

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

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FREE BOOKS

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Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

Become the Hunted
Not In Our Stars
The Captive’s Rank
The Universal Prey
The Praesidium of Archive
The Empire’s Legacy
Voyage of the Planetslayer
Revolt and Rebirth
The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy
with Demons
Warsprite
Web of Futures
The Iron Gates of Life
Deserts of Vast Eternity
The Last Age
The Shadowy Road
When Angels Fall
The Computer Ferrets
The Sea Dragon
The Thug Acrostic
What You See
Painterror
Adrift on a Foreign Sea
The Silver Crusade
Each Shining Hour
Gravelight
The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series
Eye of the Staricane
Capitulation of the Carnivores

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls
The One World
Mistress of the Waves
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World
Airy Castles All Ablaze
Stand Against the Light
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

Are you an aspiring writer? Many authors wrote their first million words — the ones they wisely did not try to publish — by writing fan fiction, fiction based perhaps too closely on Star Wars, Star Trek, The Golden Amazon, Captain Z-Ro, Lost in Space, and many more. You can't publish it commercially, but you can circulate it to people, some of who may give you polite, useful advice.

And now the N3F is giving you a chance to gain that circulation and commenting. You are invited to publish your fan fiction in our APA N'APA. Publication is open to dues-paying members (\$6/year) which by the time we cover software, the VPN on which the software is mounted, various URLs...only covers part of the club's per capita costs. Send your material (formatted .DOC, .DOCX, .PDF are preferred) to the N'APA Editor, Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>.

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Tom Feller <http://N3F.org>

Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Bob Jennings

Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>

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

Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Pat Patterson

Heath Row <http://N3F.org>

Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>

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

Jessi Silver <http://s1e1.com>

Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>

J W Stepanek <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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Books

A Desert Called Peace and Carnifex by Tom Kratman

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

(Welcome to Day Four of Jimbo's Memorial Day Extravaganza: You Can't Court Martial me for Being AWOL Because I'm A Civilian Edition. What's two weeks between friends, right? Seriously though, my apologies to both of the authors whose reviews came in late.

Today, we honor Lieutenant Colonel Tom Kratman, US Army, retired. He served for a total of thirty-two years, primarily in the infantry but also in the Inspector General's Office and Public Affairs. He was deployed to Panama, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Egypt. If you don't follow him on Facebook for his stories of serving in Panama, you're dead wrong. He was awarded both the Combat Infantry Badge and the Ranger Tab. He has also been married for forty-four years, has four daughters and a bunch of grandchildren.)

First off, the disclaimer: The Colonel, despite being an amazing author, has the tendency to put things into a story that will probably put about seventy-five percent of the populations' knickers in a twist at some point. If it's not his blatant disregard for the point of view of Transnational Socialists (who he styles as "tranzies") it's the rampant sexuality often expressed by those same people in his books. Things can get pretty explicit. If we're being real with each other, I may be tempted to point out that I love his books for those reasons among others, but if you're the easily triggered type, I'm sure that there's a Sweet Valley High book out there for you somewhere. My sister liked those when she was about thirteen. Or maybe you could go all Dumbledore and peruse some knitting patterns. Either way, buckle up when you pick up a Kratman novel, because things are always interesting, and the man just Does. Not. Flinch.

Anyway...

I'm reviewing these two books together because when I contacted the Colonel for his interview (and thank you to him and all the other authors who have replied over the years. I really have been blessed.) and he mentioned that they were intended to be one book, but he went a little long. I'm okay with that. I had a lot of fun with them.

The series (I think it's called the Carrera-verse) starts out on a planet named Terra Nova on their version of September 11, 2001. It brought back a lot of that day for me, even if the details were (necessarily) different. What our hero, Patrick Henessy (later restyled as Patricio Carrera) goes through that day is unthinkable. It changes him, and he was already leaning on the harsh side as I remember it. He crawls into a bottle for a bit, but once he comes out, look out!

A Desert Called Peace and Carnifex are both books about training and equipping a force to fight a war and then actually fight the war. Kratman's military experience shows here. He has the expertise to know how to train a force to fight effectively. These novels live and breathe authenticity. They also live and breathe a certain attitude.

Kratman would not be a good guy to go to war against, and neither is Carrera. Some of the methods

that Carrera's troops use, both in and out of combat, do not meet up to the standards of the Geneva Convention. That's okay with me though, because the people he's fighting are not privileged combatants under the Convention and don't enjoy its protections. *A Desert Called Peace* is one of the very few (maybe the only) books where I would encourage a reader to read the notes at the beginning. There is something there that is very pointed, and which would be well taken. I know I went back and read it AGAIN to make sure I got it right the first time I read these books. And then I read it a third time when I re-read these for the review. Seriously, it's shorter than any of my blog posts, but it lets you into the head of the author.

Wait.

I feel like I'm forgetting something. Is there something else I should be writing about?

OH YEAH! THE PLOT OF THE BOOKS!!!

Listen, Carrera goes from a retired gentleman to a general leading an army in all but name quickly. It works though. I really got the feeling that it was something he was born to do, and it just took him longer than it should have to realize it. He has more than enough motivation to do so once he gets going after a shock worse than many people could have survived. Carrera comes up with a plan, finds people to help him bring it to life and moves with alacrity to get involved in a war that is maybe a little more personal to him than it should be for a leader.

Seriously, just about every decision Carrera makes sense in context but, taken as a whole, I'm not sure the guy is exactly sane. The thing is that he's crazy like a fox. He seems a bit obsessed at times and approves things that I'm not sure I ever could, but he gets the job done. I would compare Carrera to Ben Sisko from *ST:DS9* on one of his worst days. I mean, Carrera never actually did anything that would kill every human on the planet, but he LIVED on the planet he was fighting on.

Then there's his other side: Carrera does absolutely everything he can to take care of his troops. Granted, he's the commander of a mercenary unit and doesn't have to force things through the legislature ala the Veteran's Administration in the US, and that does make it easier, but he does whatever he can. Whether it's medical care, a pension for those wounded in combat, or even an extended version of the GI Bill's educational benefits. Speaking as the guy with the history degree, the first US president to not do enough for his soldiers was Washington, and there hasn't been a president that got it right since.

And Carrera, like Cisco, is not a heartless monster. He loves and protects not just his men, but his family. It's the loss of his wife and children that push him into action and lead him to found the Legio del Cid to begin with. Carrera is a more complicated, fully formed human being than almost any other protagonist I've read.

And I haven't even touched the action in *ADCP* and *Carnifex*. I could read these books for the action sequences alone and be satisfied. They're gritty and realistic. What they are not is a World War II propaganda film. *Kratman's* action sequences are ugly and violent, they way they should be. He has been there and done that and doesn't spare the details.

Of course, there's also the politics. Hennesy/Carrera starts out in the Republic of Balboa, which is totally not Panama. Obviously. It's on another planet, see? But when he starts a mercenary army in the heart of the country, he attracts some seriously negative attention. And then there's his relationship with the Federated States of Columbia, who should never be mistaken for the US. Nope. Not at all.

And of course, there is politics on the other side, with the United Earth Peace Fleet (not the UN) and the actual enemy, an army of Islamofascists that may remind an uncharitable individual of Al Qaeda. Kratman does a good job of showing both sides, although he has an obvious rooting interest. I'm okay with that though. It matches mine.

In short, if you want to read something that is entertaining, believable, action-packed and believable read *A Desert Called Peace* and *Carnifex*. It's that simple.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Legitimate Reprisals

A Quiet Death by Kal Spriggs
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Ari Kiehl is back. Along with his guardian angel, the retasked grim reaper Sam, he's ready to take on the forces of darkness. Well, at least he's willing. But nothing could prepare him for what's coming.

The story

Ari Kiehl walked out of the Sandbox with a new best friend, an angel of death named Sam. After a pack of demonic, soul-eating werewolves tried to kill Ari and half the Colorado City police department, Ari has been tasked as part of Major case. He's now part of a team.

Except not even this team knows what to do when a murder victim gets up and walks away.

When the first body walked away from his own crime scene, it was bad enough. When the second one did it, Ari thought it might be a problem.

When the bodies kept dropping and getting back up, it was a world-ending issue. Even if it is ready to take out Colorado.

In *Death's Shadow* was a white-knuckle thriller, where it felt like something was going to jump out of the shadows at any minute. This one was more of a mystery, building up the world and finding out not only what the threat was, but how to stop it.

The characters

It's amusing to watch all of these characters and how they negotiate a path around each other. Ari was a murder suspect only six months before. Watching him as a rookie cop, trying to work with and around other officers who would have shot him months before is an interesting dynamic. And of course, watching Ari negotiate between Sam, his partner Amanda Ashburn, and "normal" cops is a treat. Though there are days that Ari feels like the straight man in this relationship.

Basically, everyone gets more of a character arc moving out from book 1.

The world

The world-building feels like it got a massive shot in the arm in *A Quiet Death*, which is interesting, since I thought it was great in the last one as well. It builds up a lot about the limitations of the supernatural, the preternatural, and even has some rock-solid angelology. And yes, that's a real word. It does

a great job of building up the world of angels and demons while at the same time building up a solid mystery. Ari also touches on trying to do a police DD5 daily report form when you're fighting the supernatural. It's always a great source of entertainment.

Also, the Devil is Lawful Evil, apparently. Then again, with his contract fixation, are we surprised?

The politics

It's hard to tell in this particular climate. Ari is a military veteran and isn't crazy. The cops are largely on the side of right, even if some of them are out of the loop. Politicians are tools of the Devil, but what else is new? This is good, there is evil, and there's lawful evil. Yes

Content warning

It's a horror novel. Plan accordingly.

Who is it for?

This is for fans of the Urban Fantasy or horror genre. Anyone who's read Ringo's Princess of Wands or Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International novels.

Why read it?

A straight-up, old fashioned monsters and mayhem novel.

Avenging Angels by Chuck Dixon
Review by Declan Finn
Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Jim Butcher has often told the story of how he started writing the Codex Alera novels: it was an internet "discussion" about tropes versus authors. Can a good story be made out of anything, no matter the trope? Butcher's argument was yes. It ended in a dare—could Butcher take a trope and make it work? Butcher's reply was, "Give me two tropes, I dare you." He was given "Lost Roman Legion" and "Pokemon." Then it became a massive epic fantasy series.

Superficially, there are certain moments where one wonders if Chuck Dixon was given a similar challenge, only with time travel tropes.

Obviously, to start with, the time machine has to be tested, and something goes wrong.

For the next mission, obviously they have to find buried treasure ... by seeing where it was buried in the first place.

The third trope was an online discussion started a decade ago: could a marine division take on the Roman empire?

In this case, Dixon has modified that question, and added "another trope."

First, can five SpecOps operators take on two Roman legions...?

And what do you do with a certain Jewish Carpenter from Nazareth?

Yes, you read that right: This time, our Time Traveling SpecOps heroes are going to go toe-to-toe with the legions of the Roman Empire in order to save Jesus Christ from being assassinated.

The story

After the treasure hunting expedition of Blood Red Tide, our time-traveling heroes are well loaded with money. Everything is smooth going...

Until a message from the near future sends back a dire warning: Sir Nigel, the backer of the time tunnel developed by Morris and Caroline Tauber, has started to use time travel to shape reality to his own wants and desires. He wants to remake the past and control the future. Nigel's first move: send an envoy back in time to wipe out every teenager in a small town in Galilee in 16AD.

The town is Nazareth. The target is Jesus Christ. If He dies, then everything they know, the very world, is going to change beyond their wildest nightmares.

And now, they're on a mission from God... yes, Dixon did cite the Blues Brothers.

This time, our Rangers have to square off against the Roman Empire. Joined this time by an IDF shooter who should probably be played by Gal Gadot (I should point out this book came out in 2012, so before Wonder Woman), they have to fight off two legions of the world's finest fighting force.

At the same time (pun not intended), Caroline Tauber has given birth to a son. But instead of kicking back on maternity leave, assassins from the future have come for him. Their ally from the future has taken it upon himself to hide her in time ... in Paris, 1871, a city under siege by Germany.

If you're wondering if this story might be slow at any point ... no. Every plotline and chapter is filled with tension. It's a great thriller... just with time travel elements. And every time you think you know how this story is going to go, you're wrong. Trust me. There's no guessing on this one. As noted above, just because it has a time travel trope or two doesn't mean it's predictable.

There is also plenty of blowback from the previous mission: how does one dispose of the treasure from a Greek pirate ship? The myriad relationship threads continue in a well-constructed arc. And then, there's an extension on a new friend they made in Blood Red Tide.

There are also enough cameo appearances by historical figures to make this cranky historian smile.

The characters

I said in my review of Blood Red Tide that this series feels very much like one continuous novel spread out over several books. Each volume can easily be read as singles or as part of the whole. Looking at it from the point of view of the whole, the characters balance out very nicely. Cannibal Gold was a team novel. Blood Red Tide focused on Dwayne and Caroline going back in time. And now, this book focuses again more on the rest of the team, and Caroline, as all of them are hunted throughout time and space. Some are hunted by the legions of Rome, and one is stalked by temporal hunters.

All of these characters have distinct personalities. Jimbo, the Pima Tribesman who is tempted by the simplicity of "back then." Chaz, a more religious member of the team, who in this case, as the best line

in the book (“Jesus saved me and I’m returning the favor.”) Lee Harrison is an ice-cold shooter who might have found someone who can melt him a little. There's “Bat” our IDF addition to the team (As Chaz puts it, “You’re going to have to convert to Jews for Jesus.”) who is a charming addition. Then there's Boats... who should probably just be classified as the berserker.

We also learn a little more about our villain, his desires and motivations. Whatever his endgame is, it isn't pleasant. Keep in mind, book three is halfway through the series. Sir Nigel hasn't had the screen time of your average Marvel villain. But I am already looking forward to seeing this bastard get what's coming to him.

The world

This is interesting, because here, Chuck Dixon doesn't build one world. He doesn't even build three. He builds FOUR worlds at the same time: Ancient Rome, 1870s France, dealing with our own world, and a vision of an apocalyptic future coming soon to a timeline near you.

And the damn thing is that Chuck Dixon makes it all look so effortless as he balances all of them.

In each time period, Dixon executes the world building flawlessly. He captures the time period down to some of the smallest details, without grinding the story to a halt. If you ever wanted to get a sense of history, this might be the series to start people off on. He even manages to capture the language of each time period within the narration... no, he doesn't use a lot of Latin, but you get the sense that this could easily be translated into Latin.

The fourth world could be summed up, in part, by CS Lewis: That Jesus Christ was either the Son of God, or a madman. Why? Because His message was nothing close to the ideas of the day. Or any secular thought process today. Remove Jesus from the equation, the ideas never enter into the realm of human thought. And from there, it creates a seriously different world.

(As a historian, I will quibble that the narrative implies that Christianity's existence led to the fall of the Roman empire, a theory that Gibbons postulated in Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire. In Gibbons' case, he was motivated by religious bigotry. In Chuck's case ... it probably led into a more cohesive narrative). We have a religion of science and secularism, where people are cogs in a machine of the state. There is no history, no nation, only "the state." It's the Roman "Republic," only with all of the worst aspects of the industrial revolution.

The end result here is a dystopia that lacks all of the homey charm of 1984, or Mordor without the local character.

NOTE ON THE WORLD BUILDING: In this one, Chuck Dixon adds an afterword with historical notes. Read them if only for the comments, such as "If I got anything about Roman legions wrong, blame Tacitus, I think he has a Facebook page."

The politics

There is nothing overt about the politics here. Again, as in the previous novels, guns are a good thing. High explosives are your friend, especially when fighting off entire legions.

Looking at the dystopia Dixon created, the politics are to the right of Mao, Marx, and most college professors.

The very existence of Christ is considered a net positive in the world. Draw your own conclusions.

Content warning

There is violence. The worst it gets is Lord of the Rings level violence, where the action gets bloody, but not particularly gory. The language is colorful, but nothing stood out as R-rated. Most of the language here never reached the profanity level of the playground of my Catholic grammar school.

Who is it for?

Any fan of action or adventure novels will love this one. This has all the action and adventure of a John Ringo or a Larry Correia, with the narrative insight of David Weber (without the word count), and all the speed of a Mitch Rapp novel

Why read it?

This review opened with the creation of Jim Butcher's Alera, which proved that it doesn't matter how tired tropes are if the author is an absolute literary badass. Chuck Dixon proves that here as well. The worldbuilding is effortlessly executed, and downright amazing. Chuck Dixon does it not once, but FOUR TIMES, with each setting with its own unique feel and narration. The action is tense and fast-paced

Avenging Angels is fun, tightly written, and may be the best of the series thus far. The books only get better as they go along.

Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze by Kit Sun Cheah

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Dungeon crawling like you've never seen it before!

A student with a martial arts hobby, Yamada Yuuki was finishing up a lesson with his class when the world abruptly turned inside out.

Brought to a strange dimension with other time-displaced humans, he and his class are thrust into a conflict for their very lives.

The demon that summoned them to fight for his amusement and sustenance has promised to send those who survive home – but only if they can fight through the dungeon at the heart of his world, where he himself waits to claim the brave soul who will eventually face him.

The story

New to the martial arts discipline of Kukishin-ryu, Yamada joined the class at his friend Hiroshi's insistence. Hiroshi has more natural aptitude and skill due to studying longer, but Yamada makes up for his lack in these areas with pure determination and stubbornness. This means his style is somewhat more reckless; although he wins his bout with Hiroshi at the beginning of the book, the class teacher has reason to critique Yamada for his performance.

Just as the lesson is winding down, however, both Yamada and Hiroshi hear a strange voice. Some of the other students do as well, and so does their teacher. Once class has been dismissed, reality turns inside out as the unfortunate people who heard the voice enter a realm of strange, disorienting shapes and twisting signs. Despite their best efforts, Yamada, Hiroshi, and the rest are dragged from modern Japan to another world entirely.

Once they awake in this strange location, they find they are not the only people present. Groups of men and women from East to West have been brought to this odd dimension as well, and in spite of the fact that they all speak different languages, they understand one another perfectly. Among the group is a Japanese girl wearing the attire of a miko or temple maiden. She catches Yamada's eye, but only for a moment.

The disparate abductees soon notice they all have something in common: they practice various martial arts – Eastern or Western – and they all have an interest in either the weapons or the arts of their respective culture's Medieval skills. After making that connection, they are approached by three men who fall to their knees and beg forgiveness for summoning them to this hell world. Immediately following this revelation, the demon that brought everyone here appears and thanks them “for being [his] food.”

The demon explains that their only way home is to defeat him in his dungeon. When one of the new abductees attempts to chase him off by invoking God's name, the demon demonstrates that he cannot be overcome so easily. Action as well as faith is needed to conquer this foe, something made clearer when the three men lead their new recruits to the village all the displaced humans in this realm call home.

After they have eaten, the leaders tell the newcomers to step forward to receive their skills. These paranormal abilities will help them to fight the demon and make life somewhat easier for those who live in the village as well. Hiroshi is granted a new power none have ever seen before – kishi, or “knight.” Yamada, however, earns a different and unfavorable skill: kamikaze, or “divine wind.” Those with the kamikaze skill are brave to the point of foolhardiness, being filled with blind rage and beyond-human strength when they fight.

Unfortunately, none who gains the power of kamikaze live long. Yamada, in the minds of many, has not received a gift but a curse. The question for him may not be whether or not he can survive the dungeon. It might be whether or not he can survive his new power.

The characters

Yamada is an everyman hero with mediocre talent thrust into a world that challenges him to survive. He is also given a power that is as much a handicap as it is a help, and a reader can feel his frustration with his limitations. Nevertheless, Yamada doesn't whine and moan about his situation. Whenever he is knocked down, he climbs to his feet and resolves to do better next time. Sheer determination can carry a man further than prowess on occasion, and what he lacks in finesse, Yamada more than makes up for with his resolve.

Hiroshi balances Yamada. Calmer, talented, and generally easy-going, he is also a practicing Christian. This contrasts with Yamada, who does not practice Shintoism much until it becomes necessary in the war with the demon. For Hiroshi, facing the demon just makes his faith shine brighter – and it means he aids his kamikaze friend in battle as well as in training.

Sensei, the teacher of the class, is wise without playing to either Western or Eastern stereotypes. Though strict, firm, and determined, he has a lighter side that manifests in his paternal interest in his students. In spite of his critiques, he cares about Yamada and wants him to succeed. He criticizes not because the lad is “doing it the wrong way” but because he wants him to learn and improve.

The other side characters in the novel, particularly the miko, are fleshed out and vibrant. Since most of the story revolves around fighting, we don't see the non-combatants often, but they do make appearances. Everyone has a purpose in the narrative; even if they are not present at all times, a reader will not forget them easily.

The world

Picture an isekai – Japanese portal fantasy, usually to a video game world – crossed with an American Role-Playing game, with a dash of anime and Dungeons and Dragons thrown in. Then remove the stats and gaming jargon that weighs the former down, add some strong spiritual depth, and voila! You have *Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze*.

The politics

The politics are: “Conquer the dungeon and defeat the demon.” There are no other policies to speak of, because they have no bearing on where the characters are or the battle they are fighting.

Content warning

Since the cast is fighting a demon and his monsters in his dungeon, the deaths (and there are several) get messy. The monsters are hideous, but none of this is dwelt upon. *Kamikaze* is easily one of the most PG-13 friendly novels on the market today.

Who is it for?

Fans of anime will love this book, as will martial artists or those with an interest in the art of personal combat. Historians will enjoy it for the detail Mr. Cheah adds to his training scenes and the battles, as the warriors all use Medieval armor and weaponry. Romance readers will love Yamada learning to court a girl while horror enthusiasts will be fascinated by the various monsters the characters must overcome. Video gamers, LitRPG readers, and GameLit fans who have friends they wish to introduce to the latter two genres will find this invaluable as a book to give their companions after they have devoured it themselves.

Why read it?

It's a good book that pits the heroes against overwhelming odds and the despair that naturally entails. The characters are challenged to build up their faith at the same time they must fight for their lives. A rollicking adventure novel, *Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze* has something for everyone. Why not buy it?

Dungeon Spiteful by Jana S Brown

Review by J R Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Preamble

Hey Space Cadets, I hope this blog post finds you well. I am reviewing another new book instead of cleaning up recommendations previously posted on my website. I found this one when a friend of mine, Jana S Brown, introduced me to the author. We interviewed her on The Blasters & Blades Podcast about this novel, and it sounded amazing. I loved the concept, and I was suddenly curious about the GameLit genre.

So, here we are as I prepare to write a review on the novel Warmaster: Dungeon Spiteful by Melissa McShane. I 'read' this novel in the audiobook format as read by Talon David who did a bang-up job narrating this one! I know from my interview that will air on April 10th, so check out the links for the show to listen to this one.

Overall, I am not surprised that I ended up loving a book genre that was spawned by the games that I've learned to love. I played online open world RPGs like the Fallout and Elder Scrolls franchises and loved the open world gaming concept. That transferred over to the ttrpgs, once I found a game with friends. Now I can experience that over and over again, even when solo, through this genre. I can't wait to dive deeper into this literary space.

And let me tell you, as my first foray into this genre, I got lucky and found a real gem! This book convinced me that this was the genre for me, and you'll see more reviews from me in this space! I know, you can barely contain your excitement, but please don't embarrass us in public! Let's save those moments for beer, bars and bratwurst!

Click the link if you want to know more! And why wouldn't you, this novel is some bookalicious goodness!

The Story

The main character of this novel was Aderyn, a woman who grew up in a world that is basically a ttrpg game, except it is very real to the people who live there. She gets the call to become an adventurer and ends up with a class, Warmaster, that conventional wisdom says is useless. When she excitedly tells her parents, retired adventurers, that she took the call they were excited for her... at least until she told them her class. Then they were consolatory and crushed her excitement.

In frustration, she uses her newfound ability to come and go from the town without an escort to head to the nearby woods. When she gets there, she's attacked by a minor monster, while she was unarmed. Luckily, her new friend Owen enters the scene and saves the day. It looked like they were destined to be fast friends, until he revealed that he's an outlander. After she decided that he wasn't a demon, they talked and became companions on a quest to get him home.

During the course of this book, we see Aderyn and Owen make new friends, accomplish minor feats of skill and bravery and level up through the starter ranks of 'the system.' The process of her learning about the game world, or just her world from her perspective, was a lot of fun. Because Owen was an outsider, we got to learn of the world as he did through her eyes. I really enjoyed that trick from the author, Melissa McShane. She kept me engaged from start to finish and I couldn't recommend it stronger.

This story was expertly paced and the prose cleanly written. There was never a moment in the novel where I couldn't envision the world. I could see the adventure unfolding in my mind as a movie in my head. In fairness, I have read enough fantasy to help me envision everything. Even better, I had a solid base of knowledge from my gaming experience, both video and tabletop mediums. Further, having read a lot of the classics of fantasy literature, I've seen many of the genre tropes.

Another area where my experience with gaming helped was with the monsters we encountered. Having played the games that inspired this novel, I had experience with the iconic creatures that we see in this story. Obviously, Melissa shaves off the serial numbers to keep herself from getting sued. She also gave them different names, so we had that sense of newness and foreignness for the outlander, Owen to butt up against. It did make things fun, and I would definitely play the game she's using for this novel, if it existed. I wonder what engine she'd use to create it?

And how could we talk about a novel without talking about the authorial voice? In this novel I found a well-rounded storytelling voice. There was enough depth to solidly ground you in the story, without wandering off into left field. She drip fed us enough details to keep us informed, without stealing that sense of wonder from us. However, you could tell that this world had depth to it, even though she didn't show us up front. Additionally, there was a lot of well executed humor in this adventure tale. It never felt like Melissa was trying too hard, which takes skills as a storyteller. Another skill that she had was giving us a convincing romance that's easy to believe.

Since we're talking about the story, we have to discuss the pacing. This novel kept things interesting by segmenting into smaller encounters. It very much felt like a gaming session, with lags built in for food and bathroom breaks. There were places between the action that let you breathe and released the emotional pressure from the intense combat against monsters and other adventurers. This skill is one that you only notice when the author does it wrong, but since this is a review I figured I would pay attention to these nuances. Glad I did, because this was a master class on getting it right!

Finally, the thing I liked the most about this novel was that Melissa surprised me with the ending. I can normally predict where the story is going. It's the curse of those of us who read a lot or tell our own stories. However, Warmaster's ending shocked me. I was not expecting that twist, which I can't elaborate on or I might ruin the story for you.

The Characters

This novel follows one main character, the new adventurer named Aderyn and her companions. She is a 20-ish year-old woman, who's awarded the class of Warmaster. It is a class that gives her the ability to read tactical situations, but since most in this class are ignored, their full potential is never unlocked. However, the other Warmaster's don't have Owen, her erstwhile companion whose skills mirror hers. He is the ying to her yang, allowing both of them to be better while working together.

During the course of this novel, we see Aderyn grow and evolve. She starts as a shy and uncertain noob adventurer, and then she grows into a more confident version of herself. She learns that her class isn't as useless as she'd been told. Instead, she starts to take a sense of pride in her skill set. Through this, her party thrives and exceeds the expectations of their abilities based on their collective inexperience. At times, this wishy-washy uncertainty from Aderyn was annoying. That's because we knew what she did not, but that is the fun of reading from a point of view who isn't omniscient!

I really liked this character; she wasn't your typical 'girl boss.' This was a lady who was competent, and she earned every one of her skill upgrades. She fought for those gains in a way that made sense.

During her time in this novel, she had to compensate for her smaller size by outthinking the monsters and opponents. Further, she had to learn to work with her teammates, trusting them to be weak where she was strong. And she offered the inverse to them, balancing each other's abilities. She uses her brains to empower their brawn and it worked for me.

In addition to Aderyn, we had the opportunity to meet Owen, the outlander from our world. He gets mugged on a Greyhound layover and wakes up in the woods outside of Far Haven. We first meet him as he is saving Aderyn from the monsters, swinging a club like a boss. He's dressed in a band tee, demonstrating his excellent musical choice. Or the author's excellent musical tastes? Either way, he was like a fish out of water, and through him we learned about the world of the system. The interactions about the miscommunication through their shared language was humorous and I loved watching it.

Later in the novel, we meet a few more party members. Their combined skill set reminds me of the dream party for a D&D campaign; a wizard, a bard, a thief and a fighter with someone serving as the brains of the operation. The Warmaster skill doesn't have an analog in the ttrpg space, at least not that I'm aware of. But the combination of their skills makes them able to handle a wider variety of challenges.

These characters were well written and fleshed out. Their motivations made sense to me, they felt real. I don't know if I'd want to have a beer with these inexperienced kids, but I don't hate them either. Maybe I'm just getting old and crotchety? Whatever, get off my lawn and we'll continue with this deep dive into the residents of the system!

Finally, we couldn't talk about the characters of 'the system' without talking about the system itself. It was its own character, working with its own mysterious agency. The game had dreams of its own, coming across almost like it was the deity for the world. It felt like this was symbolic or a stand-in for a higher power, which made the world feel even more fleshed out. I am not sure how else to describe it, I am still working it out on my end. Am I reading too much into it? Are the constant ads for Easter sales and commercials for local churches filtering my experience with this book? Is when I am reading it flavoring it? I don't know, but it struck me that the game ruleset that runs this world feels like the ancient gods meddling in the affairs of man. Your mileage may vary, so check it out.

The World

This story was set in the fantasy world of 'the System.' Sprinkled throughout the various cities are that special breed of humans known as 'adventurers.' These people rove around the land, completing quests and trying to earn system growth and advancement. As a GameLit world, it is set against the backdrop of a gaming system and ruleset. It is here that we find the tale of the characters of Aderyn, Owen and their other companions.

Seriously, what's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Melissa McShane, who clearly knows a thing or two about the written word. She told a compelling story set in beautiful world of 'the system.' Like I've previously said, everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, Melissa didn't info dump all her world-building up front. Instead, she fed it to us in drips and drabs that kept me on the edge of my seat, hooked from page one. She expertly strung us along and always left us wanting more.

I know that I sound like a crazy fanboy, but trust me, this story was anything but amateur hour! It was an exciting romp through dice and page. I swear, I could almost here my favorite dungeon master say

“roll for initiative” when the combat actions started, it was like I was really in the system with Aderyn! I'm practically gushing over this novel, and you will too if you give it a try!

Politics

This novel has no real-world politics and doesn't stray outside of the standard power plays that happened in the medieval world with several city-states. That absence gave you room for you just to dive in and enjoy some good old-fashioned historic fun! Okay, historic-ish and the ISH is doing some heavy lifting! But it was the standard fantasy tropes that Tolkien would approve of.

Content Warning

This was a relatively clean story, so there was nothing that wasn't PG-13 in this novel. There was violence, but it wasn't gratuitous, and I would let my kids read this novel as well.

Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoy a good GameLit story about a pair of young adults finding themselves and the path they want their lives to take. The book Warmaster: Dungeon Spiteful shows the value of found family and the positive role that the power of friendship can have on those around you and the world writ large. If you've ever seen the world as it was and wanted it to be better... this hopeful novel is for you. This novel had the action and humor and comradery of the most recent DnD movie. It had the classic dungeon delving made popular by the original tabletop game that we all know and love. I also noticed that this book struck some of what I loved of the novel Dream Park by Larry Niven.

Why buy it

Before I read this book, I would've said that I'm not the typical audience for this one. That said, I'm now a convert and will be reading more from this series and more in the wider genre. With that out of the way, this was a fun romp through a gamified story that is perfect for all ages. This is a solid escapist story for when you want sword fighting and justice in a hurry. The adventure was compelling, the prose was clean, and the story arc had me unable to stop turning the page. Sleep? Who needs it when this book is there!

If I haven't sold you on this GameLit novel, then I haven't done my job. So, if you are intrigued, check it out already!

The Eye of the World by Robert Jordan Review by Heath Row The STF Amateur

As mentioned in T&T #107, I first read this novel, the first in Jordan's series The Wheel of Time, about a dozen years ago. Inspired by the recent Ignorable Theme, I returned to the novel and read it again over the last couple of weeks while watching the first season of The Wheel of Time on Prime Video. I'd forgotten much of the book and enjoyed reading it a second time. This time around, I'm more likely to continue to the second book in the series. For the most part, The Eye of the World draws inspiration from previous epic fantasies, including the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Some similarities translate directly: trollocs are akin to orcs, fades equate to ringwraiths, and there's a Sauron equivalent. There are also

notable aspects of the novel that make it stand out as more than merely derivative. Jordan's inclusion of a matriarchal power base as represented by the Aes Sedai, gender differences in the ability to use magic, the return of a messiah figure—the previous incarnation of which broke the world—the religious order the Children of the Light (portrayed much more aggressively in the television show), the ogier and their Ways (dimensional pathways), and the Green Man—perhaps Jordan's Treebeard or Beorn—all stand out as elements that remain worthy of exploration.

At times, the narrative is relatively linear, similar to *The Hobbit*, but when the group of people en route to Tar Valon becomes separated, the novel becomes more like George R.R. Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, utilizing multiple narrative threads. My only complaint about the novel is that its climax happens in a bit of a rush, jamming quite a bit into fewer pages than the novel's more leisurely pace prepared me for. Jordan introduces a couple new characters, representing the Forsaken, of whom there are more. And several meaningful artifacts are revealed, paving the way for the second novel. It's not quite as brisk as Tolkien's *Battle of Five Armies*, but it could have breathed a little more.

Regardless, Jordan's approach to epic fantasy is his own, and this first novel bodes well for the series that follows. I look forward to reading *The Great Hunt*.

Falcons of Malta Edited by C.V. Walter

Review by Pat Patterson

www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

This is the fourth anthology of Malta stories published by Raconteur Press. Believe it or not, this is NOT the most bizarre thing this new publisher has brought forth; they also have a series of art-inspired anthologies, with each story having a max size of 50 words. I doubt that anyone could really predict what they will do next, but my money is on a Do-It-Yourself series covering items such as: how to differentiate between a GHOST in your attic, and GOATS in your attic, and recommendations for each.

As a matter of fact, anything related to an attic could show up. I believe that's where you'll find the Usual Suspects, unless they are attending a convention.

I was a Falcon for 16 years, and thus, even if they hadn't already hooked me with the three prior works, it was a foregone conclusion that this volume was going to join my review queue. I do not regret this in the slightest. HOWEVER: in order that I receive maximum adulation, I will state once more that anthologies of short stories are one of my favorite forms to read but are the most difficult to review. That's because so many short stories turn on a reveal, which must NOT show up in the review, as spoilers are a horrid thing. Therefore, I have to do actual brain work, and who has time for THAT anymore?

A condensed version of this review, beginning with the next paragraph, has been submitted to Amazon and Goodreads.

Welcome to some new stories, about entities of various ages, set on an ancient island.

Cat and Mouse, by Cedar Sanderson. The Stasi had the job of keeping Westerners and Western influences OUT, while keeping their own population IN. If that sentence makes no sense to you, I'm guessing you came of age before the Wall came down (and you won't understand THAT phrase, either). I don't know that DDR mothers ever warned their children not to be bad, or the Stasi would get them, but they were boogie man, banshee, and Baba Yaga, all rolled into one, and the threat would not have been idle. Young love doesn't have much chance against an enemy like that; it would take a magic cat to

help (plus something else I can't mention because SPOY-LERZ).

Where the Heroes Go, by Nicki Kenyon. Some myths describe the reward for fallen heroes as a great hall, where the mighty sit and drink beer forever. Personally, an eternity in the company of loudmouth drunks doesn't sound like a reward. And how does an eternity of alcohol consumption work, anyway? If getting drunker and drunker is the pattern, then again, no thanks. I like Nicki's proposal MUCH better.

Family Matters, by Evan DeShais. I'd have to classify this as a crime thriller, but that's not right, either. It's got a high-tech thread running through it, but the tech doesn't always work. Loyalty does, though, as long as you add the right amount of hard work.

Knight Errant, by E.C. Ratliff. Members of the warrior class chase a miscreant through alleys and look forward to hitting him with sticks. It doesn't work. It never works, because success takes a LOT more than muscle. It takes determination, commitment to a cause, and a magic rat.

The Old Man of Malta, by Heather Strickler. Don't EVER threaten an old man, because they aren't motivated by a fear of death. Actually, what they ARE motivated by is anything that ends the problem, so they don't have to be bothered anymore. And if that leaves the opponent mostly (or all) dead? Who cares?

The Peace of Il-Maqluba, by A. Kristina Casasent. There are extensive tunnels and caves underground in Malta; some of them are more than just rock and dirt. Everything has a purpose, which sometimes can only be revealed by doing.

The Grandmaster's Treasure, by Seth Taylor. When the Turks drove the Society off the island, the Grandmaster's treasure stayed behind. It wasn't abandoned, though; it was hidden, until the right people came back for it. Remember: no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.

Spring Festival, by Claire Bernay. How do you know when it's time to pass along the adult secrets to the children? How do you protect them from the inevitable? How can you make sure you aren't crippling them with the decisions you make?

The Tides of Malta, by Zane Voss. It's a straightforward commando raid, but the stakes are incredibly high. You can prepare all you want, but it's the on-the-spot decisions that make the difference between success and failure.

Special Delivery, by D.A. Brock. In this timeline, the Texas navy is fighting in the vicinity of the island. The submarine minelayer Devastation isn't really equipped to do the new job, but it's "other duties as assigned." What's more explosive: a boatload of avgs, or a boatload of nurses?

Backchannel, by Richard Cartwright. In the future, we have bases on the moon. High tech doesn't mean infallible, though. When the aliens land, mistakes are made, people on both sides die, but EVERYONE gets blamed. Somehow, the future of humanity depends on how well one human gets along with one alien. It doesn't look like it's going well.

Alas, my review is finished, and once again, I fear I have not done the EXCELLENT work of these authors justice. If I failed in that respect, it's someone else's fault. Not the authors, though.

Probably the GHOST or the GOATS. I'll have them cleared out sometime this weekend.

The Golden Scorpion by Sax Rohmer Review by Bob Jennings

I'm pretty sure I read this many years ago, probably in the 1960s when a ton of Rohmer novels were being issued in paperback by Ace and Pyramid Books, but my memory of the story was virtually non-existent, so since I had a Methuen edition hardback with a missing spine that was going to be trashed I decided to read it before dumping the copy.

Originally written in 1919, this story sees Rohmer return to the theme of sinister oriental criminal masterminds, a recurring plot device with Rohmer and other writers of British crime thrillers in the first quarter of the 20th century. Although this can be read as a stand-alone novel, it is technically a sequel to his novel "The Yellow Claw" (1915) where the arch villain known as "Mr. King" is dispatched with his secret identity intact.

This time notable scientists are dying, seemingly of natural causes, but the French police have alerted Scotland Yard that they believe an international criminal gang somehow connected with the symbol of a gold scorpion may be behind a series of deaths across Europe.

The nominal hero of the novel is Dr. Keppel Stuart, but the primary protagonist is Gaston Max, the astute French detective we met in the pages of "The Yellow Claw" and other Rohmer novels. Max has determined that a beautiful Eurasian girl is somehow involved with the deaths of a Russian military genius while he was in France and Max has connected her movements with deaths in England as well. The investigation is involved, as the young woman and those associated with her are extremely careful, and they are extremely observant as well. Max's identity and actions are repeatedly penetrated despite his best efforts and despite his most ingenious disguises, yet he manages to unearth conclusive proof that a secret gang of criminals using the symbol of a golden scorpion are somehow involved in multiple murders using undetectable poisons, but for what motive he cannot determine.

Dr. Stuart has encountered the young woman, who we later learn is known as Miska, and like most of the other men she had met in the service of the Golden Scorpion, he is almost immediately infatuated with her. The difference is that she is also attracted to him, something that has not happened before with her other contacts in Europe and England.

This is a fast-moving adventure with strong characterizations. We do not learn the motives and history of the seductive Miska until late in the book, and the motives for these seemingly unconnected murders are not revealed until near the climax. There are chases, there are investigations. Max is clever, but his opponents are ruthless and determined to complete their mission. The climax is well handled, and the writing style makes this an enjoyable excursion into the world of secret societies and malicious master criminals. This novel and most of the other Rohmer books are public domain now and can be read for free on Project Gutenberg and other free text internet sites.

Herbs and Empire by Alma T. C. Boykin. Review by Pat Patterson

www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

A sign of my absence from Reader Land: I'm not familiar with the first seven books in the series. A sign of astounding writing skill: in no way did that detract from my appreciation of this 8th volume:

If there were previously uncompleted story arcs, they were not obvious to me.

If there was some bit of essential information I missed, I couldn't identify it.

In fact, the ONLY effect that discovering this was the most recent in an 8-volume epic is that I realized I have seven beauties yet to discover.

So, good!

Saxo Birdson is an abused and neglected youth, apprenticed to Master Agri, who raises (giant) 'great hauler' birds for use as draft animals. While performing those duties, a beast healer (Master Jeaspe) discovers Saxo has the power to influence the behavior and healing of the great birds, and insists he be trained in that gift, per the command of the Great Northern Emperor.

And: the REAL story begins!

Among the MANY things I found particularly noteworthy is this: somehow, somewhere, Saxo has developed the most EXCELLENT habit of repeating back any instructions he is given. While a valuable habit in any job, his developing life will require such attention to detail. Alas, my own dogs are too old to learn a new trick (and by dogs, one may mean 'children').

I found myself nearly giggling with delight, as I read the descriptions of the uses of assorted vegetation. These 'primitive' people are steeped, through and through, with the disciplines of SCIENCE! Describe, explain, predict, control; that's at the heart of every use of herbs found in the book. It's transformed the use of medicinal properties of growing things from the mutterings of hedge witches, to a formal body of knowledge, which can be transmitted to future practitioners.

A small note on language: some of the names for things may be totally made up; I really couldn't say. Others are merely archaic forms, no longer in use in Woodstock, GA, Cultural Center of the Universe, in Anno Domini 2023. However, I sheepishly confess that I had forgotten that 'kine' refers to cows; I was thinking it meant 'pigs.' It took a reference to horns for me to snap back to reality. Pigs are SWINE, not KINE. Duh, me.

While it is true that this world contains significant magical elements, that is definitely NOT what drives the bus. That job goes to the role of duty, and in particular, to the degree of duty owed to authority. The story is very clear that sometimes a duty to one conflicts with a duty to the other; the society essentially requires that such conflicts exist. How is one to know what takes precedence? (That answer is found in the text as well.)

This was a delightful introduction to what appears to be a sophisticated exercise in world-building. Every step along the way is consistent with things we know or can reasonably anticipate. None of the characters are single-function villains or heroes; I could say more on this, but I won't.

My grateful thanks to the author!

Hunters & Hijinks by Nick Stevenson and Melissa Olthoff

Review by Pat Patterson

www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

Four members of the Jongee race find themselves unpleasantly employed in an office environment. It's probably much more repressive than it has to be, but I doubt it would ever be a good fit for them under any circumstances. Jongee are intelligent bipedal hyenas, sort of, and their behavior and preferences are much like those of Earth true hyenas: They like to hang out in small packs, and they are pretty good at

killing things. That doesn't really work in an office environment.

Eddie is the big, dumb klutz, who manages to break mop handles while trying to clean the floors. He's joined by the most senior Jongee, Harold, who is likely to drift into a daydream at any point. Reggie, a customer service tech (complaint manager) has a bit of a mysterious past, but clearly, the danger everyone fears is coffee-guzzling Maddy, the lone female Jongee.

When their boss tells them that because of under-production, they won't be able to take their long-planned vacation to attend a celebration at home, the four individuals clump together under the pressure, and decide to quit.

Harold insists he has a no-fail treasure map in hand, and that beats the idea of staying on their hated jobs. All it will take is everything they have saved. They pool their scant resources, and head out to the deep black, in a gasping, leaking accumulation of ancient space junk that Harold thinks is a ship. Maddy, ever quick with a punch or verbal poke, names it HIADA.

The plot thickens! Can Eddie REALLY be the incompetent goober he projects? Can Harold REALLY have no discernment whatever, while finding the treasure map? Will Reggie and Maddy come to blows over the diminishing coffee supply? Can the witty dialogue contain any more puns and cultural references?

It's an attractive group. It attracts a tiny endangered-species representative, pirates, the attention of mall cops, and stinky mud in the fur.

Also, why NOT have a planet of My Little Pony clones?

This is a delightfully pleasant romp. Yes, there is danger, from environments as well as from other sentient beings, but the authors treat these characters with happy respect. This is (allegedly) the first of a trilogy, so some obvious potentials are left unfulfilled, but much is resolved as well.

Although, perhaps not as the Jongee would prefer. Still, as long as more is coming (despite the authors' threats, I believe it will happen). We can all stand by for more.

Light Unto Another World by Yakov Merkin

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When meeting the king does not go according to plan...RUN!

Having survived a battle with a demon after his entrance into this strange new world, Uriel Makkis went to see the king who had apparently summoned him. A member of the Israeli Defense Forces, Uriel fortunately had his dress uniform on him when he was taken to a new world. So, he can look his best to see the King of Fulnar and claim the Sword which he was summoned to wield.

The problem, as Uriel learns, is that the king didn't actually want him. Uriel has a moral compass and has befriended the local demi-humans, whom most of the resident human population wishes to annihilate. To that end the King of Fulnar and his people summoned the Four Swords to lead them in eradicating the demi-humans. The other three Swords are onboard with this idea, but Uriel is not, particularly after he recognizes one of the other Swords as a Hamas terrorist.

Outnumbered and outmatched, Uriel does the only thing a sane man can be expected to do in the circumstances. He runs!

The Story

Despite the fact that the Sword of Earth is a Hamas terrorist named El-Syed, Uriel finds the Sword of Nature (a young woman named Karen) and the out-of-shape American Sword of Storms (a young man called Mike) are both quite willing to go along with both the terrorist and the King of Fulnar. With the help of a demi-human slave, Uriel set out to escape the city and ends up in a brief scuffle with the other three Swords. Each has a particular element at their beck and call; Karen can summon plants while Mike – when he manages to speak his ancestral language, German – can call up lightning. El-Syed proves to be the most dangerous of the other three Swords due to his combat experience but Karen is surprisingly creative with her more limited power set. Mike is the only one who cannot keep up either with his compatriots or with Uriel.

Still unpracticed in wielding the full range of his light magic, Uriel barely manages to get away from the three and reunite with Kirala, the young demi-human woman he befriended early in the first novel. Once he has rejoined her and some of her friends, Uriel finds out that the reason he is the sole non-evil Sword is that the local demi-human resistance against the Fulnarites interrupted the humans' ritual. They were hoping desperately to summon a Sword of Light to aid them instead of slaughter them, but they were not certain the plan would work or that Uriel would actually be inclined to help them. This is why Kirala and her fellow demi-humans (a) kept that knowledge from him and (b) were waiting to see if he would come out of the city of Fulnar on his own or with a Fulnarite escort of some kind.

Understanding Kirala's reasons for keeping this fact a secret, Uriel does not lose his temper with her or the resistance. Rather, he thanks her for her help and throws himself into the resistance's plans. The Fulnarites are gathering strength to wipe out the demi-humans still on their land, and most of the demi-humans are not fighters. To keep it from becoming a massacre, Uriel, Kirala, Sela, and new friends Revi and Akirui must team up to stall the other Swords and their Fulnarite support forces. But how can they do that with limited resources?

The Characters

Uriel Makkis returns with enthusiasm to take up leadership of the demi-human resistance. Frustrated on Earth about politics holding him back from taking action to protect his people, he is more than happy to engage in actively protecting his friends and other innocents in this new world. It doesn't hurt that one particular demi-human mage named Kirala has caught his eye, with the young elf Sela becoming their shipper-on-deck even as she enjoys prodding and annoying Uriel in any way she can.

Revi brings a sense of calm and control to what might otherwise be an out-of-hand situation. After all, a real rebellion is not a game for the youth alone; at three hundred years old (the equivalent of thirty), Revi has diplomatic status, experience, and training. She is not afraid to use it, though by far her greatest contribution is helping with magical problems and aiding Uriel in practicing his spells. Akirui lightens the mood as her youth, inexperience, and blunt faith in a prophecy regarding the Sword of Light brings some welcome winsomeness to the gang. She fits in well as the "kid sister" in the quintet.

Meanwhile, El-Syed poses the greatest danger to the team. Ruthless and cunning, he has no problem playing rough and dirty with Uriel and the girls. Karen makes up in intelligence what she lacks in physical and magical power, basically behaving like Batman's nemesis Poison Ivy, except sane and therefore even more perilous. Mike is the only pathetic combatant, as he can barely speak his ancestral lan-

guage, which is necessary to cast spells. But he can always call on Fulnarite troops to fight for him if he cannot destroy an opponent, making him dangerous even if his is an incompetent coward.

The World

Wonder and awe take a back seat to practicalities in *Light Unto Another World*, Vol. 2. Though they do not disappear, Uriel puts aside his astonishment at each new revelation of this world in order to deal with the fact that he has a resistance to lead and innocent lives to save. This means that, as the world expands, the awe and amazement is dialed back to serve the plot. Luckily the story leaves plenty of room for the audience to gasp and squeal when Uriel can only blink, shake his head, and wish he had more time to enjoy the view.

Politics

One of the villains is a Hamas terrorist. Given the events of October 7, 2023, that might upset some people. Karen's name may also trigger some people. Beyond that, however, the only politics are those relevant to the story.

Content Warning

El-Syeddd mentions taking Uriel's friends as his harem, but that is about it. The book has no swearing, cursing, or gore and is PG-13 on violence all the way.

Who is it for?

Anime fans will love this book, particularly if they know anything about *The Rising of the Shield Hero*, which helped to inspire this series. Young readers looking for a fun romp will certainly enjoy the tale as will boys. Uriel is a very active protagonist who is curious, asks questions, and still makes time to kick butt, meaning he is a charismatic male lead readers will wish to imitate. Anyone seeking an isekai story that actually thinks through the complications and necessities of being tossed into an alternate world at war will also find *Light Unto Another World*, Vol.2 as stimulating as its predecessor.

Why buy it?

It is good guys fighting bad guys creatively on a shoestring, a prayer, and a hope. Is there any better light fare to read, particularly these days?

Marymae and the Nightmare Man by A. M. Freeman
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When nightmares become real, there's only one thing to do. Face them head on!

Marymae has problems. No one believes that her imaginary friend is real. Then he goes missing and it is up to her to find him, because there are no others to take up the search.

Along the way Marymae realizes that a dark malaise is spreading through the forest of make-believe. With help from the denizens of the world of imagination, she sets out to save not only her friend, but her family and the rest of the world as well. For if the plane of make-believe falls, the real world won't be far behind!

The story

Living with her family on the edge of the forest of make-believe means that Marymae and the other children in her neighborhood are often warned away from the river that separates the real world from the fictional one. Marymae, however, is a braver girl than most. Every afternoon she goes to her favorite spot on the riverbank, sits down, and eats her popsicle. The other children are too afraid to go so close to the woods, so her practice is a rather lonely one.

But one day a bug boy and denizen of make-believe, Waldo, joins her by the riverside. Marymae hands him a popsicle and a strong friendship is born. For quite some time the two spend every afternoon playing by the riverside after eating popsicles together...

...until the day that Waldo mysteriously misses their playdate.

Initially, Marymae thinks nothing of it. But when the day turns to a week and nightmares of Waldo running while looking over his shoulder in terror plague her, she is slowly led to the conviction that something is wrong. She also comes to understand that something has to be done; someone has to rescue Waldo.

But no one – not even her family – believes that Waldo is real. She and the other children are also forbidden to cross the river or enter the woods. It is this very ban which has led to no one believing that Waldo is real in the first place.

Eventually, Marymae decides there is only one thing left to do. She will have to cross the river, brave the dangers of the woods, find her friend, and save the day. There is no one else who can do it but her.

What the girl does not know is that something in the woods desperately wants her to come to it so that she may be transformed from the bright, brave girl she is into something else entirely. If she is to rescue her friend and protect the world, Marymae will have to rely on more than herself to do it. She will have to reach for the light in her soul to defend everything she holds dear – or see the universe fall into utter darkness!

The characters

In sharp contrast to most female leads of the current era, Marymae is a charming heroine. The primary color she wears is pink, she has no problem playing the damsel-in-distress if that will rouse the courage of those who have been rendered timid, she sings, and she prays. Fierce as any young child determined to do the right thing, she never retreats to temper tantrums to get her way, though she is more than willing to tell off those who are misbehaving. She is a refreshing reminder that a girl embracing her femininity gives her a power all her own.

Waldo is a decidedly loyal friend. Filling the role of sidekick to Marymae, he nevertheless has opportunities to prove his mettle. Whether entering battle or standing guard over others, he supports his friend without having his masculinity compromised or his character demoted. A twist on the modern trope of the bumbling best friend, Waldo is a good return to the esquire archetype. He may not be the heroine's knight in shining armor, but he's a pageboy with heart and courage nonetheless.

Finally, there is the Nightmare Man himself. Neither a cackling villain nor a "misunderstood" one, there is more depth and strength in him than first meets the eye. Even he does not quite recognize who and what he is anymore, making way for an antagonist greater than himself to appear. Without the titu-

lar Nightmare Man, the book would not be half as much fun as it is.

The world

The world takes its cue from The Wizard of Oz, every Disney princess movie in existence, then adds some elements from Rise of the Guardians for its foundations without copying any of the above. Throw in some Anastasia and Dora the Explorer for seasoning, along with Ludwig Bemelmans' Madeleine and the result is a story world richer than anything written in at least three decades. Marymae and the Nightmare Man is a worthy heir to all of the above tales and feels like a continuation of their type of storytelling.

The politics

There are none. If this book had any politics within the narrative at all, they would ruin it completely.

Content warning

None. This is a story for everyone regardless of age. You could read it to an unborn baby and the child would be the better for it.

Who is it for?

Fairy tale lovers, children of all ages, and anyone who wants a refreshingly feminine heroine they can cheer on. Those searching for a feminine model to emulate will find Marymae and the Nightmare Man inspiring as well as fun, while young readers will doubtless head outside in search of their own forest of make-believe. Anyone who already has such a forest nearby will probably recognize at least a few of the denizens in this book, allowing them to say hello to old friends.

Why read it?

It's a sweet story that would make a great gift for birthdays, holidays, or just because you want to give someone something they will enjoy for years to come. There aren't enough of those types of gifts to go around as matters stand. Do you need another reason to purchase Marymae and the Nightmare Man?

Mecha: A Cannon Anthology edited by J.F. Holmes
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Big machines, big battles - what more could you ask for?

Mecha – humanoid tanks that respond to a pilot's movements as though they were an extension of their commanders' bodies. These often-titanic metal monstrosities are the next stage in infantry evolution, whether they have one pilot or several to command them. Walk through heavy fire and be ready to fight when these titans enter the fray!

The story

There are ten stories contained in this anthology, and while they were all enjoyable, the ones this reviewer liked most were "Stack Knight," "The Guardian," "Graduation Day," "Maelstrom Rising," and

“Maintenance Mode.”

Thomas Mays’ “Stack Knight” is a Medieval tale with a mech built from armor, sorcery, and pulleys. Not what one would expect in a story about mecha, which are typically hi-tech creations meant to fight on science fiction battlefields. But Mays’ makes it work by explaining that mecha in this wargame style story need to be controlled by a team. The combination of sorcery and science as well as the true merits of honor is fascinating and makes for an entertaining story.

Rick Partlow’s “The Guardian” is set in a far-flung future world much like Ancient Sparta. When hearth and home are threatened men must step up and fight for all they hold dear. But does this mean they are not “afraid and vulnerable”? The hero’s family is in hiding, as they are the only hope Sparta has. If they are killed, then their government and way of life will cease to exist. More than that, what else can a husband and father feel when he must go to war while his family trembles in a bunker, ostensibly safe, while traitors batter down the gates? “The Guardian” alone makes this anthology worth the purchase price, as it is one of the best stories in the entire collection.

Yakov Merkin’s “Graduation Day” is the only tale in the volume to deal with mechs that are not bipedal. The heroes command wolf-like zadir, which require a pilot, a gunner, and an engineer to control. On the day the latest group of Zadir Corps’ pilots are to graduate, an attack forces them to abandon the parade ground for the battlefield. Given the fact that they weren’t supposed to fight, they have no live ammunition at their disposal. As the conflict intensifies the Zadir Corps graduates must prove their worth on the field.

It’s worth mentioning that Merkin is continuing the saga of the Zadir Corps through stories available in his Patreon and Subscribstar accounts. If you like animal-based mecha, then you may want to click this link, which includes art for the wolf-like Zadir. When you read “Graduation Day” you will want to read more tales set in this world, so keep Mr. Merkin’s ongoing work in mind.

Jason Cordova’s “Maelstrom Rising” is a good story about tyranny told from the “Stormtrooper” POV. The hero leads his unit against the rebels, but all his subordinates are killed. He himself is captured and faced with the fact that he is serving an evil government. Presented with an opportunity to redeem himself and save another life at the same time, he has to decide which he will be: a man, or a cog in a machine bent on subjugating humanity.

Finally, John M. Olsen’s “Maintenance Mode” is a fun look at what happens when the bad guys tick off an engineer. Typically, making an engineer angry is a bad idea anyway. But when said engineer in question is in a repair bay for humanoid mecha on a space station, and his only way to get back alive to see his wife is to fight, you have a recipe for putting the hurt on the enemy. The moral of the story is difficult to miss.

The characters

The characters are varied and well-drawn. “The Guardian,” “Graduation Day,” and “Maintenance Mode” have some of the best characterizations in the collection. So does “Stack Knight” – a reader wants to spend more time with the heroes of that story, and it is a pity it is so short. “Maelstrom Rising” suffers from “zooming in” and “out” of a third person omniscient and a third person private point of view, but the story and the finale compensate for this.

The other five tales in this volume had similar success, and it bears mentioning that I have only touched on the pieces I enjoyed most. With ten adventures in this collection, every reader is likely to find one

set of characters they resonate with more than others.

The world

The worlds are as disparate and different as the characters within them. Of those reviewed here, I think “Stack Knight,” “The Guardian,” and “Graduation Day” have some of the most complete worlds in the story. While we are not given a great deal of time with any of them, they are all vivid and were selected for maximum advantages and disadvantages for the battles that take place within.

The politics

At most, the only politics that have nothing to do with the events in the stories boil down to: “Tyranny is bad, mecha help you smash it.” Beyond this message, the politics are all related to events in the tales and have no bearing on real world policies.

Content warning

Most of the stories in this volume are bursting with foul language. There is also some discussion of sex in some of the tales, and some gore that would not faze mature readers. But this collection is not for children and may not be appropriate for younger YA readers.

Who is it for?

People who enjoy mecha, war stories, and military sci-fi as well as fantasy and near-future fiction. “Graduation Day” in particular will appeal to consumers of Japanese manga and anime while “The Guardian” will entertain history buffs as well as space opera fans. For those who cannot get enough of humanoid, manmade tanks causing chaos and spreading destruction, this anthology will be a solid favorite.

Why read it?

Read it for “The Guardian.” Then check out the other stories and pick your favorites from among those. You are bound to find at least two to three others you will love, but that one is the pinnacle of the entire collection.

The Paths of Cormenor by Jim Breyfogle

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The women of Cormenor possess the power to transform into cormorants, an ability which allows them to fly and dive for fish, the bones of which are carved for ornamentation and sold. Hearing tales of these fantastic women, Prince Kellen, the seventh son of a seventh son and the youngest heir to the throne, sets out to visit Cormenor and see the women’s magic for himself.

Amara, the youngest female member of Cormenor House, is tasked with keeping an eye on the prince while her sisters show off. Distracted by her desire to fly with them, she misses seeing her youngest cousin falling into the lake. Noticing him fall, Kellen dives in to rescue the boy – inadvertently giving a lurking enemy the chance to strike.

The story

Following Kellen into the lake, Amara helps retrieve her cousin and the prince from the water, despite the efforts of something to prevent the rescue. While her cousin is fine the prince remains unresponsive even after they manage to get him breathing again. The matriarch of Cormenor determines that Prince Kellen's soul has been stolen by the monster of the lake, the Grimly.

Having failed to watch over the young man as she was told, Amara takes on the task of retrieving his soul to make amends for her error. With her grandmother's blessing and her family's prayers, she sets off to the east side of the lake, where the Grimly lives. Transforming into a cormorant, she dives into the water and finds the monster's lair, into which Amara swims before turning back into a human.

Amara soon finds her way into the old hag's rooms, but her investigations are interrupted by the Grimly's horrific son, Shrecken. Shrecken decides that this young woman won't be his mother's meal but his. When the Grimly summons him, he hides Amara in a wardrobe to keep her out of sight.

Of course, the girl frees herself quickly and manages to find Kellen's soul. A brief fight ensues when the Grimly finds her but, through luck and determination, Amara manages to defeat the monster. She escapes the lair as Shrecken discovers his mother's corpse, howling in rage and grief.

Although Amara makes it back to Cormenor and restores Kellen's soul to him, there is a slight snag: the Grimly imbibed a small part of the prince's soul when she captured him. When Amara killed her, she absorbed that piece into herself. Now Kellen has to find a way to recover that piece without harming Amara, whose family becomes the target of Shrecken's greed and vengeance.

The characters

Without a doubt, the characters are what make this novel. Amara and Kellen are not the main viewpoint characters: at first glance, the book seems to be a typical fairy tale retelling from Amara's point of view. But the next chapter is told from her cousin Einar's perspective, which is exchanged for Vilmar the Marksgraf's, and so on and so forth.

The transitions give readers a better understanding of Amara and Kellen by interpreting their actions through their interactions with others. Rather than confine the audience to two specific viewpoints, Breyfogle expands on his main protagonists and their world by showing the hero and heroine through the eyes of others, villain and hero alike. It makes the two more memorable and fun to read about than they would be otherwise.

The world

Paths of Cormenor has a rich world that is deeper than it first appears. After the first chapter it quickly expands and takes on the breadth of a novel set in a mythic past that has just enough Medieval or Dark Age pageantry to differentiate it from the Norse sagas and Beowulf. This isn't some paint-by-numbers modern narrative dressed up to look like a Medieval tale. It is a genuine story steeped in Germanic lore, rooted deeply in the traditions it seeks to bring back to readers' attention.

The politics

One of the most refreshing things about Paths is the absolute lack of politics. There's no talk of women's rights or sexism in the story at all; the men are men, and the women are women who are not at all

averse to having men come to their rescue. It is a good story well told – a rare gem in today’s fantasy market.

Content warning

The violence described is no more graphic than that mentioned in Beowulf, though a child is murdered horribly “offscreen” during the course of the story. On the whole, this is a PG-13 book.

Who is it for?

To paraphrase the song, this book is “for kids from one to ninety-two.” Anyone can read and enjoy this novel, but those who love Norse myths and Germanic fairy tales will find it especially engaging. Fans of J.R.R. Tolkien will also love this story for delving into “that great northern spirit” which inspired the professor so much.

Why read it?

It’s a well-written, well-conceived fantasy written in a modern day that too often waters down myths and fairy tales to make them “relatable” for the audience. If that isn’t reason enough to buy it, read it, and keep it safely on one’s shelf, then the world truly has gone mad.

Postcards from Mars CV Walter, editor.

Review by Pat Patterson

[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

(I’m NOT going to do any more research on it, so there may be errors in the next paragraph, BUT not sufficient to change the essential truth of the story.)

My primary source is my memory (HA!) of reading Isaac Asimov’s two-volume autobiography “In Memory Yet Green (1920-1954)” and “In Joy Still Felt (1954-1978).”

Sometime in the 1970s, Unknown Person approached Isaac Asimov and others with the novel idea of Postcard Stories. These were to be super-shorts, which could be contained on a postcard, and were to receive a special marketing approach (after all, money was needed). Asimov needed only the suggestion to dash off “The Turning Point,” an example of his pun-centered works.

Alas, the idea was not workable at the time.

And, what with one thing and another, a half-century passes....

....and then, THE THREE MOMS OF THE APOCALYPSE emerge on the scene. To be specific, the scene was MarsCon in Virginia Beach, where they issued the challenge: using a bit of (AMAZING) artwork as inspiration, write a short story with a 50-word limit. POSTCARD STORIES!

Whether it was the artwork, the advances in technology available since the failed attempt, or the charisma of the Three Moms (which has my vote), THIS effort succeeded. In fact, they have now published FOUR volumes, of which this is the first. I actually encountered the fourth volume a couple of weeks ago and reviewed it here.

So (stealing a line from elsewhere), these are their stories:

Verdict, by Christopher R. DiNote. If you go to the rescue of a fool, you will only have to do it again.

The March of the Hare, by Jolie LaChance. Who knows what lurks in the hearts of Alice's co-stars?

The Wedding of Sir Fluffykins, by Karina Fabian. Much can be said for arranged marriages of state.

Fred and the Barnacle, by Rick Cartwright. Parasite or symbiote, some things just go together. Other things? Not so much.

The Root of the Matter, by Rob Howell. Hard-boiled detective prose notwithstanding, the author deserves the carp!

Leo the Bunny Test the Hot Box, by Kortnee Bryant. One little mistake, and it's the sixties all over again.

Baby Warrior, by Clair W. Kiernan. Yes, I'm a monster. But I'm YOUR monster.

Restaurant Critic, by Sherri Mines. You knew it was a tough job when you took it.

Callback, by Sam Robb. It's method acting. I THINK it's acting. ("Funny, how? I AMUSE you?)

Spirit Delivery, by Evan DeShais. "Did I do it good? Did I? Did I? Did I? I hope I did good!"

The Fae-chi, by Sandra Medlock. They grow SO fast! Sometimes you wish...

The Paper Swans of Ellendell, by Jimmie Bise, Jr. Poetry and beauty, and lethal capability.

Back From the Ballgame, by Caroline Furlong. Parenting cannot be accomplished without joyful sacrifice.

Another, by Liska McCabe. We do our duty; we grow; do we change?

The Mission, by Jennifer Cameron. A journey of a thousand miles had better begin with one trip to the bathroom.

Day 4, by Nick Larda. Where else are you going to be able to see something like this?

An Evil Path, by James Bellinger. Don't leave home without... never mind. Just, don't leave home.

Not a Feature, by Dorothy Grant. "I'm a smashed bug on the windshield of your heart..."

Peace Goes On, by Brian Cameron. They made a desert and called it Las Vegas. Later, that is.

Business Expectations, by Sanford Begley. To the untrained eye, she seemed to be a nice person.

A Note to Novablanca, by ZM Renick. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful relationship. (And I

think this is maybe The Perfect, The Ideal, manifestation of the form. YMMV)

Puppet in the Stars, by C. V. Walter. Don't try to bluff an old person. They will kill you, just to avoid the hassle.

It's yummy popcorn for the brain and whatever else in you that likes yummy popcorn. The artwork is absolutely lovely, and The Three Moms credit something called Midjourney for that.

I say: BRAVO!

Peace be upon your household.

The Purple Sapphire by John Taine Review by Heath Row The STF Amateur

Inspired by my recent awareness of Eric Temple Bell, aka John Taine (The Explosion Containment Umbrella #18), a California Institute of Technology mathematics professor who wrote popular science books and early sf dating back to the 1920s, I recently read an ebook of his first novel, The Purple Sapphire. Originally published as a self-contained novel in 1924, the story was later reprinted in the August 1948 issue of Famous Fantastic Mysteries.

Reminding me at times of the writing of George MacDonald Fraser (T&T #88) and H. Rider Haggard (T&T #98), the book includes politically incorrect portrayals of Indian and Tibetan people but is otherwise a relatively interesting lost world story. The gist of the plot is that a group of people venture into the mountains of Tibet in search of a young woman who was kidnapped when she was a girl—as well as large, luminous sapphires.

Along the way, they encounter 30-foot-high statues of people holding arcane technological equipment far beyond the understanding of modern-day scientists, a tunnel running underneath the mountains, and the remnants of a once scientifically advanced society. That society had largely been destroyed when their mysterious technology ran afoul, destroying much of their history and knowledge. The priestly class, formerly the keepers of the technology, no longer know how to use it.

The science portrayed includes devices that control beams of light that affect the area's underlying magma, but that comes off mostly as science fantasy. More interesting scientific aspects involve luminous sand in the desert, radioactive rocks that require lead shielding—inscribed with text in lost languages—and geologic vapors that impart madness.

The novel is enjoyable, though there are some relatively lengthy sections in which the back story is narrated via exposition, and I felt as though the story could have been told more economically. Regardless, Bell, writing as Taine, was one of the first publicly known sf authors in Los Angeles, and he remained a favorite of LASFS members into the 1940s. With most of his works out of print other than Armchair Fiction reprints a handful of years ago, this early LA author might deserve rediscovery. I shall read more.

Queen of the Unwanted by Jenna Glass

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“So that’s it, then?” Tynthanal said after a long and resentful silence. “You’d force me to abandon the woman I love to save Ellinsoltah the trouble of having to deal with a rival claimant to her throne?”

“You make it sound like some triviality,” she retorted. “A man’s life hangs in the balance, although I hope you know I would put your happiness above the life of some man I’ve never met. But don’t you see that the issue would never have come up if Ellinsoltah had a firm hold on her throne? We owe our very existence to her willingness to protect us from Aaltah. If you marry Kailee, we will be assured of Rhozinolm’s support even if Ellinsoltah is dethroned.”

“Then offer Corlin in my stead!” Tynthanal snapped. “If this marriage of state is so important, it shouldn’t matter that he’s younger than his potential bride!”

Alys growled in frustration. She understood her brother’s distress, and she wished there were another way out, but she was in no mood to deal with a temper tantrum. “Stop being a child!” she snapped back. “As you well know, he cannot enter into a legal marriage agreement for another three years. I would not want to trust the lives of everyone in this principality on a nonbinding verbal agreement, would you? Even Delnamal did his duty and married Shelvon when he loved another. Are you telling me you cannot measure up to him, of all people?”

She had the satisfaction of seeing her verbal barb hit its mark as Tynthanal flinched at the comparison. He had to see the truth in her words, and yet he refused to accept them. “So you’re basically telling me I have to take your damn potions or else!” There was a hint of panic hiding behind the anger that flashed in his eyes.

Alys wondered how many young women had worn that particular expression over the long history of Seven Wells, how many had screamed and cried and begged to be released from unwanted marriages only to have their wishes ignored. Why should her brother be any different? And why did he have to make an already difficult situation even harder? “Yes,” she bit out. “That’s it exactly.”

“Fine!” he snarled, pushing back his chair and standing up. “I’ll take the ‘or else.’”

-Queen of the Unwanted.

It is a sad truth, as politicians as diverse as Barrack Obama and Donald Trump discovered, that it is easy to win office, but harder to bring about lasting change. The new officeholder rapidly discovers that the devil is in the details, that there were reasons beyond stupidity, incompetence and malice why the previous officeholder failed to have any long-term effects on the world. It is easy to promise a new heaven and a new earth, but harder – far harder – to actually keep those promises.

In the previous book, *The Women’s War*, a triad of unwanted women from the Abby of the Unwanted cast a spell that opened up whole new vistas of magic to women, from a subtle spell that prevented unwanted conception to nastier spells targeted that could be targeted on rapists, murderers and betrayers. The remaining women from the Abbey were sent to the edge of the desert into an exile that was intended as a de facto death sentence, but they discovered – there – a new well of magic they could use to secure their independence from the kingdom and declare themselves an independent state. The world,

however, is still reeling under the effects of the Blessing (or the Curse, depending on whom you ask) and powerful forces are gathering to destroy Women's Well once and for all.

Jenna Glass has taken a gamble in this book and centred a large part of the text on two new characters, Abbess Mairah, a cold and calculating young woman and Norah, an older woman, from a different kingdom. Mairah, the first and only woman to enter the Abby willingly (as the inevitable consequence of a revenge scheme), is perhaps the most powerful woman outside Women's Well, under strict orders from her monarch to find a way to reverse the Blessing/Curse or else; Norah, who took an immediate dislike to Mairah before the world changed, intends to ensure the Blessing remains firmly in place. The relationship between the two women is poisonous right from the start, triggering off a chain of events that lead directly to disaster as they eventually wind up at Women's Well. In a sense, toxic masculinity has given way to toxic femininity and both women play a major role in damaging their own cause.

The characters introduced in the first book, therefore, have less development than I had expected, as they grapple with the new world order. Queen Ellinsoltah struggles to establish herself as the ruler of her kingdom, even after she proved she could kill as effectively as any man; she discovers, just as the historical Queen Elizabeth did, that men on her council would work to circumvent her orders. Delnamal struggles to stabilise his kingdom and resume the attack on Woman's Well; Alysoon, now the ruler of Women's Well, finds herself grappling with the same issues that confronted her father and reluctantly forced to admit, for better or worse, that he had reason. Queen of the Unwanted is very much a middle book in a trilogy and it shows.

Alysoon, in fact, comes across as a hypocrite. Having spent her early life battling for a marriage that actually suited her, then a sizable chunk of the last book trying to prevent her daughter being wedded off to an unsuitable man, Alysoon finds herself forced to offer her brother's hand in marriage to Queen Ellinsoltah's niece. He doesn't take it very calmly, as you can see above, and Alysoon doesn't take that very calmly ... which is the exact same problem her father had, when the time came to arrange marriages for himself and his children. To be fair, Alysoon recognises her brother has reason to be unhappy – and it works out better than anyone has any right to expect – but her father had the same realization too.

Delnamal, meanwhile, continues his slow fall into madness, even though he's got most of what he wanted (in particular, an heir from the woman he loved before he was forced into a loveless marriage). It rapidly becomes clear he isn't cut out for fatherhood, unable to offer any love to the baby or his adopted older son. His kingdom's instability, made worse by his poor decisions, make it harder for him to do anything, so he grasps at the straw Mairah offers when they cross paths towards the end of the book. The result is a disaster that sets up the conflict for the final book. (It is worth repeating that much of the monarchy described in this series is simply allohistorical.)

There's less to say about how the plot develops overall. The new magics are explored and developed, allowing more research to be carried out. There are some positive interactions as well as negative ones, some characters prove themselves to be better than they seem; others, unable or unwilling to give up old grudges or even simply walk away, play a role as events move rapidly towards disaster. In the end, most of the characters are deeply flawed, because of their society, and their flaws – all too often – overshadow their virtues. It is odd, in my view, that there are few characters who are not nobility and the ones who are briefly mentioned do not get a chance to shine, at least on the page.

Overall, Queen of the Unwanted is a good read, if suffering under the weight of being a middle book. It allows everyone to take a breath, before events start picking up speed again; it digs into some, if not all, of the logical consequences of the Blessing/Curse and how clashing personalities can cause disasters none of them intended. I give it four out of five.

Robin Hood Library #51—The Dragon Worshippers Review by Bob Jennings

Robin Hood is one of my favorite publications from the dime novel era. This series was produced by British publisher Aldin as a 32 page 5-1/2x8-1/2” weekly, originally appearing around 1901 thru 1906, after which the series went thru an endless series of reprints, sometimes with cover color changes. This, along with their Aldin Dick Turpin series, lasted thru most of the 1920s before competition and economics forced the company out of business.

This adventure finds Robin Hood and his core group of Merry Men adventuring in Ireland, where they meet strange people including pagan Druids and even stranger tribes living in vast underground caverns who worship and make sacrifices to a living dragon, a huge dangerous pre-historic beast with a ravenous appetite. He doesn't breathe fire, but he is doubly dangerous because the cult scours the countryside and seashore seeking new victims to offer to their hungry reptilian god. Meanwhile, the forces of the outlaw Lord and his pirate ship continue to plague the region. Robin Hood and his buddies take care of the dragon in a suitably dramatic fashion, but the forces of human evil are only partially dealt with. The saga continues in issue #52.

This is a very well written series, with lots of intrigue, plenty of action, including good character development of both the central characters and the main bad guys. This story, indeed the entire series, is a real pleasure to read. Anyone interested can sample random issues of the series (mostly the mid-1920s reprints) as posted for free at Northern Illinois University popular literature site, or linked thru the Nickels and Dimes website. They are well worth your time.

Serpent Daughter by D.J. Butler Review by Mindy Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

I have reached the end of the road for the Witchy War series. I'm not saying it's the final book; just the last one that's been written and released.

So far, I've thoroughly enjoyed the books. DJ Butler has done a fantastic job with the world building of an alternate America and its history. His character development has been complex, and the overall story has been gripping. But I feel that as we came to the end of this book it's become too muddy, like the banks of the Mississippi.

Serpent Daughter picks up with Sarah Calhoun now sitting on the throne as queen of Cahokia. The armies of her uncle Thomas Penn and his Imperial Ohio Company have surrounded her kingdom. Beside the looming physical threat, it does not look well for our queen because she has overtaxed her energy by using magic from the events of the last book and is on the verge of death. A piece of ancient magic needs to be performed to help move her spirit from her physical body and into a separate realm. It seems that only an act of the goddess will move all the chess pieces together so Sarah can live.

I think it's here when Butler possibly starts to lose the reader, when the plan is having to be spelled out on how to get everyone together who is needed. We learn several kings are needed to perform the spell. Each comes from different kingdoms and comes with their own backstory. While some kings arrive at the same time on their own, others have to be helped to reach Cahokia because of some situations created by the Imperial Ohio Company. The story bounces around between these different pieces as well as other characters in their stories. Because it can take a while to circle back around to any one of these kings, it can take a bit before remembering the backstory of that particular monarch.

In my past reviews, I've enjoyed the different characters and their stories and how they all are woven together. However, too many logs are being thrown onto the fire and it's become hard to keep track of it all. This is a distraction from the story. And since it may be a while to come back to a character it becomes easy to forget they're in this story. Or they're being under-utilized.

For instance, Margaret, Sarah's sister. She's traveling with Nathaniel, their brother. He can travel between realms, and she protects his body when he does. This has been her role since she was introduced. Sarah's role is clear. Nathaniel's role is clear. But what is Margaret except a family bodyguard?

Another is Kinta Jane. She was a mute whore in New Orleans that Sarah and crew took advantage of a few books back. Since then, Kinta Jane joined with a Franklin actor to deliver a message to Penn, ended up with a Dutchman and giant and has now travelled to Cahokia. Her secret power? She has the tongue of a dog (literally) and can silence them when they're nearby. She seems to be sticking around because...well her friend, the actor, is dead but hangs out with Nathaniel in the other realm and...well I'm not sure what her next part will be.

Then there's the slew of men around other notable characters. They perform tasks for them, as workers or guards or errand boys. You learn about their history and what's in their heads with regard to the overall story in the book. Plenty of pages are spent on them but by the time the book ends you're left wondering if they'll be back or if they were filling up space. I'm not saying that Butler creates characters just to fluff up the story but there are those side story lines that do seem frivolous.

Speaking of getting lost, where are the bad guys? We were introduced to Thomas Penn, Ezekiel Angleton, the Heron King, Oliver Cromwell (the Necromancer), and Robert Hooke to name a few (the more prominent ones). As we have moved farther into the story, we've mainly dealt with the minions of Penn and the others have disappeared. We hear about the Heron King, stories or rumors that feed theories, but that's about it. There may be a piece of a chapter about Cromwell because of his dark magic that Penn is using; however, I come back around to why he gets lost in the story.

Now, as much as I can complain about the mass of characters in the story, I will give Butler credit for providing an index at the end of the books with a list of most of the characters we encounter. It has their name and a brief description. This is helpful but it can also be distracting if you are in the middle of a scene and need to stop to figure out who this person is – and if they are even listed.

So take all these characters, attach a string to each one, have those strings wind around a board crossing each other, and all hopefully meeting at Sarah and this is what we have. It looks like a conspirator theorist's board. (I'm not saying aliens but ALIENS!) I feel a bit lost. I like this story, but too much is going on at once and it makes it hard to relax and enjoy.

I haven't felt this overwhelmed by any of the other books. I was sad to come to the end of the last three but with *Serpent Daughter* I was relieved. I do want to continue Sarah's story and find out what happens to her main circle of companions, but I hope that the pile of extra characters doesn't become so overwhelming that I want to walk away from the series. Butler has done such a wonderful job up till now.

I'm not sure when the next *Witchy War* novel will be out, but I'll be willing to give it a go because it's a good story. I just hope to not get lost in the weeds.

Space Cowboys Edited by C.V. Walter

Review by Pat Patterson

goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

My heroes have always been cowboys. It was rather inevitable, because at that time, Roy Rogers and The Lone Ranger dominated the three channels available on the rabbit-ear-antenna'ed black and white television set, to be followed closely by Bat Masterson, Gunsmoke, Maverick, Bronco and Bonanza. Have you got the idea? Because I can list MANY more examples, if you like. I was THERE, you see; and, to top it off, we moved to San Antonio in time for me to start the first grade, and I got my first cowboy hat and boots, and saw the Alamo, and had a pet horned toad. So, yeah, cowboys.

Nothing lasts forever. The US got interested in rockets, and the new shows were Men in Space, Tom Corbett: Space Cadet, Twilight Zone, and Lost in Space; by the time Star Trek finally hit the screen in 1966, NOBODY wanted a pony for Christmas anymore.

And, if ANYONE had suggested that the writers were just dusting off un-used or over-used Western story lines, calling a rabbit a smerp, and replacing the ferocious Apache with the ferocious Martian/Klingon, they would have been shunned as a spoilsport.

Even though nothing lasts forever, nothing ever changes, either. We STILL wanted cowboys! So, we got Wild Wild West (cowboys PLUS high-tech!), which was the very first prime-time steampunk event, preceding the origination of the term by more than 20 years.

I'm ignoring cartoons, which haven't been my thing since Bugs Bunny/Roadrunner, and comic books, which I abandoned shortly after Spiderman emerged.

For those of us who really loved the blend, though, it was a wasteland.

(Firefly)

WHO SAID THAT? Please, PLEASE don't make me remember Firefly...

Yes, I KNOW I'm leaving out a lot of greatness. Please feel free to make up the lack in the comments!

At long last, a colony of psychos, hippies, chippies, rednecks, cops, veterans, school marms, librarians, pilots, priests, scientists and authors (oops, redundant!) decided it was time to get the job done. And they came up with this collection of SPACE COWBOY stories. I hope that one of the future volumes will be titled "Meanwhile, Back at the Asteroid..."

The stories:

Asteroid Wranglers, by JL Curtis. When we finally get a foothold in space, we are NOT going to be able to rely on lifting up essential resources out of Earth's gravity well. No need to either, since there is an entire planet's worth, already busted up, drifting out there, waiting for us. It's dangerous work, though, and The Man only cares about the bottom line.

Drover, by Evan DeShais. The man told me that he was excited by our future in space, because there are SO many resources out there that everyone will be rich, and there will be no crime, just peace. So, I sold him some crypto-currency, an extended warranty on his car, and the winning ticket to the lottery. He was happy for the opportunity! (NOTE: none of that happened; it's just my way of illustrating that where opportunity exists, cheaters, robbers, bullies and thugs will find a way.)

All Creatures Weird and Wonderful, by David Bock. I understand that it was customary in ancient times to lame the blacksmith. He was so vital to the village, they didn't want him to run away. Same could happen with medics, in a future on another planet, with bizarre forms of disease. Query: did witch doctors ever get killed if they guessed wrong?

Getting the Herd In, by Richard Cartwright. Cool, this one is in the BIBLE, sort of! There's a difference between a shepherd and a hired hand, paid to watch sheep. In this case, it's bison adapted to a semi-terraformed Mars, but that takes NOTHING away from the story.

Showdown at Palladiumtown, by Andrew Milbourne. The Texas Rangers are the oldest law enforcement agency in America. There's no reason to believe their history can only be written on Earth, is there? Sure, there are bound to be conflicts over jurisdiction, but competent professionals can usually win over well-intentioned local cops. And, if they AREN'T well-intentioned? I don't know; shoot 'em, maybe?

Gideon's Wild Ride, by Scott Slack. Roy took good care of Trigger, and the Lone Ranger took good care of Silver. The partnership between horse and rider is a precious trust, and it goes both ways.

No Home on the Range, by Rick Cutler. This isn't a story about homeless space cowboys. This is a story about how keeping to a code of honor can be complicated; it's about loyalty. And it serves as an excellent reminder that survivors MUST know their environment.

Tin Badge, Tin Dog, by Daniel G. Zeidler. A good dog has saved more than one person from harm, and from loneliness as well. They are amazingly perceptive, and the bond between a dog and his human has to be seen to be believed. Will robot dogs be able to do that? Well, I hear that some people can be both cop and combat, so maybe it's possible.

Interstellar Cattle Drive, by Cedar Sanderson. A herd of cows may look placid, but they can DEFINITELY kill you. If that happens, though, it won't be because of evil intent; it's just that the cow couldn't be troubled by realizing you were in the way. If you are appropriately prudent, though, you can expect to operate safely in the vicinity of the herd. That safety doesn't extend to situations involving humans.

W.A.R.P. in Sector 3! by Jesse Barrett. There are good reasons that ship captains are given a great deal of authority. Most of those reasons are related to potentially lethal events. It would be nice if the threats could be limited to weather. Or even warfare! However, I suspect that threats generated from actions by crew members are those which are most likely to succeed. A captain's authority will NOT save the author of this story, however! He played "fun with the written word," inserting cultural references, and probably puns and other japes, and is destined for the carp catapult.

This volume is certified free of existential angst and may be used to illustrate the value of an ethical system of beliefs to youth and others in need.

The Star Scroll by Melanie Rawn Review by Tom Feller

I can't really say that this book, the second in the author's Dragon Prince series, is in the tradition of Game of Thrones, because it pre-dates Martin's series by several years. There are dragons, and there is one scene in which some of the characters, at a discrete distance, watch a battle to the death between two male dragons for the right to mate with a group of females. There is also a struggle for the

right to rule the continent. Rohan, one of the central characters, had defeated the High Prince Roelstra in personal combat at the end of the first book. The second book picks up 14 years later and could even be titled *The Dragon Prince: The Next Generation*. Rohan has a son, Pol, who is fourteen and has spent the last three years as a squire in the household of one of Rohan's oldest friends, and another major character is Maarken, Rohan's nephew. Roelstra had three grandsons, although only one of them is a major character in this book, and Masul is Roelstra's possible son who openly claims the throne. Some of Rohan's enemies accept his claim.

There is also an alternate magical system to the one shown in the first book, and its main practitioner is a new character called Mireva. It relies on starlight for its power, while the one from the previous book relies on sunlight and moonlight, which is, of course, reflected sunlight. The leader of those practitioners, called Sunrunners, is Andrade, who just happens to be Rohan's aunt, and her designated successor is Andry, another nephew of Rohan. I found the book to be fascinating, although some readers might decide that there is too much talk and not enough action.

The Thing From HR by Roy M. Griffis
Review by Richard Paolinelli
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When I first opened up this book I wasn't sure what to expect. It had been years since I'd read Lovecraft, and I was never that big of a fan of Cthulhu to begin with.

But what I found was a great read that pays homage to Lovecraft's vision and peppers his mythos with a healthy dash of Harry Harrison's *Stainless Steel Rat* and Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

Here's why this is a book you really should be reading...

The story

Narg is a shoggoth who works in HR, Human Restraint Office, not human resources, dear ones. He's also the nephew of an Elder God who has a favor to ask - and by favor, I mean a direct order: Hop on down to Earth, have his essence downloaded into one of the humans and complete an assignment that he will not be briefed on until he has arrived in his new "meatsuit" by his local native guide.

Telling an Elder God no is not an option, so off Narg goes. Only the Chaos Department isn't very helpful, even when Narg burns down a dwelling trying to contact them for more info and has to carry a naked co-ed out of the fire he started. And his native guide? He knows even less about what's going on.

What Narg does know is that there is a human nearby using forbidden knowledge to try and summon VI'mrkh, an Elder Being whose only purpose would be to devour everything on the Earth, and only he and Murph can stop its arrival.

Working their way through suspects, and an increasing number of bodies, while trying not to become suspects in murder themselves to the local constabulary, the pair finally confront the human with evil intentions and face off against the VI'mrkh in a final confrontation with all of existence hanging in the balance.

The characters

Narg is the driver of the story, after all it is told from his POV. He's content to be a simple paper-pushing Shoggoth from Damnation Services-10 in HR - sipping from his nice hot mug of blood from a thrice-damned man - but he's been assigned to go to Earth because he's the only one around who has made the study of the "Hairless Apes Who Fling Their Poo" his own.

His local guide is Murph, a human whose soul was stolen just before the thief plunged a knife into his heart and is now damned to spend eternity hanging upside down in a cave whilst being nibbled upon by bearded, winged clams. Like Narg, he has been inserted into the body of Dr. Weisenheimer, and like Narg, he has no clue who it is they are supposed to find and stop.

There are a host of humans, unaware of who is inhabiting the visiting Professor, and one among them is the person meddling in knowledge forbidden to humans. Which means I can't tell you much about them without giving away who it is our protagonists seek. Narg and Murph are forced to try to figure out who it is with very few clues thanks to the inept Chaos Department. This is also, in a bizarre sort of way, a buddy story, as Narg and Murph work their way through the story and become as much friends as a shoggoth and a human can.

The world

It is actually two worlds. Narg's underworld where the Elder Gods live and underlings like Narg gibber away over steaming mugs of the blood of thrice-damned men while knowing why one should never give power to cats, opens and closes the story. The human world is set nearly eight decades in the past, which makes some of Murph's hippie anachronisms clash with the humans of the time. Where those worlds collide is where this story lives and how they interact is where this story is told.

The politics

Real world politics don't exist in this story. And I prefer my fiction stories to keep present day politics out of the plot. We do encounter some of the politics at play in Narg's plane of existence, especially where his uncle - an Elder God they all call 'The Bits' - is concerned. As for Narg's time on Earth, he's too busy trying to figure out why's he here in the first place and then later trying to figure out which human is trying to use forbidden knowledge to destroy the world to get involved in Earth's politics of the time the story is set in.

Content warning

Yes, Roy was writing something meant to be fun, but there is still a lot of blood and guts involved, especially near the end. But they are mixed in with just the right light touch that it isn't much of a problem. Other than that, its a PG-13 read for the most part.

Who is it for?

Anyone who wonders what would have happened if Harry Harrison or Douglas Adams had decided to step into H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos with their flair for sci-fi with a healthy dollop of humor mixed in.

Why read it?

If you are looking for a story about monsters - both human and non-human - that is a lot of fun to read, this is the book you want to read. And you can get your copy right here along with the rest of this amazing series: Cthulhu Amalgamated series by Roy M. Griffis.

Time Thieves by Dean R. Koontz Review by Bob Jennings

I seem to be reading a lot of damaged books this time round, books that I cannot sell and ultimately have to trash after I finish reading the things. I wish this book was in good shape, since this is an early SF Koontz story and would be worth fifteen to twenty bucks if it was in good shape, but alas, this book has severe problems, including badly scraped covers, spine damage, water stains on inside pages, edge-wear, and chips at outside cover tips. It went into the trash as soon as I finished reading the story, which is a good one.

Dark menace surrounds Pete Mullion as he returns home one afternoon to discover that he has been missing for months and is presumed to be dead. He thought he was doing some repair work up at the summer cottage before winter set in, but it turns out things are seriously amiss in his life. Someone, or something is causing him to have lapses of consciousness in which he loses chunks of his life. The next event is only a couple of days long, but he and his wife discover that things are not well, that they are being stalked, and then they discover that the stalkers are mechanical men in human form. His brain is blasted by a psionic attack and then he discovers that he is a pawn in an unfolding crisis involving forces using time machines to take over planet earth and the human race. But first they need to either eliminate him or convince him to join their ranks. Why is Pete so important to them? Well, that's the crux of the story.

Nicely written and fast paced, my only quibble with this tale is that the introduction of the psionically endowed bad guys leap onto the scene a bit too abruptly and Pete adjusts to the confrontation a lot more casually than the buildup would imply. But other than that, this is a good adventure that clearly shows Koontz was an accomplished word slinger even back in the early 1970s.

I tried to read the other half of the book "Against Arcturus" by Susan K. Putney. It was her only published SF work, a space opera, but I could not get into it.

Toll Of Honor by David Weber Review by Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

Toll Of Honor Pays Off, Nicely Fills In Some Blanks

In the midst of events detailed in the book Field of Dishonor, we have a few points that apparently David Weber wanted to revisit and "fill in the blanks" with regard to Paul Tankersley and the showdown between Honor Harrington and Pavel Young.

Toll of Honor fills in those gaps, and it also delivers the story of how Chief Petty Officer Horace Harkness won the attention of Sergeant Major Iris Babcock. I mean, come on, a Navy chief and a Marine? Inside the Honorverse, a lot of people had a tough time believing it. Now we get to see how it came about. We also get more detail on the friendship that forms between Lieutenant Brandy Bolgeo and Major Clint Hendren, a relationship first seen in the novella "A Travesty of Nature" from the anthology Onward Libertycon (Brandy's father, Tim, is named in honor of Timothy Bolgeo, the founder of LibertyCon).

When this book was first announced, the initial selling point was “see how Harkness and Babcock got together!” and that sold me right away. But this book is more than that. In fact, the Harkness-Babcock courtship really is more the C-story thread that weaves in and out of the A-story, which is the slow burn building up to the duel between Harrington and Earl North Hollow.

Starting with his court-martial after his cowardice at the Battle of Hancock, the “filling in the blanks” begins right away, as we now get to see the discussions that center on the delay in getting a formal declaration of war and how it affects the operations of the Royal Manticoran Navy (short answer: not well). The delays caused by politics have the Navy brass sweating bullets at the notion that more time gives Haven a chance to consolidate and actually train up officers after the purge leaves their Navy in the hands of a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears tyros with no experience and political officers breathing down their necks. Sir Thomas Caparelli knows that the longer it takes to get a declaration, the less chance he has to make this a short war.

And Young’s trial lies at the center of it, with a final compromise that leaves everyone dissatisfied.

The court-martial is too much for the elder North Hollow, and Pavel Young finds himself now the Earl of North Hollow after the death of his father. This gives him access to the dreaded North Hollow Files and his father’s assistant/fixer, Georgia Sakristos. And he starts to wield his influence right away, all the while trying to figure out how to finally have his revenge on one Honor Harrington.

The bulk of the first part covers territory we visited in *Field of Dishonor*: Paul Tankersley’s death at the hands of Denver Summervale, the confrontation that leads to Summervale’s confession, Honor’s subsequent duels with Summervale and North Hollow, and her banishment to Grayson in the aftermath of killing a peer. But in between all of that, we finally get a few pieces that have been cause for speculation: the actual duel between Paul and Summervale, North Hollow’s machinations behind the scenes to get revenge on Honor, the lead-up to the formal declaration of war and the operations Admiral White Haven leads in the opening rounds.

And, of course, the courtship of Iris Babcock.

There’s also the first meeting between Steadholder Harrington and her personal guard, and given that we’ve already seen how that goes, it was a bit of a kick to see everyone in the very early stages of figuring each other out — including Honor realizing just what she’s gotten herself into as a newly christened head of state.

That’s the first half. The second half gives us a look at Honor’s crew and what they were doing while she was becoming a Very Important Person on Grayson during *Flag in Exile*. The Royal Manticoran Navy finally gets their formal declaration of war, Admiral White Haven and the 6th Fleet get to start pressing the attack against the People’s Republic of Haven. Captain Alistair McKeon is right there in the middle of it with HMS *Prince Adrian*, where Brandy Bolgeo is the newly minted Chief Engineer having to deal with the new Marine detachment commander, Major Hendren.

I’ve always admired the way Weber and his co-conspirators co-authors have always been able to tell stories within stories. Whether it’s a novel like *Storm From the Shadows* — Weber telling the tale of Michelle Henke’s capture — or *Torch of Freedom* with Eric Flint, giving us a new side-story series that weaves in and out of the main line of books, the Honorverse is one of the best and most tightly-woven narratives I’ve run across. While it’s not perfect — Weber has admitted as much — it’s probably the closest thing we’re going to get in terms of maintaining continuity and cohesion throughout the near-

forty novels and anthologies that have been published since 2012.

This is the kind of book you don't realize you were missing until it sits on the shelf as part of your growing personal library. While I never needed to revisit these events, I have (on occasion) felt a little shortchanged by the fact that Paul Tankersley died off-screen in *Field of Dishonor*. I understood at the time — that story was about Honor and how events were pulling her inexorably toward a final confrontation. This time around, with the focus being on the supporting cast, we finally get that first duel as well as the reactions of the crew as events spiral out of control.

And even though it's not the main plot, the scenes between Harkness and Babcock are absolute comfort food. The banter between these two remind me of another couple — yes, it's me and Mrs. Boss — and given that they're not spring chickens falling all over each other in *luuuuuurrrrvvve*, the relationship actually feels inevitable instead of "because plot said so" like we get in other stories.

All in all, an excellent entry into the Honorverse, one I didn't mind at all reading while I wait for the sequel to *Uncompromising Honor*, which needs to be out sooner rather than later.

To Turn the Tide by S. M. Stirling Early Review by George Phillies

Many older readers will have been introduced to alternative histories, in particular history altered by time travel when they encountered L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*. This fine tradition is continued with *To Turn the Tide* by S. M. Stirling, currently available as the electronic, unedited, advanced reader copy.

In this version of changing time, the five heroes and heroines are projected back into the past, to be precise into the Roman Empire at the time of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, just before the outbreak of the Marcomanic wars. The creator of the time projector has diverted billions of Euros to his project, which completes literally at the last possible second. The heroes are projected into the past just as a general total war breaks out. The blast wave from the thermonuclear device that destroys Vienna reaches the projector site just as the projector activates, so the hero of the work can watch in distorted time as the windows every so slowly begin to blow in towards them.

This is the last we see of the projector's creator, who has thoughtfully provided the travellers with all sorts of resources needed to survive and thrive in the ancient world. The introduction of inventions is spelled out, beginning with the observation that there are inventions that can be shown to a local craftsman, who will exclaim 'why didn't I think of that', and inventions that could not have been imagined by a craftsman. There is a reason that the original Newcomen and Watt steam engines were referred to as *philosophical engines*, namely that only someone who understood natural philosophy, in particular the works of Boyle on the pressure of gasses, could understand how they worked well enough to build one.

There is plot.. There is romance. The travellers are all scholars, who are distracted from their important work, extending the *Pax Romana* to the entire world, by the sight of lost manuscripts such as Ovid's only tragedy, the *Medea*. Modern novels can be much longer than the thin works of pre-World-War II America, so Stirling enriches his description with gloriously thorough descriptive details. There is well-worked-out characterization, Marcus Aurelius and the physician Galen being to my knowledge the only historical figures that we see in any depth.

If you like the genre, the work is a *must-buy-and-read*. Available from Baen books.

Literary Criticism

We came across an interesting article of relevance to writers and readers:
<https://www.elysian.press/p/no-one-buys-books> Why trad pub often does not help you.

Wanted: Gatekeepers
In praise of Upstream Reviews
L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright
<https://ljagilamplighterwright.substack.com>

In this post, I wish to praise Upstream Reviews, but first, I want to talk about why I feel they and similar ventures are so valuable. [Editor: And if you find other such review sources, please tell us about them.]

Once upon a time, in the long-ago dreamtime of Indie publishing, there was great celebration. Traditional publishing was so difficult, so limited, so claustrophobic. Indie publishing was about to set us all free. No limits.

No gatekeepers.

No big meanies keeping our books from reaching eager readers because they happen to hold a different ideology.

It was going to set writers free.

Only, like the little comic where someone defiantly leaps over a fence...that turns out to be a guardrail over a cliff, big meanies objecting to alternate ideologies was not the only purpose of gatekeepers.

One of the other purposes was: quality.

If someone reads a good book, they often want to read another one. "Hey, I just read this great book. Do you know anything like it? Can you recommend another?"

But when they read a bad book, they tend to put the book aside and go do something else: watch a movie, watch a video, go for a walk, play a video game.

Anything but read a book.

And when everyone can publish anything they want, chances of getting a bad book out of the grab bag of indie books is high.

Just so you don't think I'm casting shade on my fellow authors, let me tell you a story:

In the 90s, I wrote my first novel. I sent it to my agent. He got a job with Tor...so he became my editor. But he was pretty busy.

Took him six years to get back to me.

Six years.

That's a long time to wait. For anything.

Nowadays, I would probably have given up and gone indie.

But back then, I wanted to do things right. Right meant getting into a big publisher. So as I waited, I rewrote the entire book, then two books, and, eventually, after Tor bought it but wanted a trilogy, a third book.

I learned a tremendous amount during those six rewrites. It became a better book. I became a better writer.

By the time Tor published it, it was a much better book than it had been in 1998. It was published to all sorts of lovely starred reviews from Kirkus, Publisher's Weekly, Library Journal, etc.

The finished product was a much better book. I know this. If you read them both, you would know this. The readers and reviewers would recognize this.

But do you know who did not know this? Who had absolutely no clue?

1998 me.

When I first finished the book, I thought it was great. It wasn't. It needed a lot of work.

But 1998 me had no clue.

If 1998 me had existed today, she might never have learned how poor her first try was and how much better it could be. She might have waited a year or a few months, and then gone indie.

She might have despaired when no one really liked the book.

Just the other day, I commented on a video, and a stranger recognized my name and told me that he has reread my series once a year, every year, since it came out.

Best thing that happened to me in a while!

But I can assure you, it would not have happened if I had gone indie in 1998 and never put in the sweat and hard work of truly learning the craft.

So, to return to our main topic: No gatekeepers, no quality control.

This is bad for readers and, as we see above, it can be bad for writers, too.

On top of quality, there are other things gatekeepers can do for us. There are ideologies we might not wish to read, genres we don't really enjoy, and other qualities that an editor might bring to choosing books that is missing from a random Amazon search.

Having someone whose judgment you trust who can tell you which books are worth reading is...well,

it's a lot more valuable than we realized!

It's more than a decade since the great "no gatekeepers" celebration, and we find ourselves adrift on a sea of books. Books, books, everywhere, and not a drop to read...er...I mean, not a good book in sight.

So how do we find good books?

The answer is: we need gatekeepers.

Specifically, we need voluntary gatekeepers, such as review sites, that have similar taste or values. So we can find books we might actually enjoy reading.

And people who might like our books can find them, too.

One such site is Upstream Reviews.

Upstream Reviews on Substack

Andrew Breitbart is famous for having discerned that culture is upstream of politics.

This translates to: you cannot change the politics—the way people vote and what they want in their government—unless you change culture first.

Upstream Reviews takes its name from this concept. The site endeavors to review books that have a chance of fanning the flames of the kind of culture in which we would like to live: a culture where virtue and heroism are lauded, and vices and vileness are not.

If you like books that are heroic, Superversive, Iron Age, Pulp Rev. or any number of other modern movements that strike not to fall into the trap currently called by the term Woke, this site is for you.

If you want to know which Indie books are worth reading, this site is for you.

If you want to know which series—books or TV—you might be able to enjoy without wanting to rip your eyes out, this site is for you.

We need more sites like this. Places we can go to find works that might appeal to us that we tell each other about—so that readers can find books, and authors can find readers.

Give Upstream Reviews a visit. Tell a friend. Even subscribe.

Maybe you'll even find a book you truly love!

Know of other good review sites or places to find Indie books worth reading? Let us know below!

Prose Bono

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

Contemplating the appeal of the limp heroine and brooding dark hero

This article was originally published at The Mad Genius Club on February 11, 2017. It came up while I was looking for something else and having a conversation about the danger of writing Bad Boy romantic heroes. I did wind up writing a lot of fantasy, but my heroines are never limp unless fully unconscious.

I had gothic dreams last night. Most likely the product of working on the finale of my novel. Not that it's gothic at all... For those of you aren't familiar with gothic romance, it's all dark and stormy nights, tons of angst, and heroines who are too stupid to live. Literally. I'm not familiar with the early beginnings of the genre, but think Jane Eyre, the author Barbara Cartland, or for that matter, much of the Victorian novels. Brooding heroes any sane woman would look at, slip into the powder room, and climb out the window to get away from.

But none of the girls in these books seem to have the sense God gave a goose. I never read many gothics, and the ones I did read were because there was nothing else. Or, in the case of Barbara Michaels, because I knew her work as Elizabeth Peters and wanted to see... Bleah, no. Looking back as an adult and an author, Barbara Cartland is impressive because she may be the most prolific writer, ever. I'm not sure how many were published, but a quick search taught me that she had 160 manuscripts unpublished at the time of her death at the ripe age of 99. I may not have been fond of her books, but I aspire to that kind of production level.

I'm straying from my intended topic. I did have one, really. The plots of these books were mostly very similar and easy to predict. A girl, or rarely, a spinster on the shelf at the shocking old age of say, twenty, was thrust by unforeseen circumstances from her home and into the cold cruel world. This didn't bother the younger-reader-me much, I could see even back then that you had to work for a living, and if your parents both died, you were on your own. It seemed logical that governesses would be in demand. Some of the more modern books left me puzzled, since in them the heroine haring off across Europe thousands of miles from home making her living as an art restorer or some such seemed a lot more improbable.

It was the next part of the plot that always left me internally screaming at the fictional idiots. They never seemed to check up on where they were going. I could be wrong, but a major element in most gothics, almost a character in its own right, was the house/castle. If a house, it had to be huge, mostly empty, with miles of disused corridors. Whichever it was, it had to be falling into ruins. I mean, you would think a kindly villager would take our girl by the elbow and firmly turn her around to put her on the train. "Yer the fourth one this month. That Baron, he's not right in the head. C'mon ducks, here you go" and she'd be spared a lot of trauma.

Of course, we the readers know she has nothing to fear. This is where the glittery hoo-ha originates, after all, with the *ahem* notorious totally-not-a-serial-killer man suddenly being put on the paths of

angels by one look at our daffy-brained heroine. But it's not love at first sight, oh no. He will likely growl at her, verbally abuse her, and that's if he deigns to show up at all when she does. Also, what is with the number of time he's her employer, or worse, guardian, but romancing her is still on the table as a viable option? Most of these books are set in eras when that was beginning to be frowned on. I have to wonder about some people's fetishes. Nothing wrong with having kinks, that's just not mine. Makes me want to hit the girl in the book upside the head with the family Bible

The remainder of the plot usually involves some sort of madness, because you don't expect to find some crazy relative locked up in an old ruin like that. There may be a ghost, or in the more modern versions, the mad relative dressed up in sheets like one. There's probably a plot moppet in the form of the adorable and very traumatized child from the Brooding Hero's first marriage. There is always rain, and none of that gentle spring stuff, either, this is driven and cold and will half drown you and of course our Daffy-brained heroine goes out in it.

Finally, the half-dead heroine, saved by the hero, accepts his offer of marriage, the sun comes out, and she settles down to make a happy home in the ruin. Me, I'm left gaping like a fish thinking "Run, dammit! Run away!" But no...

That's not precisely what I was dreaming, which was more a muddled dark and rainy night at the edge of the sea, a coffin-like box strapped to rocks there, and a mad doctor torturing a pale faced girl who refused to give up the names of the Resistance even as he was closing the lid on her. You can see why I called it gothic. Horrifying, at the least. I woke up gasping and tangled in blankets, and lay there thinking about the appeal of the gothic novel.

Why do readers like that emotion storm? The emotions invoked by reading, or music, are no less real than ones brought on by actual events, they are just less powerful. Even when I was younger I didn't care for angst, but I did enjoy other emotions invoked by reading. We all know that book hangover, after finishing a really compelling story that has made you laugh, and cry, and wind up in triumph on a high note. Perhaps this is what the gothic readers were in search of. A heroine worse off than they were, in some exotic setting, who they knew would wind up with a happily ever after. I prefer my characters with more spunk and less wet-noodle aspect, is all. Which is why I gravitated to science fiction, in the end.

Feeding Up

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I should probably write something on selling books, but just at this moment I'm vague, foggy, and trying to consume enough coffee to simulate awakesness. I could, I suppose, make the analogy that in order to sell a book, you first have to attract the reader's attention the way food does an eater. We think about food, we get hungry... ok, books don't really make us hunger, do they? Why not? We are bored, we are tired, we are lonely, we want to learn... the right books can fill each of those holes in our spirits, and sometimes more than one at a time.

I went to a restaurant with friends yesterday. We'd been talking about food, and getting hungrier, before we arrived. Then, when we finally got out of the car, we could smell fragrant aromas of cooked meats and such, savory and appetizing. Who of us hasn't walked into a bookstore and taken a deep breath? No doubt, ebooks lose on this one aspect, as much as I love my ability to own and carry thousands of books around in my pocket. The same appetite stimulant can come in the form of talking about books, reading a review, and thinking about reading, though.

When you get closer, you see the food, and then you begin to understand why presentation matters on a plate. If the food looks a bit of a dog's breakfast, you might lose your appetite and turn away, revolted at the idea of putting that mess into your mouth. The cover of a book serves here as the beautiful portrayal of something good inside. Even if you are, say, serving a chicken curry which is largely colored with chickpeas and turmeric, there are ways to serve it that look beautiful – a scattering of fried onion, vivid green of chopped herb sprinkled on there, perhaps a crumble of feta. The colors play well together, as do the flavors, and your mouth waters. You begin to know what to expect when you put it in your mouth. A book cover signals all the same things to a reader.

The other thing you want to do, with your book, is make it varied and balanced. A meal that shoots from one flavor to another, willy-nilly, or worse, has no flavor at all, will cause the picky eater to give up after pushing it around on their plate and stare sadly at it, still unfilled and longing for what they weren't given. A book that is one-note is as bad as uncooked unseasoned gravy, a quivering gelatinous blob on the plate that would turn anyone's stomach.

You want to make sure you have balance! The richness of character emotions played out on the page, through the use of dialogue and interactions. The piquant stab of conflict, tart and puckery like citrus in the salad. The sweet at the end, soothing and leaving the reader smiling as they close the book's cover to sigh over leaving the world you wove for them.

Your book could be anything from a bowl full of uncooked ingredients, interesting in potential, lacking in execution. Or it could be a fully developed multi-course meal, with plot structure conducting the journey from one part of the story to another in harmonic flavor symphony.

Yes, I do think of cooking as akin to composition – which is how I conduct a story. I am no musician and never have been, although I appreciate how it is done. In any given dish you want salt to bring out the flavors and add to the savory. Fat to convey the flavor and add richness. Sweet and sour, in their places, can be unexpected notes but very useful as beats of story that come in moments to convey emotional growth. Heat, in many cuisines, is there to warm, to linger, to be a lasting memory of the bite long after it's swallowed. When done properly, not so much that the tastebuds are seared and left numb, it is a wonderful way to enhance the blandest of underlying food bulk.

For storytelling? Well, you want a little of this, a little of that, the ghost of your writing exemplars will whisper in your ear when it's enough... I realize that many writers are looking for recipes they can follow slavishly to a completed dish, er, book.

However, they will become truly good writers when they realize that they can safely substitute, just as you can in a recipe, and in doing so subtly affect flavors, textures, and wind up with something new and fresh to present to their readers. When they have sampled many, many stories – not just fiction! Not just books! – then they can begin to amalgamate all of those flavors into something that is uniquely theirs.

And now, I am going to wander off to the farmer's market in search of ripe tomatoes to make up [my own tabbouleh](#), and come home to make up hummus for supper tonight, because I'm in the mood for food.

Rootstock

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I was thinking about the peach tree, and what I could write about, and the conversations I've been having over the last week or two on the topic of the books that formed us. That all connected, as I contemplated what to do about the garden. Last year I planted a peach. Like many other things in the garden, it seemed to have died back entirely, but in the late fall, I saw shoots coming up from the very base of the tree. It meant the rootstock has survived. This spring, there is a cluster of shoots, with healthy leaves. I plan to pinch off all but one that can develop into a proper trunk. I have no idea what will come of it. Rootstock on many orchard trees is not good for fruit.

The rootstock is chosen for its hardiness, the ability to grow good strong roots and support the less vigorous fruiting graft. I don't know just when this technique was first used by orchardists wishing to clone their best trees, but it is very old. For mine, I shall at least let the tree regrow to a few feet tall and at least as thick as my thumb. Then I may order a scion of a good fruiting variety and set it to graft. If it takes a few years, I might expect ripe juicy peaches. Or perhaps not. Gardens rarely do precisely what we want of them.

It would likely be easier and more reliable to dig up the scrubby little thing and compost it, replacing it with a nursery tree this fall. I don't think I shall do that. It's withstood the heat of last year, and the flooding of this spring, which means it is stronger than a new tree would be. We adjust, to the surroundings, and bring forth what fruit that we can.

The rootstock of the writer is of course the books they read. We learn, from the months before we are born if we are fortunate enough to have parents wise in reading to their children. The cadences of reading-aloud are old familiar friends, and when we grow impatient – and the very young are almost never patient! – we learn to read for ourselves so that we may spend hours immersed in the worlds between the covers of a book. Some of us – not all, but enough – read so much that we choose it for pleasure. Others find it a chore and give it up as soon as they get out of school and are no longer made to look at the words on the page. A few, very few, find they have run out of stories to read and start to make up their own. The worlds have grown out of all of the books, the adventures, the experiences of themselves and so many others they have consumed. They have become writers.

Their books, then, are the seeds for the next tree to grow up. For another writer to be grafted onto, having learned the necessity of a solid foundation of good story, a crafty plot, and delicious juicy dialogue. We are all supported on the rootstock of our libraries in the mind, the books we have read and grown with.

The Author as Hunter

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

““It isn't like that at all; it isn't like building—not a bit. In building, you see, you know beforehand what it's going to be like; at least, I suppose you do. I mean, it would never do to start off building a house and find you've built a bridge, or something, when it was all finished. It's more like hunting, really,” said Barbara, warming up to her subject. “Yes, it's really rather like hunting. You start out to hunt a stag and you find the tracks of a tiger. It's an adventure, you see, that's the beauty of it. You don't know a bit what you're going to find until you come to the end, and, even then, you don't know what you've found. At least you know what you've found for yourself but you don't know if you've

found anything for anybody else, but that doesn't matter, really. The only thing that matters is that you must find something—some sort of—well—prey. Otherwise it's no good, of course. You go questing about, like a—like a hound, and sometimes you get lost, and sometimes you find things you never knew were there.”

— Miss Buncler Married by D.E. Stevenson

When I am very tired, I default to comfort reads, and D.E. Stevenson is one of my favorite authors for this. Her novels are light, often cheerful, and sometimes a bit introspective, but in a clever way that doesn't get deeply philosophical. Most often it is presented as amusing musing. She was brilliant at making her characters into very real people with foibles and follies, that you liked very much and would enjoy knowing in real life.

With that in mind, I've been avoiding the Miss Buncler series for a little while (ok, years) as I tend not to enjoy self-referential books. Books that are about an author writing, much less a book about the book being written, creating a fuss (and earning the author much money), and becoming absurdly like wandering through a funhouse of mirrors, as the main character muses in the first book. As you might have guessed from my tenses, I broke down and bought it not long ago. The other reason I hadn't yet read it was that this series is, for some reason, priced much higher than Stevenson's other books. More than I would pay for an unknown author, and even more than I'd shell out for a favorite, at least until I really needed something to read.

The first book was light and frothy and fun, and I was having trouble sleeping, so I took advantage of the one-click on a series and splurged on the whole thing. Terrible of me, I know. Still, it's been a rough month, and I desperately needed the retreat of light fiction. I wasn't expecting to be reading along in a comedy of manners and village life and have a bit of an epiphany regarding the nature of creation.

The opening quote of this article is part of a conversation between the main character, Barbara, and her neighbor Mr. Marvell who is an accomplished artist. He doesn't know she's a writer and had been wondering why on earth she was interested in his art studio when it was apparent she “didn't know one end of the paintbrush from the other” and when he was trying to explain his art process, she burst out with the analogy of hunting for the art within the process. Afterwards, he looks at her with surprise and exclaims that she must be a writer. The artist in paint recognized the artist in text.

I am, like Miss Buncler, and I gather D.E. Stevenson who knew well how to express this, a hunter when it comes to writing. Art, as well, which probably explains why I'm so bad at it in traditional media, as I haven't the patience to learn how to do all the traditional mediums well enough to be happy hunting on the canvas until I find what I want – ink and watercolor neither erase nor paint over well. This is where using MidJourney to render ideas until I find what I want – or better yet, things I didn't realize I wanted until that very moment – comes in very handy. I've spent over a year now learning how to prompt so that I can get things approaching what I may want. Then, I have to start the hunt to find the art in the results.

Prompt: Across the Sea of Stars, retro science fiction book cover –ar 2:3 –v 6.0 (part of the monthly challenge art in Book Club With Spikes, where we are exploring cover art and layout as a means of learning how to make those better. I'm using it to teach, others are learning, but with anything you are truly studying, you learn even while you are teaching!)

It was interesting, reading that passage, and the one that precedes it, and seeing that authors like Ste-

venson have been exploring the same questions and challenges as I am, only they did it a century ago.

He's wrong, you know. Art isn't solely about the mystical experience of the creator. Instead, as Barbara points out a little later, it is about the hunt for something you can't necessarily express, and when you find it, you don't always have a name for it. It feels right. And when the reader, or the viewer, encounters your art, it might not mean anything to them. Yet there is the possibility that it may, and that is when you create something very special. A book with no readers, art with no onlookers, is pointless. We don't create to shove things into dark recesses and never show them to anyone at all. Or, if an artist does, they cannot benefit from the feedback of their audience, and in that feedback both fuel their imagination and hone their craft. How you are creating doesn't matter. The technical media is not the art. It's the experience of both halves, creator and consumer, interlocked forever in a tidal confluence of artist and audience, that truly makes it art.

The joy of creating, the adventure of the hunt as Barbara expresses it, is only the beginning. There will be another story or piece of art, and you'll have the joy of that as well. The truest joy that lasts longest is seeing the reactions of others to your work. I wish I could tell D.E. Stevenson how much I enjoy her work, and how her writing has made her strangely immortal, a voice I can listen to long after her physical form ceased. A communion of kindred spirits, in a way. I can enjoy her words, as have hundreds and thousands before me, where she enjoyed writing them only once.

We weave bits of our souls into our work, as artists. What that work manifests as varies as wildly as people do, and even more as there are those of us who craft words, art both 3D and 2D, with dabbling in garden design which is... I don't know what to call that. I do know I'm not unique. I don't want to be limited. I want to create in any way I can, as much as I can.

Oh! And if you want to see some of the things I've created recently, you'll want to pick up a copy of Wyrd West. I think you'll see some of what I mean in it. The fiction is impressive, and I've done my best to enhance the stories in my own way.

All of Writing in an Hour
Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

It's been a minute since I last posted. I've been strangely busy and bored out of my mind. My editing group has been going through the last five books that I've written—not published yet. If you want a look, you need to glance at my Patreon for that. Or be a paid subscriber here.

While that was going on, I had to work on this speech.

Last week, I gave a little speech to a writing class. Apparently, in Texas, "I'm a local author" actually means something. Who knew?

So, here it is, everything you ever wanted to know about writing ... that I could jam into a one hour course, with enough time to accommodate a Q&A session.

Howdy.

My name is Declan Finn, probably the most prolific author you have never heard of. In the last ten

years I've published approximately 35 novels—because I stopped counting after 30. Professor McNichol has asked me to talk a bit about my writing, including how I got here.

First of all, if you want to write just to write ... you can just do that. And you don't have to take a single class in writing to do it. I personally started at 16, before I took my single writing class in high school. Back then, I created fiction around a science fiction TV show called Babylon 5. I watched the show, read everything about the show, started inserting my original characters into the corners of the show that were never explored. I created my own stories within that universe. At the time, I had not known that I was creating something called "fan fiction" because in 1998, I barely dealt with the Internet if I could avoid it.

Eventually, my fan fiction grew beyond the TV show, and generated original stories, world building, my own alien species. In 15 months, I had created over two thousand pages of text. And by that, I mean I probably made four thousand pages, because I was 16, I didn't know that publishers used double spacing.

Orson Scott Card, author of the novel *Ender's Game*, has been quoted as saying "The First Million Words are practice." And my fan fiction probably covered half of that word count, if not more.

Keep in mind, much of this fan fiction was written during summers, where I could write in 36 hour stretches. I had no social life back then, since my books were more interesting than the people around me. So I had no problem locking myself in an office for hours on end.

Well before the end of those 15 months, I had essentially rewired my brain. I needed a notebook by my bed because ideas would not let me sleep until I wrote them down. I took notes on real life anecdotes so I could use them in a planned murder mystery set in my high school. I looked at locations with an eye to making them set pieces in novels. And I did.

So before anyone asks, "Mister Finn, where do you get your ideas?" the answer is that I approach life with a functional mindset and build stories out of whatever's lying around.

Before I left high school, my fascination with writing led to me being branded a terrorist...

For those of you paying attention, that's called "a hook." It should catch the attention of your audience. If you intend to write fiction at a professional level, keep that in mind.

For the record, I had not actually planned to do anything to my high school. One evening when I was particularly punchy, I had fallen into the works of classical English comic operettas written by Gilbert and Sullivan in the late 1800s. You probably are familiar with some of their tunes, even if you don't know the pieces offhand. But the one song that got me into trouble was a song called "I have a Little list." I thought it was funny, and wrote a version based around my high school. Long story short, my parody got out among my classmates, which led the high school to try and throw me out for "acts of terrorism." Please keep in mind, this was March of 2000, before 9-11 redefined terrorism for most people.

By the time I was in college, I knew I wanted to write novels professionally. I took history in college, because that's where all the stories are. And trust me, there are some things that happen in real life that you can't get away with in fiction. I was good at history, because they were just stories that actually happened.

In fact, I fell into one subject so hard and so deeply, I turned it into a trilogy of novels. Back then, it was trendy to create novels built around history. The history was terrible, and the writing was garbage, but some of those books became so hyped, bookstores could make bestsellers out of trash. If you don't believe that garbage can make money, I suggest you borrow a James Patterson novel from the library. The odds are good that the novel you grab would fail any writing class. But it doesn't matter, that man can market a book.

You want to know where to get ideas from? One class during my own college days was "Christian Spirituality and Mysticism." We spent one class discussing the charisms of saints: Padre Pio bilocated. Thomas Aquinas levitated—and since he was so fat he made his own jokes about it, that sounds worrisome. Saints who smelled evil. Saints who raised the dead.

My first thought was "Slap a cape on a saint, and you have a superhero."

At "smelling evil" I thought "That would be useful for a cop."

I immediately had a character who was a cop, with the charisms of a saint. So obviously, I had to have a possessed serial killer, because that makes sense, doesn't it? A demonic criminal matches the protagonist. It became Detective Thomas Nolan, the lead character of my series Saint Tommy, NYPD. I milked that premise for 12 novels, and multiple short stories.

If you think a Saint as a protagonist is boring, I advise that you read Butler's Lives of the Saints and see just how colorful some saints are. Between saints who are flaky (such as Thomas Aquinas) saints who didn't even like other people (such as Saint Jerome, who liked his pet lion, and Saint Ambrose, the hermit down the street).

There is a fantasy author named Jim Butcher, best known for writing Fantasy. He got into an argument online. The discussion was about tropes—think of a trope as a meme in storytelling, from "the villain is really the hero's father," or "this scoundrel really has a heart of gold," or even "this agent of chaos will do the correct thing, if only as a last resort. Jim Butcher's discussion asked, "Can an overused trope be good if the author is good enough?" Butcher argued that a good author can spin a good story out of anything. It descended into a bet. Butcher's opposition dared him to write a story based on an overused trope. Butcher insisted, "No, give me two tropes." The tropes he was given was "Lost Roman Legion" in "the Land of the Pokemon." He turned it into a series called Codex Alera and made enough money to build a house from scratch.

So, yes, you can get ideas from whatever's to hand.

Good news, if you can wire your brain into finding ideas everywhere, then you will never have writer's block. Since I was 16, writer's block is what happens to other people. It's also a handy paperweight that is easily thrown.

I've been asked to talk about "process." I have discussed a bit about outlining. For the most part, outlines are suggestions. They're the dots you have to connect. My first outline was for a Saint Tommy, NYPD novel called Hell Spawn. The outline dictated that there was going to be an entire chapter of my heroes pounding the concrete, going from one institution to another. But I was bored, and it was just easier to throw in a car bomb. Just because you outline doesn't mean you're locked into it if the needs of the story dictates that the pace needs to change.

My initial process with my fan fiction was to write a series of short stories and string them all together over the course of a novel. Later on, as I mutated the fan fiction into my science fiction series *White Ops*, I had to change a great many things. One story was a hostage taking of “Disney Planet,” and I turned the 30-page short story into a full novel about a hostage situation on “Yesdin Planet.” Please remember, big companies have lawyers.

Between writing short stories and outlining novels, I would build characters first and drop them into plots. From there, I would see how the pinball reacts to getting knocked around the machine. You’d be surprised how well that can work. The characters will make decisions you, the author, will not see coming. But sometimes they work. And sometimes they don’t, and you have to backtrack, dragging your characters kicking and screaming all the way.

If I talk like your fictional characters are real people, who act like they have free will, this is why I call writing “Legalized schizophrenia.” When you build people from scratch, and you know what their parents and their grandparents did, you create their hobbies, their likes, their dislikes, you’d be surprised just how real they can feel. Occasionally, I have picked a person, and I liked the rhythms of their speech, so I just create a voice filter, where I have a specific voice say what I write, and see if it matches.

Your next step after you write is editing. Personally, I cannot edit something I write. I have to put the draft aside, work on something else, and come back to it when I have forgotten parts of it. Why do this? Because sometimes, you can read a sentence, and you read what you meant to write, not necessarily what’s on the page. When I started out, I would run one manuscript past my entire family of readers. My mother would read the newspapers and correct it. My sister was an English major, so I put her to good use. My father was good at conceptualization and execution. So I had an editing team to work with from the time when I was 16.

If you cannot assemble that yourself, you’re going to have to pay for it, and that can get very pricey very fast.

When editing, please get out of your own way. If you are not familiar with the term “murder your darlings,” it’s the point in editing when you have a line, or a paragraph, or a page, where you just love everything about it. It is so good. It is so awesome. And you may be forced to delete it. Or at least cut it from this book. As I said before, I cut a chapter an outline for *Hell Spawn* because it killed the pacing.

However, that chapter managed to fit book two perfectly. Sometimes, you have to murder your darlings. But you never throw anything out, because you don’t know what comes in handy later.

And yes, editing can be painful. The last two book projects I worked on, I cut fifty thousand words from one book, and 75 thousand from another. For those of you who want to do the math, that’s 200 pages from one book, and 300 pages from another.

My simple advice with dealing with edits is simple: Do Not Take It Personally. Some things don’t fit. Some things will kill the pace. Some elements will just be out of place. It happens. Do not spend your time fighting with the editor who made the comment. Try to objectively evaluate the edit, fix it as best you can, and move on.

A quick sidenote to this: Sometimes, the elements of your writing you have to spike may be tantamount to preaching. I know it’s unlikely that any of you will have that problem at this stage of your life. However, books may touch on subjects you feel strongly about. I had an opportunity to preach in *Hell*

Spawn. It's a long story but suffice it to say that my villain was part of a politically protected occupation. I brought in the villain's employer, and she waxed poetic about the profession for maybe five pages. I did not put in my opinions. My character voiced no opinions. In fact, the opinions expressed were only the ones I disagreed with, taken directly from real-world sources. I quoted real world quotes stuffed into the character's mouth.

I still had people whine that I was preaching by making the other side "too cartoonishly evil." The moral of that story is, sometimes you just can't win.

While I have talked about the creative side of writing, there is something I must stress. And I'm not sure that I can stress it enough. Yes, you can "just write," and let it sit on your hard drives and in your notebooks. That's fine. But if you intend to make money off your writing, writing is a business. If someone tells you that writing is art, and that someone spins lofty notions that disregard thoughts of profiting from your work, tell them get thee behind me Satan, because they are not helping. Art has never been separate from money, and I'm not talking about modern day money laundering.

Personally, as a full-time writer, I write full-time. It's a 9-5 job. Sometimes, an 8-6 job. And if you have the house to yourself, you can keep writing until you can't see the screen anymore. I don't recommend that, because you're going to spend more time the next day trying to figure out what you meant to say, because the last paragraph or two will be gibberish.

But don't worry, it gets worse. Because if you become "a writer" because you think that will get away from people, you're wrong. You are so wrong. Because after you're done locking yourself alone in a room with your manuscript, then comes selling the product. And I don't mean selling it to a publisher. That's a different problem. Whether or not you self-publish, or go into traditional publishing, you will have to sell the book. While James Patterson has largely devolved into one of the worst writers on God's green earth, he makes money by being a marketing machine.

So, hate to break it to you, but if you want to write professionally, you will have to do the majority of the selling. It is the bane of my existence. I don't know what your age bracket thinks about social media, but I am literally on every platform known to humanity, and some that aren't. Sometimes, my 9-5 involves getting into a flame war online because someone doesn't like that you're X, or Y, or Z. Maybe they don't like your face. They don't like your tone. They don't like your book. Sometimes, they don't like the fact that you have published, they're still on page one of their grand masterpiece, and they need someone to go after.

Both threats to my life have come over my writing. I already told you one of them. In the age of social media, I don't see that risk going away.

Personally, I tried getting into traditional publishing in 2010.

Correction: I spent three years submitting two different book series to dozens of agents from 2007-2010. I stopped counting rejections around the 300 mark.

In 2010, I had an agent and everything. Problem: I had gotten a foothold at a time when major publishing houses were firing people in job lots. After two years of my agent trying to get me a hearing at a publisher, I gave up. I self-published. Between 2012 and 2014, I published a murder mystery and five thrillers. I kept sending out queries to publishers, until I was personally invited to send to someone I knew online who was an acquisitions editor. Perfect, right? They accepted my vampire novels. The first

one got published. Excellent.

The publisher was bought out two months later. I ended up self-publishing all four vampire novels. And I caught the attention of another publisher. They published nine of my ten novels. They then published my next 8 novels, my Saint Tommy NYPD series. Perfect setup, right?

That publisher folded two years ago. I now have three publishers, only because I knew them all personally through a decade of working my butt off.

Oh, and even when I had a publisher, I self-published another murder mystery, two more thrillers, and a history. Because unless you're going to play in one genre exclusively, you may need more than one publisher. There are some authors who use a different pen name for each genre they write in. I don't recommend that, but you may draw a different conclusion than I did.

Do not scoff at self-publishing your own work or going into the independent publishing route with smaller publishers. Believe it or not, self-published and independent works are over half of the book market these days. I don't mean that they're half the output, I mean that they are half the sales. That's the number that counts.

If you want my advice about writing ... knock yourself out. Write whatever you want, whenever you want. But learn from my mistakes, and be careful who you show it to, if anyone. Write what you know? You don't have to. No one wants to know about my grandfather the drunk, my grandmother the socio-path, and I, personally, am very boring. I'm 42, and my life has only been threatened twice. That's not enough action for even one of my own novels. A bestselling author like David Weber does not lead space fleets, no matter how often he writes about it. I am not a police officer nor a saint. Nor am I a vampire. I am clearly not an action hero. Stephen King is ... technically ... not a demonic clown, no matter what his behavior indicates otherwise.

If you want my advice on writing professionally?

First, read. Read fiction to keep your mind open and read nonfiction to see just how odd reality is. I find that you write what you read. If you're writing science fiction or action, read some Edgar Rice Burroughs at one end, and some Timothy Zahn at the other. You can learn from everybody. Sometimes, you learn what to do, and sometimes, you learn what not to do.

Second, write on a schedule. As a professional, I write from 9-5, every weekday. The book will not write itself. You probably won't have that amount of time. But even if you carve out thirty minutes every day, and write one page a day, 365 days is a whole novel.

Third: To write professionally, gain some knowledge of the field. Look into traditional publishing and decide if you want to go into it. Given the current conditions, I don't recommend it. But they may change by the time you get around to making something you think is publishable.

Item four: remember, this is a business. At the very least, read some books on marketing. If you're heading to college, perhaps take a course on it. Also, get some experience in graphic design. Trust me, as someone who made two of his own book covers, you will want to have experience with graphic design. AI is not going to do all that work for you. Either that or get some friends in the business and art departments.

Final bit of advice: I said you don't have to draw on personal experience to write. You don't. But please do some research. If you're writing action novels, go to a gun range, and go to a self-defense class where you have to hit something, and perhaps block a few punches.

Anyway, that's pretty much everything I know in one easy package. As an author, I hear a lot of random people tell me that they want to be a writer. I will tell you simply that, no, you don't. Seriously, you don't.

Frankly, yes, you can hotwire your brain to write. It's relatively easy. I did it to myself when I was 16. I wasn't even trying. I just wanted this idea out of my head. Half a million words later, I had novels on my hands.

To be a writer, your brain is basically ON all the time.

You're (re)writing TV shows and books. You're calling plot twists.

When the story goes a different way, you want to rewrite it because your idea really was better.

That news story is now part of your thriller.

Your demonic plot to destroy a city becomes current events within a year or two. I've had that happen more often than I like to think about.

Sometimes, you're basing people on friends. Then your friends are asking how you came up with this great character... that they don't recognize as themselves.

You didn't pay attention to that conversation with friends / family about something really important to them, because something they said ten minutes ago started a plot outline in your brain.

Your brain occasionally overclocks from writing from 8-6, occasionally remembering to eat.

You take a break so your brain can cool down, but then the compulsion to keep writing presses on your brain like a heavy blanket.

You need a notebook next to your bed so you can make notes-- because the ideas don't let you sleep until you write them down.

There's a difference between "I want to be a writer" and "I have to be a writer."

If you want to be a writer ... no, you don't. If I had my druthers, and could do it all over again, I'd have been an electrician or a plumber. I'd probably be using electricity to kill people in murder mysteries, but I'd have a 9-5 job I didn't have to take home with me.

If you HAVE to be a writer? If you are compelled to write. Then you don't really have a choice. Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead. And good luck.

~Finis~