

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

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# FREE BOOKS

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

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch  
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future  
The Brittle Riders  
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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Not In Our Stars  
The Captive’s Rank  
The Universal Prey  
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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>

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Mistress of the Waves  
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World  
Airy Castles All Ablaze  
Stand Against the Light  
Of Breaking Waves  
Practical Exercise

Simultaneous Times

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

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

# Editorial

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# Books

## A Cowboy in Modernopoli by Tim the Idahoan Review by Pat Patterson

A grillion years ago, when pterodactyls ruled the skies (1973, to be exact), I was a new Christian believer. I was ALSO a massive bookworm, specializing in gobbling down science fiction.

Those two things may not have caused conflict for others, but they did for me. I KNEW that some of the things I had read were NOT going to help me develop my Christian walk, and for me, it was a matter of life and death.

So, I sought to satisfy my double thirst in the fiction section of the (tiny) Christian bookstore, located about 100 miles away from where I was stationed. There was NOT a great selection. However, I did find a copy of John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress."

Take "Pilgrim's Progress;" add 345 years; and you get "A Cowboy in Modernopoli." I'm not certain how many allegories are being written these days, but this is one. Whereas Bunyan's work was an allegory of the perils and rewards of the Christian walk, The Mighty Tim (h/t to Monty Python) has chosen to focus on a single peril: that of idolatry.

As he points out in his prefatory material, our current civilization is not much given to erecting pillars on mountains or forming a golden calf. (Or are they?) Instead of looking for suspicious construction as a manifestation of modern idolatry, The Mighty Tim has selected certain causes which appear to have to power to seduce the individual beyond interest, to obsession, and perhaps even into worship.

I think he is on to something.

This is a light, easy read, and it's almost always very clear just what person, place, or principle he was discussing/skewering. It never took me more than a few seconds, even if I did have to say the words he was using out loud, in order to identify the real-life counterpart.

I'll not cross the line into Spoiler-opolis in this review, by specifying the things The Mighty Tim has offered as possible objects of idolatry. Please, read for yourself; and should you find something that pinches a bit, consider whether you might have crossed the line yourself. I really don't think that this work will offend anyone NOT in that category.

Interestingly, The Mighty Tim goes to great length to identify the difference between involvement and worship, and while commendable (and altogether in line with the gentle spirit he has shown me), I think that was a waste of time. The non-idolater will recognize the issues, and find the humor contained in the exposition, while the idolater is just going to lose their mind. I may be wrong about that; and, in any event, I do appreciate the extra effort The Mighty Tim took to avoid breaking off the bruised reeds.

## Athenaeum, Inc. by Dan Kemp Review by Pat Patterson

Don't waste ANY time looking for the first two books in this series; they don't exist. The 'Door Num-

ber Three' in the title references 'The Price is Right' game show, in which contestants can pick from one of three doors. Door Number Three is a bit like The Gripping Hand, in that there are two choices which are pretty nasty, and then a third choice, which is better for the narrator and his comrades.

HOWEVER: There IS a prequel, of a sort. I've not read the book, but in Seth Anderson Bailey's "Edge of the City," the real-life person of Dan Kemp is given a literary existence and encouraged to write more. So, he did.

(IS THAT NOT COOL?)

That character appears in this book as The Professor, a former US military special ops person, now working for much more money in a civilian agency (which is also involved in special ops). Because they are civilians, they can get involved in things the government needs to remain distant from, and so they have come to rely on government contracts and funding to operate. The government jobs aren't exclusive, though, and thus the private sector also provides them with some work.

Taking the name Athenaeum Inc, with some associated links and influences elsewhere, the agency is governed by a small group of aging spooks, goons, happy guys, and whatever else seemed good at the time. As we enter the story, recent and impending death, plus a desire for a less active role, has resulted in The Professor getting drafted into heading the organization.

A word about The Professor: he is solidly ensconced in middle age, but years spent doing physically damaging activities have left him with a body that is somewhat-almost-maybe near-crippled. Mentally, though, he's still got what it takes; more importantly, he has some (unspecified, I believe) moral compass that is the real reason that the old guard is comfortable in hiring him. Perhaps most valuable is his ability to recognize that he REQUIRES help in some areas, both physical and intellectual.

Nearly first in line among the required help appears in a flash of glitter bombs (not literally!) TA DA! As a financial genius who has been stealing LOTS of money from cartels. She's about to get killed, or arrested, when The Professor appears in her bedroom holding a gun. Of course, she takes door number three (SWIDT?), and goes to work for the Professor at Athenaeum as their accountant.

Quick plot summation: steal lots of money from very bad people, then meet bad people who are kind of good, who can help you turn lots of money into something useful (and hidden). Will it work? Read the book to find out!

The author is, I believe, a person who truly appreciates guns and gear. I know NOTHING about gear, but I do appreciate assorted firearms, and I found all the passages in which they are discussed to be quite pleasant. By that, I mean that there are NONE of those goofy errors found all too often when it becomes bitterly clear that the author doesn't know the difference between a Dan Wesson revolver and a Dan Wesson 1911, or even the fact that Dan Wesson exists. I believe this type of writing is referred to as 'gun porn,' and Mr. Kemp has my heartfelt thanks for getting it right.

I have no means of assessing whether he gets the rest of the gear/equipment/transport/customs items right, EXCEPT that his writing style consistently deals with THOSE issues in the same way he discusses assembling a complete Ithaca 1911 from loose parts. So, I'm going to say he's got it right.

I hope you don't find those things boring. The ONLY things I found boring were the mind-numbing political debates he has with assorted semi-governmental drones in the latter part of the book. HOW-

EVER: I THINK those debates were really intended to prove just how stupid/incompetent/goofy the drones were, and they end badly for his opponents.

Minor quibble: a person as damaged as The Professor is NOT going to easily engage in bedroom gymnastics. Fortunately for geezers (I'm one), mostly the bedroom door is closed on those scenes, anyway.

In a review published on my blog, I have another minor (maybe) quibble: I wanted to know what happened in Dallas, and I suggested that might eventually appear as Door One and Door Two books. I have since discovered, in a private communication with the author, that those events are in the previously referenced "Edge of the City."

Peace be on your household.

**Blood Red Tide by Chuck Dixon**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

What does one do with a time machine? Look for buried treasure!

Upstream Reviews recently looked at Chuck Dixon's Cannibal Gold, book #1 of his Bad Times series. It was a little like Michael Crichton's Timeline, only with military operators as the leads.

In Blood Red Tide, Chuck Dixon continues his epic time traveling military saga. In fact, book #2 picks up the very next day after book #1. And it is a very logical step. Because after all, what does one do with a time machine? Murder Hitler? Better yet, murder Woodrow Wilson?

Nah.

How many of us would go out there and look for buried treasure?

The story

Obviously, some spoilers for Cannibal Gold., because the plot of this book involves blowback. Lots of blowback.

After the events of book #1, the survivors of the expedition 100,000 years in the past must now survive in the present. Blood Red Tide takes its time (no pun intended) filling in the backstory of Cannibal Gold, discussing the mysterious benefactor of the time tunnel project and how brother and sister Morris and Caroline Tauber were approached to build the Tauber tunnel.

Except their backer is a dangerous man, one of the richest on the planet, and our heroes have something he wants. This leads to our heroes being hunted through time and space, on multiple levels, in current day, in research, and... it's complicated.

But being on the run requires money. And how best to make easy money than to find buried treasure—treasure that no one else has ever found? It's easy when you can go back in time and see the treasure being buried.

However, no plan survives first contact with the enemy.

And it builds up to a great twist ending that I didn't see coming... but probably should have.

Overall, even though this is only book #2, the Bad Times series feels like on long novel broken up into parts. And each part is a heck of a ride.

## The characters

The characters are all fleshed out with vivid, distinct personalities. Some have full back stories and family who are mentioned or make an appearance. But this is an action novel, not a character study bogged down with complete biographies. (That's a compliment, trust me, I bog down people with complete biographies all the time. It can be a pain.)

At the end of the day, I can say for certain that no one is exactly as you expect them to be. They will almost certainly surprise you, especially at the end.

## The world

This is one of those books where you appreciate where someone fills in details, and addresses ideas no one else will. In the previous book, it was preserving the ecology of time travel. In this book, it reflects on the consequences of time travel. And there are so many consequences, it's not even funny.

In Blood Red Tide a lot of it focuses on logistics. I know I made some comparisons to both Crichton and John Ringo in the previous review, but both comparisons match up better the further we go along...

Okay, we would need three more chapters of nerd speak and a dozen graphs before it matches up perfectly with the late Mister Crichton.

Chuck Dixon also manages to capture a sense of the brave old world they're dealing with in "The Then." This time, it's ancient Greece, and the result is a lot of "CS Forester, BC." The naval tactics felt very much like Horatio Hornblower, or Patrick O'Brian. It's so nice when someone gets history correct... for a change.

I love a lot of the little touches. Like referring to the events of book 1 as "Operation Never Happened." Also, lines like: "Just remember, we're not watching the history channel. We're ON the history channel."

## The politics

I don't see much in the way of politics here, unless you want to twist yourself into a pretzel that "we need money to survive being on the run" is an endorsement of capitalism. But that requires a brain hardwired to see everything as politics.

## Content warning

There is sex, but it's very far off screen. Very far offscreen. Literally, if you blink, you might miss that it happened.

Implied and threatened rape, as well as mentioning the uses of cabin boys.

If you can't handle that slavery existed before Christ, you probably can't handle this book.

Who is it for?



Anyone who enjoys a good action-adventure romp. Or for anyone who wants more to their time travel stories than Doctor Who will provide. This has enough science fiction for the SF fan, and more than enough action for the casual reader.

Why read it?

Because it's fun and because the story carries it, even if you think (for some reason) that the action may not.

**Born Under Mars by John Brunner**  
**Review by J-P. Garnier**  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

An interesting tale told in first person from the perspective of a human born on Mars who works the space shipping lanes. It could almost have been an espionage novel set in space but the different human cultures that it portrays are so rich that it makes for excellent science fiction. There is not so much world-building going on but rather culture-building, both thoughtful and intriguing. I particularly enjoyed the interactions between Martians and the peoples that looked down on them, dealing with xenophobia and elitism through language such as “sea-level” being an earth term that feels derogatory to the Martians. Through this device Brunner is able to illustrate just how much humans would change given enough time and distance. In part the book is about eugenics, but not in such a way that racism comes into play. It is more about differences in the way people think based on their environment. Not the best book I've ever read but I am interested in checking out more of Brunner's work.

**Escaping Infinity by Richard Paolinelli**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

This book starts out like David Weber, continued as written by Rod Serling, and ends with the epic scope of John C. Wright.

If you want world-bending, rule-breaking science fiction that explores great new ideas and explores philosophical insights about humanity, the way classical SF used to be, then you better get your hands on the complete works of John C. Wright.

But make danged certain to get Richard Paolinelli in the same shopping trip, because he will do the exact same thing... usually, using fewer twenty-dollar words.

Escaping Infinity was my introduction to the man who I would easily put in the top 5 science fiction authors of today.

And for the record, no, this is NOT the author who wrote Eragon, that's Christopher Paolini.

The story

Peter Childress and his buddy Charlie Womack are engineers driving to Phoenix. But Charlie's “shortcut” has them lost in the middle of the Arizona desert. When their car breaks down in the middle of the night, they figure they're well and truly screwed. Lucky for them, Peter and Charlie trip over the Infinity Hotel. Charlie can't help but enjoy all the hotel's casino and other delights.



Peter, on the other hand, wonders where the front door disappeared to, and why the floors on the inside of the building seem to go on forever.

If you read the above and thought this was a scifi version of The Twilight Zone taking place in the Hotel California... yeah, pretty much. Sort of. After a fashion.

Though if you're worried that the description above will spoil the plot, it only covers up to chapter 2. Our hero, Childress, has already started to piece together that the hotel is bigger on the inside by that point.

Yes, the Hotel Infinity is bigger on the inside. And if you think that's bad, you should see the Star Trek references. Heh.

The book is written in a style that's very novel-like. Less Victor Hugo, and more modern novel, but Richard is very much an artist with no pretensions. It's smart and well-thought-out, a mystery that plays perfectly fair, and gives the reader all of the pieces and parts to figure out what the bloody blue heck is going on. However, you really won't figure it out.

I will say that going from the prologue to chapter 1 is a little disorienting, as it goes from space opera, David Weber style, to a road trip in the Southwest. The last 10% of the book could have been an additional novel by itself, with what it pulled off. But the ending we got gave a complete, satisfying conclusion to the story, the characters, and the world that's been established.

## The characters

One of the nice things here is that everyone has a back story. And I do mean everybody. If they have a name, they have a backstory. There's at least one chapter of history for almost every named character. We know their full biography. It's so effortlessly done, it's a joy to see how he does it.

Oh, and while we're trying to escape the ultimate booby trap hotel, free all the inhabitants, save the world, and figure out what's going on here, Richard found time for a romance subplot that's surprisingly well done and ties in to everything.

## The world

I'm going to have to pass on this one. One of the key elements to this is the mystery, and I can't explore the world building without spoilers.

Suffice it to say that Richard uses very little and that it effectively describes a lot.

## The politics

The politics are, in a way, socially conservative. It favors small towns over big cities, ("small" being a few thousand instead of millions) and focuses a lot on family units and personal responsibilities. That's as much as I can get into without spoilers.

## Content warning

There will be a fade-to-black, offscreen sex scene. That's it. I don't even think there were any four-letter words.

Who is it for?

Do you like Rod Serling? David Weber? John C. Wright? Classical Science fiction that explores new ideas without worrying what other people might think? Then read *Escaping Infinity*.

Why read it?

At the end of the day, this book starts out like David Weber, continued as written by Rod Serling, and ends with the epic scope of John C. Wright.

Richard Paolinelli obviously also thinks in terms of epic scope. I won't say that Paolinelli is in Wright's league just yet. Give him another book or two, and expect Wright to have serious competition in the "awe-inspiring scale" category.

**In Death's Shadow by Kal Spriggs**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Ari's new friend is his guardian angel, "Sam." Except Sam is a retasked grim reaper

Kal Spriggs' *In Death's Shadow* is everything you probably want in a novel: there's humor, there's action, there's an epic showdown between good and evil, there's compelling lore, and characters you like.

I know, I was surprised as well. I don't know Kal offhand. I don't even recall how I ended up with a review copy of the book. However, I did make sure to go out of my way to buy both it and the sequel when they came out in hard copy, just so I had something to share around my friends and family. *In Death's Shadow* (Angel of Death Book 1) by [Kal Spriggs]

The story

When fighting in the Sandbox, Ari had a rough time. The night of the werewolves was no picnic. By the time the battle was over, Ari had a new friend, his guardian angel, "Sam." Except Sam is a retasked grim reaper, and his ideas of protecting Ari can get ... messy. It's getting so bad, the cops think that Ari is a serial killer. But when the werewolves come back to finish what they started, Ari is going to need more than an Angel of Death to survive the battle to come.

Overall? The book is so much fun I didn't put it down from the moment I picked it up. As of this minute, I'm glad book two has finally come out. Kal Spriggs brings a lot of wonderful little touches to his writing style. He has one of the better opening lines I've seen since "the building was on fire and it was not my fault." The writing style is smooth, with off-hand casual descriptions and backstory feels effortless — largely executed with nice sharp background notes that leave a nice little sting and then continues with the rest of the story ... But boy, does the reader feel these little touches.

There is also a lot of casual humor with how Sam (our Guardian Reaper) chooses to protect our hero — but Kal never resorts to a Rube Goldberg mechanic to describe them. In terms of little touches, there are lines like "I'd managed to avoid ruining this set of clothing with blood at least." It's the little things that make this book stand out.

We have great action, dark humor, easily executed backstory that is all relevant to the plot, along with

some great world-building at a pace Mickey Spillane would have loved.  
The characters

I cannot spell out just how much I love these characters. Ari is sympathetic and an utter badass. Sam is entertaining in a dark way. Even with a grim reaper playing guardian angel, I appreciate how Kal has avoided making our hero utterly indestructible despite giving him a guardian angel who is akin to a weapon of mass destruction.

I even enjoyed the execution of the premise—down to showing us the point of view of how this reaper operates within his rules and regulations. And no, even though Sam is very thorough about his job, he never turns into a deus ex machina. Never. That's freaking impressive. And I can't stress enough how much the humor and the little touches struck me. Kal even manages to have to make use of the old canard:

“Do you have plans for the day?”

“No, I can't make plans, then they can throw around words like premeditation.”

I've been waiting for someone to use that in a novel for years. He just slid it in like a nice stiletto and moved on. I want to touch on multiple characters, but I honestly don't want to spoil too much of the book. But even the legions of the damned have personality, backstory, and motivations that are effortlessly spelled out. And they're still evil enough you want to see them die screaming.

The world

This book has so many fun entertaining elements to it, it is hard to know where exactly to begin.

You have metallurgy on bullets that I have not seen since the first Monster Hunter novel.

It brings in creative elements that would make Jim Butcher want to take notes.

And frankly I also believe that there is a Quantum Leap reference just thrown in for good measure. (I try to remember back to Quantum Leap to recall if Sam was Dean Stockwell or Scott Bakula)

There are several elements that almost feel like nods to other genre novels. For example, one could be forgiven for thinking that Harry Dresden's werewolf / Terminator scene is slipped in this one, or having supernatural beasts encountered in Afghanistan feels a little bit like Monster Hunter International. And again, little touches like casually mentioning a werewolf and "how thermite grenades work wonders." I even like the little bit about how Sam really enjoys the 24-hour news cycle as "like an athlete staying up on sports news". (Also, Sam's commentary on CNN is beautiful.)

I will also admit to highly enjoying Kal's version of werewolf mythology and lore. He does some nice variations that I personally have never seen before. And he comes up with perfect reasons and rationale for werewolves to be 100% pure evil all the time. After all, one of the enemies is literally a soul sucking werewolf from Hell.

As I said above, some of the metallurgy is so good, I intend to steal some of it. Including silver and mercury rounds, as well as electrum. And werewolves .... are some of the lesser problems our hero will have to deal with. Because on top of an awesome first novel, Kal has effortlessly set up a sequel without any actual sequel baiting. There is no Empire Strikes Back level BS. There is no "to be continued." And there is only an ending that would have worked perfectly well with the final line of a comic book

movie. I mean a good one.

Spriggs is such a good author that it was nearly halfway through the book before I realized how many tropes and clichés that Kal had made good use of... but without any of them feeling at all like clichés or tropes. Ari has a a dead fiancée (doesn't everyone?), memory loss before a certain age (hello Wolverine), et al. But these are the best use of tropes, where you don't even notice them unless you're a neurotic book reviewer who also writes novels (Hello).

Honestly, Kal's use of tropes feels more like the sort of mash up that brought us something as brilliant as Jim Butcher's Codex Alera novels. At the end, we even get a little of the "hero of the borrowed heart."

If you don't get that reference, don't worry.

Great lines of dialogue include:

"Are demons common in Detroit?"

"Clearly you haven't been to Detroit lately."

Okay, that might be too easy. How about:

"Angels are the police of the Supernatural world."

"What does that make Sam?"

"Designated sniper."

The politics

This is right-wing in the same way Die Hard is right-wing: there are bad guys who need to be stopped, and sometimes law enforcement just isn't the right tool. There is a Heaven. There is a Hell. And both of them have soldiers on the Earth. There is evil in the world, and it needs to be shot in the face ... a lot. Guns are your friend. So are thermite grenades.

If you have to see politics in everything, this is a right-wing action novel with some interesting religious elements.

If you just want a fun novel on par with Jim Butcher or Larry Correia, you should be reading this book.

Content warning

There is violence. If there is a lot of cussing, I didn't notice at the time. But yikes, is there blood. Werewolves are messy to kill, even if you're just shooting them. This doesn't even count all the things Sam does to people ... and things.

Who is it for?

For fans of Jim Butcher, Larry Correia, Daniel Humphreys... or heck, even fans of Declan Finn.

Do you have a dark sense of humor?

Read this book. Do you like that monsters are part of the forces of Hell and can be fought off with lots of artillery? This book is for you.

Why read it?

Great world building, amazing characters, filled with dark humor while blasting infernal werewolves with heavy weaponry: what's not to love?

**The Lost War by Karl Gallagher**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

What's the worst that can happen? This. This is the worst that can happen.

When I was sitting next to Karl Gallagher at LibertyCon, he mentioned that Torchship was about his day job (yes, he is a rocket scientist), and that The Lost War was about his hobby.

His Hobby? Welcome to the SCA, the Society for Creative Anachronism.

IE: Welcome to RennFaire.

Buckle up. This is going to be fun. This was my fantasy pick for best fantasy for the Dragon Awards in 2019. It is awesome, and you are going to like it. And if you don't, you're wrong.

Our main character is Newman Greenhorn — and if you can't tell that he's a newbie at a gathering of the Society for Creative Anachronism, now you know. When his girlfriend brings him to the pagan circle on the first night, well, what's the worst that can happen?

This. This is the worst that can happen.

As the circle disbands, the entire camp has moved. The flora is different. The fauna is different. The stars are different. And there are three moons in the sky. The entire camp has been moved and the struggle to survive has begun. They need food. They need weapons. They need to know what threats are out there. And look up in the sky! It's a bird... No, it's a plane... No. Aw crap, that's a dragon.

If you're thinking "SCA surviving in a fantasy landscape. Hmm, sounds like John Ringo's Council Wars ... that is a very superficial view of it. Let's put it this way, when I read Karl's Torchship trilogy, I said in a review "Well, if David Weber ever needs help finishing Honor Harrington, maybe he should talk to Karl."

Having topped David Weber, Karl has apparently decided to top John Ringo. And I don't even mean The Council Wars. Because there is a very specific reason that Newman and the camp have been brought over to this new world. This land has a problem, and the humans are to be the pest control. Thank you, you rotten, mutha-bleepin elves. (Yes, think Posleen. Only worse).

Then the orcs arrive.

I have only one problem with the book — no chapters. The novel is more or less one continuous work. Luckily, I read quickly, so I didn't have to lose TOO much sleep.

## The characters

The character of Newman himself is ... a lot of military guys with two brain cells to rub together. (Which seems to be most of them — I've only met one or two I wouldn't trust to breath into a paper bag.) Down to one section of "I'm more comfortable with strangers trying to kill me in the wild than dealing with protocol for nobility. Your excellency."

It was perfect. Down to the placement of the period.

There is a lot of easy character development. At least one character became my favorite in a one-page description (look for the character of "Burnout." I suspect she is a PA).

And then human beings start developing magical powers, and we have SCA X-Men.

This leads to some interesting moments, including several instances where the characters make a deduction, follow through on the deduction, and it is apparent to the reader what is going on — and it is AT NO POINT SPELLED OUT FOR THE READER. Because Karl figures that the reader also has two brain cells to rub together. And he's right. I didn't have to be told what was going on ... in fact, I had to double back to make certain that Karl didn't spell it out. It's great writing.

And it's so nice when a character calls out "Thalassa!" and I know what the bleep he's talking about.

## The world

The plot is not what got me started on thinking about John Ringo. There is so much readable logistics in this book, it's amazing. There is a ton of effort put in on how things get done — is the flora safe? Is the Fauna safe? The amateur astronomer who confirms, "Yes, the stars are different. We are not in Kansas anymore, Toto." Or, "Oh look, here are piles of bones, we can deduce that we aren't the only hunters out here." There are considerations about medicines, hygiene, resource consumption, resource allocation, down to "How do we make soap?" and the question of law enforcement.

Karl does a great job of setting up the situation, the variations of reactions to the setting, the governing of the new world — both official and unofficial. You can see how it feels a bit like a Ringo novel, as he's one of the few I can think of who can recreate and rebuild an entire society that completely.

Amateurs study tactics. Karl's a professional.

Also, I dare you to find someone else who will deal with fantasy parasitology, microbiology and serology on this level.

AND EVERY LAST MINUTE OF IT WAS EASILY READABLE AND ENJOYABLE. Unlike most geniuses, Karl writes plainly and easily without dumbing it down.

## The politics

The entire society is ordered on SCA grounds. Everyone owns a weapon, and everyone is going to have to fight or die.

It's a little biased.

Content warning

Fantasy violence is a thing. There is also rape — it's not on screen, but it does happen.

Who is it for?

We can recommend this to any fans of John Ringo, the Witcher, or anyone who enjoys military fantasy, or just basic logistics.

Why read it?

This is a a great book, brilliantly executed, and I finished both books in one weekend. I'm hoping there's a book 3.

Please buy a few copies and ensure that book 3 happens.

**Out of the Silent Planet by C.S. Lewis**

**Review by J.-P. Garnier**

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

This is the first book in the ambiguously named Space Trilogy. I haven't yet decided if I will continue the series, but I immensely enjoyed the first installment. A man is kidnapped and sent to Mars as an apparent sacrifice to the sentient beings of the planet. Once arriving and escaping the protagonist discovers that there are multiple sentient species and attempts to overcome the present language barriers. I always find this an intriguing premise and love books that deal with language and communication. I also love the idea of multiple sentient species developing together on a planet and sharing cultures. Great aliens and a great story overall.

**Penance by Paula Richey**

**Review by Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Artful Dodger with superpowers, working for Fagan-as-super-villain.

This is an older book, from back when Silver Empire Press had a line of superheroes.

Silver Empire fell (government covid Restrictions hurt them badly), but the books are still here.

Starting with this little gem...

The story

Penance Copper is a "Prime" (The world's version of someone with powers). At 17, she's been on the streets most of her life. She's been raised by a street thug named Acid her entire life. Then the day comes that Acid asks her to kill a local hero named Justice.

That's the last straw.

Unfortunately, this last mission from Acid leads Penance into the middle of an interstellar invasion by



Kail— a supply sergeant from another planet. His men need food, and they need water. And the nearest planet to raid? Earth. And they have a place full of food and water. It's called a "football stadium," and there's a game on, so there are plenty of hostages.

Penance is the only one who can get inside.

Hilarity ensues.

This story was just so well told, I breezed through more than half of it in a single night. Good plotting, action, and character. It's all well put together.

The characters

Penance is interesting. Because she's the Artful Dodger with superpowers, working for Fagin-as-supervillain. She's a character that has to think about using her superpowers — like using her electromagnetic powers and abilities to copy anything with an RFID chip (electronic keys, alarm system codes), or her plasma abilities to cook microwave popcorn in her hand. Also, the ability to shock someone back to life, something I want more electricity-based heroes to do (I think Endgame may have been one of the few times someone tried it). Paula even highlights how Penance can have these powers without cooking herself.

She's also stronger than the average bear (a literal bear). And she's Southern... By the time I got a quarter of the way through the book, Penance sounded and looked like X-Men's Rogue (the early 90s TV version), with additional powers that feel like "What if Jubilee was useful?"

And yet, Penance isn't so overpowered that she overcomes anything that gets in her way. At least four times in the book she gets her ass kicked fairly thoroughly— once by simple science.

With Kail, our alien, it's interesting that his story could be easily summed up as "the quartermaster needed some lousy supplies," but boy, does that spiral. Seeing things through his eyes tells the reader more about his planet, his culture, and him, more easily than a chapter-long data-dump on societies. And the culture clash is as effective as Crocodile Dundee, if sometimes less funny.

Not to mention that limiting the POV to these two main characters highlights just how much one knows about the other, that even the other isn't aware of about it themselves...

Yes, I think that sentence made sense. Honest.

And I like that Kail, as supply sergeant, makes his own clothing. And bookshelves.

Kail even thinks like an alien.

The world

Separating out the world building from the characters and the story required a crowbar in this instance. There are no data dumps. There are no exposition paragraphs. There isn't even a chapter where Kail regales Penance with the exact nature of their cultural and societal differences.

Because it's unnecessary. Paula Richey spent the entire book worldbuilding. It's shown in almost every

interaction between the two, and their actions and thought processes throughout the novel.

If David Weber could do this in his novels, they'd be at least 20% shorter.

The impressive thing is that Paula Richey created and explained an entire alien civilization with stopping to spell out how it worked: imagine if Ming the Merciless learned to make an entire generation put themselves in debt and be in chains forever. I didn't know he was a Democrat.

Paula does a great job of making a villain who is such an unrepentant SOB, you just want to see have a stake rammed through his heart.

At the same time, Penance spells out a lot of life on the streets in a world with superheroes. She manages to do a lot with very little. Paula even manages to take one element and write a good chunk of the book around it.

There are also at least two threads that tie Penance back to the original Heroes Fall book, if you can get your hands on it.

Not to mention that I enjoyed having the civilians in the book dismiss the alien invasion as "he's a new supervillain. Nothing to see here." Not to mention that Paula has a great grasp of technology. For example: "Your invisibility suit is nice, but what happens if it's really dusty?"

### The politics

There is only one way there is a political angle to this novel. Penance is reading a Bible throughout, because she's trying to learn about this Jesus person. I think that will turn off certain readers. And we all know some of them, don't we?

Imagine if "Christian Fiction" only started having conversations about Jesus at natural points in the story... like if an alien asked questions.

### Who is this for?

This is for anyone who wants to see someone making superheroes great again.

### Why read it?

Penance was just plain fun. I can usually tell what writing tricks are executed when. "This is the data dump. This is the act one finale. This is how they slip in backstory." Not here. It's all smooth and effortless and makes writing look easy. Why couldn't I have written like this when I started?

And yes, this is labeled "YA." How? Why? Aside from the age of the characters, I can't really tell you. There is no egregious violence, or sex, or foul language. (And nothing in the entire series has been as bad as the icicle in Die Hard 2, not even John Wick's pencil.)

And, as one reviewer said of Narnia, "This is too good for children."

Anyway, this book is fun, it's awesome, and you should buy it.

Postcards from Foolz  
Review by Pat Patterson

As you are enjoying yourself at a con, a lady walks up to you and hands you a card with beautiful artwork. Do you:

- A. Say, 'Thank you!'
- B. Refuse to take the artwork.
- C. Write a 50-word story inspired by the artwork.
- D. Hand her a card with your contact info, and hope for the best.

The correct answer is 'C' but 'A' is marginally acceptable.

These stories were generated by recipients of some BEAUTIFUL artwork, handed to them by one of the Three Moms of the Apocalypse (google it). Never reviewed such condensed writing before, but here's what I came up with:

A Matter of Some Urgency, by Jack Wylder. If you CAN'T keep up with your stuff, then either leave it at home, permanently attach it to your body, or just die in the field.

In Memoriam, by Richard Hailey. I used a laser pointer to provoke my mom's poodle into running head-first into the wall, when he couldn't stop in time.

Peace of Meat, by Diana Walser. Only the bravest rulers can resist the cries of the mob demanding military action.

Fool's Paradise, by Bethany Petersen. Never try to make a deal with supernatural beings.

Morning Moth Mayhem, by Trey Thurber. I rode my manly motorcycle to the pawn shop to buy a laptop. They sold it to me in a Hello Kitty bag. I was all the way home before I realized why people in cars were laughing at me.

Wight Squirrel, by Jessie Barrett. It's not a stupid idea, if it works. Wear protective gear, anyway.

Geoffrey's Lament, by Wally Waltner. Very few things are sadder than a former child star trying to hang on in Hollywood.

Lusty Fool, by Crystal Gayle. There's definitely an added attraction when a hunk puts on a uniform.

Mine, by Bex May. When the story is The Lady AND The Tiger, no low-born courtier boyfriend is necessary.

A Note to the Spider That Dressed Me this Morning, by C. V. Walter. No, I LIKE the dress, I really do! It's just that I can't scratch my itches with it on.

She Taught Me to Dance, by John D. Martin. No one dared to cut in because true love was in the air.

The Tenor, by Z. M. Renick. An incredible future opened, with offers for voice actor work piling up at the mailbox.

The Wizard You are Trying to Reach is Currently Unavailable, by Sara Martinez. All my friends told stories about sneaking their father's car out in the middle of the night. But the first time I tried it...

Cedar v. Ford, by Samuel A. Miller. Big companies have clout, but small companies can turn on a dime; you can't teach an elephant to tap-dance.

Enlightenment, by Lee R. Anderson, Jr. You really should have just gotten off my lawn when I told you to.

Thrift Store, by Michael A. Hooten. It's really good that trucks are so easy to rent these days.

Magic Beans, by Stephen White. All kidding aside, there are definite side effects when you prop up pole beans with a '34 Tula Mosin Nagant, with all matching serial numbers.

One Last Ride, by Petra Lynd. It wasn't a betrayal of his promise to love, honor and cherish her; it was a fulfillment.

She Doesn't Love You, by Wayne Whisnand. Every cop in the world hates a domestic disturbance call more than a bank robbery in progress.

Siege Perilous, by Ben Hunsinger. It's your job to capture or kill; but sometimes, the fugitive does your job for you.

For Want of a Sky, by Nancy Frye. If you can't see potential just over the distant horizon, this job is not for you.

Wrong Order, by Kortnee Bryant. When the Fonz showed up, everything was suddenly all right.

**Project Eclipse by Robert Tillsley**  
**Review by Michael Gallagher**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A corporation terraforming Mars effs around, finds out in a masterfully written slow burn of a novel.

As a big fan of pulp and Robert E. Howard in particular, I'm generally an impatient sort of reader. Get me to the action: splash alien vistas, forlorn abandoned crypts and savage godless lands across and establish the hook on the first page or shortly thereafter if you want me to give the story a chance. Slow burns and so-called "fridge moments" are the types of things I'm ill-suited for (you can thank that masturbatory doorstopper House of Leaves for that). It has to be a talented writer indeed that can keep me just interested enough to stay invested to see what eventually gets uncovered.

And Robert Tillsley knows how to pace tension like few others can.

### The Story

Mankind's foot has firmly set upon Mars. While there aren't domed cities quite yet, its terraforming is just underway, with colonies of workers, scientists and engineers living and working long hours in dangerous environments with things breaking all the time.

Bill Hayden works as a surveyor, spending his days very slowly traversing the planet in his rover and sifting through mind-numbing amounts of data logs and repairing whatever instruments whenever they happen to be broken, which is all the time. It's a well-paying, secure gig, if a little boring, but he likes it that way, compared to his past as a spook. It's a past that he's happy to leave on Earth.

That is until a call comes over his comm that a mayday signal has gone out from his coworker Charlie's rover. A dust storm is preventing security from investigating, and he's closest. At the bottom of a crater, he finds an abandoned rover, and no sign of his buddy Charlie. Seeing the mouth of a nearby low-ceilinged cave, he reluctantly searches it, discovering his coworker's brutally mutilated corpse. Bill discovering the body naturally gets people talking. Part of him is eager to let it all die down and finish up his contract. But strangeness is cropping up all over the colony; building sites that were surveyed and found stable having sinkholes appear when building crews arrive. Mundane geographical data logs seem just out of sorts enough to make one wonder if something's being covered up. And Security is extremely touchy about anyone getting close to the BILT4 compound, where scientists are closely guarding a recently discovered black pod, the discovery of which they're trying to keep secret.

But agency habits die hard, and soon Bill starts digging for answers to questions he can't stop asking himself. It isn't long until he discovers his profit-driven corporate betters are messing with something they can't contain.

## The Characters

Tillsley's characters are exquisitely believably written. Our protagonist Bill Hayden is very much a working stiff who's just trying to keep his head down and avoid attention so he can get paid. He uses his old spy training more to convey befuddled innocence to stay out of trouble from his managers than anything else. He begins to tug at strings, ponder hypotheticals, and analyze data, more in the hopes of putting his own nagging doubts to bed than anything else. He is dogged, reluctantly but inexorably driven towards the ever-growing possibility of endangering the quiet life he worked so hard to attain. The warnings of his friends don't stop him. Orders barked from security forces don't stop him. Thinly veiled threats from corporate don't stop him. He is the archetype of the crusading detective, one of my all-time favorite hero tropes, and someone you can't help but want to tag along with through to his case's end.

The colony is run and financed by an ungodly morass of corporations in an uneasy alliance to bolster their stocks and further their bottom lines. Everyone is out to be the one to make some groundbreaking discovery or be the first to find something worth patenting. This corporate ruthlessness is no better embodied than in Jane Wagner, one of the executives whose company scientists have discovered the aforementioned black pod. When trouble arises, she's quick to arrive with plenty of handshakes, false compassion and ready to deflect blame.

Her head of security, Karlo Ware, is a protective bulldog who zeroes in on Bill's nosing around, but eventually is forced into allyship when the terrible presence lurking beneath the planet's surface makes itself known. Jane Trax is a tough maintenance engineer who's not afraid to call out corporate's indifference to the colony's human lives after scores of people go missing when it's attacked in the dead of night. The three, along with a few lesser characters, form the core of the human effort to survive against an enemy that can strike at will from almost any direction.

The dialogue, while having a distinctly Australian tinge, is superb. Bill switches almost effortlessly between calculating analyst micro-parsing minute details to a confused office worker asking for directions when he's found conducting a little casual espionage in a building he shouldn't have access to. Wagner's polished corporate speak rolls off her forked tongue with ease. Karlo, a man torn between duty to his own post and helping Wagner uncover what's really afoot, argues with Bill while simultaneously struggling with the reality that they need to help each other. Jealous scientists and engineers, all battling for everything from site access to promised funding to discovery credit, snipe, haggle and backstab with stoic and measured precision. The expertly written dialogue, and the intense human drama it all

conveys, make the comparably slow pace of the first half dozen or so chapters entertaining to go through as it sets up the terrible, blood-sprayed inciting incident around chapter seven or so.

## The World

Mars is a barren and hostile beast that does not take the hubristic attempts of man to conquer it without a terrible fight. Conditions for life even within the colonies are fragile and constantly on the edge of a knife, be it thanks to battering winds in a nearly all-carbon dioxide environment or depraved corporate indifference. You feel that anything happening at any point, no matter how benign, can go unforeseeably haywire and cause the entire fragile ecosystem to implode at any moment, even before the threat against the colony is revealed. Then the setting turns from savage wasteland to primordial inescapable hunting ground. Tillsley writes tension you can feel in your chest as you read it.

## Politics

None, unless you think “gigacorporations existing 140 million miles from the merest hint of any judicial consequences for their actions is a bad” is any kind of a political statement. This is sci-fi survival action/horror first and foremost.

## Content Warning

Humanity disturbs things with big claws and teeth that don't want them there. Be warned. The violence isn't spared but is far from stomach-churning.

## Who is it for?

If you're into First Contact Gone Horribly Wrong, this is definitely up your alley, but Tillsley peppers in enough techno-engineering speak to satisfy any fan of Michael Crichton, enough sly and subtle spycraft to satisfy any fan of John le Carre, and enough bug-on-human violence to satisfy any fan of Starship Troopers.

## Why buy it?

Project Eclipse is equal parts mystery, survival horror and action novel. The character development is top-notch. Tillsley's ability to hook a hater of the revered slow burn speaks to his ability as a writer. No matter what's happening in this book, you will be entertained.

**The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel by L. Jagi Lamplighter**

**Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

If the books get any more dense, we're going to have to call Rachel Griffin “Jack Bauer.”

You might recall that Upstream reviewed the Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin, in which a magical girl ended up at a magical school, collected nearly a dozen magical friends, joined a fraternity, investigated a mystery, saw an omen that heralds the doom of worlds, headed off an attack by an army of dozens of mind-controlled students, saved the entire campus, and provided support for a battle that involved the dragon that used to be Professor Moriarty...

Not bad for the first week, huh?

No. Sorry, my mistake.

It's not bad for the first five days of school. Take that, Harry Potter.

How do I know that book one was the first week? Because book two opens only a few hours after the end of book 1, and states she's only been there five days.

If the books get any more dense, we're going to have to call Rachel Griffin "Jack Bauer."

The story

In spy novels, most people will cite John Le Carre, usually for good reason. As far as I'm concerned, his crowning achievement was his George Smiley novels. The middle book of his Carla trilogy was called *The Honorable Schoolboy* — book 1, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, ended with the discovery of a mole in MI6, and his unmasking. Much of the second book is "walking back the cat" — going through the mole's history and discovering exactly what havoc he hath wrought upon the spy service during his period working for the other team. Much of *The Raven*, *the Elf*, and *Rachel* proceeds forward in a similar manner. Book one was so dense, and the implications from them so vast, we essentially need an after-action report just to get a good idea of the fallout.

In fact, the first 100 pages of *The Raven*, *the Elf*, and *Rachel* handles: recapping the first book, reintroducing the characters, walks back the cat on the enemies from book 1, as well as sets up the conflict going forward. Not bad, huh?

So, if you think that the first book ended a little abruptly, without any follow through, there's a good reason for that. It would have added another 50-100 pages. But don't worry, there is enough solid data here that you can read these books back-to-back without it being a problem. How do I know that? Because I have three other people I convinced to read these books who did just that.

Anyway, for those of you who fear the repetitive nature of YA books ... no. Not at all. There is nothing repeated here. In fact, this one continues to wrap up plot threads left over from the first books -- there actually were plot threads dangling, but I didn't realize it with all the screaming, chaos, and running about in the grand shootout in the finale. I'm almost afraid to see how the series will end.... answer: in fire, probably.

The plot wraps up a lot of plot threads from book 1. And there's a lot to wrap up: the raven that heralds the doom of worlds; the Outsiders from other worlds; the "Light bringer," the villains behind Moriarty of book one; the one behind THAT threat; her relationship status; the story behind Rachel's father and his work as an agent ... there's an awful lot kicking around.

And this review hasn't even touched all of the new various and sundry plot elements kicking around.

The characters

If you've ever read a book where you're convinced that the author has entire biographies on every character--even if it's a janitor that has two lines in the entire novel--you have an idea of how Lamplighter builds her novels.

In *The Raven*, *the Elf*, and *Rachel*, you see more sides to people we've already seen. Whether it's the magical prince of Australia, or the Artful Dodger and his pet dragon, or even Vladimir von Dread (I'm



almost certain that his family crest reads DREAD IS BAVARIA. BAVARIA IS DREAD, but I haven't asked yet). It is a vast and colorful crew, and I suspect we're going to see more of their own backstories as time goes on.

The world

Good God, I think you need a degree in classical literature, a minor in mythology, and be in on the jokes of three different languages and five different cultures in order to get all of the little hints and nods and such in the novels. But that's a general observation, not specific to this book. Now, I've seen that Jagi doesn't like having her book compared to Harry Potter. I know. It's not fair to JK Rowling. But I've given book 1 to other people. And they read only 10% into Unexpected Enlightenment and decided that it was a deeper and richer world than Potter. And the farther in we go, the deeper everything is. Or maybe it just shows us how shallow Potter was and we never realized it. There are no johnny one-note characters here. Everyone has different emotions and moods and personalities. Hell, I think Rachel went through more emotions over the course of any five pages of The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel than the entire body of Hogwarts in 7 novels. That may be unfair, but I don't think so.

The politics

It's Christian, which seems to be a one-party characteristic lately. How Christian? Aslan is a recurring character.

Content warning

If you pay very close attention, squint one eye and tilt your head, it is suggested that mind control was used for the abuse of a student. I'd still say that this book is still better than most everything in YA.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who wants a straight up epic fantasy novel with amazing world building and (no pun intended) fantastic action.

If you're tired of JK Rowling and Harry Potter, read this book.

If you want something that's superior to Harry Potter, definitely buy this book.

If you want Christian fiction on par with Tolkien and CS Lewis, why don't you own this book already?

Why read it?

As someone once sneered about CS Lewis' Narnia, "This series is too good for children." You should own book one already, and probably have started book 2 by now.

**The Return by William S. Frisbee**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**  
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Somewhere out there, in the nerdverse, there is a beginning more heartbreaking and poignant than a married couple on patrol in deep space that spots a task force that promises to end both of their lives and the lives of the people they're out there protecting. Somewhere out there is a story with a couple

that is more endearing than a wife who won't swear, her husband who will and their absolute and utter dedication to each other and their cause. Somewhere out there, is an author who can make my heart bleed worse than William S. Frisbee did in the first couple chapters of *The Return*. I mean, I'm not sure who that person is, but they're almost certainly an asshole if they'd do that to their audience. I'll give Frisbee a pass just this once because *The Return* kicks ass, but the opening to this one hits pretty hard.

And it keeps rocking along. *The Return* is not for the faint of heart. The action is intense. It seems like there's always something happening. It could be human/alien, it could be human/human, I think at least once it was alien/alien, and well...

Whatever. Just know that boredom will not be a problem while reading *The Return*. Even down time can be exciting, because you never know what is going to happen when or from where. Or to whom, for that matter. Seriously, keep your head on a swivel, because a feeling of safety is often misleading, especially in the beginning of the story, when you haven't really learned the rules yet.

Speaking of which, I'm pretty sure *The Return* is set in a new universe, and I love that about it. We get to learn the rules and the characters as we go. And it's really cool because there is a lot here, and not a lot of bottom dragging while the author tries to make us understand his creation. Don't get me wrong, we learn a lot as we go along, but Frisbee does a damn good job of Heinleining in the details instead of navel gazing.

Our hero is a guy named Luke, and he has been through some things. He fights for humanity in a part of the universe where there aren't many of us. He has a tactical style similar to that of Will Riker and the bedside manner of Dr. Gregory House. His ship is crewed by robots because he doesn't like having people around. Actually, that's not fair. His robots, some of them anyway, are people.

I'm guessing Frisbee read some Asimov at some point, because the robots in *The Return* are a lot like the robots in the *Robots* series, only without the Three Laws of Robotics and like ten thousand times the personality. Seriously, Daneel and Giskard were both brilliant and dynamic, but Frisbee's robots have pizzazz. Think HAL except not murderous, at least to humanity. Seriously, watch out for that martial arts instructor.

Of course, Luke is inevitably forced to work with fellow human beings, and he does not like that turn of events at all. Apparently, emotions are hard for him to deal with, and he's got heartbreak issues...

Yeah, he's in need of some counselling, I mean, I feel him. I've been there. I didn't get it when I needed it either. And he ends up not really knowing how to deal with what he's got to deal with because he hasn't. Fortunately, things go a bit better for him than they did for me.

It's when Luke and his group of human people encounter other human people that shouldn't be there (IE they're from Earth, which is on the other side of a wormhole) that things really start to pick up. It seems that bad things have happened back home, and if things don't go right humanity could end up being wiped out to the last person. So, it's once more unto the breach with some people that he doesn't know all that well and doesn't want there and, oh yeah, his robot buddies.

And Luke goes through a bit of a character arc. Training new subordinates, feelings starting to function again, he's caught off guard by all of it. It's like he's been on his own fighting for decades (and, since the world has an aging treatment similar in effect to prolong in *The Honorverse*, he has) and not dealing with human beings has stunted his emotional growth and made him unused to feeling much. It's almost like losing someone important and shutting out the rest of the world had a poor effect on him personal-

ly, even if it worked for his career. Who woulda thunk it?

So, he ends up taking on the real challenge: Fighting is easy. Emoting is not. Granted, I've never been a deep space warrior intent on saving the human race, but I did take karate as a kid and I've had to deal with feelings and, well...

Kicking something in the face is really a lot easier than dealing with a lot of what Luke has to deal with. I'm pretty sure he'd agree with that. Or course his workouts are a lot more intense than mine were, but he has better medical facilities than I did. I mean, humanity has colonized the Solar System and moved out into space through a wormhole, so obviously they have better medical tech than we had thirty years ago. This leads to him getting fixed up after some pretty serious hand to hand training sessions, which ends up putting him out in harm's way much faster.

Of course, this leads to more conflict, which leads to more action, which leads to...

The end of the book.

I wasn't ready for that. I mean, why didn't someone warn me that it was coming? I didn't want the book to be over.

I was really kind of upset that there was no more to read. The good news is that there are two more books after this one. I can't wait to get to them, and I wouldn't have...

Except, yeah, Memorial Day. Three more veterans/authors to go!

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Rag Dolls

## Saints of Malta edited by D. LawDog Review by Pat Patterson

As a reviewer of a book of stories about Malta, I must confess that I know nothing of Malta. However, I discovered that the editor of this collection (and I suspect, some of the authors) also knew nothing of Malta. This surprises me not at all; you see, I KNOW some of these people. They call it 'Raconteur Press,' because they are getting uppity. Also, Redneck Hillbilly Press was too long to fit on the business card.

I also discovered that this is the THIRD collection of Malta stories; and that in the first collection, a significant bit of background material is provided. That information is NOT a requirement for appreciation of the works found in this volume! Most of the stories are completely self-contained; those that are not could be used as a class in how to bring the reader up to speed with economy-of-words-as-an-art-form. MASSIVE respect is due to the authors, editors, and those who support them, in managing the mysteries of story relevance!

For those far removed from sixth-grade world geography: if Italy is the Boot, and Sicily the Football, Malta may be regarded as the Tee. AFAIK, this has no other relevance than geography.

Pilgrims by Tom Rogneby. The core facts in this story are contained in Chapters 27-28 of The Acts of the Apostles. This story expands and extends the narrative contained there.

Squire at Arms by E.C. Ratliff. Keep the peasants down, if you want feudalism to last. And if that tends

to breed arrogance? That's just the cost of doing business.

Once a Goddess by Z.M. Renick. I'm not aware of any teen-age girl who has not chafed under the restrictions of unreasonable authority. Young Daniela flees into deep caverns to avoid death from a bomber attack and discovers that her definition of 'unreasonable' was pathetically limited.

Cleithrophobia by Tuvela Thomas. No, I don't know what the word means, either. I do know that this (thrilling) adventure story demonstrates that super-powers are worthless, if not accompanied by determination to reach a goal.

The Knights of Time Sarah A. Hoyt. Hoyt plays with Time here as if it were a long-familiar teddy bear. Maybe it is for her? For most of us, though, the closest we will get to the reality she describes here is the bizarre experience of attending a 50-year high school reunion, and meeting former enemies, former loves, and trying to match that up with decades of separation.

Jumper for Hire Copyright © 2021 by Erin N. H. Furby. The best teachers, the best bosses, realize that sometimes you REALLY need a scamp.

Rest, Relaxation, and Rampage! by James Totten. I could write pages, chapters even, about Daniela, a character in this story. But I'm not going to, because I don't want to.

Relics of Time by David Bock. It is my custom, developed over decades, to read more than one book at a time. As I was reading THIS book, I was also reading a collection of The Very Best Detective Stories! I got confused, because there are strong elements to this story that would justify inclusion in the other collection. Plus, references to The Movie (which are also found elsewhere).

The Knight's Game by Daniel G. Zeidler. She's looking for her sister, and she has a magic gun. It won't be enough; she'll need her wits as well.

The Sumdood Chronicles: The Siege of Malta by Kelly Grayson. This was the only story in which I thought perhaps I might have missed some background. That was exacerbated by a flashback sequence, from 1565 to 1522.

I am inclined to believe that in a spiritual sense, all conflicts here on Earth reflect conflicts in the heavenly places. In this story, that is literally true.

**Storms of Victory by Andre Norton and P.M. Griffin**

**Review by Caroline Furlong**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Storms build, danger swirls, and magic rises....

The land of Estcarp is ruled by a Council of Witches, women who wield magic only so long as they remain virgins. But when war threatens from the south, they find they have insufficient manpower to deter the forces of Karsten.

Desperate to save their nation from destruction, the Witches pool their Power to physically twist and reshape the mountains on their southern border. This event, known as The Turning, saves Estcarp from destruction. But it kills numerous Witches at the same time it awakens threats and Dark things that have been left sleeping for long centuries...

### The story

Storms of Victory contains two novellas: “The Port of Dead Ships,” by Andre Norton herself, and “Seakeep,” by the late P.M. Griffin. Readers are introduced to both stories by brief introductions from Duratan, a border guard who fought to keep the southern boundary of Estcarp safe. After being injured on patrol he retires to the scholarly keep of Lormt, where he discovers he has some of the Power that the Witches claim. Men are not supposed to be able to wield the forces that Witches command; if they do, then they are evil and must be destroyed – or so present wisdom held.

Along with others, Duratan learns men have wielded and can still use the Power, something which comes to benefit the former Borderer and those who call Lormt home. “The Port of Dead Ships” follows the first-person perspective of Destree m’Regnant. She is summoned to aid in discovering the reason why several ships that have ventured south into uncharted seas have returned intact, but without their crews. It is hoped that her small gift for farseeing and foresight can be of use.

However, not all are happy to have her present on the mission. Destree is thought by some to be cursed, in part because if she uses her foresight for anyone but herself, that person will die. One of the men at the meeting lost his foster-brother after she claimed to foresee that man’s future, whereafter he died a month later. Despite this, it is determined that Destree must travel south with him and the others to find the source of the missing ships – some of which have come from Earth!

P.M. Griffin’s story, “Seakeep,” follows both Una of Seakeepdale and Tarlach of the Falconers. Part of the Dales of High Hallack, which make up the Western continent of Estcarp’s world, Una’s country is recovering from a war fought with an enemy from over the sea. Although they won, the war drained the Dales’ manpower, meaning the political situation among the independent fiefdoms is precarious. This is especially true of the northern Dales, which were hit hard by a fever that killed a large number of the men who survived the war. Una’s father and her new husband both died when they contracted the fever, though she herself survived. With her Dale now being threatened by a tyrannical neighbor she must seek out help from mercenaries stationed farther south.

Luckily, she has the perfect type of mercenary in mind... Tarlach’s company of Falconers, currently lodged in the port town of Linna on the coast, await his decision. He can either lead them back across the ocean to Estcarp or find employment in High Hallack. But with the war over, service for a company of five hundred men is difficult to discover. Returning to Estcarp will offer little in the way of improvement: A race that has lives apart, Falconer men are renowned mercenaries who would sooner die than violate their oaths.

However, they are equally well-known for hating women, keeping their own females in secluded villages they visit at set times when they need to ensure a new generation will follow them. In Estcarp, a land ruled by a matriarchy, the Falconers are considered barbarians. That did not matter so long as they had their keep, the Eyrie, in the southern mountains. But now those same mountains have been Turned, destroying the Eyrie along with everything else amidst their peaks. Fate seems poised to end the Falconer race once and for all at the same time it threatens to destroy Seakeep. Is it possible that Una and Tarlach have the solutions to one another’s problems?

### The characters

Duratan, despite his brief introduction, is a memorable character. I still find myself wishing Andre had given us more time with him. For her part, Destree grows into a more capable heroine as the story progresses. But the real stars of Victory are undoubtedly Una and Tarlach.

Una's love of her Dale and her people, as well as her determination to do whatever is necessary to protect them, makes her an engaging heroine. Meanwhile Tarlach's growing admiration for Seakeep and its ruler challenges not only his race's customs, but the despair at the Falconers' apparent doom that pulls at him. A fighting man through and through, watching him fall in love with the Holdlady is almost more fun than seeing him do battle on her behalf!

## The world

As usual, Andre's grasp of her world is impeccable. She expands upon the realm of the Witch World by taking the tale from the land - where most Witch World adventures occur - to sea, a location otherwise unseen in the series. The atmosphere for "Port of Dead Ships" slowly transforms from one of awe and excitement to a tense anticipation of horror and dread.

The Dales of High Hallack also receive new development with Seakeepdale, the first Dale to truly be tied to the sea. Readers also have their first real glimpse of the Falconers as individual men, beset by fears and concerns about their race's future. A reader cannot help but be drawn into the travails upon wind and wave while wondering just how the characters will get out of these adventures alive.

## The politics

Neither Andre Norton nor P.M. Griffin were wont to insert politics into their stories. The most one will see are comments about the assumptions men and women make regarding the other sex, and how wrong both those suppositions can be for the two parties.

## Content warning

"Port of Dead Ships" has a brief scene that intimates cannibalism, while "Seakeep" makes some mention of romantic desire. The Falconers' method of propagation basically amounts to rape, though it is discussed rather delicately. It is a PG-13 book.

## Who is it for?

Readers who like horror, adventure, romance, and rollicking good stories. Andre Norton fans who have not found this gem will also wish to pick it up, while those who have never heard of her should give Storms of Victory a shot. This book is one of the best entry points to the Witch World series.

## Why read it?

It is sword and sorcery written by the Grand Dame of Science Fiction and one of her best students. Do you truly need any other reason to read it?

**Sword Summer by Katie Cross & Derek Alan Siddoway**

**Review by JR Handley**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

I am finally reviewing a new book instead of cleaning up recommendations previously on my website. I found this book from an author who I adore. I had never read her books, but Katie Cross is a frequent guest on my podcast, The Blasters & Blades Podcast. She writes YA fantasy novels and is the wife of a former US Army special squirrel. After we interviewed her about the first book in the series, I had to read it. I was hooked, so I wrote the review for it here. I couldn't leave it there, so I read book two, and



now here we are!

What is this book about? It's a fantasy novel about a young woman's coming-of-age story, but cooler... because wolves. This novel takes place a year after the first book when the war has finally arrived on their doorstep. This epic fantasy adventure has plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat. So, grab your coffee, set some Kibble out for the Amarak wolves, and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

## The Story

The fate of the Wolf Riders still falls on the shoulders of Astrid, a Wolf Rider... whose wolf is not an Amarak but is instead a normal wolf. She is able to ride her mom's old companion, Atka with Maera at her side. I loved seeing the culmination of the relationship between Astrid and her wolf. This journey started in book one and left us wondering what that would look like. Would the wolf grow into an Amarak, or would they find another way? Those questions were answered in this novel, but more questions are there to lead us into book three.

Like in the first novel, the main character is Astrid. She is the type of person who would give anything to protect her people and defend her home with her fellow Ulfsark. She dreams of proving that she has lived up to the legacy of her mother. What happened in the first novel wasn't enough for her drive to prove herself, so she continued to seek bigger and bigger accomplishments. She's desperate to prove her worth and live up to her mother's legacy. Will it be the death of her? We'll find out in book three, I hope!

During this romp through the countryside, we meet the old cast of characters from book one and a few new friends we discover in this novel. This story was compelling, keeping you on edge from start to finish. I listened to the book on a road trip, and it made for a most enjoyable ride. It gave you all of the feels, which is all we can ask for from the fiction we love.

Join Astrid and her friends on her thrilling new fantasy adventure in *SWORD SUMMER*, the second novel in the *WOLF SONG SAGA* series by Katie Cross and Derek Alan Siddoway.

First, the prose from Katie and Derek was conversationally poetic. In addition, the vocabulary of these two had me grabbing a dictionary. It was fun, like being a kid again and discovering new words and ways to express yourself. This journey was made even more incredible because I listened to Katie narrate it to me. I listened to some sections several times to hear the soothing cadence of her reading the story. It was truly like hanging out with an old and dear friend. Since this is the second novel I've read by either author, I can't tell you where one of their voices stopped and the other began, but it blended seamlessly into a coherent, compelling style.

I could keep going about the quality of their prose, but let's move on to the other facets of this story.

These two seasoned storytellers also knew how to expertly pace the story, so it flowed smoothly from one plot point to another. I thought that it was a one-off when they did it last time, but boy, was I wrong. They kept it up for book two and kicked it up a notch. This book kept my attention while giving me room to breathe and process the various parts of this continuation of an epic adventure. Even better, this novel felt like it was setting up book three to kick the action up a notch, and I'm here for it. I do worry: can these two continue to take us higher into the stratosphere? They nailed the delivery so well on this novel that I wonder where their room to grow and improve is.



Another aspect of this story that is worth evaluating is the audiobook quality. As I previously mentioned, one of the authors, Katie Cross, read this novel. She hit the ball out of the park, telling me a story that I couldn't put down and kept me going when I should've been doing other things. She nailed the various character accents, keeping my ears engaged from start to finish. I honestly hate Katie, just a little bit, for being so good at everything. She's a business genius, a narration goddess, and an author who we'll talk about long after her grandkids have grandkids. I predict this series will be one for the ages, and I don't say that lightly.

Oh, and did I mention that the way that Katie and Derek set up their spiritual world was top-notch? They gave us a sense of the otherworldly better than I've seen in a while. From the colors, they chose to describe things to the nature of the creatures seen in this other realm. I would love to see this as a role-playing game so I can experience playing and exploring this setting long after the books have ended. It probably isn't in the cards, but a kid can dream, am I right?

These two authors also showed their skill as they sired a literary creation that will stand the test of time. I know, I've said it before, but I don't have their skill at expressing the sheer awesomeness of this adventure. So, one aspect of this adventure that I loved was how realistic the fantasy combat seemed. The spiritual warfare was on point and kept me on the edge of my seat in anticipation of what might come. There were spirits, maybe ghosts, and then the mysterious nyx cats that came from this spirit world. Then, we saw the actual fighting in the 'real' world. Wow, just wow. It was well-executed and totally believable. We saw Astrid out-smart, more than out-fight, the bad guys. Talk about setting the standard for female heroines!

The next part of the story that I wanted to rave over was the creatures and monsters in this world. From the Amarak wolves to the nyx cats, we see animals that are fleshed out and believable. The descriptions were there and allowed me to envision them. I could see them playing out in the movie in my head, as described in the scenes and in print. I really love it when authors make their worlds feel lived in and believable, and these two authors deliver.

Oh, did I mention that they killed it with the descriptions? Normally, when authors describe things, they stick to visual and auditory senses. They ignore all the smells, the feel of things, and how things taste. That includes more than food; the air in some places has a taste if you pay attention to things. Ever smell a peppermint plant and tasted it in your mouth at the same time? That can be portrayed in writing, too. An old campfire with the remains of dinner tossed in... and you can almost taste the veal? So many missed opportunities here.

What I really loved is how the authors did not skip the rarer sense of proprioception or the sense of space. This sense includes the feeling of our limbs and their relation to the world around us. It includes the feelings in your body as you ascend or descend from or to great heights. We got this as Derek and Katie described their climb into the mountains north of the wolfmoors. It is also the ability to sense force, which was used to describe the combat scenes that I mentioned above. I could go on, but you get the idea!

Finally, I think it is worth mentioning that these authors did an amazing job with the plot in general. It is the curse of the author or the well-read consumer to be able to predict what's going to happen in a novel. There are only so many plot variations, and the more you read, the easier it is to see the writing on the wall. In fact, you'll often discover the big reveal light-years before most of your average readers. I've found this to be especially true for my author friends. We think about the plot a lot more than most, so we start to see the ghostly breadcrumbs that the author strung along to set up the big reveal. I've accepted the reality that I'm rarely surprised when I read a novel anymore. Happily, Katie and Derek were

able to keep me on my toes, and there was one twist that I didn't see coming. That is such a rare occurrence that it's always worth noting when it happens.

### The Characters

This novel follows one main character, the Skolvarg named Astrid. She is a 20-year-old young woman who is training to master the life of an Ulfsark. It has been her lifelong dream of Astrid to become one of the mounted warriors who ride Amarak wolves into battle. She got that, sort of, in the first novel when she became in tune with a wolf. Except... it wasn't an Amarak, but the normal, run-of-the-mill variety. But don't tell her wolf Maera that; she would be devastated! She's of a small body and a big heart breed. Astrid still wants to live up to the shadow of her mother, but it isn't displayed as overly angsty. And then she gets a special new power, which she never wanted. She didn't want to be different; she just wanted to be a wolf rider. A warrior defending her people. Through this struggle with her true nature, we see the strength of her character, which is impressive.

What I like the most about Astrid is that she is a strong woman and a competent warrior. Despite being extremely petite in her society of Amazon-sized people, she is a fighter. She uses her cunning and speed to out-fight and defeat monsters and warriors larger than her in very believable combat sequences. You can tell that Katie Cross relied on her husband's special skills because these scenes checked out. Furthermore, while Astrid started out a bit of the Joe Everybody Rookie Warrior, watching her grow into the leader we all knew she could become was worth the price of admission.

What I liked the most about this character was that she wasn't a raft floating along the waters of life in this book. Instead, Astrid was both affected by and affected the world around her. This symbiotic interaction added to the superb world-building that made Vigard a fun world to experience. It showed the reader her role in the world and added together to create a three-dimensional experience.

Astrid, the main character, will make you chuckle at her initial reluctance to admit what she really is. She will make you want to shake her silly throughout this novel, as she misses so many chances to work everything out by trusting her best friend. That was the solution that was so obviously right in front of her, but she was too proud to ask for help. She was written as a cross between Arya from Game of Thrones by GRR Martin and Xena, Warrior Princess with shades of Fedelm and Queen Boudica.

### The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Siddoway and Cross, who know how to tell compelling stories set in beautiful worlds they've created. Everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, this incredible duo didn't info dump all their world-building up front. Instead, they fed it to us in drips and drabs. Seriously, these two were the perfect drug dealers. They expertly strung us along and always left us wanting more. I know that sounds toxic, but trust me, this story was anything but. It was an exciting thrill ride from start to finish. What's not to like about their already expansive world? This novel was definitely a Tolkien-Esq Master Class in creating fictional universes. Seriously, I'm practically gushing over this novel. I loved that this book, which is different from the first novel in the Wolf Song Saga, explored a different area. We traveled through the northern ranges, where the first book took us south of the Wolfmoors. We also got to learn about the spirit world, the gods and goddesses, and finally, the spirits of nature. It was so amazing the first time we saw a certain wolf seer talk to rocks, trees, and even the river spirit. I truly loved this aspect of the world-building and cannot wait to read book three!

Politics

This novel was apolitical in the sense that it didn't deal with any real-world politics. However, we did see some political struggles from the political parties in this world. It was a background struggle in this novel, though that struggle becomes central to the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist. I suspect that this only kicks up into high gear in future books. What I did love to see was freedom being lionized through the story of the Skolvarg People. The inhabitants of the Wolfmoors are the quintessential everyman, with the benefit of a boon to their natural healing abilities. They're a nomadic people in a world that is quickly becoming more agrarian. Vigard, where the story takes place, is a medieval setting.

This proto-Europe backdrop is par for the course of a modern fantasy novel, but there were shades of other cultures thrown in, too, which I loved. In addition to the world that's trying to kill them, the main characters must fight the existential evil of greed, the pursuit of power, and an unthinking quest for vengeance by Queen Rosamund. Predictably, it ends badly for everyone involved. Like in the real world, there are no real winners in war. You've probably heard that before; it's a tale as old as time.

## Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 13. The book *Sword Summer* had zero vulgarities, though one scene hinted at the physical aspects of the romance between the female protagonist (Astrid) and her bard love interest (Ewan). Nothing happened on screen, but it feels worth mentioning, as this can be a sensitive issue for some parents recommending books to their kids. I would feel comfortable letting my boys read this, for whatever that's worth. Further, this novel is about a young warrior, so there is violence in this book. It wasn't overly gory, but it was there, and people died in the battles of this novel.

## Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoyed reading the *Dragon Riders of Pern* but think wolves are cooler than dragons!

This novel, by the award-winning duo of Derek Alan Siddoway and Katie Cross, has the conversational prose of Neil Gaiman or Jim Butcher and the world-building of David Eddings. Throw in some shades of *Xena, Warrior Princess*, without the sexy leathers, and you've got this story summed up in a nutshell! I also loved that this is a novel where the journey is more important than the destination... but oh, what a trip it was! A wild ride from tip to tail, so dive in if you're brave enough. This one will surely be a story for the ages!

## Why buy it

This is the story of the everywoman, an underdog warrior who overcomes her tiny size to achieve greatness. I loved that the authors take into account the reality of size differentials. Instead, they had Astrid use cunning, wit, and speed to triumph against her opponents. Even cooler, we learn that she is more than just a petite warrior; she is something more. I'd elaborate, but this is the spoiler-free zone, so you'll have to read it to find out. If you love a thrill ride through nature and the spirit world that would make Alexander the Great proud, this is the novel for you!

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? If this tale doesn't make you a superfan of Katie Cross or Derek Alan Siddoway, then you didn't read the same book that I did! Once you buy and read the book, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

That Was Now, This is Then by Michael Z. Williamson

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Today we're featuring Michael Z. Williamson. Mad Mike seems to think I know how to do math. He's done five years in the US Air Force, three years in the Army National Guard, twelve years in the Air National Guard, then another two in the Army National Guard and another three in the Air National Guard. I think. Any mistakes are mine. He deployed for the Mississippi flood in 1993 and for Operation Desert Fox in 99, as well as Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2008, retiring as a Technical Sergeant. His army MOS was Utilities Equipment Repairer (52C30) and his Air Force MOS was Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration.

He got to play with some construction equipment and some small arms.

He's married with a total of four kids from two marriages, three cats and some livestock. He is also the proprietor of [sharppointythings.com](http://sharppointythings.com) and [michaelzwilliamson.com](http://michaelzwilliamson.com), to go along with The Sacred Cow Slaughterhouse

Being a book geek (and I think I qualify, what with having a blog about books and all) there are few better feelings than finally getting a chance to read a book that you've been waiting on. You all know what I mean, right? It's a rush to finally crack that spine (okay, open the file on your Kindle, but work with me here, okay?) and get to readin'. It is, however, better when that book is everything you wanted it to be. So when I got to read *That Was Now, This is Then* by Michael Z. Williamson, I was both excited and happy. That's a powerful combination. And if you're reading it a little late because you didn't realize that it had released, that's your bad, or mine, as the case may be.

Those of you who remember the first book in the series, *A Long Time Until Now*, will find all of their old friends back, if not always for a long time. Some of our friends have decided to stay home this time. I can't say I blame them. As much fun as these books are to read, living them might not be the most enjoyable thing ever. Living in the dim, dark past isn't always all it's cracked up to be. Personal lives are a thing too, and not all the old crew are still in the military, so they can't be ordered to go. All this to say that, if someone is missing, it makes sense that they're missing.

Of course, we have a couple of additions to the team as well. Both are females that have their Ph.D.s and neither has my phone number. The former is fine. The latter would be unacceptable if they actually existed. Ya'll need to stop hogging up all the brainy chicks. Anyway...

This time we're headed back to grab another squad that got stuck, and things didn't go so well for them. They didn't have the skills that the first squad had, and they've been there longer. Things are pretty grim. But not everyone wants to go home, and their reasons, while not always admirable, make sense. And that leads to one of the cruxes of the novel.

When is it okay to take people's lives over and tell them what to do? If someone has established a life in a place where they are welcome and doesn't want to leave, do you have the right to drag them away? What if they're being there could cause problems for someone else later? What if you want to kick the dude in the junk for the reason he wants to stay? Does that have any bearing?

And, without getting too far into spoiler territory, I think I might just kick that dude in his junk if I ever meet him. Seriously. Read the book, you'll get what I'm saying. Fortunately, dude doesn't actually exist,

so I get to stay out of prison, but some things I just don't countenance. Ick. Not that he's portrayed as a hero or anything, but still. Then again, it's something that comes from the real world, so I get why it's here.

Military conflict with the natives of the time they've gone back to is part and parcel of the series. It's about what you'd expect. Williamson has a knack for showing the adaptability of literal cavemen in the face of technology they can't match, too. It's not a situation where the primitives give up and it's not to a point where they do something stupid either. Certain situations lead to conflict and always will. They do their best with what they have, and they don't waste their lives. I'll take it.

I want to take a camping trip with the gear they get to take to the past this time, too. Seriously, every year when I do this (at least for the last few after I got a better idea of how to do this right) I send the authors a questionnaire so I can do their bio, and I always ask about what cool toys they got to play with while they were serving. I frequently hear about a lot of cool stuff, but I've never heard about ANYTHING that comes close to some of the field gear the Bykos (not the Cogni) have.

All of that aside, *That Was Now, This is Then* was a very human novel. The speculative element is there in the technological sense but, honestly, *Mad Mike* does one of the best jobs about really getting things down to the people and emotions that I've ever read. I'm guessing dude has some education (maybe formal, maybe not) in psychology, sociology and anthropology. I have a few (freshman level classes I took in college, but I got A's in all of them) and I'm seeing some things in here that look awfully familiar. Williamson has considered things in early societies that most authors would miss. Kudos to him.

I'm also a fan of Williamson's take on time travel. Too many times it's something that's either taken for granted (*Dr. Who*) or at the very least one hundred percent accurate (*Back to the Future*) but that doesn't really make sense in a lot of cases, especially with what, for the Bykos, is new technology. Things get wonky and they don't always go right. Longer gaps in time are less precise, it all makes sense. It's consistently inconsistent. I like that. Too much science fiction makes technology infallible. That is clearly not the case here.

There is an obvious opening left for a third book. I've heard rumors that we'll see it, but nothing seems to be confirmed at this point. While I can't make any guarantees, I really hope to see more soon, because there is too much awesome here for this series to die early. If it comes, you'll get a review here. If not, I will personally stick my bottom lip out so far that I step on it. Test me if you think I'm playin'.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Stun Guns

**Torchship by Karl Gallagher**

**Review by Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Firefly + Honor Harrington = Torchship

Imagine, if you will, if the TV show *Firefly* was written by David Weber, before Honor Harrington became *Game of Starships* with 500 characters whose names you can't recall.

The story

*Torchship* is told as a series of anecdotes that serve to build the world. Over the course of each story,

the five missions all build on each other. The opening deals with a bunch of tourists ... which turns into a cat and mouse chase among asteroids, a shootout, and some additional SCIENCE!

Events that take place during the first story lead to the next mission with Terraformers ... called "Kitty Chow." Yes, really. Trust me, you won't see this coming.

"Kitty Chow" leads to several bits of business in the next arc of stories, with Pilgrims, the Treasure of the Sierra Madre .... IN SPACE ... and then Hitchhikers. How do you have hitchhikers in space? Heh heh heh.

## The characters

The characters here are difficult to describe, for the simple reason that much of who they are is expressed during the story and as part of events. Imagine starting with a collection of characters who seem to be a handful of cliches, and every last one of them has a surprise inside. To steal from one TV show, on this ship, no one is who they appear to be.

## The world

There are several interludes that take place in between the missions of the torchship in question, and they both add to the narrative and provide some exposition. This is important, since there is little in the way of exposition in the stories. There is just enough data here to get you through the story, but nothing else. "The Fusion worlds" are paranoid about technology, because the AIs revolted. Why did the AI revolt? No idea. We don't need to know. We just need to know that they dislike humans. Don't worry, they'll explain.

But dang, this was fun. Granted, we don't have the scene-chewing, over the top characters from Firefly, but we also don't have their angsty BS. The crew of the Fives Full are ... generally well-adjusted individuals. The story doesn't leave you wanting, but it does leave you with a desire to know more about the world, and what happens next to our heroes.

On the one hand, I would say that this is hard SF -- our heroes plot courses with slide rules, we have terraforming (right now, it's mostly done by Israel), AIs, genetic engineering and using elements for fuel. I think the only thing that isn't merely an extension of current technology is translating through space via various and sundry portals. But this man has planets listed with their gravity well intensity. Who does that? Answer: an MIT grad with an engineering degree.

Yes, Karl is a rocket scientist.

However, to say that this is hard SF would be terribly mislabeling it. Much of hard SF is so techy, you'd be hard pressed to find character or culture among the people and places. Here? Here, there is something for everybody. There are multiple systems of government, from an auctionocracy (yes, they auction off seats, it's half the tax income for the year) to representative government, et al. The cultures are clear, and unique, and varied all over the place. It's a wonderful array of stuff here, and it's obvious that Karl has put in plenty of time contemplating ... everything.

## The politics

Not only is this libertarian to conservative, it is so in multiple ways. How many different types of small government can you have in a world? I think Karl's still adding to the pile. `



But overall, our heroes are basically small businessmen trying to make out a living. All the way, they're solving problems that big government just can't, or won't, solve. In some cases, it's because big government is the sole cause of the problems --sometimes deliberately. But this is a group of ordinary people doing the best they can with what they have and coming up with extraordinary heroism as a result.

Content warning

There's some sex. It's not graphic; it's mentioned off-screen.

Who is it for?

Torchship is recommended for readers who enjoy David Weber or Timothy Zahn. This really feels like if Firefly had been done really well, and if Honor Harrington were made into three books instead of 40.

Why read it?

One problem I have with this particular novel: why are they broken up into short stories instead of chapters? It reads continuously. Also, the opening few pages (less than five) are disorienting. They do feed into the story, and any confusion from the opening is resolved by the end, so no worries there. It may make it a little difficult for some people to get into the novel initially. Don't worry about it, just push through the first five pages (okay, more like page 5, 6, and 7) and you're good.

Is it Superversive? Hell yes. That's the easy part. Is it Pulpy? Well, that's according. You see, there's a romance going on here, a spy story, a thought problem story, with multiple types of adversaries -- the ever-present man versus nature of hard vacuum, man versus man, man versus self, and man versus society.

Overall, it's just awesome. It's fun. Read it. Enjoy.

## Twisted Tropes Review by Pat Patterson

Sigh. I really don't know who to blame this on; there are SO many candidates. I'm gonna have to go with "It's Texas, of course," even though I don't know for certain that all of this collection of hippies, renegades, rednecks, bikers, pilots, gingers, and associates of African special-ops chaplains are all currently dwelling there. My second guess would have to be North Carolina, and I'm just basing that on my mostly legal experiences in Asheville and Chapel Hill.

Anyway, while perhaps not ALL of them ever proudly wore the 'Sad Puppy' badge, this work CLEARLY demonstrates that they are now, and likely forever more, be regarded as 'sick puppies.'

What did I expect? Right up front, we read that the only goal was to take a trope (movies, books, whatever) and twist it into something new. Achievement: UNLOCKED! Sigh. I confess: I really love these people....

If I can actually identify the (untwisted, original) trope, I will. I promise NOTHING; not coherence, competence, nor consistency.

Caliborne's Curse, by Monalisa Foster. Presumed trope: New Orleans has vampires. Bless her sweet heart, Mallory Claiborne needed inexpensive housing, and took what she could get. Bad choice; it's a



house, at least, but it's old, dilapidated, and packed with extreme amounts of clutter. That might be fixable if her landlord was reasonable. Or even human.

Late Night Drive, by Ethan Whisnand. Presumed trope: A monster is waiting for you, along the dark, deserted highway. (If this was ONLY a horror story, it could have ended as soon as we learn that Jane is working retail in a hardware store; although perhaps only those who have been there and done that (or something closely similar) would understand. NICELY done, Ethan!)

Plaza of Pain, by Tom Rogneby. Presumed trope: Resourceful hero is himself the weapon; the guns/knives/whatever are just tools. Also, there are ten million puns, references, and McGuffins included. That last statement might not be accurate.

The Luck Breaker, by Rhiain O'Connell. Presumed trope: Something something the Fae something something. Sorry, I just don't know this branch of literature well enough to identify it, but, like Potter Stewart and pornography, I know it when I see it. Powerful princess, humans, plots deeper than we can imagine...

The Chosen One, by Cedar Sanderson. Presumed trope: In times of great danger and chaos, the Chosen One will return to set all in order. If you happen to run across anything written by Cedar Sanderson, RUN! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE! Unless, that is, you wish to fall in love with the works of one of the finest wordsmiths, story tellers, and balloon manipulators of all time.

Dog Saves Man, by Christopher Markman. Presumed trope: In the deep woods lives a hermit, with a dark and terrible secret; also, the government was behind it whole the time; and Man's Best Friend is his dog. Hey, Christopher: Melanie was right. Glad you followed through; you did her proud.

Demons and Dishes, by Dorothy Grant. Presumed trope: Some things, you should never say their name after dark. Okay, I confess to cheating; that's the first sentence in the story. Perfect, though, and I like that. Also, the Dark Side has cookies, GREAT cookies.

Nick Slade-Private Eye, by JL Curtis. Presumed trope(s): Hard-boiled Detective, The Newsboy (or Shoeshine Boy) Knows Everything, and It Always Goes Down on Monday. Jim, STOP mentioning old cars, because it induces Vehicular Lust; I almost bought a Studebaker pickup truck off eBay, after reading that the private eye drives a Ford Deluxe.

**Wild Souls – A Werewolf Anthology By Julie Frost**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Wild Souls, Wild Wolves!

Think werewolf stories are just about hot guys with angst and snarl winning over good – or bad – women? Allow me to introduce you to Julie Frost's werewolves, who most assuredly do not match the genre's present stereotypes. Life as a werewolf doesn't entail only torment and bad tempers; it requires loyalty, strength, and courage.

The story

This is an anthology, and so the stories' only uniform characteristic is the fact that the point-of-view characters are werewolves. Some of these men and women live in the Wild, Weird West while others

are denizens of fantasy settings. A fair number reside in the modern world, but others can be found in the far reaches of space. Yes, Frost actually put werewolves in space. You are welcome.

Each story has enough atmosphere, character, and plot to carry it forward at a good pace. Whether her characters are dueling over water rights, struggling to save miners in a collapsing asteroid, or trying to convince a psychiatrist that they really are werewolves, Frost weaves tightly knit tales that will keep a reader eagerly turning the pages to see what happens next. The stories may not be from the same fictional universe, but they really do not have to be to draw you in and make you forget the world around you.

Horror, humor, action, and adventure merge together seamlessly in each installment. The thirteen tales in this collection are arranged in an alternating pattern that prevents the reader from being bored. With the ease of long practice Frost leads one from setting to setting like the Pied Piper enchanting children with his music. You may not know where you are headed but you are quite eager to see what will happen when you reach the last page in each tale.

## The characters

By far, the characters are what make the narratives in this anthology interesting and memorable. Frost's heroes, heroines, villains, and monsters bounce off the page straight into the readers' heads. Whichever hero or heroine was your favorite, you will remember him or her after you turn the last page in the book. You will also shiver as you recall Frost's villains, who may be drawn in brief strokes, but are all the more terrifying for that very reason.

## The world

The worlds are different and varied. However, each one feels real; believable in a way only a master storyteller can make them. The space opera stands out most, but Frost's weird westerns are likewise authentic, primarily because she gets the attitudes and speech patterns of the time period right. There are no modern werewolves in her Old West; there are only men of the Wild West who happen to be werewolves.

On that subject, Frost has an excellent grasp of werewolf lore and plenty of innovative ways to apply it to her stories. How much of their human mind do werewolves retain when they transform? That depends on the person, the spell itself, and the story. Silver bullets kill werewolves if they impact the brain or the heart, but otherwise, they only slow them down. If you want werewolf lore that matters, then Frost has the stories you are searching for but did not realize were available.

## The politics

There are no politics in these stories, save perhaps that the men of the cloth are not the villains. Frost has said that she cannot abide this trend, and so she never writes her religious characters as anything but unapologetically God-fearing men.

## Content warning

Some of the stories included in this volume are horror stories, but for the most part, they are PG-13. Frost doesn't lavish time on the horrific elements of her tales, relying on atmosphere and character to give the reader chills. If you want nightmare fuel, seek elsewhere.

## Who is it for?

Werewolf lovers, people who are tired of the “normal” werewolf fare on brick-and-mortar store shelves, and anyone who loves canines. Frost doesn’t skimp on the pack mentality and loyalty of wolves in her tales; the werewolves may be human, but they also have the instincts of their namesakes. If you want complex characterization in well-plotted, compact packages, then you will like Wild Souls.

Why read it?

It’s fun, it’s different, and it will make you laugh when you do not expect to be amused. What other reasons do you need to grab this book?

**The Women’s War by Jenna Glass**

**Review by Chris Nuttall**

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

The spell they were set to cast tonight had been generations in the making, built by a succession of gifted abbesses who’d seen what no one else had seen—and who’d had the courage to act on it. It was well known that magical aptitude ran in certain families. In the Abbeys, it was similarly well known that the rarer feminine gift of foresight also ran in families, though only women who inherited that gift from both sides of their families could use it. And so the abbesses of Aaltah had set about manipulating bloodlines based on what they saw, strengthening and concentrating the abilities they needed. A love potion slipped into a client’s drink. A contraceptive potion withheld. A marriage falsely predicted to be unfruitful when the bloodlines were analyzed??.?.??The fate of the world rested on these small acts of feminine defiance.

Bryнна Rah--Malrye had completed the process by bearing Nadeen and breeding her with that repulsive Nandel princeling to produce Vondeen. Generations had labored to produce these three women—the virgin, the mother, and the crone—who were the only ones who could complete this epic spell.

There was no turning back, no matter how high the cost or how much it hurt.

By a rather curious coincidence, shortly before I cracked open *The Women’s War* I read a biography of King Richard II, who – while hardly the worst person to park his rump on England’s throne – was a mess of insecurity and paranoia that led him to make an endless series of unforced errors that eventually resulted in his cousin invading the country, then overthrowing and murdering Richard before taking the crown as Henry IV. It is hard not to look at Richard’s career and think he must have been driven by his own personal demons, because many of his decisions were practically suicidal. Given his early life, it would be odd indeed if the adult was not shaped by the experiences of the child, but – when that adult sat upon a throne – his shortcomings became incredibly dangerous. Richard was nowhere near as unpleasant as Delnamal, the main antagonist of *The Women’s War*, yet I cannot help wondering if he was the major inspiration. If there was a wrong decision to be made, Richard (and Delnamal) made it.

*The Women’s War* is set in a fantasy world that clearly draws inspiration from medieval Europe (with some major differences, which will be discussed below.) Magic is a constant presence, with magical elements that are male-only, female-only and both-genders. Female magic is regarded as lesser and largely forbidden, outside the Abbeys of the Unwanted; women, in short, are regarded as little more than chattel, treated as property by their male guardians. A woman can be sent to the Abbeys on a whim, where she will be pushed into de facto prostitution. Marriages are arranged, at least amongst the nobility, for political reasons; a wife who fails to give her husband a (male) heir runs the risk of being discarded at any moment. It is, in short, a no woman’s land.

Everything changes when a handful of women, led by the Abbess of the local Abbey, enact a ritual to tamper with the source of magic itself. All of a sudden, women have access to far more – and different – magics, starting with a shift in reality that allows a woman to automatically terminate an unwanted pregnancy. As the social and political implications start to sink in, and chaos spreads around the known world, the monarchy sends the surviving women into exile ...only to discover, too late, that the exiles have stumbled into a wellspring of new magic, open largely (if not only) to women. They eventually turn it into a de facto kingdom of their own, posing a threat to the established order that may trump everything the kingdoms have yet seen.

The story is centred on three different characters. Alysoon Rai-Brynna, daughter of the king (her mother was put aside and sent to the Abbey, allowing her father to marry again), finds herself wrestling with the changed magic and trying to save her own daughters from the wrath of their uncle; Princess Ellinsoltah of a different kingdom finds herself unexpectedly on the throne when everyone above her dies in an accident, then caught in plots hatched by older and more cunning (and masculine) advisors; Delnamal, half-brother to Alysoon, starts to plunge into madness as he loses his unborn child, his hated wife starts plotting against him, his father dies, leaving him on the throne. The three characters, and a handful of relatively minor ones, interact repeatedly, each clash triggering off the next stage of the plot.

Alysoon is something of an atypical character, being a widow and mother in her late forties when the world changes. She is curiously naive as a character, unable to anticipate that her mother would have told the world what she'd done (which was obvious, as otherwise the truth might not be realised until it was too late); she is reluctant to step into the light as the eventual de facto leader of the new community; she is, perhaps worst of all, unable to see the person under her prim and proper daughter until it is too late. Ellinsoltah is a little more conventional, slowly growing into her new role; she makes mistakes, some of which come very close to destroying her, but she eventually secures her position. Delnamal is perhaps the most conventional of the three, and a type we've seen before in many earlier works, yet he's not entirely without reason. Jenna Glass does not make excuses for him, and rightly so, but she does help us to understand him. A person who is dealing with a colossal personal crisis, even one brought on by his own failings, is not going to respond well to hectoring from outsiders.

The Women's War is not blind to the problems caused by the sudden change in the world, although – as all three major characters are royalty – it is hard to see what, if any, effects the crisis has on the commoners. The sudden loss of a number of unborn children is obviously disastrous, as is the realization that altar diplomatic will have to be radically altered. As more and more newer magic spells start to make their emergence, including spells designed to render someone impotent or even kill them outright, the world continues to change. Spells designed to prevent pregnancy can and do liberate women, allowing them to have sex outside wedlock, but this isn't a cure-all. Ellinsoltah discovers, very quickly, that she has traded one problem for another when she consummates her relationship with her lover and this, eventually, nearly unseats her.

It also allows women – and men – to continue research into magic, assessing how the change worked, what the shift allows people to do now, and – for some – trying to figure out a way to reverse the change. This is one of the more interesting parts of the book, although it does raise the question of precisely why no one thought to investigate female magic more closely beforehand. The power to heal is also the power to kill and the implications should have been obvious.

The book does, however, have its weaknesses. On a small scale, Alysoon's daughter seems to jump around a lot in the last few chapters, resulting in a shock ending that feels more than a little contrived. Delnamal's development as a character also jumps around a lot, leaving him veering between trying to come to grips with the crisis, then trying to tackle his insecurities, then finally jumping right off the

slippery slope. At times, Delnamal comes across as an indecisive actor, at one point convincing himself that horrific things have to be done and, at others, regretting them the instant it is too late to deal with them.

On a larger scale, the treatment of women and firstborn heirs is largely all too historical; it wasn't uncommon for unwanted royal and aristocratic women to be sent to convents, just to keep them out of the way, but they were hardly turned into prostitutes. Nor was it something done on a whim. A king who disowned his foreign-born wife because he wanted a son, as Henry VIII did, would have found it harder to find a suitable replacement as the new wife's family would suspect the relationship wouldn't last long enough to put their child on the throne. A firstborn heir would be almost impossible to put aside, as it would call into question the very basis of the monarchy. (Note that Jane Seymour, mother of Edward VI, died shortly after childbirth; she wasn't discarded by her husband.) Delnamal's father would be unlikely to put his firstborn aside in Delnamal's favour, even before Delnamal's character flaws became apparent. The former heir would become a civil war waiting to happen.

(This, for example, is probably why Elsa and Anna's parents didn't quietly take Elsa out of the line of succession, even though it might have been the best possible thing to do.)

The Women's War has been called 'fantasy for the #METOO era.' This is something of an exaggeration. It is set in a world that is very different from our current era and still quite different to anything that existed in the past. It presents issues that are not entirely contingent with ours. It avoids some issues that need to be assessed and raises issues that work in the book's context, but don't work outside it. And, in places, the author stacks the deck. The heroines have a powerful male ally, in Alysoon's older brother, but if things had been different – for him – he might be on the other side.

The book is not like *The Power* or Farnham's *Freehold*, where modern society is flipped upside down, nor set ten or so years after the change like *The Philosopher's Flight*. It has less to teach and illustrate for us than more contemporary books. But, as a story set in a changing world, it works fairly well.

# Literary Criticism

Why Boys Don't Read (Enough)  
Literary Criticism by Chris Nuttall  
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

OK, true story.

Back in 2003, I graduated as a librarian and set out on what I hoped would be a climb to the top of the field. (Spoiler alert – it wasn't.) As I waited for my final exam results, I set out on a series of job interviews at various schools and universities around Greater Manchester, one of which remained stuck in my mind. The interviewers asked what I'd do to encourage kids to read. And my answer was that I would offer books that were popular at the time – the example I used was *Harry Potter* – so kids would read books they like and thus develop the reading muscles they need to move on to other, more advanced, books. I even suggested that the kids should be allowed to nominate library books for purchase, on the grounds they were the ones the kids actually liked.

This answer did not go down too well with them. They seemed to think I should choose books based

on their literary merit. They found the idea of selecting books based on the likes and dislikes of a handful of kids to be wrong-headed, perhaps even counterproductive. As you have probably guessed, I didn't get the job.

But I still stand by my answer. If you want kids to read, or do anything really, you have to present them with books that actually encourage them to read.

A few weeks back, a friend of mind pointed me to an article entitled 'Boys Don't Read Enough.' (<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/09/why-girls-are-better-reading-boys/571429/>) The general gist of the article is that girls do better at reading than boys and it tries to offer a handful of explanations, but none of them are particularly convincing. They tend, I think, to avoid the fundamental problem. Adults are not children and therefore adults have a skewed idea of what children actually read. Nor do they understand that children, even the cleverest of children, have a very limited mindset.

You can argue, for example, that Charlie and the Chocolate Factory defended slavery. An adult might argue that the Oompa-Loompas are effectively slaves, and (at least originally) racist stereotypes. A child wouldn't know or care about the underlying issues – his mind would, hopefully, be swept into a world of wonder and mystery that combines chocolate with the sense that bad people get what they deserve. (He wouldn't care about the fridge horror in the fates of the four bratty kids either.) Or you could argue that Dumbledore is a very dodgy character indeed in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (he left a one-year-old on a doorstep, for crying out loud) and the Dursleys are, at best, neglectful and, at worst, outright abusive. Again, a child wouldn't care about such details. The whole story is more about a young boy who steps into a whole new world.

One can also argue, if one wishes, that these books have little literary merit. But that doesn't matter. The point is that the books appeal to kids.

But, throughout my schooling, I was frequently forced to read books that bored me, irritated me or generally frustrated me. Bill's New Frock was supposed, I believe, to teach us boys how different life was for girls. I found it boring and silly. Stone Cold was depressing as hell, as was Brother in the Land. Oliver Twist (the condensed version) was interesting, but it was hard to draw a line between myself and Oliver. The further the gap between me and the characters, the harder it was to feel for them. Z for Zachariah started well but grew harder to follow as the story progressed. I'm not sure why I felt that way, at the time. I do wonder, in hindsight, if it had something to do with the main character growing more and more feminine before things went to hell. As an adult, I don't blame her for crushing on the newcomer and considering marriage; as a child, it was just tedious.

In some ways, I think that is an issue. My mother had an old Girl Guide Annual I used to read. The stories I liked best were the ones the heroine could be swapped out for a hero without severely altering the plot. It's easy to say that stories about people who are different promote empathy, and perhaps they do, but it's also easy to turn those stories into moralistic bore-fests. It doesn't help, I think, when people feel forced to read them.

I think, judging by my experience, that young boys want exciting stories of action and adventure, not tedious lectures or inappropriate morality. It is easy to blame Enid Blyton for not living up to modern-day standards on everything from race to gender roles, but Blyton died in 1968! Her books are often simplistic and, looking back at them, it is clear there were aspects that could have been reasonably criticized even at the time. And yet, what does that matter to a young reader? Blyton's stories have clear heroes and clear villains and even the more complex ones are still quite simplistic at heart. They draw



readers into their world in ways few modern stories can match.

Nor does it help when people overthink such matters. Reams of paper and ink have been wasted debating ‘the problem of Susan,’ in which Susan Pevensie is denied heaven for growing up, embracing her adult life and doing her best to forget Narnia. Lewis is condemned for this by people who think too much and yet too little. On one hand, Susan is not in heaven for the very simple reason she’s not actually dead! On the other, more thoughtfully, the Narnia books were written for young boys and Susan, from the perspective of the target audience, is actually the least interesting female character. She occupies the role of older sister, mother-figure without actually being the mother; she’s the kind of person a young boy would regard as boring, if not an outright opponent. She’s neither the tomboy-type (like Lucy and Jill) nor the fascinating enemy (like Jadis). She just is.

If you want young boys to read, you have to offer them books keyed to their interests and tastes – their real interests, not the interests you think they should have. And that means acknowledging, right from the start, that those interests will be different from both young girls and adults of both genders. Do not force them to read books that bore them, annoy them, or slander them. Let them shape their reading habits so they develop their reading muscles, then proceed onwards to more meatier works. I look back at some of the stuff I read as a kid and I roll my eyes. Did I really read that crap? Yes. I did. And it helped me develop the skills to read more.

If you want boys to read, give them books they want to read.

## Prose Bono

Awash in Emotion  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I was going to try and write something insightful about writing, and managing stress, but what I was thinking about required more research than I have the time or ability to do this morning. I slept in. I was up until two in the bloody morning binge reading. I haven’t done that in I don’t know how long, but it’s been years. I’m late with this post, have obligations today I cannot fail in, and...

Right. So. Let’s talk about the endocrine system, shall we? Keeping in mind this is all off the top of my head and I’m still waking up, so more research is required, and so forth. My anatomy and physiology professor was a funny old bird. I enjoyed him. The class where he really lit up, though, and you could see his passion coming through even as he worked through thirty-year-old transparencies on a projector (and no, I did not have this class more than a decade ago. He really loved his transparencies) for a class he’d taught perhaps a hundred times before, was the endocrine system. The most overlooked and underestimated system in the body, he pointed out, bouncing on his toes. The one that, really, determined how every other system in the body ran.

We are, all of us, every moment, adrift in a sea of hormones. They are the chemical messenger equivalent of the human internet. The brain uses them to @everyone when it needs to flee or fight. The unconscious circadian rhythms of hormones help us sleep, and wake, and keep the human race going by signaling ovulation. There are hormones for making sure babies get fed, which is an obvious biological need for the continuation of the species, and there are hormones for making sure you can properly process your food. There are, as I’m sure you are getting my drift, hormones for most everything.



Much of our emotions on a deep, unthinking level, are hormonal responses. Those gut feelings are the end result of a rapid subconscious reaction of the brain, and they really are fast – faster than the brain can logic its way to the same conclusion. Something wrong, and we are flinching, hairs raising, eyes dilating, before we are even aware that we are doing this. Something right, and a similar process has entirely different external tells to the pleasure center being activated: lips curl upward, the posture loosens, turns towards the stimulus, and again the eyes dilate but not in the same way. The book *Left of Bang* has some excellent descriptions of these tells, and what they mean. It is a good book for the writer and for a person in general who wants to improve their situational awareness.

From a writing perspective, when we are considering a character, their reaction to the situation that we, the author, have placed them in, we need to tunnel all the way down to this hormonal response. Not in great detail on the page. But we should know what's going on, and why, from a physiological perspective. For one thing, it will enable us to write in small bits of description that will give the reader a visceral reaction they may not even realize is happening – the mark of a really well-done scene. For another, it will help the author understand why the character is motivated to do something – or why when they force past the realities of hormones and cause the character to do something literally inhuman in violation of those unconscious urges, the reader rejects it and leaves a review (which rarely pinpoints why that reader was disgusted with the character's actions, in another telling point towards no-one paying attention to themselves). We talk about breaking characters, and this is one way to break a character for the author, and the reader. If you are stuck on a WIP? Go take a fresh look at it once you've looked at hormones and what they do to us and for us and see if that makes a difference in what that character should be doing, versus what you've made them do.

Emotions are important to crafting a compelling story with characters that will draw you in and keep you reading. The books I was bingeing last night (and this morning, heaven help my sleep schedule) were all about the emotions as they were romance novels, but that doesn't need to be the case. You don't need to write romance to have emotion in your stories. There can be emotions in any story – and should be, if you want to connect with your readers. Unlikeable characters are more often than not unemotional (because the author didn't take time to ground them in motivation and meaning behind their actions) or are acting in an unnaturally emotional way (the reason I wall probably nine out of ten romance novels I try to read these days). Even if we can't articulate what our hormones do, we know when we encounter a human reacting as though they are completely without them, that we've found a pathological type. Unless that is what you want – say, in creating a villain – then make sure you're paying attention to the endocrine system.

~Finis~