic fantasy novel involving dragons, political intrigue, and a war of succession would be compared to *Game of Thrones*. This novel predates George R.R. Martin’s series by about 10 years and is a fine one. Like Martin, the author is not afraid to kill off characters and do nasty things to them. Rohan is a desert prince who succeeds to his father Zehava’s throne early in the novel when the latter is killed hunting a dragon. He is close to his sister Tobin and her husband Chay, a nobleman who is both an experienced soldier and a prominent horse breeder. Sioned, the daughter of a minor prince herself, is a Sunrunner, aka a faradhi, a magic order that utilizes the power of the sun. They can communicate over long distances with each other, so long as there is either sunlight or moonlight, and create fire. They are forbidden from killing people, although that rule is disobeyed several times during the course of this novel.

Andrade, who is also Rohan’s aunt, is head of the Sunrunner order and decides that Rohan and Sioned should be married. Fortunately, when they do meet, it is love at first sight. The principal villain is Roelstra, the High Prince, who has been unable to beget an heir. It is not for want of trying, as he has seventeen daughters by one legal wife and several mistresses at the beginning of the novel and another

about half way through. He wants Rohan to marry one of them and produce an heir who would be his grandson. One of the daughters is Ianthe, who becomes an important secondary villain. This is the first book in a six novel series and has a satisfying ending. To my surprise, it was the author's first novel. Few authors start their career with a novel this good.

Fae Wars: Futures Past by James Copley and J. F. Holmes Review by Jim McCoy

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

Once upon a time, when I was a much younger, thinner and better-looking Jimbo (just ask your mom, she remembers) I went to the bookstore and picked out a book named Death Quest by some Hubbard dude who later (or possibly before and I just hadn't heard of it) went on to establish a "religion" known as Scientology. It was the sixth in the series and I had sworn never to start another series in the middle again, ever, for as long as I lived, or probably longer since I didn't see myself as starting any new series after I had passed. Not that I wouldn't try, but you know...

Yeah, anyway...

So I had kept that vow for three decades plus and I just broke it. I blame James Copley, because I saw him advertising this book all over the stinkin' place and, you know what, I'm glad I did. Fae Wars: Futures Past was worth my time and money. I'm going to read it again someday. I mean, not right now, but eventually. I just finished it.

Fae Wars: Futures Past starts out like an alien adventure story, but with a twist: The aliens aren't from Outer Space, they're from another dimension. They don't arrive in ships, they come through portals. They don't have super science, but they do have a magical force field capable of stopping bullets. That's important because they fight with medieval technology; swords, axes, bows, etc. The entire army doesn't own a single gun from what I can tell but they kick ass because our weapons don't work against them.

Oh, and they've got magic. Freezing rivers in seconds, tossing fireballs, and the aforementioned ability to open portals from an alternate reality to ours are just the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot going on here and my certainty that we haven't seen everything magic can do in the Fae Wars universe approaches unity. That's okay though. There's more to read already and Futures Past certainly didn't feel like it ended the Fae Wars series. This thing feels like it has as long way to go still and that's exciting.

And, having already mentioned that Futures Past is part of a series I should mention that I had absolutely no problem following what was going on whatsoever. It works just fine as a standalone novel. Given the title I'm guessing that this was a prequel, but I can't even say that much for sure. That's okay though. I'm good with not knowing, at least until I finish writing this review and have time to hie off to Amazon and pick up the first two. They're on Kindle Unlimited too, so I can actually afford it.

The main antagonists of Futures Past and, one would assume, the Fae Wars series in general are elves, but these are not your grandfather's elves. Tolkien would probably barf up a lung if he saw the elves in Fae Wars and Dungeons and Dragons fans aren't going to see what they're used to either. The elves in Fae Wars are expansionist, domineering slave holders who fight mainly for material gain. Old school players of the Palladium Fantasy RPG may remember that the elves in that setting had once enslaved the dwarves and made them manufacture rune weapons, so they come closer but they're still not quite a match. In some ways, specifically to exclude dietary preferences, the elves in the book most closely

represent the Posleen in John Ringo's Legacy of the Aldenata series. They show up, take what they want and destroy what they don't. I like these elves. By which I mean that I love to hate them. Seriously. They're almost like Blood Elves from World of Warcraft, only at the head of the Horde instead of part of it Think Lor'themar Theron's dream of world domination. "Trust no-one" indeed.

There are other fantasy races as well. Orcs are enslaved by elves and do most of the actual fighting, serving under elven officers. Gnomes and dwarves are enslaved by elves and a few feature prominently in the book. The gnomes and dwarves are artificers and bring something to the fore that is frequently missing in other works: Magical technology. It makes sense that a magic using society could accomplish many of the same things as a non-magical one given the right mentality among some of its members. While dwarves and gnomes aren't necessarily treated with respect by their masters, they should be. They build the stuff that makes things work.

They also fix the stuff that doesn't and that's important, especially if you're a human who thinks they broke something irreparably only to find out that they magicked it back together again. Or that they found a way to bypass your fix. Of course, a fix is only good until you break the object again and humanity seems to figure that out early on, but it's going to be an ongoing theme, I can feel it.

There is an element of real-world religion that works its way into the narrative. I love that part of it. Religious leaders knew something was coming and it's more than one religion if I'm understanding what's going on correctly. As goofy as I am, I'm thinking I get this pretty well, too. They didn't know how or when an invasion would be launched, but they knew it would get here eventually. Prophecy makes a return into the world as part of the narrative and helps to move things along. It's an aspect that works and fans of everyone from Jesus to Harry Potter will recognize the way it works.

Overall, Fae Wars: Futures Past just works. It's got just enough familiarity that you can relate to it and enough twists on the old stuff to keep it interesting. I'm looking forward to getting to know more about this universe and trying to see if I can figure out where it's going. There are some interesting predictions listed so far, but it's very obvious that nothing is set in stone. Things are wide open, and I can predict that it's going to be a wild ride. This is also Copley's freshman effort, and I can't wait to see what else he has in store. That's assuming that he doesn't get lost along the way to his third hour French class. I know how confusing it can be.

Fisherman's Hope by David Feintuch

Review by Heath Row

Telegraphs & Tar Pits #101

It's rare that I'll read the fourth book in a series without reading the previous three, but I'd not encountered David Feintuch's Seafort Saga previously and was unaware that this book was so far into the series when I cracked its cover. While a reader might benefit from reading the three precursors—Midshipman's Hope, Challenger's Hope, and Prisoner's Hope—first, Fisherman's Hope reads relatively well on its own, and there are three subsequent novels, as well.

Set in the year 2201, this novel continues telling the tale of Nicholas Seafort, an officer in the United Nations Naval Service who, in the previous three novels, has been established as a midshipman, the elected leader of earth, and the captain of a UNNS flagship. He's also a mutineer, a hero, and a definite leader. And he's encountered hostile, amoeba-like aliens dubbed "fish" who are attracted to the N-waves of UNNS spacecraft, developing a method to counter their very effective attacks.

You'll pick that up in bits and pieces over the course of this novel, which presumes the fish as a known entity and refers to previous experiences and indiscretions. What's new in the novel is that Seafort has been named commandant of the naval academy, which requires that he take care of about 400 teenage recruits—N-waves seem to affect younger crew members with fewer deleterious effects—and exposes him to the political machinations of other military and political leaders. It's not an easy fit, and much of the book explores how uneasily the new, two-pronged leadership sits. That leads to an interesting subplot about criminal bookkeeping, as well as numerous flashback scenes revealing Seafort's childhood and time as a recruit, almost serving as a prequel of sorts to the first novel.

Over the course of the book, Seafort learns to be a more empathetic leader, taking several raw recruits under his wing while staving off the intrusive inquiries of the politician father of a student, often with the support of his administrative assistant or second in command, perhaps, who'd served with him previously.

He also travels to Earth, to the "transpop" gang-controlled Manhattan of Old New York City, to look for his wife, who escapes from a medical facility while recovering from a rape in an earlier book. There's a space station and a facility on the far side of the moon. The fish return, attacking Earth, and unable to persuade the remaining forces that fleeing in spaceships will only attract more invaders with their N-waves, Seafort develops a cunning and perhaps cruel plan to fend off the alien attack. That plan might cost him and his charges their lives.

While Feintuch's novel is more intensely military sf than I'm used to, I found the setting and multiple relationships compelling, particularly the transpop angle. I'm almost glad I hadn't read the previous books because the prequel nature of this—via flashbacks—was particularly interesting. And there was enough action, among the recruits and officers during extravehicular activities and when leading the fish on the wild goose chase at the end to speed one's pulse. Though much of the story takes place at the naval academy, there's also sufficient spacefaring to scratch that itch.

I might not run to read any of the other novels in the series, but I'm glad I read this one, randomly pulled from a Little Library and then my bookshelf as it was. Feintuch received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in Science Fiction in 1996 and also penned a fantasy series, Rodrigo of Caledon. He died in 2006.

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

One of the best and most heartbreaking books I've read in a long time. The story of a man who is mentally handicapped and goes through an experimental surgery to make him smart. It works and he becomes a genius, but only temporarily. Just long enough to give him a taste of what he has been missing, realize that people always laugh at his expense, fall in love, and generally be a respected human being. But he finds his genius more isolating than when he was dim, both ends of the spectrum being ostracizing and causing him to think differently than others. This book started as a short story, which won a Hugo award, and then was expanded into a novel, which won a Nebula – well deserving of both. It was also adapted into a film in 1968 and is worth seeing and almost as touching as the book, the film version is called Charly. There have been many other radio and film adaptations, but I am unfamiliar with these. I don't want to reveal too much of the story, but I will say that the last fifty pages had me crying.

The Innocent Sleep by Seanan McGuire Review by Tom Feller

The premise of the author's October Daye series is that the faerie world shown in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is real and operates in parallel with our own, occasionally intersecting it. October Daye herself is mostly absent from this novel, the 18th novel in the series, which focuses on her husband Tybalt, the King of Cats, because she falls under a spell cast by Titania. The wife of the chief fairy, Oberon, Titania wishes to remake the faerie world to her liking. The Cait Sidhe, the faerie cats, for instance, are banished into enclaves where they will eventually starve, but Tybalt leads break-ins at local Costco warehouse stores to get them enough food to last until he can rescue October and help defeat Titania. Along the way, he visits the undersea Duchy of Saltmist and the Library of Stars, the official faerie library. Warning: this novel covers the same events of the 17th novel *Sleep No More*. The other novel is from October's point of view and the second from Tybalt's. I had not read the other book so it was new to me and a first rate addition to the series.

The Last Tale of the Flower Bride by Roshani Chokshi Review by Bob Jennings

This is a book highly recommended by a number of people whose opinions I value, and it is a book I was interested in reading, especially since Ms. Chokshi is not only a well-respected contemporary author, but one of her books was cited by Time Magazine as being one of the best 100 fantasy novels of all time.

I really wanted to like this story, but I found it tough going and the experience was not necessarily what I expected. Billed as a fantasy, this novel more clearly falls into the coming-of-age, and literary-romance categories. I might also add that the book is more of a gothic mainstream character study than a true fantasy. The fantasy elements are mostly consistent and important for the two primary characters in the story, but they are slight, and readers cannot truly distinguish whether these presumed supernatural elements are real or just figments of the very overactive imaginations of the two young female protagonists.

In addition, the entire story is filled with references to fairy tales of all kinds, especially all the things that can and often do go wrong in fairy tales, of innocents destroyed by their own ignorance and trust, betrayed by their own suspicion and disbelief, and destined to become unwilling toys of uncaring gods and magic forces beyond their understanding. This is the "Had-I-Only-Known!" school of writing, and while it initially sets up that feeling of unease and distrust for the events and the character narratives that the author is revealing, it is overdone. It is overused, overwritten, and becomes tedious with the extended buildup to the actual plot developments dogged every chapter with all these fairy tale cross references and none-too-subtle warnings that things can and do go wrong when people put their trust in magic and the world of the supernatural.

The story centers on two young female characters, Indigo and Azure. Their last names aren't important. There is a male character, introduced immediately, the husband of Indigo, a folklore researcher and fairy tale specialist whose brief interaction with Indigo results in a marriage. His name isn't important at all. What is important is that Indigo's stipulation for marriage is that they accept each other exactly as they are from the moment they meet, that there will be no examination of the past lives of each, particularly of her past.

Well, you immediately know how that's going to turn out.

Indigo was orphaned as a young child, the heiress to a fabulous inheritance that includes a string of luxury hotels located mostly in Europe. We meet her at age ten. She lives in a huge mansion with her guardian, her material aunt Tati. Indigo believes the mansion, known as The House of Dreams, is magic and is alive, that the fairy folk are real and that she is in contact with them thru the Otherworld, a secluded patch on the expansive grounds where magic is alive, where the fae and magical beings play and dance and beckon her to join them in eternal magical bliss.

She is joined by Azure, whose mother and stepfather are very poor. Fascinated by the house, an estate that dominates and overshadows the small oceanside town, the two ten-year-old girls bond and become close friends. More than friends, Indigo considers them two halves of the same soul, and easily convinces Azure that they must work together to be worthy of becoming part of the fairy tribe and dwell in the magical bliss of Otherworld when they are old enough to make the transition.

Indigo is the dominant personality in this friendship. Most of the book is made up of the memories of Azure and The Bridegroom discussing their interactions and lives with Indigo. Indigo is possessive, often loving and caring, sometimes ruthless and deliberately selfish. Indigo's entire goal in life is to make sure that when she and Azure reach the appropriate age, approximately when they graduate high school, that they can cast off their earthly restraints and join the fairy realms forever.

Azure is all in favor of this, because Indigo wants it, but time marches on and puberty interjects itself. Indigo views this as a time of testing, a time to purify themselves. Azure is none too sure, as her interests gradually develop beyond the House of Dreams and the Otherworld, and the realization that other people in the world exist besides two girls, their two families and a magical mansion.

The buildup to the core plot takes a long time. There is a great deal of character study, and a great deal of talk of various fairy tales and their ins and outs and the lessons that might or might not be learned from folklore. As The Bridegroom presses his curiosity the story begins to reach crisis points. There are a number of completely unexpected twists and turns in the final third of the book, and the ending is not necessarily what one might have imagined.

The book is a bit over three hundred pages long, but as I said, it was a hard push for me to get thru it, primarily because of the redundant fairy tale morality warnings and the long evolving character studies of two young girls deeply attached to one another, driven by the belief in ethereal magic by Indigo and her desire to become part of it.

I don't think I was the target audience for this story. I suspect women will find this a much more interesting book than I did. I read it, but the part I most enjoyed was the last third of the novel where things began to gel, and the climax(es) unfold. The first two thirds, not so much. It took much longer to read this novel than I anticipated, and after reading this book I really don't have any great desire to examine more of Ms. Chokshi's writing.

Mortal Fear by Robin Cook Review by Tom Feller

My medical insurance with my former employer was a Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) rather than a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO). Medicare Advantage Plans hold down their costs by being either PPOs or HMOs. The latter are the least expensive. Most of the main characters in this

novel work at an HMO called GHP. This included Dr. Alvin Hayes, a research scientist who was investigating how to prolong life. This novel not only did nothing to encourage me to switch to an HMO, but it actually discouraged me from ever making the change during Medicare open enrollment.

The main point-of-view character is Dr. Jason Howard, an internist with the HMO. As one of their services, they provide annual physicals for the patients. When several of his middle-aged patients and those of other doctors at the HMO die of old-age related illnesses, he realizes that something is wrong, especially after Dr. Hayes himself dies while they are having dinner.

Investigating the deaths, he meets Hayes's ex-girlfriend, an exotic dancer named Carol Donner, who is using the money to get her Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Harvard. Other major characters include Shirley Montgomery, the CEO of GHP, Michael Curran, a homicide detective, and a Cuban professional killer who came to the U.S. on a boat. As a thriller, it is quite a page turner. As a whodunit, on the other hand, I guessed the identity of the main culprit fairly early on. It is also marginally a work of science fiction, because before his death, Dr. Hayes made a scientific discovery that is a key plot point.

The New Galveston Duology by Dale Cozort Review by Christopher Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

New Galveston Book 1: Operation Croatoan New Galveston Book 2: The Wild East

Dale Cozort is well known amongst alternate history fans for his detailed WW2 scenarios and, more rarely in the AH world, equally detailed scenarios following possible Native American/Spanish Conquest period. He brings an astonishing grasp of both periods to his work, with enough details to make them some of the most plausible timelines/outlines in the genre. Dale does his research, and it shows.

In the New Galveston books, Dale combines both time periods to create a very different world. In 1939, when much of the US Navy was at sea holding a massive exercise – with President Franklin Roosevelt as the guest of honour – the United States simply vanished, to be replaced by an alternate new world still inhabited solely by the descendants of the Aztecs, Incas and North American tribal societies. (The US vanishing is not unique – John Birmingham did it well in *Without Warning* – but replacing the US with a ‘new’ New World is unique as far as I know.) The remnants of the US try to settle the new land, but find themselves competing with foreign powers, including the Nazis and the Japanese, both of whom have allied themselves with the Aztecs and other hostile Indian powers. And an uneasy peace is about to be broken as the Nazis make a bid to take over the New World ...

The story is very pulpy, with a handful of very diverse characters competing to stop the Nazis and save the New World before it is too late. There are relatively few moments of contemplation – instead, rather, all-out action as the characters race across the ‘undiscovered’ lands in constant running battles. The bigger actions – the USN fighting the German Navy – are largely off-screen, although it is clear the battles are quite significant. It also draws in political insights, from the US being reluctant to arm local allies (and, accidentally, forcing them to bend the knee to the Aztecs), to the impact of a vast new space for exploration and settlement. The politics are a tight squeeze for the US, caught between multiple different factions of varying levels of hostility. And the Nazi plot to cripple and isolate the remnants of America is horrifyingly plausible.

There are issues I might take with the global politics. Losing the US in 1939, even before the war broke out, would severely damage the global economy (although not to the extent of Without Warning). The Reich might actually be less able to sustain a war – and in this timeline it is clear Hitler never invaded Poland – but it would be balanced by Britain and France being thrown back on their own resources. Given time, the Reich would peak and start to decline – just when this would happen is hard to calculate, as Britain and France – and to some extent Russia – would be weakened by the loss of the US. I'm also unsure if the Germans could have deployed a major fleet – pretty much everything they had – to the New World. Even if they had bases in the region, they would not be capable of supporting the fleet. The logistics would be an absolute nightmare.

The book doesn't try to sugar-coat either the Native Americans or the Nazis themselves, nor does it skim away from the immense problems facing the Native Americans when the confronted Europeans for the first time. Disease is a serious problem, even with 'modern' vaccination techniques; tribal warfare and constant feuds makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a stable society to arise. (The Aztecs had actually neared the limits of their expansion when the Spanish arrived.) The willingness of certain powers to ally with the Nazis is quite plausible, particularly when the Germans appeared to be the only outsiders willing to trade modern weapons to the locals. They are, of course, planning to backstab the Aztecs when they've outlived their usefulness.

Overall, the two books are good quick reads. I might quibble about the ending – and I would love to see a third book – but I enjoyed reading them. You might too.

The Other Time by Mack Reynolds and Dean Ing Review by Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Stories in which someone is sent back in time and starts making changes, for better or worse, have always been a favourite of mine, although the genre is never easy to get right. It is difficult to understand the technical limitations facing the locals, as well as the simple fact they have a very different mindset. Slavery, for example, is repulsive to us – and rightly so – but simply part of many primitive societies. Indeed, it can be difficult to convince people set in their ways (with very little room for manoeuvre) to change on your say-so. Doing a story in which this happens convincingly is very difficult.

The Other Time follows the adventures of Don Fielding, an American archaeologist who falls through a rift in space-time and finds himself in the Mexico of the past, when the Spanish Conquistadors had just begun their conquest. (This neatly solves the language issue, as Don speaks both Spanish and a handful of local tongues.) Blundering into Cortés's camp, Don makes the mistake of telling him about the rich lands to the north – ironically, ones that don't yet exist in Cortés's time – and finds himself a prisoner, eventually sentenced to death.

Making his escape, Don flees to Tenochtitlan, becomes an adoptive brother of a leading Aztec nobleman and winds up advising them on how to resist Cortés, eventually becoming the war leader and effective dictator of the Aztec Empire. Although not a military man, Don's combination of hindsight – he knows what to expect, before events start to change – and cunning give him the edge, allowing him to leverage the empire's greater manpower to produce a victory, assimilate the surviving Spanish and set out to build a world where the Americans meet the Europeans as near-equals. The book does end with the outcome unresolved, but it is clear that history has been changed beyond repair.

Don is, right from the start, a likable character – it helps he has no emotional tie to Cortés and his men.

The book does a good job of showing his earlier befuddlement and while he does make mistakes, they are understandable ones. He never talks down to the Aztecs or indeed anyone else, despite knowing far more than they do about what is to come. There are limits to what he can do – and what he can convince them to do – and the book acknowledges this. The locals find him a little odd, but it generally works. He serves as the eyes through which we see the Aztecs, a society very different to our own, and allows us to recognise their possession of traits we recognise as virtues. This is also true of the Spanish themselves. They may be painted as greedy monsters, which was partly true in the original timeline, but they have virtues too. How well this works out will depend on your point of view. Don is, at one point, shunned for not leading his men into battle, unlike both his closest allies and Cortés himself.

The authors show an excellent understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the Aztecs, detailing why they lost so badly in the original timeline and altering matters to reshape the future. Don does not snap his fingers and bring forth modern weapons from the soil to arm his troops. Instead, he uses his manpower advantage to bait traps and try to force the Spanish into killing grounds, leveraging their weaknesses against them while trying to capture as many Spanish craftsman and horses as possible. He also starts introducing concepts like the wheel, allowing the Aztecs a chance to take his ideas and build on them. His insights into how the Spanish think also prove instructive – Don points out, to several Spanish commoners, that they're not going to wind up rich men, as Cortés and the aristocracy will take most of the loot. In the end, he uses the promise of genuine wealth to convince many of the Spanish to stay with him.

At the same time, however, the book does suffer from two major weaknesses. The first one is that the impact of smallpox on the Aztecs is significantly understated. The disease was so lethal because the Aztecs had no immunity whatsoever, a problem made worse by the demands of the war. It is possible that a sizable number of newcomers could have made a difference, simply by taking care of the ill before becoming infected themselves, but there just weren't enough people to handle the task.

The second is that the Aztecs themselves are, for what of a better term, whitewashed. They were not nice people. They were an aggressive empire with a nasty habit of bullying its neighbours, taking their people for sacrifice and generally being thoroughly unpleasant to everyone they happened to encounter. Cortés had no trouble finding allies in his war against the empire because there were a lot of tribes and cities that loathed the Aztecs and would be happy to side with anyone standing against them. While in the long term this was disastrous – in much the same sense as Russians who sided with the Nazis against the Soviets; they traded a bad master for an even worse one – it was understandable. Don does nod to the difficulty of convincing other cities to let bygones be bygones, but I think the book understates it.

(The suggestion the Aztecs saw Cortés, and later Don himself, as a god is mentioned, but it isn't clear how seriously anyone really took it.)

Overall, though, the book does maintain a fun pulpy atmosphere. The action moves quickly, the infodumps are worked neatly into the text. It does sometimes get a little strange – there is a suggestion that La Malinche (aka Doña Marina) originally let Don go because he kissed her, something Cortés never did – but those are minor issues. The book does paint the Spanish as heartless conquerors, which is largely true (although the historical Cortés wanted to present the entire empire to his king, rather than destroy it) and general monsters, although – unlike Turtledove's *The Guns of the South* – the primary audience was not composed of people who might take offense at a nakedly hostile depiction.

Pilgrimage by Zenna Henderson

Review by J.-P. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

This book was fun but not my cup of tea. While billed as science fiction I felt that it read more as a fantasy novel, evoking magic rather than science. I enjoyed how the book was set up as a series of oral histories, slowly unfolding what is happening almost as an epistolary, but that being said it was a little on the slow side. What I did like about this book is that it all took place in rural settings, almost in the vein of Clifford Simak. There isn't enough pastoral science fiction out there, and one can tire of cities and futuristic settings.

Promises Stronger Than Darkness by Charlie Jane Anders

Review by Tom Feller

In Star Trek, there was a species called “The Seeders”, because they seeded the DNA of humanoids on planets throughout the galaxy. This was a way of explaining why the crew of the Enterprise 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 third 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 learned that the shapers, now extinct, called themselves the Mayt, and that they have no particular affection for humanoids. They were hoping the humanoids would fight for them against the Fatharn. Although the Fatharn lost their war with the Mayt, they left behind the Bereavement, a Doomsday weapon in the form of weaponized black holes that threaten all life in the galaxy. At the beginning of the latest book, there are only 300 Earth days before the weapon is activated, and each chapter counts down the remaining days.

The main characters return from the previous two books, which is set almost immediately after the second: Tina, the clone of Thaoh Argentinian, a great warrior, is raised as an Earthling; Rachael is her best Earthling friend and an artist; Marrant is the trilogy’s principal villain, and he now controls the Royal Fleet, the largest military force in the galaxy; Yattoo the Monthaa is a member of the Royal Fleet, and he becomes Rachael and Tina’s friend; Elza is a Brazilian hacker who becomes Tina’s girlfriend; Kez is a physicist from Cambridge; Damini is a gamer from Mumbai, and Yiwei is a Chinese musician who becomes Rachael’s boyfriend. At the end of the second book, Tina has been possessed by Argentinian, and while she is allied with Tina’s friends, she has her own agenda. They call their spaceship the Undisputed Training Bra Disaster and refer to themselves as “The Galaxy’s Most Wanted”. Marrant does not so much want to stop the Bereavement as control it so that he can exterminate the non-humanoid species in the galaxy plus the humanoids he considers “lesser”, which include those of us who inhabit the Earth. This is a good, solid young adult space opera.

Scamps & Scoundrels: The Bad Guys, Book One by Eric Uglund

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I don't know what it is. Maybe it's too many hours spent playing World of Warcraft and Everquest. Maybe it's being a tabletop RPG player. Maybe it's just a general geekishness. But, whatever the rea-

son, I sure do love me a good Lit RPG story. And Eric Ugland's *Scamps & Scoundrels*, *The Bad Guys: Book One* fits the bill. It's got the action. It's got the drama. It's got the clueless protagonist who doesn't seem to get the fact that the girl wants him. Okay, that last one isn't necessarily a requirement for good LitRPG but, if you're a geeky guy, you've probably been him at some point so it's easy to relate to. I love characters I can understand.

I did have to read the first chapter or so to get to the actual GameLit part of the story. At the beginning of the story, our hero (known in the game world as Clyde Hatchet but at the beginning as Ben) is burgling a house with its owners' home. Someone tries to burn the house down while he is in it (God help the people who live there) and next thing you know, he's waking up in the hospital and can't move. Then he's offered a chance at another life...

Enter the game. This is when it gets fun. And maybe a little weird. See, in most LitRPG the main character immediately turns to hardcore leveling/acquisition/etc. It's like playing an MMORPG in the real world. Not so much with our buddy Clyde. He has a tendency to kind of loaf and just try to survive. He makes a friend, helps her out, gets a nice reward and...

Doesn't level much at all. *Scamps and Scoundrels* may be the first LitRPG I've read where the protagonist gets a job and just tries to function in society, at least for most of the story. I like it. I mean, he does a bit of fighting in his job and has a tendency to n00b it up (Seriously, who doesn't know that you can only fight a gargoyle with a magic weapon?) but it feels familiar in a way that some LitRPG just can't.

And it's also weirdly awesome that Clyde takes a class (actually, makes a Choice. Apparently this game doesn't have Classes) that reflect what he did in the real world. It makes sense. He was a thief in the real world and now he's a Rogue, but gaming is usually about escaping what we do in the real world. He wants to continue with what he always has been. It's oddly satisfying.

Another oddly satisfying thing about *Scamps and Scoundrels* is that the main character is a good dude in a lot of ways and that's key. Michael Corleone was a thief, a murderer and a racketeer but the man will do literally anything to protect his family. Tony Soprano is just as bad but, not only is he a dad and a husband, but he gives to charity and he is going to counselling and trying to make himself a better person.

Clyde is a similar type of guy. He gets hurt in the fire that kills him trying to rescue the family trapped inside. I won't say he does it in the most intelligent manner possible and it's entirely possible that he took risks that an actual fireman would not have, but he does it. He goes out of his way to help others through the whole story and yet he wants to make his living by stealing things.

Clyde is also smart enough to know how dumb he is, and that's key. He finds help wherever he can. He gets training to be a thief. He gets training to use magic. (And yes, it's a bit weird that he's a magic casting rogue. So what? It's fun. I'd play that character.) He finds help in every form he knows that he needs to. I like that. If you've ever played an MMORPG, you've probably needed help starting out. (Thanks Persifinee, Myronath and Iinien!) Clyde needs help. Clyde gets help. And yes, Clyde blunders, but hey, who doesn't?

I cannot remember the name of the planet on which *Scamps and Scoundrels* takes place, but it takes place in the city of Glatun, capital of the country of Glatun. Glatun is a weird place. In some ways, it's a typical medieval European town. But in other ways, it almost feels like the Coalition from *Rifts*. Magic is outlawed. Elves (and Clyde is an elf) don't seem to be very popular. Danger abounds, and not all of it is human.

On the other hand, Glatun does not equal the entire planet. There are a multitude of other nations and places. Clyde gets a peek at all of them when he's choosing his initial spawn point. I'm not convinced that he picked the right place. Don't get me wrong. It's a good story. But I'm hoping that at some point in the series (and this is book one of ten) I'm hoping we get to see more of it. Then again, worldbuilding is best done when starting small. So maybe, just possibly, Ugland knows what he is doing.

I'm not saying I'm in a big hurry to read the rest of this series. I'm just saying that when I got to the end of the book and left my tiny little "I'm too lazy to write a big review on Amazon using my phone keyboard, so I'll do like thirty words" review (You guys all do that, right? It's important!) that I dropped my phone trying to get the second one and it slid under my pillow (what, you don't read in bed?) and I panicked thinking my phone was about to get swallowed by, like the Sarlacc or the Jaberwocky or sumfin' that it took me a whole thirty seconds to fish the phone out (narrowly avoiding having it end up between the bed and the wall. THE TERROR!!!) and get the next one on Kindle Unlimited. It was a panic inducing experience. I survived it though, and the next book is already on my phone just waiting for me to get off this computer and go read it. So that's what I'm going to do. In the words of the great philosopher Foley, "Have a Nice Day!"

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Bronze Short Swords

Shock by Robin Cook Review by Tom Feller

By 2001, the year this book was published, Dolly the sheep, two rhesus monkeys, named Neti and Ditto, mice, cows, and goats had already been cloned. The premise of this novel is that an infertility clinic on Boston's North Shore is successfully cloning copies of the primary villain, the head doctor. Since no confirmed, successful human cloning has ever been reported, this novel is on the borderline between a medical thriller and a work of science fiction.

Roommates Joanna Meissner and Deborah Cochrane are graduate students at Harvard who answer an ad to sell their eggs to the Wingate Fertility Clinic for \$45,000 each. They plan to use the money to live in Venice while writing their dissertations. Joanna has just broken up with her long-time fiancé Carlton Williams, an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital. Returning home after finishing their dissertations, Joanna and Deborah are curious about what happened to their eggs. Rebuffed by the clinic on the grounds that giving out that information would violate the privacy of their patients, they decide to get jobs there under false names. They succeed, although they do not even have false IDs or social security cards for those names, and no one checks their references or work history. They work there for one day before finding out more than they bargained for, and it turns out that human cloning is not the only illegal activity at the clinic. This is a pleasant, albeit implausible, diversion. The interactions between Joanna and Deborah are quite good, but the ending is rather abrupt.

Starship Found, Child Missing by Miles Rozak Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

One of the best pieces of advice I can offer to anyone is to never mess with a Marine. They're generally in pretty good shape, they have combat training and they've been taught to be aggressive in all things. The Marine way of making war is to charge straight at their objective and take it by whatever means necessary. The government issues them firearms and explosives for a reason. Here's an even better

piece of advice though: Don't ever mess with a Marine's kid. They've still got all the aforementioned skills and abilities and they're even angrier. Seriously.

In Miles Rozak's *Starship Found, Child Missing* someone is just beginning to learn both lessons. It's going to suck to be him once our main character, Tyson Gage, catches up to him. Gage is every bit as interested in taking the subtle route as you would expect a devil dog to be, and he's not really into promoting the general health and wellbeing of those who get in his way. He seems a bit cranky at times and for good reason. Someone snookered him, then stole his kid and now he's a bunch of centuries in the future and his planet has been destroyed. I think I'd be in a bad mood, too.

Starship Found, Child Missing is clearly marked as the first in the series and this a good thing for a couple of reasons: One is that Rozak's universe is built sandbox style and there is a lot of it we have yet to see. He's done a great job of giving the reader enough to keep them interested without getting excessively bogged down in worldbuilding. While good in and of itself, this left me wanting more, and I'm confident that I'll get that in future books. We'll chalk that one up as a win. Also, there is a lot more story left to tell at the end of the first book and I'm looking forward to see what happens to our faithful friends as things move on. I don't want to spoil too much, but it almost feels like the end of SF,CM is the beginning of the story in a way. I mean, if the *Alien Ship for Sale* series were a three-act play, this would make a good first act. We've got a bunch of the main actors on the stage now, and it's time to see how bad things get before they get better.

Gage is my favorite kind of protagonist: He has a clear goal that I can agree with. He has a strong moral code. He doesn't give up just because things look bad. He can come up with a good plan when he needs one and is resourceful enough to improvise when things go south on him. In short, he's not just a hero, he's a heroic hero.

This guy is in some ways the antithesis of Thomas Covenant: He's on a mission that he cares about, and he wants to see it through. If he has to hurt someone to accomplish his mission that's on them, but honestly at that point they deserve it. He builds a team of deserving individuals, and he shows them the respect that they deserve, at least after he removes his cranium from his rectal cavity. Then again, it's natural to worry about people you care about and that's why his head is lodged in an unnatural position. I love heroes I can cheer for, and Tyson Gage is that guy.

Of course, having a villain that kidnaps kids and uses people as human shields is a good thing too. Seeing the good guy win is even better when I can see the bad guy lose. And while I believe there is quite a while left for the ultimate resolution, I'm willing to wait and savor the journey because it will be epic when it hits.

There is a lot of backstory here, at least as far as Tyson goes, and we're just beginning to get a look at what makes him him. He's a man who has been through some things and they affect him in ways that he probably doesn't realize. As a matter of fact, I don't know much about Rozak as a person, but I'm guessing that either he has some training in psychology or that he's done some independent research because there is a bit of psychoanalysis that goes on at one point and it makes sense to someone who has a very little formal training in Psych (I took the freshman level intro in college and I aced it, but that's the extent of my training) but has done some independent reading here and there. Also, I'm watching the Sopranos and at least one conversation sounds like it could have happened between Tony and Dr. Melfi and that's a good thing. Whatever big time Hollywood writers wrote that knew what they were doing.

That's not to say that *Starship Found, Child Missing* bogs down in psychological minutiae. There is

enough action here to keep even a vicarious adrenaline junkie like me happy. You've got everything from gunplay to fist-fighting, a couple of fights that could be either described as lightsaber duels or kendo depending on preference, a mecha battle and some deep space fighting. At some point even Gage's dog gets involved, and he has Marine training too. They served together. Don't blink because you'll miss something.

To say that *Starship Found, Child Missing* held my attention would be a massive understatement. I read just under three hundred pages of this thing in three hours. I haven't done that in years. I couldn't put the thing down. It seems like something totally different is happening on every other page. Seriously, buckle up before you crack this thing open because it's a wild ride and you're going to want to forget about life for a while. Then again, that's kind of the point, right?

All in all, I'm really excited for the next one. I'll be downloading it soon. I can't wait to see where Gage and his intrepid group of friends end up.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Opening Gambits

The Survivors: Life After War by Angela White Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Imagine a power mad man hijacking the United States nuclear arsenal and launching missiles with the intent of getting the US destroyed by the retaliation. Imagine it working. And when the whole world, when all is lost, people trying to survive in the world that's left afterward; a world with no government, no law and where only the strong survive. This is a world where radiation is a deadly threat that one has to regularly guard against, where the population has been massively culled, where women and children are treated as property by most and where there are no police to call. It's *The Survivors*, and it's *Life After War*.

Angela White has given us a masterpiece of disaster. The cities are destroyed. Resources are rare and getting rarer. One of the most important factions in the story can't even find bullets for their rifles, although they practice regularly with their pistols. Tribes of slavers roam the world with no one to stop them. Mutations abound; Creatures affected by the radiation. Giant ants, spiders with more than eight legs, weird birds, it's all there.

But there's more than just the standard tropes featured in every post-apocalyptic story. White includes magic in her world. When I first caught hints of this, I thought I was headed into a setting similar to that of the *Rifts* tabletop role playing game. So far though, that's not the case. Magic appears to be extremely rare in the world White has created, at least so far.

And I say so far because it seems to me that there is a lot of worldbuilding still not done at the end of the first book. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's just that when I finished *The Survivors* I was looking forward to finding out more about the use of magic, how it fits in the world and where this is all heading. White has revealed one large group of threats, but not how they'll affect the attempts of another group to rebuild and salvage something possible. The group that we're all following hasn't even decided where to settle yet. They're still exploring, trying to figure out where they can go to live and build a society.

I said that magic seems rare because we don't see much of it, but it may be more common off screen, or become something that future generations who have more aptitude for it as things move forward (the series is twenty-one books long) or it might not. Magic items may be a thing, or they may not. Magic

has some usefulness in battle but it's not enough to win a pitched battle all by itself, unless it is and there's more to see. I mean, it's obvious that there's more out there but we don't know what yet. I'm not even sure if I'm making this more of a big deal than it should be.

SHRUG I guess I'll figure it out eventually. I plan on reading more of the series.

That's to say nothing of the characters themselves: Angela is a woman caught between two men. I know that love triangles aren't as popular among some audiences as they are with others and I get that, but this is a love triangle more in the vein of *The Hunger Games* where it's a side plot than with *Twilight* where the love triangle is the whole story. Angela goes through an amazing character arc which I won't describe in detail as it would spoil a lot of the story, Angela being the closest thing the story has to a main character.

Angela is out to find her son. They were separated during the war. Along the way she manages to hook up with her old buddy Marc. He helps Angela out and trains her to be a warrior, having himself been Marine Recon for a while. It's not exactly a match made in Heaven (read the story to find out why) but it works after a fashion, and they end up hot on the trail of her son and the man who helped her raise him. It's a wild premise and a wild ride.

The action scenes in the book are well done. I don't get the impression that White is necessarily a Larry Correia level gun expert, but she knows enough to have a person who uses a revolver reload it with a speedloader and that puts her ahead of a lot of the other authors I've read. A lot of the hand-to-hand stuff makes sense and it's really exciting so that's a bonus. I have a sneaking suspicion that White may have taken a class or two in some type of martial art. I don't know that, but I did when I was a kid and a lot of what's written here comes across as the way things would actually work. Not that it's all high-flying karate kicks. Some of it reads like a backyard brawl but that makes sense, too. Not everyone has training and some of the people that don't are pretty hard core in their own right.

So yes, asskickery does indeed abound and that's a good thing. There's a more human side to the story though, too. We get everything from the aforementioned love triangle to mother/son, a conniving bitch, concerned leaders, power mad leaders (not the same person) and animal lovers. White seems to have a solid grasp on the human condition, and she puts it into her work.

I have only one complaint about *The Survivors* and I debated whether or not I should even include it. On one hand, I feel like I shouldn't. It's not about story, or characters, or action or anything I would ordinarily include in a review. On the other hand, it definitely affected my enjoyment of the book, and that's something I definitely review for.

So anyway, here it is: [It's an ad for something.]

I don't get putting that there. It took me out of the story completely. I mean, commercials are something I'm used to on TV, but not in a book. It took me a day to get back to reading a story I had been enjoying intensely up to that point. I still finished the book and I'm still planning on reading other stuff by White, but that threw me for a loop.

Bottom Line: 4.0 (4.75 if not for that commercial) out of 5 Mutated Ants

Triplanetary by E.E. “Doc” Smith
Review by Heath Row
Faculae & Filigree #28

This novel originally published in 1948 is a fix-up of the original serial *Triplanetary* as first published in the January-April 1934 issues of *Amazing Stories* and new material intended to tie *Triplanetary* into Smith’s *Lensman* universe and position the resulting novel as a prequel. Some reviews suggest that the pairing is somewhat awkward and disruptive, but I quite enjoyed the new material—perhaps more than the bulk of the narrative as represented by chapter seven onward.

The first six chapters, then, are broken into several sections depicting two alien groups’ interventions in the development of human society during the fall of Atlantis and Rome, World War I and II, and an undated nuclear World War III. The portrayal of the Arisians and Eddorians, representation of their respective degree of awareness of the other, and description of their meddling in human affairs is quite interesting. (I also now know the origin of the Boston con names Arisia and Boskone, the latter of which doesn’t come into play in this novel.)

After the historical establishment of the roles of the Arisians and Eddorans, more than 90 pages in, the main portion of the storyline begins. One of the main characters is a descendant of the Arisians’ genetically engineered Kinnison family. A spacefaring police force, the *Triplanetary League*, has been formed by the humans of Earth along with the governments of Mars and Venus. *Triplanetary* is facing pirates under the leadership of Gray Roger, a mysterious, formidable figure. During a battle, another alien race, the aquatic Nevians, arrive. Several *Triplanetary* agents and allies are abducted.

Generally held up as a prime example of space opera, the novel—while fun and adventurous—involves a lot of scientific and technological hand waving. There’s an inertialess rocket reverse engineered from an alien craft. There are red and violet rays (among others), horizontal planes of force utilized to sever tractor beams, and other high drama yet utterly perplexing combat technology. The Nevians employ another type of beam that converts all iron—even that in human blood—into liquid allotropic iron that can be used to power their ships. Luckily, there are also impenetrable shields. And there’s an illegal poisonous gas, the widely effective and luckily odorous Vee-Two. Despite the complexity and sketchiness of the technology, the combat scenes are still effective and energetic.

What I found most distracting was the intensely silly and overwrought romance between Conway Costigan and Clio Marsden. While I’m glad the fictional characters found each other, their incessant “I can’t believe you love me!” and “I love you more!” dialogue made me roll my eyes more than once. Hand waving and eye rolling aside, *Triplanetary* is an enjoyable read—and not just because of its historical importance. I fully intend to read more in the series.

The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin
by L. Jagi Lamplighter
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin by author L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright has been described as *Fringe* meets *Narnia* in *Hogwarts*. The *Narnia* is easy to see. And it is set at a magical school. But the rest?

Imagine the end of the Harry Potter series. You know, where the school is under full assault, things are blowing up, students are fighting, and great beasts are tramping around?

Imagine that's only the prologue. There's a dragon, and possession, and hordes of the possessed out to slaughter the school. There's even an evil math tutor (Moriarty, anyone?). I was expecting a few lines from Maleficent (the character, not that terrible movie). But it was not to be this time out.

The story

Rachel Griffin is just starting out at Roanoke Academy for the Sorcerous Arts. In a world where the world has been rewritten, only she can see through the machinations trying to hide what has been forgotten. And Rachel wants to know everything. In this case, "everything" may just get her killed, and destroy reality along with it.

Like all good stories, this has elements of a mystery. (Don't look at me like that. Even Die Hard has a mystery: "Detonators? What about them?") And *The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin* wastes no time in setting this up. Chapter one sets up an existential threat to all existence and ends with an attempted murder. The rest of the story takes place over the next five days of the first week of magic school.

And the grand finale is so epic, you're going to wonder why you haven't heard of Rachel Griffin before.

Jagi does so much with so many different things in this, you'd think she has an encyclopedic memory of all of mythology and fantasy and threw them into a blender. And while it looks like a standard "boarding school" story, she jams in so many subplots and stories and character arcs, you'd think it would be cluttered. But she makes it look so easy, you don't realize how much you've read until they try to recap it in the next book.

The characters

Our heroine is Rachel Griffin, 13 years old, a student at Roanoke Academy for magic, in New York. She's English royalty in a new world, with classmates from all over the world. This alone puts it head and shoulders above **the next nearest competitor who shall not be named** (which first treated America as a nonexistent land in the world of magic before turning it into a neo-puritan hellscape in a spinoff film series).

Chief among Rachel's new acquaintances is Siegfried Smith, who comes with a background of a Dickens character, and all the psychology that should come with it. (Oliver Twist is less fiction and more fantasy, orphans in the system aren't that cute.) Siggy is an acquired taste. Then there's the magical princess of magical Australia, who's another oddball.

And then we're off to the races.

The world

The easiest way to review this is to compare it to Harry Potter. It's not fair ... to Harry Potter. Don't get me wrong, while I enjoyed the books 20 years ago, the world of Harry Potter was so narrow and confined, you never really got the sense of the larger world. What did it look like? What would it look like?

The nice thing about this is that we get the perspective of someone who lives in the world of magic,

excluding the Stranger in a Strange Land effect.

That's right, unlike Rowling, who relied on the tried and true "Alice in Wonderland" variety of dropping an outsider into a new world, make them the primary narrator, and explaining it to the narrator and the reader, Jagi has managed to make a complete world, encompassing every question one might have about how things work. Jagi didn't get to taxes yet, but I almost expect it while reading.

And instead of three primary characters, excluding almost all others (let's face it, Neville Longbottom was a punching bag until he became a sword swinging badass out of nowhere), there are friends and acquaintances all over the place. There are mean girls, certainly, but nothing fits into the nice, neat little boxes that Rowling jammed her characters into. There is no one "house of obvious villainy" here.

Sure, there are plenty of ominous characters. There's a Victor von Dread, who I expect to talk in all caps about Latveria. There's a Salome Iscariot, who worried the heck out of me from the moment she was introduced. The characters are vividly drawn, and deeper than you'd expect.

The politics

This ends up as Christian Fiction. How so? Let's start with Aslan being a character. The serial numbers are ribbed off, but you can still see the impression.

Also, everyone in this school open carries a sidearm. It comes in handy.

Content warning

None. It's really YA. Though as someone once sneered about Narnia, "This is too good for children."

What makes this worth reading?

The short version is that this book is awesome. Lamplighter combines a lot of disparate fantasy elements into something unique and captivating.

You need to acquire this book and read it today.

Wavelengths: Covering Sci Fi in Every Reality by Daniel Dickholtz Review by Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

Those of us that are "of an age" will remember the heady days of the magazines devoted to our niche: Starlog, Fangoria, Cinefantastique, Comics Scene, just to name a few — many of them were held in high regard by fans, and even though a lot of them are gone, we still have the nostalgia of what came before the internet pretty much ruined it all...

And we're also very familiar with the concept of the multiverse, thanks to a Hollywood machine that just won't let them go away. But when you combine those two things, you actually get something worthwhile: Wavelengths.

This book gives us a look at different variations of the universe — called "frequencies" here — where-in there exists a magazine called Wavelengths, which is Starlog in another skin. The book offers up a

collection of articles from the 501st issue, dated November 2019, across three frequencies. This gives us a look at several “what might have been” scenarios in science fiction and horror entertainment. It’s like Harry Turtledove edited Starlog. Some things are the same, but other things are just slightly skewed in a completely different direction.

The challenge with a review is in deciding how much to spoil — enough to intrigue without ruining the experience of discovery — so let’s leave broad strokes here and if you want more depth, keep reading after the jump past the interview I did with Dan.

- What if Star Wars hadn’t been a massive success?
- What if Gene Roddenberry’s career had been launched by Genesis II instead of Star Trek?
- What if Roddenberry had discovered Tom Selleck?
- What if Charlton Comics had survived?
- What if Kenneth Johnson had saved Star Trek?
- What if the Barsoom movies were hits?

Just a few items among many, and some of the nuggets are deep dive items, things that only long-time and in-depth fans will recognize. But if you’re not that familiar with some of these behind-the-scenes stories, that won’t keep you from enjoying the “What If...?” aspects of the book. And for those of us who grew up reading magazines like Starlog and have combed the internet for those deep cuts, the knowledge of what could have been in this reality will give you further appreciation for what came to pass in those other frequencies.

Dan deftly weaves together things that actually happened with things that didn’t happen with things that might have happened in a mix of narratives that’s both fun and inventive.

Those who are familiar with Starlog will recognize the style of the writing, with both the convention coverage articles and the notes about current and upcoming productions. Plus: one of the editors being named “Don MacDavid” is a clear nod to Starlog editor David McDonnell.

From the casual, conversational tone of the op-eds from editor “Ed Carson” to the articles collecting and reporting the latest developments and rumors swirling about upcoming film and television projects, Wavelengths really does feel like a collection of lost Starlog issues. If the magazine had continued past 2009, it would feel very much like this. Of course, it would have been reporting on Taylor Kitsch as John Carter instead of Tom Cruise, but still...

You will not be disappointed by the attention to detail in this book. Dan’s research has given him the opportunity to mix and match a lot of different “What If...?” scenarios with actors and filmmakers that almost were matched up over here in this frequency, projects that almost happened over here, and careers that zigged when they almost zagged.

Blending the alternate histories with things that actually happened only helps to lend a certain air of authenticity to the various narratives. There was more than one occasion where I found myself wondering at the possibilities, especially the notion that in some universe, there’s a whole series of John Carter movies, Tom Selleck is a sci-fi icon, and Gene Roddenberry had more success with shows after Star Trek.

I’m also wondering what Wavelengths has been reporting over in Frequency 616. Or Frequency 1138. Or Frequency 8675309...

Literary Criticism

Interview with Gary Phillips, author of *The Unvarnished*

By Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

JPG - What drew you to want to write in the style of the pulps?

GP - The fantastic plots, the outsized characters, the staccato pacing, what's not to like? My crime fiction has some pulp influences, but the stories in *The Unvarnished* which have some crime fiction elements, are consciously in the style of the pulps. That's pretty much an extension of growing up reading comics, which grew out of the pulps so it's all rather circular.

JPG - The stories take place in all different time periods, but are cohesive stylistically, how did you navigate this as a writer, and how did you go about your research for the different eras?

GP - I figure even though I might be writing a story about shape shifting aliens, as a storyteller you want to ground such a character in traits and attitudes the reader can relate to or at least understand to give that character a psychological heft. As to researching different eras, again I refer to a childhood spent watching gangster films of the 1930s and '40s.

JPG - LA plays a predominant role in many of the stories, how did growing up in the city inform your writing?

GP - Being born and raised here, L.A. is in my DNA. Even now when I read a book like my friend Naomi Hirahara's *Evergreen*, set among the recently returned Japanese and Japanese Americans (from internment camps) to the city, I learn something new, some histories not taught in schools.

JPG - Cars and trucks, classic and otherwise, also play a predominant role in many of the stories in *The Unvarnished* - tell us about your interest in vehicles?

GP - My dad Dikes was a mechanic, so we always had cars around. A friend needed a fuel pump put on, or another one their car wasn't running right and he'd suss out what was wrong. Mind you this was on the weekends, work he didn't ask for money for except to cover the cost of parts. He was a Teamster and worked as a lead tire man at Pacific Motor Trucking in the Lincoln Heights area of town. One of my proudest achievements is that he and I rebuilt a '59 Ford Fairlane.

JPG - In my favorite story in the collection, *Saderoc the Soul Shaker*, you have characters battling music! And music shows up in many of the stories, what music inspires you, do you listen to music when writing, and was this story in any way inspired by Sun Ra?

GP - I'm pretty eclectic in my musical tastes from the R&B of Etta James, blues a la John Lee Hooker, Gary Clark, Jr. to Springsteen to a group I recently discovered, *The Comet is Coming* - these cats very much in the Sun Ra cosmic lineage. For sure too in *Shaderoc* there's the influences of Funkadelic and Rick James...cocaine is a helluva drug! Sometimes when I'm at the keyboard I'm playing an instrumental, like the Count Basie soundtrack from *M Squad*, an old TV crime drama with Lee Marvin, the podcast of Ann the Raven's Blues show or *Morning Becomes Eclectic* on KCRW.

JPG - You're also an activist, how has this area of your life informed your storytelling?

GP - In my Golden Years I'm not out on the frontlines like in the '70s into the '90s. The police murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent nationwide protesting, now that got me and the wife out like back when. But it's the case my experiences of the past and reflections about conditions today thread their way through my work. Though very conscious not to preach, merely socio-political matters shade the environs of my characters.

JPG - You're also a novelist, do you prefer short or long format, and why?

GP - The mercenary answer is I prefer any format I can get a check for writing. The artistic answer is the short story is great 'cause you're in then out and along the way you can experiment with mashing up genres and approach. The long form of the novel allows for more depth of characters and sub-plots so that's a groove too.

JPG - Tell us about your process of reviving a public domain character from the '40s, and why you chose Phantasm?

GP - There's a thing about reviving or retconning characters in the public domain. Where the writer is presumably using a character or set of characters who are familiar to segments of the public. Like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*. Or the folks belonging to several Facebook groups who are somewhat obsessed with Clark Savage, Jr., aka Doc Savage, a prototypical adventurer from the 1930s pulps. Because Doc is still under copyright, various writers among these groups have created pastiches of him and his crew. There's also been legit licensing of the character as well for prose and comics projects. It's also the case Doc as portrayed by Lester Dent, the writer who shaped and wrote the majority of his monthly outings, was an influence on me reimagining real life explorer in Matthew Henson and the *Ice Temple of Harlem*. Anyway, I knew of Phantasm, created by black comics artist E.C. Stoner in 1940 and wanted to pay homage to the pioneer. Stoner later became a fine artist.

JPG - In the Phantasm story there are illustrations, what was it like working with the illustrator?

GP - Having written a few comics mini-series, it's always a blast to see what you've written in pictures, be they sequentials as in a comic book or single spot illos like what was used in the interiors of the old pulps.

JPG - What are you currently working on, and what's coming up next for you?

GP - Currently writing a heist novel featuring O'Conner, a professional thief character I've featured before in the novel *Warlord of Willow Ridge* and *Culprits*, a linked anthology. The latter was optioned and ran recently on Hulu under the same name. Though the streaming version was far removed from O'Conner's incarnation in the books. Too the sequel to *One-Shot Harry*, *Ash Dark as Night*, set during and after the Watts riots of 1965 drops in April 2024 from Soho Crime.

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And learn more about Gary Phillips at <https://gdphillips.com/>

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Asking for It
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I had a conversation with a new author the other day, and one of the things we talked about was marketing. There are many ways to market your work. The trick at first is to pick one or two, work on those, and gradually figure out what works for you, and what doesn't, rather than trying out everything everywhere all at once. If you do the latter, and something works, you're stuck doing them all! Also, if it doesn't work, you aren't sure why.

Buying ads isn't the best strategy when you are starting out and only have a single book, or short stories. What you can do, though, is to build up your readership organically. If you are publishing more than one thing (and you really, really should be) make your readers aware that if they follow you on Amazon, they will be notified when you have a new release. You should have a blog, website, or newsletter (and all three can be had for free if you have no budget, and only later upgraded to a higher-cost option if you like) to stay in touch with new readers and to attract readers, outside of the retailers. Pick one, not all at once: blog, website (which can be one and the same) or newsletter. Word of mouth is slow, but sure.

If you have a way to reach out to your readers and potential readers, don't be afraid to ask them questions. People like answering questions. Don't do things like asking for reviews too often, but do make sure you ask periodically, reminding readers that they are important to you and your writing. Don't be afraid to ask if they will follow you through the retailer (I assume other stores than Amazon offer this). Or, even at your blog/substack/newsletter. If you do have a blog and want more participation in comments, ask questions of the readers (maybe not 'beans or no beans in chili?' unless you want a flame war!) that aren't related to your writing, and then participate in the comments with them. You're building a relationship with people on the other side of screens, and it's something that comes naturally to humans. Just keep in mind they are people who, like you, don't like to have pushy sales in their face all the time. Give them interesting content, don't make it all writing, all the time.

Need more followers at the blog? Well, on Substack I'm finding that interacting with other 'stacks, particularly on Notes, is helping people find me and me find people. Just like the early days of the blogosphere, it's a community of like-minded folks if you're using it properly. Linking and sharing each other grows both your audiences, and remember, the rising tide lifts all boats. Also, be polite and professional in your comments and interactions. Trolls are rarely amusing and attractive, whatever they may think. Social media is of limited use these days. I find that groups are better than the main timeline of Facebook, but that's not saying much, to be honest. X/twitter is even more throttled. I've been focusing on content on Substack, and finding it rewarding, but I enjoy writing essays (like this one, yes, although full disclosure I'm pre-caffeinated).

Consider being multi-media. When I was doing the read-aloud children's books on YouTube my stats there went way up, and I suspect if I could manage the time to do that more like my blog, covering a broad range of topics, it would be a good audience. If I had audiobooks available (which is a work in progress) I would definitely be doing more there. Podcasts work as well, I think. Again, consistency is

key. Yes, content marketing takes time, time you could be spending writing. Here is the thing, though, if you schedule posts, after spending a couple of hours a week creating the content you are going to post, it's not that much in the grand scheme of things. If you are going to make writing your business, you must budget into your time marketing, or you won't have the sales to support the business. It's the creative's paradox.

So ask. Ask things like: where did you hear about me or my book? How did you find your way to my blog?

Write that down. Compile the data. Then, you can start to find the story the data is telling you about the people who make up your audience when you put out a book or a blog post (and those may be two different audiences!)

~Finis~