

The N3F

Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor

June 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/>

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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>.

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

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

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

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Russ Lockwood <https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

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Fiction

Archangel by NR LaPoint

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Raven Mistcreek is back. But so are all the forces of Hell

Look up “full gonzo” in the dictionary, and the Raven Mistcreek novels should be held up as an example. The horseman of war riding atop a velociraptor, mounted with dual miniguns? That was just the first book. Then the Seven Deadly Sins came after her again in Dusklight.

Now, Raven Mistcreek is going to have to stop the end of the world ... again. Somehow, it never gets easier.

The Story

“I was surrounded by dead bodies, and only half of them were my fault.”

Has NR LaPoint been reading Jim Butcher again? Because that’s the opening line of Archangel.

To begin with, Raven Mistcreek and her friend the Kitsune (and her friend the half-succubus) have been ambushed by the forces of darkness. “Even the cute little pink bow” on her nightshirt had blood on it.

Then they are promptly swallowed by a sandworm of Dune. When they force it to cough them up, they land right in the middle of Raven’s old Catholic girls’ school.

Unfortunately, they ended up exactly where the worm was supposed to drop them.

Ackbar it’s a trap meme

Raven’s old school has been turned into a gauntlet. Two of the Deadly Sins are out to kill her and her friends. The walls are rearranging themselves. Monsters are crawling out of every corner of the high school. Every death drags the school deeper into the varying levels of Hell itself. Her chalk golem August is getting beaten around, her chainsaw is running out of fuel, and they’re all running out of bullets.

And that’s only act one.

I have to hand it to Nate LaPoint, the man knows how to write a flying start to a novel. At this point, Nate feels like he’s in a race with himself to see just how fast he can pace a novel. Also, he’s trying to top how many weird monsters he can stuff in each book. Chalk golem? How mundane. The horseman of War with a Velociraptor mount, armed with miniguns? Droll. Time to throw in giant blind albino penguins and a Yoggoth!

Nate gets double bonus points for the Lovecraft references.

Agatha Christie liked to wave the main clue under the reader's nose the entire plot of her book. By Nate LaPoint is more like Mickey Spillane; the reader is so busy being caught up in the action, one barely notices that there's even a mystery to solve, never mind the clues being assembled in front of them. He and Timothy Zahn have that in common.

While Zahn's heroes are busy with a full puzzle, LaPoint just keeps everyone running too fast.

The Characters

Raven Mistcreek is the oddest fairy tale Princess in the written word. She's an oddball, and even the other magic users and half-monsters think she's a little off. She stops short of being Full Magical Girl and will slow down long enough to think her way through to the novel's solution.

One of our characters is the literal Beast of Gévaudan, who will also go by Cerberus, who also sounds like Christopher Lee for some reason.

But really, this has all the wacky, colorful characters from the other two books. There's her kitsune friend Kasume (with a katana named... Katana), the knight Percy Dayspring with "smart metal" swords that throw plasma, and August, Raven's chalk golem. There was also Damien Mistcreek, Raven's brother the Paladin, and her sister Ariadne, who walks through shadows and feels like Wednesday Addams.

The World

Oh, this world is so interesting. It's supposed to be a backdrop, but it feeds the plot so heavily they're indistinguishable.

NR LaPoint has a great visual style, painting an elaborate landscape wherever the plot takes him. Some of these horrors are what HP Lovecraft would have described if Lovecraft ever moved a step beyond "this horror was indescribable."

Politics

None. No, seriously, none. Unless you think that having Templars and the Holy Catholic church are heroic figures is political. If that's how you think, I worry about you.

Content Warning

None. It's a credit to Nate's writing that he can have a succubus as a character, an incubus as a villain, and Deadly Sins as demons, and still be on this side of PG-13. In fact, it would probably be considered a relatively soft PG-13... however, you can't go by me, I read Jurassic Park when I was ten.

However, it is horror. So if you're squeamish about tentacled monstrosities ... I still wouldn't worry. This isn't Hentai, and there aren't even any jokes along those lines. Not even from the kitsune.

Who is it for?

If you like the action of Larry Correia, John Ringo or Jim Butcher, with the mind of John C Wright, you should already own this book.

Why buy it?

If you like insanely good action with a fantasy world that stops just short of over-the-top, you are going to enjoy this one.

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes by Suzanne Collins

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Suzanne Collins takes us back to the world of The Hunger Games with this prequel, giving the reader a gripping backstory for the villain: Coriolanus Snow.

But where did he come from? What was his family like? And how did he end up using power with such deadly results?

The Story

Coriolanus Snow is 18 years old, and his family has fallen on hard times. His parents are dead. He and his cousin Tigris live with their geriatric grandmother, who doesn't understand the dire straits they're in. The family fortune is gone, and with new property taxes coming down the line, their poverty will soon be exposed to the other noble families of Panem.

His only hope lies in winning the 10th Hunger Games. He'll be a mentor, and if his tribute survives the ordeal, there will be a cash prize as well as a scholarship to the University, securing his future among the ruling class.

But if he fails, he will fall farther than he ever has before, into the dregs of society, the bottom rung of the working class, with no hope of ever clawing his way back to the top. And to make matters worse, there are officials within the government who are dead set on seeing him lose.

The Characters

Coriolanus Snow, who we already know ends up becoming President of Panem in the original trilogy, is the protagonist. Unlike the other books, this one is told in the third person, but it's always from Corio's perspective.

Sejanus Plinth is Corio's classmate, and his polar opposite in just about everything. He wasn't born to power, but rose to it from the lower ranks, as a direct result of the Snow family losing their fortune. He doesn't want the Capitol life, but rather to return to District 2, where he's from. And above all, he hates the Hunger Games. Due to his father's position, Sejanus is also given a mentor's berth, and his tribute is expected to win.

But perhaps the most surprising character introduction in the story was that of Lucy Gray Baird, the girl from District 12. The Reaping was rigged so that she'd be sent into the Games and killed; Coriolanus doesn't know why, but he's quickly charmed by her flamboyant personality and her seeming apathy toward her pending doom. She worms her way into his heart, and his infatuation with her drives the entire story forward from there.

The World

We're a few iterations away from the society we currently have in this world. At some point North America becomes Panem, the borders of which are never specified. The States are dissolved and the Capitol moves from the East Coast to somewhere in the Mountain West, likely Salt Lake City or Denver. Panem decays like the United States did, and the 13 Districts go to war with the Capitol, resulting in a nuclear holocaust, and the Capitol stays in power. The Hunger Games are designed as a constant punishment against the Districts for their rebellion.

While the original trilogy shows us Games 74 through 76, this prequel gives us an insight into just how crude and analog the Games were in the beginning. The Capitol wasn't completely sure how to use them, and wanted to make sure they were effective in quelling rebellion. We see just how young this new version of Panem is, and how Coriolanus started to influence it all from a very young age.

The Politics

Among the many virtues of this book is that it doesn't concern itself with Current Year (TM) nonsense. It's asking bigger questions and tackling bigger topics about the role of government, the use of force, and what real fascism actually looks like. These things have plagued humanity since we became self-aware, and the lessons from it therefore become timeless.

Content Warning

There is hardly any profanity that would bump the language above a PG rating, and no sensuality beyond some chaste kisses. There are a few tap-dancing references to prostitution among the desperate classes, but it doesn't factor into the story much. The violence is present, given the subject matter, but Collins has always handled that element without reveling in it.

Who is it for?

While billed as Young Adult, the quality of writing and the depth of the story takes it outside of that audience and makes it accessible to adults as well. I started reading this series in my early 20s and I'm still reading it in my late 30s.

Why read it?

Because this is a master class on how to write a villain's backstory. In the past decade we've seen an abundance of origin tales where the bad guy was made to be sympathetic, a victim, or misunderstood. Frequently these stories end up justifying the villain's actions, which then casts the hero in an antagonist's role, muddying the waters between heroism and villainy.

Collins doesn't take that route with Ballad. While you watch Coriolanus start out as privileged and bitter, you see him go on a journey away from those things, and ultimately end up with a choice between love and power. Given that he's the future villain of Panem, you know he chooses power, and thus it becomes a cautionary tale about what we value, and what it costs us.

Most times when you read a literary tragedy, it's just verbose dog crap that public schools forced you to read. This was the first time I read one I'd actually consider beautiful and would want to read multiple times.

Brother, Frank by Michael Bunker

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A genius—who also happens to be a madman—saves the life of a dying child by sticking his brain inside a high-tech DARPA robot that has the power to win wars singlehandedly. And then things go sideways.

Note: the print edition of this story is titled Brother, Frank K while the audiobook is called Brother, Frankenstein. The distinction is unclear to me.

The story

What kind of story can you tell when you mix DARPA, the Amish, a mad scientist, and a terminally ill autistic kid? This one, and probably several more that are nowhere near this good. Chris Alexander is the aforementioned scientist who has a loose moral code and a drive to see if he can do the impossible. Think of Hugh Laurie's Dr. House, only with an affinity for cybernetics.

Alexander usually takes time off during the year to help a local Amish community with their medical needs, and eventually befriends a young man named Frank. Frank is only about middle-school aged, and his severe autism has held back his development considerably. He's verbal and able to recognize faces, but he's also fixated on certain tics and habits that make it highly difficult for him to control himself.

His prognosis is compounded by other factors that leave him with a short clock for the remainder of his young life. That is until Alexander realizes Frank is a perfect candidate for a new project over at DARPA, fusing human nervous tissue with a robotic chassis. Human brains, mechanical bodies. The implement? Why, war, of course!

But hey, Alexander is gonna do the responsible thing. He'll just disarm the robot and make sure its urban camouflage is up to snuff, so that Frank can pass as human throughout society. Any oddities in his appearance will just be chalked up to his autism.

Here's the problem, though: Alexander didn't really have permission to use DARPA's robot. And he definitely didn't have consent from Frank's Amish parents. He wanted to see if he could do it, so he did. And now he's got a whole new batch of problems breathing down his neck.

Especially once Frank finds out that DARPA is holding his community hostage, and he gets his hands on all those weapons that Dr. Alexander removed...

The characters

Dr. Chris Alexander is our POV character, while Frank is his patient. There's also a shady government agency, shadier than our CIA, somewhere on par with Larry Correia's "Special Task Force Unicorn," only more serious.

The world

It's our world, on paper at least. The DARPA elements are meant to be hidden from public view. Of

greater interest is the fact that Michael Bunker lives much like the Amish do and writes regularly on his website about homesteading off-the-grid. His Pennsylvania roots heavily influence his worldbuilding and this isn't the only story of his that features people living a low-tech life. That lends a degree of authenticity that brings Brother, Frank to life.

The politics

Bunker's politics are less divided between "Red Elephant, Blue Donkey" and more between "high tech conformity, low-tech individualism." So you'll frequently see protagonists who come from strong communities full of responsible individuals, people who make things with their hands and support their neighbors. Antagonists are usually excessive consumers or cogs in the government machine, who find human life to be comfortably disposable.

Content warning

Action violence, especially when Frank goes Full Metal Awesome against the dark state operatives. Some language, but nothing in excess of the S-bomb. No sensuality.

Who is it for?

Fans of sci-fi and military fiction, with bits of medical fic mixed in. If you've got any familiarity or love for the Amish and their tight-knit communities, you'll find a kindred spirit in Michael Bunker's characters.

Why read it?

It points to True North on my literary compass: it's just plain fun. In addition to that it reinforces why strong family-based communities are preferable to the immoral might of entrenched government alphabet agencies. Of the handful of Bunker books I've read, this is the one I'd plug to anyone regardless of their tastes.

Deathbringer by Blake Carpenter'

Review by Jim McCoy

[Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://JimMcCoyJimbossffreviews.substack.com)

If I've said it once, I'll say it again: I love a strong female protagonist. Whether it's Ellen Ripley, Honor Harrington or Kathryn Janeway, if there's a woman at the heart of the story that kicks ass, I want to read (watch?) the story. It's no different here. Inga Ivanova is such an amazingly badass female that I'm wondering if Blake Carpenter intentionally gave his main character of his novel Deathbringer: The Spellword Saga: Book One the same last name as the second Most Badass Woman In All of Science Fiction and Fantasy (as decided by me) intentionally. Inga Ivanova certainly does remind me of one Susan Ivanova in all the important ways that I love in a female lead. If she's a little obsessed and maybe a bit bloody-minded, so be it; She has her reasons.

Seriously, Ivanova's Call to Action is particularly grisly, high stakes and jarring, but it's enough to make anyone want to get revenge. I mean, if your story started up with someone showing up at your town, slaughtering everyone there, and you only escaping because of some serious weirdness, you'd want to take the person who did it down, wouldn't you? I sure would...

Then again, I'm a McCoy and that thing is kind of genetic for me. Just ask a Hatfield.

Anyway...

Hopefully, it's not revealing too much to state that Deathbringer is not just the title of a book, it's also the name of a sword. The reason for the name will be painfully obvious to anyone reading the book, and if you still miss it, the name of the series is The Spellsword Saga. I'm guessing that should make it obvious.

The use of spellswords in the book/series (although I haven't read any of the other books yet. I'm honestly not sure if anymore have been released, though I'll be finding out soon.) was cool for me on a couple of different levels. One is just that spellswords are sentient, linked to a particular individual, and capable of awesome feats of magic. I mean, you would think that would be cool enough on its own, right? But no, I have to go and make it cooler.

Seriously. I can do you one better. Having played both Dungeons & Dragons and the Palladium Fantasy RPG, spellswords felt like the weapon you spent your entire career questing for. Whether you're referring to a rune weapon in the PFRPG or an artifact in D&D, you're talking about the real deal. These spellswords are on that level. You do not want to cross paths with an unfriendly spellsword wielder, I promise you. What these things can do will amaze you.

But that brings up an interesting point. Inga's grandmother, who was the last one to wield the sword in battle, had something of a bad reputation. I'm wondering if these swords don't have a corrupting effect like a D&D artifact. I'm wondering how Carpenter is going to make Inga a sympathetic figure going forward if she slides too far down that path. This is going to be a delicate balancing act, for sure.

In a way, Deathbringer almost feels like reading a fantasy book by Stephen King or Dean Koontz. There is a lot of action here. There is plenty of excitement. There is also more than just a bit of horror. It's a good mix that definitely stays interesting for the entire story. If you're offended by blood and gore though, maybe you'd best stick with my boy Albus and his favorite knitting patterns. Deathbringer is obviously intended for an audience that can handle the rough stuff. I loved that about it. Carpenter is not afraid to let us see the consequences of the violence in the books. And, if I was reminded of something terrible I read about as part of my degree well, it happened and it's believable.

The antagonist of the piece, Yenda Avard is a sick, twisted, evil, power-seeking wannabe-tyrant who makes Delores Umbridge look like the little old lady down the street who used to bake you cookies when you were a kid. She is a flat-out mass-murderer. I don't like this chick AT ALL. Of course, that makes her an ideal villain. Her motivations are crystal clear and unyielding. They make sense and are the same motivations (personal profit and power) that have motivated everyone from Adolph Hitler to Mao Zedong. The only possible difference is that Avard doesn't pretend she's in it to help others the way the rest of them did.

This leads to a strong desire on the part of the reader to see said wench get precisely what is coming to her. At least I know I did. I love to hate an antagonist and Avard fits the bill. This is almost an obsession with me. I love Anne McCaffrey's work in general but, having read the entire series up to Dragonflight, I never really liked her Dragonriders of Pern series because thread is a boring enemy. I mean, I get the fact that the stories are about the riders themselves, but ugh...

I need something for the hero that has a brain and an attitude problem. Avard fits that bill. I hate that chick. At some point, you actually want Avard dead. Whether that happens or not is something I won't reveal, but if you get into the story at all (and I'm sure you will) you'll be rooting for all of the bad things to happen to this woman.

The world building here is superb. There's so much going on against the backdrop that Carpenter built that it's hard to focus on the world where it all takes place, but its wonderfully rendered. The kingdom is a matriarchy, but it is not a peaceful, calm matriarchy envisioned by many of the people who promote the idea of a matriarchy. There is scheming, feuding and outright conflict. Deathbringer reads like a realistic depiction of what would happen if the mean girls from your old high school ran things.

All in all, I loved Deathbringer and I can't wait to get the sequel once it gets here.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Massacred Villagers

Deeper than the Darkness by Gregory Benford Review by Jean-Paul Garnier <https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Rating: 6 of 10

Overall, this book had an interesting story line and cool, very foreign aliens. Yet the book didn't really do a good job of holding my attention. I found that Benford spent too much time on superfluous details and brushed over the parts that I was enjoying. It also jumped around a lot. I did enjoy how it dealt with differences in culture, but it started off slow and confusing and then at times moved too quickly. It had the feel of being written in sessions separated in time and I couldn't help but feel that the style of writing changed throughout the story. I'm curious to read another one of his novels to see if this is indicative of his style or if he was still developing his chops at the time this was written. I didn't hate this book, but I also didn't love it.

The Dream of the Iron Dragon by Rob Kroese Review by Neovictorian <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A starship holds a secret weapon that may save humanity from extinction. An accident sends it back in time 1300 years. But these humans will keep fighting!

The story

In the 23rd century, humanity has been hunted to the verge of extinction by an alien race. When an exploratory ship accidentally travels back in time to Viking-age Scandinavia, the human race is given a second chance. Thankfully, the crew has the skills, the dedication and the grit to do what has to be done to keep hope alive.

Traveling by horse and ship and foot, trying to learn about Viking life and politics, and fighting for their lives, the crew of the Andrea Luhman will do what it takes to survive, and stop the future extinction of humanity.

Eventually, the chief engineer figures all the options are closed.

Except to build a new ship...

The characters

Kroese is a master of characterization. The crew of the Andrea Luhman are living, breathing individuals, and their backgrounds are woven seamlessly into the story.

Humanity's rivals, the Cho-ta'an, are skillfully built up as characters and people, with plausible language, customs and culture.

The Vikings are...real. The author has obviously done a lot of work and study to get the details of his Vikings right (they're Norwegian, by the way, and really don't like the Danes). Viking weapons, tactics, ships, social organization and customs all seem solid, and fit together to make a holistic picture of the society the 23rd century spacers find themselves dropped into.

The world

The future world, of star travel and the conflict with the Cho-ta'an, is very interesting in its details, especially how humanity has responded to the existential threat it faces.

The past world, of the Vikings, is brilliantly detailed and realized. It seems so natural, after a few pages the reader feels right at home, running around with Vikings.

The politics

To focus on the Vikings again--the politics of the time period, as King Harald attempts to consolidate Norway under his rule, is an important part of the story and determines many of the actions the crew is able to take. There's an undercurrent of localism and libertarianism here, freedom-loving people and villages resisting the offers of "protection."

We also get a glimpse of Cho-ta'an politics, and it ends up being a vital part of the events that lead to the situation the crew finds itself in.

Content warning

There is violence and death, but it's done with discretion. Probably not for very young children, but it's not their kind of story.

Who is it for?

People who like classic science fiction, good stories, and great characters. Even if you're not into "hard" SF, this book is simply a well-told tale of humans, their struggles and triumphs.

So, anybody who likes a good novel.

Why read it?

The book reminds me of Niven and Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*, which those with some knowledge of classic science fiction will recognize as high praise. But Kroese's work is not derivative in any way, instead it's original, well-written and it satisfies. A book so entertaining one is glad it's the first in a five-book series.

Going Ballistic by Dorothy Grant
Review by Becky Jones
<http://ornerydragon.com/>

Michelle Lauden always wanted to be a pilot and go to space, but that didn't happen. Piloting sub-orbital planes, known as ballistics, got her closer to space than most people. Then on a routine flight leg she, her plane, and her passengers became pawns in the life-threatening political games playing out between two planet-spanning governments.

What kind of pilot does it take to bring a plane in for a safe landing after it's been shot at by one government and almost hijacked by another? Michelle is about to find out as she uses everything she's ever learned or experienced to get her bird safely on the ground. Then she still has to avoid becoming a casualty of a cold war that's rapidly going hot.

Here's the blurb:

When her plane tries to come apart at apogee during a hijack, ballistic airline pilot Michelle Lauden handles the worst day she could imagine. When she gets down safely without losing any passengers or crew, though, she finds her troubles have just begun!

The ground below is as unsafe as the air above. The country she's landed in has just declared independence from the Federation. The Feds intended her passengers to be the first casualties in the impending war – and they're not happy she's survived to contradict their official narrative in the news.

The local government wants to find her to give her a medal. The Feds are hunting her to give her an unmarked grave. As they both close in, Michelle's running out of options and time. The only people able to protect her, and hide her tracks, are an accident investigation team on loan from the Federation's enemies... the same enemies who sent her hijackers in the first place. And they have their own plans for her, and the country she's in!

Being a pawn in political games is obviously never fun and Michelle has to quickly figure out who, if anybody, is on her side, and where she might be safe. She concocts a plan to hide herself among pilots who fly cargo around the continent. She will have to give up her career and her dreams of heading off-planet, but at least she'll be free and alive – if she has the time to carry out her plans.

The characters in *Going Ballistic* are fully realized and authentic. We feel Michelle's worry and stress as she goes into the crash investigation board meeting, and her relief when she's offered a modicum of hope by perfect strangers who seem to understand exactly what's at stake for her. It's already clear that she is going to be used as either a scapegoat, or turned into a victim – likely a tragically dead victim – for her part in safely landing a badly damaged plane and saving the lives of her passengers and crew.

Some readers might feel that a government shooting down a plane in order to create a crisis is taking the willing suspension of disbelief a bit too far. To those readers I say that idea is a bit too close to home for me. There are numerous examples in history of governments deliberately causing mayhem, destruction, and loss of life among their own citizens in order to provide an excuse to implement some new policy or emergency orders, or even change in governmental structure. Grant has taken those examples and used one that has occurred in real life and given us a story of how the outcome might be different if enough players work to change the government-approved version of the story.

An experienced pilot, Grant brings a wealth of knowledge and detail to Michelle's experiences in the cockpit of different types of aircraft. There's enough information for the average non-pilot to figure out what's going on, but the writing never drifts too far into insider jargon. Instead you get just enough detailed information to realize how damn complicated it can be to fly an airplane, and that despite that, it might be fun to learn how to fly. And I'm prone to airsickness so that's saying something!

Dorothy Grant has given readers an action-packed political thriller, added in some military-science fiction (mil-sf), some great flying, and topped it all off with a touch of romance. The characters are fully realized, and the political games unfold as you move through the story. The political geek in me thoroughly enjoyed it all. *Going Ballistic* is a fast read with well-paced action, a good amount of humor, and realistic characters and settings. Go get it and read it!

The Groundskeeper: Raking Up the Dead by Cedar Sanderson Review by Pat Patterson

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

Those of you who know me also know that (among other things) I DON'T do horror. It's not because of any ethical principle; it's because I'm a crybaby who hides behind the couch when the scary part comes on the TV.

You would therefore predict there's no way I would read something about raking up the dead, right? If the author was anyone else than Cedar Sanderson, you'd be absolutely correct. However, in 9 years of reading her work, I've discovered that she reserves her truly nightmare tales for happy stories about children's balloons, and that sort of thing. Even if I didn't have THAT knowledge, just look at the cover (which is also her work). See the happy little golf-cart looking thing, bouncing across the purple landscape? Nobody writes scary stories with a golf-cart on the cover.

When Chloe applied for the job as caretaker at Belleview Cemetery, she anticipated quiet days cutting grass and trimming hedges. Because it had obviously been a LONG time since that form of care had been applied, she did expect to have some difficulty in the beginning. She imagined that difficulty would involve cutting brush and pruning trees; that happened not to be the case.

The word 'caretaker' can have SO MANY different meanings! Fortunately, Chloe is resilient; she is also gifted with a gift of humor. That allowed her to turn the first attempt by a formerly living cemetery resident to scare her into the world's oldest knock-knock joke, which both ended any immediate threat, and set the stage for her interactions with all the other needy beings.

In addition to her resilience and sense of humor, Chloe is smart enough to know that blindly believing everything that non-humans tell her is likely to have a bad outcome.

That doesn't mean they can't be friends, though. They just do what they do, and Chloe just does what she does. But who's taking care of the Caretaker Chloe, while the caretaker's busy taking care? Man, oh gosh, oh gee; that's what's worrying me. (Actually, that's not true. I don't worry about anything. I just felt like a riff of the song "Caretaker's Daughter" was in order.)

Once again, I'm left with the impression that Cedar actually LIKES her characters, even those who might do socially unacceptable things. Whether that is her gift, or her gift to us, I could not say. However, for the moment, I'm embracing the power of 'and'.

Hauser's Memory by Curt Siodmak

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Rating: 6 of 10

The science fiction element of this book is medical, but the majority of the story is a cold war spy thriller. I love medical sci-fi, espionage, but not so much. The medical aspect concerns transfer of a dying man's memory to another individual through the extraction and injection of RNA, which unwittingly transfers his manic-depression and emotions, causing all kinds of problems for the guinea pig. The book moves through West and East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and the States, all along followed by cold war spies. The story is certainly the type that could only have been written post-World War II cold war era and does a great job addressing the paranoia of those days.

The Icarus Job by Timothy Zahn

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Zahn has another twisty SF spy thriller with a mystery you didn't know was there.

In The Icarus Plot, we run into two former bounty hunters who find themselves in the middle of a conspiracy to overthrow the galaxy monopoly on travel.

With The Icarus Twin, our heroes learned that the stakes are even more deadly than they were at first, though.

Now, Gregory Roarke and his alien partner Selina find themselves ones more in the crosshairs. But not only are they on the hunt for more Icarus gates, they may discover the secrets of the civilization that made them.

The Story

In a universe where transportation is subsumed by the Paath monopoly, Gregory Roarke and his partner Selena have been hired by the Icarus program to find interstellar gates that allow instantaneous transportation between any two points in the galaxy.

But when their old, organized crime employer reaches out to them with the offer of another Icarus gate, the payment is too good to turn down. Icarus wants the gate. The Paath want the gate.

The first problem is that the gate was stolen from the Paath.

The second problem is that in order to win the gate, Roarke and Selina must transport an assassin to her mission.

And the assassin herself is a target.

But if that were all there was to it, it wouldn't be a Timothy Zahn novel. As always, nothing is what it seems, and nothing is simple. The opening bar fight serves four different purposes, and the reader doesn't find out all of those implications until near the end of the book.

This is another multi-sided chess game played on a roller-coaster. Icarus wants the gate. The Paath want the gate back. Hunters are after the assassin. The assassin is playing a game by rules only she knows. The mafia has their own agenda.

Zahn's writing is, as always, quick and efficient. A throwaway character on the first page, who we never see again in the book, gets this description.

“Oberon's lovely little niche market of organizing slave- on -slave and prisoner- on- prisoner death battles to amuse the more degenerate of the wealth class hadn't exactly endeared him to the general hunt population. It was a good bet that anyone in here who knew him well enough to stick their neck out for him probably wouldn't bother. More likely they would settle back and enjoy the show.”

Nice, quick and efficient writing, all the way down.

Agatha Christie maintained that the trick to writing a mystery was to keep showing the reader the key to everything throughout the entire story. Some people describe Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer mysteries as going so fast, you don't realize that the clues are right in front of you. Timothy Zahn's Icarus novels go so fast, the reader doesn't realize that there's even a mystery to be solved, despite giving you every single bit of information, and flat-out telling you what's happening every step of the way. The reader is even told, in chapter four, the key to the mystery, but it isn't spelled out until the very end.

If there was any justice in the world, Timothy Zahn would already be an official grandmaster of science fiction.

The Characters

As Zahn is the man who created the Star Wars expanded universe's Mara Jade, we all know he can write espionage, and characters who can think their way through problems. In spy terms, “the wilderness of mirrors” is often used to describe the nature of the espionage world, where nothing is as it seems. Some people get lost in the wilderness of mirrors; Gregory Roarke lives there, has set up permanent housing and as multiple escape routes through it. Some moments, I'm not sure Roarke knows who's scamming who, or even who he is scamming.

And as in the last two books, Roarke seems to have been raised by a father named Maverick, but he always has endless sayings from his father.

“As my father used to say, the best strategy in a barroom fight is to stay completely out of it. I'd always considered that wise advice. Of course, as he also used to say, that probably won't work if you're the one that started it.”

And that's the opening line. Other gems include

“Sometimes subtlety just isn't worth the effort. In those cases, and with those people, make sure you have a brick handy.”

I await the day that we get to meet his father, because I suspect he will steal a whole novel, just by showing up in the last five pages.

Roarke's partner Selene is interesting in that she's an alien who thinks enough like Roarke that she can communicate whole paragraphs to him in one line of dialogue.

Then there is "Nikki," the assassin with some interesting principles, and even more interesting upgrades.

And then there is the series antagonists, Director Nask, of the Paath. While Nask is nowhere near as interesting as Zahn's Grand Admiral Thrawn, you can see that he was built in a similar mold. And he's growing on me. Nask isn't even lawful evil ... maybe lawful a-hole.

And then, working for Nask are his thugs Huginn and Muninn. And you have to figure Zahn is just having fun.

The World

The world is integral to the plot. In fact, not only is Zahn creating a world for the current plot, he's creating a world from the past, during the time of the first Icarus Gate construction. In the middle of all this chaos, Zahn still manages to slip in archaeology (Indian Jones style) and uses some of his deductions to move the rest of the story forward.

Not only does he know where Roarke's story is going, he knows where the story of the gate creators already went. It's a beautifully layered SF world.

Politics

The only politics here are the politics between people and cultures. All of which are fictional.

Content Warning

There is nothing truly alarming in this book. The most explicit language are in my notes.

Who is it for?

This is one-part original Mission: Impossible with some extra layers of The Sting and Leverage, and then add a few more twists. The first scam is on the first page, and it does not stop until the last page.

Why buy it?

This is Timothy Zahn at his best, the top of his game. The Icarus Job is a perfect SF espionage mystery that runs at the pace of an action novel, with perfect writing. Dang it's amazing.

Kindred by Kelly Grayson

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Recently, I WAS perseverating on stories of the 87th Precinct; I found a source for ALL of them, going back to 'Cop Hater,' written in 1956. I read seven police procedurals before I came up for air. That isn't AT ALL possible with Kelly Grayson; the four items I've read so far are WILDLY different.

I'm not review-stalking, either. I know that's a thing usually done when an author's work irritates a reader's sensitivities. They respond by writing scathing reviews of all the author's other works, whether they have read them or not. Perhaps positive review-stalking is a thing, but I've never seen it.

SO: if I'm not doing THOSE things, why AM I reviewing so much of his work? LTUE prevented me from reviewing for the past mumble years. I'm currently fighting back, and I needed all the help I could get; I did NOT want to get blocked by impenetrable prose. The writers in Texas have given me good leads in the past, so I asked them, and Kelly's work came highly recommended. I understand why, now.

Review. We are given a look behind the curtain and see a portion of a war involving angelic beings, fighting for causes we may be incapable of understanding. However, this much is clear: humanity appears to be chosen as the weapons the angels use. In this single volume, we are given three scenarios, which quite easily could be divided into three books. In each vignette, one angel (mostly, identified as Azazel) nastily uses humans as puppets in his attempts to destroy mankind, while the other (only given nicknames until the end) shows concern for those he invests in to stop that from happening.

First story, Cowboys and angels, 1877/8: I don't know if this has been attempted before, but I love the way it's done. Without spoilers, I can say that Clete Miller is an example of how people die in wartime by accident. The angel he called Jerry offered to return him to health, conditional on Clete agreeing to help him thwart the evil intent of the bad angel. Even John Wayne couldn't handle a shoot-out in a bar better than the Clete & Jerry team.

Second story, Cops and angels, 1914. All wars are stupid, but WWI/the Great War wins the prize for most stupidity. The assassination of Grand Duke Ferdinand in Sarajevo ended what some thought of as the Golden Age of Man. Zoran Marković is a Bosnian Serb police captain, working with the angel he calls 'Jerri,' is determined to prevent the bloodbath by stopping the assassination.

Third story, Medics and angels, 2011. Bryan Thibodeaux, a New Orleans paramedic, is working with the angel he knows as Remy to stop a TRUE drug epidemic. A new, powerful form known as 'Sumdood' (named after the unidentifiable person who tricks innocent people into things) is doing terrible things to users and triggering cartel warfare as well.

Jerry/Jerri/Remy is NOT just a super-weapon/plot device. He is on a spiritual journey as well, and while he may not learn as much as he teaches, each one of his contacts contributes to making him, for lack of better terminology, a better angel. It's NOT a trivial point.

Monster Hunter Bloodlines by Larry Correia
Review by Graham Bradley
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

The eighth installment in Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International series delivers on the expected, hits you with a few plot twists, and high-fives the fans several times along the way.

The Story

When you get into book 8 of anything, it's hard to summarize it without recapping everything that came before, but I'm not going to do that. Basically, there's a bunch of companies that hunt monsters and collect bounties from the government, and MHI is the focal company for this series. Our hero, Owen Pitt, is now a father, and he and his wife are juggling the monster-hunting duties with their role as parents.

The main part of this book focuses on a McGuffin designed hundreds of years ago by Isaac Newton. It's a powerful ward stone that can be used to slay giant cosmic gods, like the one Owen used in a previous volume. Several factions want to get their hands on it, and this leads to a dangerous game of hot potato, running afoul of competitors and big-bad villains alike.

The Characters

You've got the core characters like Owen, a chosen champion of the gods in the Eternal War; his wife Julie, a Guardian with special powers of her own; Trip, the resident geek; Holly, a former stripper who's very adept at killing baddies; Milo, the mad genius inventor; and Earl, the boss who's secretly (sorta) a werewolf.

While we get some more screen time with guys like Gutierrez of the Vatican Guard or Stricken who was formerly the head of Special Task Force Unicorn, nobody was more interesting than Sonia Gardener. Fans of the series will recognize that surname from the Monster Hunter Memoirs trilogy co-written with John Ringo. Yes, she's Chad's daughter, and that's all I'm going to say. No spoilers.

The World

It's our world, but the hidden side of it. We've got a Monster Control Bureau in the government, basically a subdivision of the DHS, that keeps monsters a secret from the public. Since our protagonists spend their time in that hidden side of the world, they don't hang out too much in the spotlight, though there is a fun pursuit through DragonCon where Larry gives a wink and a nod to his readers.

The Politics

To the extent that it comes up at all, the politics can pretty much be boiled down to Guns Good, Government Bad, Kill Monsters.

Content Warning

Correia doesn't really write sex, but he does violence and profanity on the R-level. This one toes that line.

Who is it for?

Fans of action and urban fantasy who like a lot of details in their battles. My only complaint about these novels is by the time I'm done reading one, I've got action fatigue. Correia's very thorough with writing those scenes, but they're still entertaining.

Why read it?

If you're a fan of the series, you'll see some payoffs to things that have been set up a few books ago, especially with Chad's memoirs, which I really liked. It's just good plain fun and it's nice to know there's still a series out there with something to look forward to.

Off to Be the Wizard by Scott Meyer Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The Venn Diagram of computer hackers and fantasy geeks has a LOT of overlap, so here's a story about a guy who uses his hacking skills to become an actual wizard in the Middle Ages, almost by accident. The thing is, he's definitely not the first one to figure out how...

You have probably seen some of Scott Meyer's webtoons over at www.basicinstructions.net. He brings that same level of dry humor and quick wit to his debut novel series in *Off to Be the Wizard*. After a hiatus of about seven years, he started doing new cartoons on the site again.

The story

What's that Japanese word? Isekai? It's used to describe "portal fantasy" novels where the protagonist jumps from our world into a different one. *Off to Be the Wizard* kind of feels like that, though it's more like a time travel book. I really liked the mechanism used by Martin to jump from the 21st Century to the Middle Ages. Meyer introduces it quickly and neatly, so there isn't a ton of exposition that explains how the whole concept works.

It starts out as a "nerd walks around a setting he only ever daydreamed about" kind of book, only to develop into a "wow, I bet he never predicted THIS problem or THIS problem or THIS problem..." kind of book. From the get-go we learn that Martin is a hacker, he pokes around in corporate databases, and he loves fantasy novels. When he stumbles across a parcel of data that happens to have his name in it--along with numbers like his height, weight, and SSN--he modifies some of the entry, only to realize that doing so literally changes the world around him.

Martin does some other experimentation with the data parcel, called the Repository, only to end up bringing the Feds down on him, and soon he has to hide. I liked how Meyer found a way to get Martin to hide in the past without making it feel forced. I mean, the premise of this book is a hacker becoming a wizard, right? That's really where we want to go and have some fun, and he gets us there without dragging it out or contriving anything. It's good, quick, tidy writing.

The characters

Martin is our focal character, but we're soon introduced to a bunch of other time-traveling hackers who've done the same thing he's doing. The first is Phillip, who defeats Martin in "magical" combat, then takes him under his wing to show him the rules of the time and place.

There are other time travelers posing as wizards, nearly two dozen of them, and they've put rules in place to prevent their fellow "magicians" from screwing up the timeline while they play around in the 12th Century. The important one is a wizard named Jimmy, who isn't afraid to buck the rules and tweak things that he shouldn't mess with.

It's Jimmy's actions that lead to the main conflict of the story, which are worth the price of discovery for the reader. It's a more interesting conflict than I would have predicted when I first picked up the book.

The world

Our world, with computer code-based magic. The "wizards" from the future debate whether the 12th Century in which they find themselves is even real, as opposed to being a digital construct where no action can have any moral consequence.

As mentioned above, this is where the divide between the main wizards and Jimmy comes into play. Big philosophical and moral questions have to be asked, as Jimmy starts messing with the lives of innocent people to create his own fantasy world.

The politics

Joyously, deliciously, there really aren't any. The story asks a moral question but doesn't bother with any of our real-world politics. I really loved that.

Content warning

Literally nothing! That was another surprise, and a welcome one. All of the focal characters are in their twenties and thirties, and yet this is a PG-rated story. No language, sex, or graphic violence. I quite liked this piece of sci-fi/fantasy for that reason.

Who is it for?

Due to its lightheartedness, clean content, and actual moral substance, I'd recommend this to anyone. Young readers could sink their teeth into it for a challenge above their grade level, and the seasoned sci-fi consumer can be entertained by its easy accessibility and surprise factor.

Why read it?

Meyer has created a fun world to play in, a bit of lighthearted escapism that isn't afraid to have a big moral conflict play out in the third act. Once I finished the first book, it didn't surprise me to learn he'd written five more after it; there's obviously a hunger out there for a book of this particular profile, and I'm excited to read the next one.

Out of the Soylent Planet by Robert Kroese

Review by Ginger Man

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Galaxy needed a hero. It got Rex Nihilo.

Rex Nihilo, scoundrel and grifter extraordinaire along with his robot Sasha are nearly shot, crushed, and ground into fertilizer as they try to earn a dishonest living in a hostile galaxy.

The story

While it might be a Rex Nihilo adventure, the story is actually told from Sasha's point of view. We meet the nearly sentient robot languishing in a lot being sold along with a bunch of other scrap on a backwater planet. She's laying there, lamenting her fall from grace as a promising actress when she meets Rex, the self-described greatest wheeler-dealer in the galaxy. Rex is trying to get to a spaceport

to sell a bunch of explosives he just stole when the Malarchy Marines show up, forcing the ne'er-do-well to take extraordinary measures to escape, measures that ultimately fail but gain him his robot companion.

From there things only get worse for pair as Rex keeps managing to land them in ever more dangerous and ridiculous situations, including a massive gambling pyramid, a soylent (don't worry, it only tastes like people) processing facility, and culminating in an escape that involves 399 murder bots dancing to "Staying Alive." Yes, you read that correctly. Kroese delivers an amazing array of puns and parodies from Star Wars, Dune, and more while keeping the action moving along at a steady pace.

The characters

Imagine if Han Solo were really a scoundrel and had even worse luck. That's basically Rex Nihilo. He spends his days alternating between trying to get rich quick and trying to stay alive depending on how his latest scam is going. His unshakeable arrogance and confidence are both highly irritating and oddly endearing. Rex is the kind of scoundrel who could be a great leader if he had any sort of moral compass other than his own good. However, he does seem to care for his robot Sasha, though you still wouldn't know it most of the time. While he doesn't treat her terribly well, he does make an effort at least to bring her along on his escape plans in contrast to the other temporary companions they meet that Rex never hesitates to kick to the nearest curb.

Sasha is a less insufferable version of C3PO, fluent in many forms of communication and not good for much else. Unlike her golden counterpart though, she often knows the language you need at the moment, and she can pilot a ship. Unfortunately, she also shuts down every time she has an original thought. Yet, she feels an inexplicable attachment to Rex. Or maybe she's just literally unable to think for herself thanks to the laws of the Galactic Malarchy that prevent the production of actual sentient machines.

Poor Sasha was meant to be a demo of just how close one could get to sentience, but the laws necessitated that she be equipped with a thought arrestor, the device that causes her to reboot. The result was the end of what she hoped would be an illustrious career on the stage. She had been doing well when she rebooted during a production and found herself upstaged by a floor waxer. The not-quite sentient machine still has aspirations for the stage though as she regularly demonstrates her abilities by re-enacting a scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The world

Kroese creates a galaxy that is full of a variety of planets, each with its own perils, suckers to be taken advantage of and gangsters to be avoided. Usually, Rex manages to be the sucker, and make the gangsters very angry with him. It would have been easy for Rex and Sasha to simply make their way from one seedy spaceport to the next, but the main part of the story takes place on a little backwater planet, Jorfu, ruled by the evil Ubicorp. They're sent there along with a cargo hold full of creamed corn getting smuggled onto the planet.

From there Kroese draws on other sci-fi properties to get his pun on, especially in this case Soylent Green. He does a good job describing the way Ubicorp controls the food supply on Jorfu as Rex bumbles around, narrowly avoiding certain death any number of times. Perhaps the best example is when the ne'er-do-well stumbles on a covert patch of strawberries and is nearly shot after he eats a handful of them. Or maybe it's when he sneaks his way into Xanatopia, which is basically a giant casino, and then is sent to work for Ubicorp when he 'wins' their lottery.

In short, even though it's a story focused mainly on getting its readers to laugh, there are a surprising number of solid world-building details that help readers understand the many perils that Rex Nihilo navigates daily.

The politics

There are no explicit politics in this world other than galactic empires are grossly incompetent and massive corporations tend to see everyone in terms of their usefulness to the company.

Content warning

Nothing objectionable, other than some innuendo and semi-intelligent plants that get aroused when people pick their fruit.

Who is it for?

If you enjoy pop culture and grew up with greats like Star Wars, Dune and Soylent Green and the humor of Mel Brooks and the Naked Gun movies then you will definitely enjoy the humor throughout, even as Rex perhaps inadvertently saves the Malarchy by letting a certain garbage-can-like robot get destroyed, one with a message for a princess.

Why read it?

Rex is a lovable jerk, the one you know has massive potential but keeps shooting himself in the foot along the way. Combined with his lovable loser robot Sasha, and the author's propensity for puns and ability to craft ridiculous situations, this story is just plain fun.

Pirates of the Electromagnetic Waves by Fenton Wood

Review by Rob Kroese

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Pirates of the Electromagnetic Waves, the first book in Fenton Wood's Yankee Republic series, is a quick, delightful read. There is also a full series omnibus edition, which you can order in Kindle format from Amazon or as a paperback direct from the author. I've seen the books compared to The Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, and the Mad Scientists Club.

For me, though, the most apt comparison is to the works of Ray Bradbury, particularly Dandelion Wine. Don't let the rather bland cover fool you; there's something wonderful inside.

The story

The story revolves around the boys' efforts to build a pirate radio station. And that's... well, honestly, that's pretty much it. There's almost no overt conflict; just a series of challenges--technical, physical, interpersonal, political, and logistical, that the two boys and their friends have to overcome. And yet, between the detailed descriptions of the process of setting up the radio station, the likeability of the protagonists, and the sweet-but-never-cloying sentimentality that infuses the book, it's just so much fun.

The characters

The main characters are two teenage boys, Philo Hergenschmidt and Randall Quinn. Randall is something of a raconteur (not to say fabulist...), while Philo is a bit more grounded (to make an appropriately electrical pun).

The world

Pirates is set in a small town on an alternate timeline where America's past, as well as a little of our future, intermingles with the present day. As one reviewer put it, the world of Pirates "went right everywhere we went wrong." Fenton Wood immerses the reader in his world, gradually and expertly revealing subtle differences from our own--and hinting at more. The result is a setting that is simultaneously comforting and unsettling.

The politics

There's no overt political angle, though Wood is clearly big on individual freedom, community, family and personal responsibility. Wood's depiction of the idyllic 1950s-esque town is subtly subversive (or rather, superversive). Pirates makes the reader wonder what our world might be like if we had managed to hold onto more of our freedom.

Content warning

None. This book is appropriate for all ages.

Why read it?

It's fun, fast, easy-to-read, and leaves you with a big smile on your face.

Who is it for?

Anyone who doesn't hate goodness and fun. If you're a fan of Ray Bradbury, particularly his more Earthbound work, you really should check it out.

The Powers of the Earth by Travis J. P. Corcoran

Review by Rob Kroese

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A novel too good to be any author's first foray into long fiction

Imagine a mashup of the best elements of The Moon is a Harsh Mistress and Atlas Shrugged, with a little Neal Stephenson and David Brin thrown in for good measure. That's The Powers of the Earth, a novel too good to be any author's first foray into long fiction. It's certainly no surprise that this book and its sequel, Causes of Separation, won back-to-back Prometheus Awards. They're just damn good books.

The story

The title comes from the U.S. Declaration of Independence ("When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with an-

other, and to assume among the powers of the earth..."), so as you might expect, TPoTE tells the story of a revolution. And since it's sci-fi, that revolution naturally takes place on the Moon.

Corcoran clearly modeled his novel on TMiaHM, but TPotE is no mere pastiche. Corcoran riffs on and remixes the elements of Heinlein's masterpiece and adds much that is uniquely his. Warning: TPotE is a loooooonngggg book (Amazon says the Kindle version is 663 pages), and it's only the first book in the series. The second is out now, and Corcoran is rumored to be working on a third (and final?) book.

The characters

As befits a tale with the scope of TPotE, there's a sizeable cast of characters, including an AI reminiscent of the supercomputer in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, the U.S. President (an insufferable former talk show host), and a group of uplifted dogs. If there's a main character, it's driven, principled and somewhat antisocial Mike Martin, the founder of the Aristillus moon colony. An ex-soldier named John, who fled to the Moon with the aforementioned sentient canines to save them from being murdered by the government on Earth, also gets a lot of screen time. As with most novels dealing with the Fate of Humanity, the characters clearly exist solely to propel the story, but Corcoran does a fine job of making each character feel distinct (although I did have some trouble remembering which dog was which).

The world

Corcoran's dystopic vision of Earth's future is vividly portrayed and seems to be inching closer to prophecy with every passing day. He gives us a world so constrained by red tape, regulation, taxes and political correctness that fleeing to the Moon makes perfect sense. The first time I read TPotE, about three years ago, I thought the inclusion of the "alternately abled soldiers" was a bit of a misstep, pulling the narrative a little too close to satire, given the cold realism of the bulk of the story, but as I watch people argue in dead seriousness that pregnant women (sorry, pregnant persons!) should be allowed to be fighter pilots, I'm starting to think the world we live in is a much sillier place than Corcoran's future.

The politics

TPotE is unapologetically libertarian (or perhaps anarcho-capitalist) in its outlook. The heroic characters are rugged individualists, and the villains are scheming tyrants, benighted pawns, or something in between. That said, Corcoran takes a much more subtle approach than, to pick a name completely at random, Ayn Rand. There are no eighty-page monologues on the value of the individual or the evils of collectivism. If you're of a more left-leaning persuasion, though, this book will probably piss you off.

Content warning

There's a fair amount of profanity (f-bombs and other cursing), as well as a moderate amount of violence, as one might expect in a book about a war.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys Robert Heinlein, particularly *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and fans of Neal Stephenson and Ayn Rand.

Why read it?

Who doesn't love a story about plucky underdogs (heh) standing up to tyrannical overlords? Judging by the sales of YA fiction, pretty much everybody. But instead of a cartoonish future drawn in broad strokes, a la *The Hunger Games*, Corcoran gives us a world that feels almost too real. This is hard sci-fi done right.

Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

As much as I like to recommend light, fun sci-fi, the heavier stuff like this is a good pace-breaker.

As Andy Weir continues to build his bibliography in the wake of *THE MARTIAN*, he makes an admirable effort with a new novel about a man stranded in space, trying to solve a world-ending problem.

The Story

A new solar phenomenon could spell disaster for the human race: a species of microscopic phage is eating our sun, causing its output to drop. Astronomers realize the same thing is happening all over the galaxy with the exception of a single star, Tau Ceti. Once humans are able to convert the "astrophage" into a fuel source, they build a ship to send scientists on an interstellar voyage in the hope that they can find a cure for the phage.

The Characters

Our protag is Rylan Grace, a PhD in biology and space sciences, who gets recruited to join the crew of the eponymous Hail Mary. He wakes up on the ship from a forced coma with retrograde amnesia, and the story is interspersed with glimpses into his past, showing how he ended up on the ship. His other two crewmates died en route, so it's just him out in space, trying to remember why he's there.

We also have an alien that Rylan nicknames "Rocky," who is a very interesting character in his own right. But I don't want to spoil the discovery process that the reader will enjoy.

The World

Ours, but a little bit near-future. Enough for life on the ground to feel familiar, but life in space to be possible.

The Politics

Present-day Earth stuff, with an emphasis on foreign policy, as many nations have to work together to make the Hail Mary a success. If you read *THE MARTIAN*, it's basically the same. The only part that came across as a heavy-handed lecture was the eco-scientist who complained about global warming skeptics...but we all know that dude IRL, so eh. This one's fine on the politics.

Content Warning

Far less profanity than Weir's other books, but there were still three or four F-bombs. One of Rylan's character traits is that he doesn't swear a lot, so when he does, he at least has a big reason for it.

Who is it for?

This one skews more heavily toward the hard side of sci-fi. You can read it for the adventurous elements, just be prepared to drown in the hard science that Weir dished out in THE MARTIAN. Even the stuff he made up is heavily grounded in real science, and he'll walk you through every bit of it so that you understand it the way he does. Is it accurate? Hell if I know, I'm just a truck driver. But I found the overall story to be very engaging after about the 25% mark. Once Rocky shows up, it was hard to put it down.

Why read it?

As much as I like to recommend light, fun sci-fi, the heavier stuff like this is a good pace-breaker. The story is still exciting, and the stakes are still high, while the technical side of it challenges the reader to really understand why things are happening the way they are. This is the kind of book that entertains you while helping you to understand the forces that govern the cosmos.

Scattered, Smothered and Spellbound by Kelly Grayson

Review by Pat Patterson

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

It's rather bizarre the way Kelly Grayson popped up while I was on hiatus. I lay my reviewing aside briefly (okay, not so briefly), and when I return, he is recommended as producing writing I might like. So, I go check on Amazon, and there are maybe a million entries for him. Will I be able to catch up? Who knows? Who cares? (Who pays?)(nobody PAYS, idiot. Shut up, and review.)

There is NOTHING you can teach me about Waffle House. However, this is Waffle HAUS, and therein lies the difference. Waffle HAUS serves the same menu, but the clientele and the staff are somewhat...enhanced, shall we say?

It seems that a long time ago (as humans count time) a deal was cut between the mundane and supernatural, and as a result, unearthly beings can appear in Waffle Houses, and look like humans. Appearances don't control behavior, though, and so it was necessary to...enhance (shall we say?) the security. SO: the line cook is a sorcerer/sheriff, and the wait staff is similarly in possession of ethereal talents.

Customers could go either way. You might be sitting next to a mundane retired schoolteacher, or it could be an orc. Or both.

On this particular day, in this particular Waffle Haus, most of the customers ARE mundane. Sort of. However, their routine, calm, normal existence has gifted them with affection and ownership of a variety of weapons, and a passion for monster hunting. This has existed in something of a vacuum to this point, but today? Today, they get to act.

Here are the problems: there are more bad guys than good guys; the bad guys have heavier weapons; the Waffle Haus fortifications aren't really designed for extended siege; it is ESSENTIAL that the mundane world NOT discover the supernatural. And then, the news people show up, with cameras and stuff.

How you gonna get out of THIS?

That's for me to know, and you to find out. Hint: it's not solved by Larry Correia.

Short, sweet, an easy read, and while there ARE some inside jokes, you really don't need to be an insider in order to enjoy.

The Schrödinger Paradox: Entanglement by Holly Chism

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Holly Chism scares me badly enough that I hide under the bed while I read her work.

With the lights out. (I can do that now! Yay, Kindle!)

I don't bring a gun with me under there, though; it's not that kind of scared.

It's the 'Killing Me Softly With His Song' kind of scared. Did she study my secrets before writing? Is she looking at me NOW?

Holly Chism can go deep. Look out.

'Entanglement' is the third volume in the 'Schrodinger's Paradox' story line, and yes, the world is coming to an end. For reasons OTHER than fear, I found myself reading this volume first. Under normal circumstances, I won't do that; therefore, you may assume that the circumstances weren't normal; or, I could be lying about that. It did, however, re-affirm my belief that Chism is an exceptional talent; she managed to bring me up to speed with an economy of words that suggests she has had some training in cramming BIG story into (small) bag.

A big honkin' rock is going to smash the Earth. How big? Half-again as big as Chicxulub, which ALMOST killed everything on Earth 66 million years ago. We've got 10 years to stop it from happening.

The good news: we CAN stop it!

The bad news: The people who authorize spending money on big space projects refuse to believe the data, for political reasons. Furthermore, they don't want the dirty little worker drones (the people who discovered the big honkin' rock) to disturb the peace, so they use threats and sanctions to silence them. This is more than foot-dragging; it shows that Higher Up cannot tolerate different opinions and gets downright crotchety about different facts.

More bad news: Douglas Adams' Babel fish isn't real. That's significant, because there are people who understand the physics of the problem, and there are people who understand the finances of the solution, and they speak different languages. How can THAT get resolved?

Enjoy this one. It's an excellent blend of tech talk, the problem of communicating with bureaucratic monsters, sprinkled liberally with real-life examples of the hassles of moving and the need for coffee. Also, cats. BIG cats. Maine Coons, in fact. I think you'll like it.

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

Imagine a Cthulhian romp that's equal parts Terry Pratchett and Mel Brooks.

Roy M. Griffis seems to have something of a Midas touch. The prolific author of the By The Hands of Men and Lonesome George Chronicles series of novels has also written poetry, as well as for stage and screen. His original film script, A Cold Day in Hell won him the first John Milius Screenwriting Award. With The Thing From HR, he tries his hand at horror-comedy, and it just might be the funniest novel I've ever read.

The story

Set in what is gearing up to be its own literary universe known as Cthulhu, Amalgamated, the tale is told by NargLAh, a low-ranking Shoggoth for the Human Restraint office. The massive cosmic bureaucracy oversees the comings and goings of the "hairless apes" on Earth as they mess about with Things Beyond the Ken of Man. Due to NargLAh's odd fascination with humans, his uncle Beefbits, a big shot up the ladder, recommends him for a mission among them. Before he can even be properly briefed, our shambling thousand-eyed protagonist is whisked away into the body (or "meatsuit") of one elderly Professor Heinrich Wisenheimer, the newest faculty member of the Physics Department at Newton College in the fictional town of Quibben.

NargLAh wasn't sent completely unaided, however: he does have a native guide on Earth. Sharing the same consciousness in that body is Murph, a young surfer who met his end after being lured by a femme fatale into being the unwilling sacrifice to some eldritch abomination in mid-orgy. Combining Murph "The Surf" briefing him on human custom with both being plopped outside of their elements in World War II-era New England, Griffin mines the the story's rich vein of comedic anachronisms for all their worth.

For example, early in the book, NargLAh's first-ever interaction with a human gets off to a rocky start when he meets a young woman greeting him at a train station. His first instinct is to kiss her, because he saw her boyfriend do it. "I leaned over and rubbed my mouth against hers, as the male of her species had done. And that is when John stepped forward and, I believe the expression is, 'clocked me'."

As NargLAh settles in however, the story becomes a mystery to discover just what his mission is, and it quickly becomes apparent that there are plenty of people on campus with secrets to hide and agendas to further. Perhaps most disconcertingly, the more coffee, pie and sleep he takes in, the more comfortable he becomes among the (shudder) Hairless Apes.

The characters

Griffis really does a wonderful job of presenting the reader with a variety of memorable characters while managing to turn more than a few Lovecraftian tropes on their heads. NargLAh is a trepidatious bean counter who (it's implied) got his meager position within the organization thanks to his uncle and tells the bulk of the story with all the high-minded airs of a would-be anthropologist. The delivery of his humor is appropriately bone-dry, yet side-splittingly fish-out-of-water as he confidently bungles earthly colloquialisms. He thinks, for example, that Murph's constant reference to "chicks" has to do with some preoccupation with barnyard fowl.

His arc (which I won't spoil here) is perfectly paced and imminently satisfying as the people he encounters gradually grow on him. The supporting cast, villains and heroes, all manage to color whatever scene they're in vividly and never leave a dull page. Griffis even manages to give the sanity-shredding monstrosities NargLAh works with at the office distinct personality and voice. If that doesn't make you want to read it, nothing will.

The world

There are two, really: the otherworldly organization the shoggoths and others work for monitoring the humans, and Griffis' idyllic college town of Quibben, where nearly all the earthly action takes place. Both are quite fully realized and draw the reader in. The Void From Whence Hope Perishes has vivid descriptions of everything from the bloodied quivering bits of the latest misguided cultist that just arrived for processing, and Quibben College has firey autumn leaves all around the campus' lushly forested grounds.

Magic and ritual of the occult variety in this world is fairly soft, and is able to get explained to the audience in a few brief lines. Nothing gets in the way of the action.

The politics

One character is rumored to be a Nazi. One is rumored to be a Communist. Neither play in on any level beyond marking clear antagonists. You can just enjoy the story as a fan of two-fisted (or tentacled) Lovecraftian adventure.

Content warning

Pretty tame as any work having to do with Lovecraftian horror goes. Griffis' vocabulary is bang-on and does a wonderful job of delightfully obfuscating even the grisliest of details. There is one instance of almost-sex early on which does involve a woman being naked, and an occult ritual at the climax of the book that involves some wince-inducing razor work, but's that's it. Murph's story of how he died is told through conversation, not flashback.

Who is it for?

Any fan of Lovecraft, the occult detective subgenre, or horror-comedy. It's tone certainly remains light enough to veer well away from grim, but keeps the stakes high enough to never let you completely relax, especially during the story's climax.

Why read it?

This is a masterfully written homage to HPL's mythos in both linguistics and humor. This had me laughing for pages on end, and I can say it was without reservation the funniest book I've read in decades.

Virus Thirteen by Joshua Alan Parry
Review by Jason P. Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

There's a rare time when I absolutely regret not reading a book when it first comes out. There are times when I get around to reading a book and it was better than I expected; in such times, I reflect on my tardiness, but I don't dwell on it to the point of distraction.

This one, I'm slightly beating myself up over. Mainly because it reads so much differently now that it would have if I'd read it when it was first published in 2013, seven years before a certain global event did irreparable harm to our trust in media, government, the pharmaceutical industry, and the health care industry.

Virus Thirteen takes place in a nebulous future time, when people have access to genetic modification. Some good, some not so much. And what I'm sure was a satirical tone at the time, we have a Department of Home Health Care, a government agency tasked with monitoring and policing the physical fitness and wellness of the general population. As they gather up people with marginal conditions — both physical and mental — they also are about to face a pretty hefty challenge with the onset of a new flu-like pandemic.

At the heart of the research to find a cure: GeneFirm, Incorporated. Led by the clone of Dr. Weisman, GeneFirm was responsible for the various genetic modifications done to people over the years, including the new genetic code to prevent anyone from getting cancer. And just as Dr. James Coleman and his wife Dr. Linda Nguyen are about to announce an aerosol variant of the genetic therapy, Coleman gets brain cancer. This is supposed to be impossible, because he's got the anti-cancer gene.

Except he doesn't.

Coleman is ostensibly the lead character in this story, but he doesn't do a whole lot to drive the action forward. That's one of the problems I have with the story (more on that in a moment). Coleman is learning more about the cancer modifications, and the more he learns the worse things get. Not to mention, his wife has been sequestered away at GeneFirm to fast-track research for a vaccine to this new super-flu.

Wait. This sounds awfully familiar...

Reading this, I felt like I was cruising along in 2020 again as the world learned of this new flu-like virus, this Covid-19 bug, and the subsequent fast-track research that delivered not one, but four vaccines within weeks. And how reassuring was it that there was suddenly a cure for a virus that suddenly may have happened overnight — developed in a lab, perhaps? And surely, the pharmaceutical companies' motives were pure as the wind-driven snow, were they not?

Our story comes complete with a conspiracy theorist, Coleman's Aunt Rose, who tries to warn him that there's something smelly in Denmark (actually Austin, TX, which is quite fitting for a company that's out to ... well ...). But nobody listens to crazy Aunt Rose. Poor, poor, crazy Aunt Rose. And then there's her son Pat, who got picked up by the Department of Home Health Care because he was getting a little too pudgy and his blood pressure was up, so it's off to the camp with him for a six-week concentrated dose of athleticism and enthusiasm at 6am.

The connective tissue between Coleman's plot and Pat's plot are two Homeland Health Care agents, and really they're just reacting to events same as everyone else in the story. And that gets me to the problems with the book.

There's no hero. Coleman doesn't drive the story at all. And Pat's b-story has absolutely nothing to do with the a-story. They don't intersect until the end, and it seems the only reason we see Pat at all is because he's Coleman's cousin. Other than that, there's no reason for his story to be here. It doesn't have anything to do with the overall virus plot. None whatsoever. At the end, I found myself wondering why Pat was even in this story, not to mention the pink-haired young lady he meets at the re-education camp.

The villain isn't much to write home about, either. Pretty generic "I have to save humanity by destroying it" type of thing. Which is annoying because there's so much more that could have been done to make him a tragic figure trying to correct a massive mistake that doomed the planet.

Overall, the main reason I'm beating myself up on this one is because I found myself ... not enjoying the book, per se, but at the very least I was leaning into the parallels between this story and how actual events played out in 2020 and 2021. That skews my perception of the book, which is just OK in terms of story. There are a good number of characters, none of whom get fleshed out with any real depth, and the plot is full of tropes that in and of themselves wouldn't have gotten a second look from me. But because of the subject matter, because of the way things unfold in the book and how they resemble so much of what we all actually endured, the story resonated with me in a way I don't think it would have in 2013.

So, it's a mixed bag. On the one hand, it's an easy read that moves from one scene to the next with a lot of characters who do much except react to things going on around them. No one has real agency — one of those "modern sensibility" words — and no one is quite who they appear to be, but the reveals are pretty predictable if you take a few minutes to take a look around at what's going on in the rest of the book. On the other hand, it's a fascinating and somewhat cynical precognitive vision of 2020, and the Orwellian Department of Home Health Care is a nice touch, because it's more believable than ever that the US government would try something like that.

If I give myself longer to think about it, there are a lot of problems with the book. It's clearly a first novel for Joshua Parry, and Tor editor Stephanie Flanders didn't do Parry any favors. There's a lot of material that doesn't need to be here at all, or else there needs to be more story connecting the two plots together. And if you have a "main" character, he should actually be doing something to drive the narrative rather than just react to it throughout the story. Everything's cursory, rushed with passing glances. Aunt Rose, the guy on the plane (who never shows up again?), Agent Marnoy, Dr. Nguyen... all of them need more depth, more investment by the author so there's investment by the reader. I found myself reading the next chapter not because I cared about any of these people, but because I wanted to see just how much Virus Thirteen played out to match the Covid-19 fiasco.

And whenever I bother to think about it, I'll wonder just how I would have felt reading it in *The Before Times*...

White Ops by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man <http://www.declanfinn.com>

With *White Ops*, Declan Finn tosses his hat into the world of sci-fi and delivers an action-packed adventure mixed with layers of political intrigue against a background of interstellar warfare.

The story

Sean Patrick Ryan is known to many as the biggest badass in the galaxy. To paraphrase another character known for getting into more than his fair share of fights, “he doesn’t say that, that’s what people tell him.” With a reputation like that, trouble seems to follow him, which is how he learns that a little-known race called the Pharmakoi are breaking out of their star system in a bid for galactic domination. Fortunately, his early warning to Earth’s military and his relationship with the most technologically advanced race in the galaxy, the Renar, gives Earth a fighting chance against the belligerent and well-armed aliens. Over more than a decade, the Pharmakoi are finally defeated, having been eradicated after a last ditch attack on Earth.

However, Ryan and his long-time friend Peter Sierra sense early on that something isn’t right. Realizing that the Pharmakoi aren’t smart enough to have even reverse engineered their tech and that their hardware for ground warfare is far behind their spacecraft, the pair conclude that there is another race behind the scenes. A race that is almost certainly at least as far advanced as we are over the age of the musket.

As Ryan and Sierra conduct their separate searches, another, more political drama plays out between President Douglas Wills and Admiral Sherman Newcomb. Both fought in the Pharmakoi War. Wills, however, ensured that he stayed out of harm’s way and intentionally crafted situations to make himself appear far more heroic than he was. Newcomb on the other hand was the hero of the war, leading the charge against the invaders with his combination of brilliant tactics and generous use of nukes. The Admiral’s record naturally made him popular, so popular that Wills has always seen him as a threat even though the military man has never displayed any political ambitions.

Now, as the hidden enemy is ready to make their move, the war between the two men is heating up. Wills may have Earth’s military and the telepathic Thought Police on his side, but Newcomb has Sean Patrick Ryan and Associates.

The characters

In some ways, the main character of Sean Ryan is like other Finn main characters. He is larger than life, a tactical genius, and Catholic. However, Ryan’s personality is markedly different than either Tommy Nolan or Marco Catalano. While he certainly enjoys taking out the trash, Ryan is more of a happy warrior than Marco who takes a borderline sadistic glee in dishing out violence. While he may have been raised in a monastery, Ryan is also less saintly than Nolan. Unlike both, he has never had any interest in leading anyone or anything up until now. Not that the biggest badass in the galaxy has held himself aloof from society, he just doesn’t want to be responsible for anyone except himself. That is, until the Anima, the power behind the Pharmakoi begin to make their move.

Admiral Newcomb is the picture of leadership. A mere intelligence officer at the beginning of the war, he finds himself in command of his ship after the top brass of his fleet are wiped out in the first battle. Fortunately, like Jack Ryan from the Tom Clancy novels, Newcomb isn’t just good at analyzing data;

he's also willing to act boldly on his conclusions. It's his willingness to think outside the box and actually learn about his enemies that allow him to rack up victory after victory against the better armed Pharmakoi. And while he doesn't have political ambitions, that doesn't mean he's inept on that front either as he has managed to hold off Wills' attempts to discredit him over the years, and even adapt to running a massive Dyson sphere known as Alexandria station populated with multiple alien races, including the perpetually fighting Soivan and Touri.

Douglas Wills is the classic overly ambitious politician, quick with a smile and turn of phrase that get the attention of the media and of voters. And like many politicians, he is corrupt to the core, willing to go far beyond mere media manipulation and skimming a few tax dollars here and there to murder in order to advance his career. In fact, it's one of his more detestable acts that brings him to the attention of the Anima.

There are a host of side characters throughout *White Ops* that are also well developed and interesting without ever quite stealing the show from the main characters. Most if not all of them could carry their own short stories and a few could be the focus of other novels in the future. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if that should happen given Finn's characters have a tendency to grow beyond their original confines.

The world

White Ops is set far in the future, far enough that humanity has spread far into the galaxy thanks to figuring faster than light travel. There are, however, several other intelligent species out there amongst the stars and not all of them are friendly and many others are much more advanced than the humans. However, thanks to human tenacity and their performance during the Pharmakoi War, the people of Earth often find themselves in the middle of galactic events, mediating disputes between a variety of other races.

It's also a galaxy full of strange locations and we get to visit more than one. Between Earth, Renar, and Alexandria Station, it's clear that this is a galaxy that is lived in by more than one kind of intelligent life form.

Different races also have their own unique aspects, most especially the Renar who genetically modify their ambassadors to reflect the world they are sent to, resulting in physical forms that look completely different than most Renar. The Touri are extremely dinosaur-like in appearance and the Soivan spend their first hundred years with an exoskeleton that earns them the nickname "crickets." In short, the work put into differentiating the alien races is much more impressive than the *Star Trek* method of giving everyone different bumps on their foreheads or pointy ears.

Finn also avoids the *Star Wars* trap of giving one profession to an entire race, i.e. the Jawas are all junk traders. The Renar for example have a caste system centered on their different professions.

The politics

The politics within the book are typically corrupt and supposedly democratic. Those of the book however are along the lines of, "I work outside the system, don't get in the way."

Content warning

There are some gruesome deaths but that's about it.

Who is it for?

If you are a fan of Finn's other work you definitely love this. If you don't already have that as a baseline, Kai Wai Cheah delivers a similar level of action in his novels. Also, any action-oriented franchise in which the hero mows through tons of bad guys. John Wick or the Equalizer immediately spring to mind.

Why read it?

Because Finn takes his penchant for larger-than-life characters who have no problems taking out the bad guys and puts it in space. What follows is not just action but a healthy dose of political intrigue and a hint of mystery that demonstrate that the author can do a lot more than just write a solid fight scene.

Series Reviews

Riptides, Storm Surge, Flotsam of War and Ratchet's Run

by Blaine Lee Pardoe

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Gather round, loyal reader(s) and I'll tell you all the tale of how I read four awesome books and was too lazy to review them individually.

Hey, I love to write but sometimes I get really into a story, and I don't wanna stop, so I just get the next one, and the next one...

Yeah, I've got a story problem, and not the kind you used to do in math class.

All of this to say that I have confirmed my former suspicion that Blaine Lee Pardoe is a spectacular author. Having read his books, Riptides, Storm Surge, Flotsam of War and Ratchet's Run I have run out of books that are currently published in the Land & Sea universe and I find that I am just a wee bit disconcerted at not having more to read.

I mean, Pardoe has been cranking these books out at an amazingly rapid pace and I really shouldn't give him problems for not writing fast enough, but would I really be a fan if I didn't? I mean, the way I see it, a fan should serve the following functions for an author

Cheerleader: I love your work, Mr. Pardoe! I'll tell everyone else about it!

Source of Income: Consume the book legally. Make sure the author gets paid.

Pain in the a... I mean Motivator: Urge them to keep up the hard work. Remind them why it's worth it. Even if it's only to get the fan (me) to shut up for five minutes.

Or sumfin'...

So, about the books themselves...

I mean, I probably should talk about them, because this is supposed to be a review, right? Why wouldn't I just get straight to the point and tell you about what I read? Huh?

Yeah, I know...

Anyway...

Riptides and Storm Surge were both pretty much what I expected, only more awesomer. I mean, I put up Splashdown as my pick for the Dragon Awards, but these two were almost as totally amazing. I think I just liked the first one more because I love getting to know new worlds and it was the first book.

SHRUG

And I don't mean what I expected as just more of the same. Those were the books that moved the story forward in a massive way. If Splashdown had been Star Wars, then Storm Surge and Riptides would have been along the lines of The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi, except that the story didn't end there. But still, the overall plot of the series moves along at about that pace for the first three books.

Some parts of Storm Surge and Riptides are not for the squeamish. I like that about them. They're realistic and necessary, but they're not pretty. There's a bit of mutilation and some torture. It fits though, and it shows the enemy as something other than just a group of aquatic soldier ants constantly moving forward without thinking. I like that. If they came from some other planet somewhere to get here and invented the weaponry to fight the militaries of Earth, then they can obviously freaking think. I may not always approve of the way the villains gather information, but it's obvious that they need to and there are many reasons why those things needed to be revealed in the way that they were.

Flotsam of War is a one writer anthology and works more along the lines of The Lost Chronicles by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman where they went back and filled in the missing parts of their original Dragonlance Chronicles trilogy (and I'll shill for them some other time, promise.) only we it's one book instead of three and we didn't have to wait three decades for it. It also kind of reminds me of Nerilka's Story except that Flotsam of War was actually enjoyable.

Oops.

I didn't say that out loud, did I?

Ratchet's Run is probably the only one of the sequels that works as a standalone in my opinion. The others are good books, but you need to read the previous stories to really get them. I think you could probably understand Ratchet's Run with no previous knowledge, but it might take you a chapter or two to get up to speed.

At any rate, it combines an alien invasion and a bank heist by several competing interests and things go totally wrong for the characters. In this case though, that works for the readers because the action ratchets WAY up (DYSWIDT?) and it's crazy fun to read. I just want to know how many times Pardoe had to rewrite that section to get it all straight because there is a LOT going on. He managed it though.

And it's weird, because through most of the story I thought Ratchet's Run would be more of a side story that didn't change the world much, but then I got punched in the mouth with the knowledge that I was wrong. I don't do spoilers but stuff happened. Cool stuff. Something that might be maybe repeatable in other places where the conflict is ongoing.

I was really pleasantly surprised there, too. Reading a series like Land & Sea can be a weird experience for me (but in a good way) because I always want it to know what's going to happen next but I don't want things to move too quickly and the story to end. So, like you want more, but you want less, but you want more, but not that much, but even more, but...

Yeah, weird.

Overall, though, I was really impressed and I'll be downloading the next one as soon as it gets published.

I love the tech in the Land & Sea universe though, and I love the fact that it keeps getting better. I also freaking love the way that the new tech works, but it has some bugs. Pardoe doesn't make his people out to be supermen who can't fail at anything. The stakes of the war are high. The people, whether military, political or civilian, are aware of this. The pressure is high to DO SOMETHING. Some things are rushed that shouldn't be. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes the consequences of a failure can be extreme. Sometimes the end user doesn't make it. That sucks, but in a real-world scenario it would be inevitable and in fiction those types of equipment failures are the height of realism. Listen, I hate Murphy, and I'm sure you do too, but that guy passed his law for a reason.

Overall, the only disappointing thing about the Land & Sea series is that the next one isn't out yet. But hey, I'm just doing my job by pointing that out, right?

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Safe Deposit Boxes

Uplink Squadron and Second Flight by JN Chaney and Chris Kennedy Review by Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

So, when I cracked Uplink Squadron open (metaphorically speaking since I read the e-book) I was immediately intrigued. There was something going on here and it smelled bad. There was a new technology in town. Countries were using it to build the latest in fighter/bombers for their air forces. The technology used to pilot the craft, it turns out, was addictive and some pilots were dying. Others went crazy. It was a bad scene. Only now, we've got most of the bugs worked out and it doesn't happen much anymore.

Doesn't happen...

Much?

Uhhh...

Yeah, I mean, everyone who has ever gone to war has done it (in)secure in the knowledge that they may not make it back. That's what makes them heroes. But when it's their own technology that's killing them, it's a different story. I mean, aviation is dangerous and bad things happen, but when people are losing their minds and their lives inexplicably...

Yeah, it's a little worrisome. I mean, is that something you'd want to send your kid into? Me neither, and my oldest starts firefighter training in the fall. She's already EMT qualified. But these fighters take things to a whole new level.

And that's just for starters. Wait till the aliens show up. What do they want?

I mean, I'm not totally sure either. There are, I think, seven more books in the series at present (having only read the first two so far) and so I'm sure there is more to be revealed, but I haven't gotten that far yet. So far, what we know is they're quick to fight and they seem to need a superior force to have a good chance against the Earthlings. I find this perplexing as they have superior technology and more experience in space (probably) and they just don't have the tactical knowledge to succeed against humanity. Something still doesn't feel right here.

We here at Jimbo's are thoroughly impressed by the work done on Uplink Squadron and Second Flight by both Kennedy and Chaney, but we're wondering what the story truly is with these aliens. They seem to be a little more inept than we expected. There just has to be something going on here.

For their part though, the humans are pretty human. They eat. They fight. They get involved in emotional entanglements that they shouldn't then try to deny what they're feeling. I'm thinking that might go a little wrong in the upcoming novels as well. We're just not there yet. At least I'm not. Once again, I'm behind.

SIGH

What else is new?

What's new, I guess, is the pilot interface with these fighters. Instead of the classic heads-up interface, they jack into their fighters with a cord, like a decker from Shadowrun. (Which, it should be noted, I haven't played in ages. Sorry if this has changed.) It's also somewhat reminiscent of Anne McCaffrey's Brainship Series, except that these are fully grown adults who are physically capable of jacking out at any time. At any rate, I don't know if this is quite common enough to be a trope, but "jacking in" is definitely a plot device that works. And the whole "lose your mind" thing just makes it that much better. Just like you went up against some black ICE, chummer.

Lieutenant Lance "Stinky" Baker is our protagonist and he's a good dude stuck in a weird situation. He has problems from the first page when he has to get the port he'll use to connect to his fighter adjusted or reinstalled or..

I dunno, sumfin'. Look, it wasn't right. They had to redo it. He slept for three days afterward. Don't ask me about the details. Ask a brain surgeon. I'm just your humble book blogger.

At any rate, he gets to fly the newest and best fighter in the entire solar system once his head heals. Once he jacks into that fighter with his link, his whole world changes. Even hearing the experience described, it's easy to see how you could get hooked on it. It's like the best of Virtual Reality but with real world consequences and senses that surpass anything the human body is capable of on its own. It's the kind of thing that someone would pay good money to experience, and the military is paying him to do it.

It's a good thing he's got those capabilities too because, after a bit of training (where he shows off some tactics he shouldn't know yet) he gets his baptism of fire. He ends up needing every bit of gear and

training he has available. And then the whole squadron has a bad day...

Yeah, if not for his comrade Sofia Jimenez, and a few more friends you'll have to find out about all on your own, he'd have been screwed right off rip. But that's the thing about the military, right? They're big on the team concept for a reason.

The action sequences are fun and believable. I don't know much about Chaney, but I do not doubt that Kennedy is a retired naval aviator and his expertise shows here. Dude can write a furball. I mean, I don't see anything here to top Kennedy's work in Asbaran Solutions, but no system's perfect and that was the best I've ever read. Uplink Squadron and Second Flight both have rocking fight scenes and the occasional "OMG WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!!" moments appear right where they should. Both authors should take a bow, because the pacing here is amazeballs.

I'm a newcomer to Chaney's work, although I did just join his Facebook group yesterday and I'm looking forward to reading more of it. I just didn't know anything about him until I started this series. That's my bad not his. Kennedy though, I've been reading for a while now and he's known for his long series's, series? serieses? However that works. There are nine of the Uplink Squadron books so far and I'm going to read them all. I already downloaded the third one last night after I finished Second Flight and I should be reading that right now, but I don't want both of my fans to be stuck wondering where I am, so I thought I'd let you all know about these two first. I can't wait to run off and start reading. Really. You guys are on your own for a while.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Gremlins

Literary Criticism

The Symbiosis of Adventure Fiction and Futurism: A 19th and 20th Century Dialogue

Franklin Dalcò Grande

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61560691464754>

The 19th century bore witness to an explosion of adventure fiction that captivated readers' imaginations and sowed the seeds for the avant-garde movements that would define the early 20th century. Among these movements, Futurism, which originated in Italy in the early 1900s, stands out for its radical embrace of modernity, speed, and technological advancement. This article delves into how 19th-century adventure fiction may have inspired Futurism and, conversely, how Futurism influenced 20th-century action and adventure fiction, highlighting a fascinating dialogue across time.

19th-Century Adventure Fiction: Pioneering the Path

The 19th century was a golden era for adventure fiction, with authors like Jules Verne, H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Emilio Salgari leading the charge. These novels were characterized by their exploration of uncharted territories, encounters with exotic cultures, and a profound sense of wonder at the technological advancements of the era. Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the

Sea" and "Journey to the Center of the Earth" exemplify this spirit, blending scientific curiosity with thrilling escapades.

Emilio Salgari, often hailed as the "Italian Jules Verne," wrote captivating tales of daring adventurers and exotic locales. His "Sandokan" series and "The Black Corsair" series transported readers to far-off lands and thrilling high seas, embodying the adventurous spirit and imaginative scope that would later resonate with Futurist ideals. Salgari's works were particularly influential in Italy, where his vivid depictions of action and exploration captured the imaginations of young readers, including those who would become the architects of Futurism.

These works did more than entertain; they inspired a generation to dream beyond the confines of their immediate reality. The themes of exploration, discovery, and the limitless potential of human ingenuity resonated deeply with readers, fostering a cultural milieu ripe for revolutionary artistic movements.

The Birth of Futurism

Futurism was launched in 1909 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who published the "Manifesto of Futurism" first in a local Italian newspaper and then in the French "Le Figaro." This avant-garde movement emphasized speed, technology, and a break from tradition. The movement celebrated the energy of the machine age, urbanization, and the new rhythms of industrial life.

The Dialogue: From Adventure to Futurism

The adventure fiction of the 19th century laid the conceptual groundwork for Futurism by fostering a cultural fascination with the new and the unknown. These novels encouraged readers to look forward, to imagine a future shaped by human ingenuity and technological prowess. This forward-looking perspective is intrinsic to the Futurist ethos.

Moreover, the narrative techniques employed in adventure fiction—fast-paced plots, dramatic twists, and larger-than-life characters—paralleled the Futurists' desire to inject vitality and dynamism into art. The vivid descriptions of fantastical machines and futuristic landscapes in adventure novels provided a template for the Futurists' visual and literary experimentation. For instance, the mechanical marvels and rapid, action-filled sequences in Verne's works can be seen as a precursor to the Futurist fascination with speed and mechanization. Salgari's relentless pace and exotic settings offered a sense of escapism and adventure that aligned with the Futurist desire to transcend the mundane and embrace the extraordinary.

Russian Futurism and Its Intersections

Russian Futurism, a parallel but distinct movement, also drew from the same well of technological optimism and revolutionary spirit. Figures like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov were inspired by the idea of breaking from the past to create a new, dynamically modern world. Russian Futurism, with its emphasis on innovation and disruption, was similarly influenced by the themes prevalent in 19th-century adventure fiction. These Russian Futurists extended the reach of the movement, emphasizing the cultural and technological revolutions happening within their own rapidly industrializing nation.

Futurism's Influence on 20th-Century Adventure Fiction

As the 20th century progressed, the influence of Futurism began to seep into action and adventure fiction, transforming the genre in subtle yet profound ways. The celebration of speed, technology, and a break from tradition in Futurist art and literature found echoes in the adventure novels of the time.

Early 20th-century adventure fiction began to reflect the technological optimism and modernist ethos that Futurism championed. Stories set in the near future or featuring advanced technology became more prevalent. Authors like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke incorporated elements of Futurism into their works. Their speculative worlds, with advanced technologies and futuristic settings, owe a debt to the Futurist vision of a rapidly changing world.

The influence of Futurism is also evident in the stylistic evolution of adventure fiction. The fragmented, dynamic narratives and the use of innovative language in Futurist literature found a parallel in the increasingly fast-paced and visually oriented storytelling of adventure novels. The emphasis on action and the breakneck speed of plot development in 20th-century adventure fiction can be seen as a literary counterpart to the kinetic energy and movement celebrated in Futurist art.

The Legacy of Futurism in Contemporary Adventure Fiction

While Futurism as an organized movement waned by the mid-20th century, its influence persisted, particularly in genres like science fiction and speculative fiction, which often overlap with adventure fiction. The Futurist celebration of technology and innovation continues to inspire authors who explore the implications of future advancements in human society.

Contemporary adventure fiction often grapples with themes central to Futurism: the impact of technology on human life, the quest for new frontiers, and the dynamic interplay between humanity and its creations. The speculative worlds of authors like Philip K. Dick and Michael Crichton, with their advanced technologies and futuristic settings, continue to reflect the Futurist vision of a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, the relationship between 19th-century adventure fiction and Futurism is a testament to the enduring power of literature to inspire and transform. The adventurous spirit and technological fascination of 19th-century novels laid the groundwork for the Futurist movement, which in turn reshaped the landscape of 20th-century adventure fiction. This ongoing dialogue between past and future, tradition and innovation, continues to enrich the literary world, reminding us that the boundaries of human imagination are ever-expanding.

Prose Bono

For the Boys by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I've been collecting books for research recently. Some of them I already had on hand, but this is a good excuse to acquire others. Books I remember well from childhood, that I loved and that helped shape me into who I am. That's not what this project is about, wholly, although in part it is. You see, I was a tomboy. These days, that comes with a lot of baggage. Back then, I preferred the 'boy's books' to read and

set me dreaming of things I would do. And I did a lot of them, too. Search and rescue, hunting and fishing, becoming a scientist, and much more. Then I became a mother of a son, and to my dismay realized that the books in the library were largely targeted at my daughters, and not all of my daughters. They were, as I'd put it when I was a tomboy in my jeans with the knees out and scabs to earn those holes, for girly-girls. Nothing wrong with that, in theory. The problem is when there's nothing else.

So, I've been piling up books for boys from generations past, to mine for boyishness and take the nuggets I pan out of them to melt into something for the boys of today. The rough-and-tumble boys. The boys whose hearts yearn for space, and exploration, and dinosaurs in some strange frontier somewhere. The boys who will be engineers, and divers, and work with their hands at jobs that leave them filthy when they stumble home at night to shower in the garage before the wife will feed them a hearty supper.

Those boys. The ones who will grow into the men we call heroes. The boys who desperately need noble masculinity modeled for them in stories. I may be a girl, but I grew up a tomboy, and with the help of old friends, I'm going to try my hand at telling some of those stories.

I have some Tom Swift, and Tom Swift Jr (which is very different than the original) to read again. I have Tarzan books and many others by ER Burroughs, as he was a favorite when I was younger. Jim Kjelgaard's dog books still resonate, as I learned when I introduced them to my son. Danny Dunn and Encyclopedia Brown helped feed my lifelong desire to be a scientist. Talking to friends reminded me of The Mad Scientist's Club, and The Great Brain. Others I picked up for the delight of the title – who could resist Tom Stetson and the Giant Jungle Ants? or the appeal of nostalgia, with the Lone Ranger (although having grown up without television, I haven't seen the show).

These books are a representation of generations lost to time. Tom Swift's debut was in 1910 and none remain who read the first editions as boys turning over the crisp new leaves eagerly. Tom Swift and His Atomic Earth Blaster (a Tom Swift Jr book) came out in 1954, a couple of years before my father was born. Tom Stetson and his ants debuted in 1948. The men who were nurtured by these stories, which entertained and influenced them, did great things that saw a man step onto the moon.

After that first wave, came the next generations. The Mad Scientist's Club, which appeared as a collection in the 1960s had been serialized in Boy's Life. Encyclopedia Brown and The Great Brain came along in the same decade. It's not that there were no more boy's books after that. There were, and I'm sure you will tell me about them in the comments. It's that the culture started to change. Exploration, with all of its risks, became a fearful thing instead of eagerly anticipated. Kids weren't given the freedom to roam a neighborhood solving mysteries and building strange contraptions.

Which is a pity. Boys need freedom enough to learn and grow and become competent, independent thinkers. Books can help them with the thinking. Books can spark ideas in them of what they can do with their hands, and in time their lives, and that can give them meaning and purpose, which they desperately need if they are going to be happy human beings. And all of this should be fun.

The Quirky Reader by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

As I was making myself iced coffee this morning (to the endless horror of my dear husband, I like it this way in summer when a cuppa hot seems too much before going out to work in the yard) I was contemplating the nature of my sense of humor. The coffee station in our office is a repurposed hutch (lest you think me handy, I bought it cheap while junking around). It's really convenient to have coffee and

teakettle in the office. Over the years I've added a bit of décor to it. Behind the coffeepot is a tin sign depicting a black cat with slitted golden eyes, holding a steaming cuppa joe. The lettering reads: Coffee, because murder is wrong. And off in the corner is stuck a nice vinyl sticker I got with an order of Deathwish coffee. These two, I was thinking, say a lot about what I find funny, and friends who've noticed them tend to chuckle as well.

Violence doesn't solve everything, although it can certainly be a help. When you are plotting a book, what were you thinking? Anyhow, there are stories where the old advice of Raymond Chandler "In walks a man with a gun" just doesn't work well. I don't often use his advice straight up, lest it get boring, but when you are sticking and the scene is dull, having something unexpected happen will often jolt the story back on track and get the whole thing moving again. This can, of course, be done badly. The trick is to make it fit with the story, and the world the story is set in, and not break the characters.

I've been stuck for a while on the novella I'd hoped to release for Valentine's Day. As this is mid-May, you see there is a problem. It's not the plot – well, not just the plot – it is the level of stress and business in my life this year. It's been a heckuva year, this last eleven months. Aside from that, while writing I've realized that I do depend far more on violent conflict, drama, and situations to propel the story than I can use in this story. Writing science fiction and fantasy allows you to be more dramatic. Writing a small-town boy-meets-girl is... cozier. And that is where I'm having difficulty.

It's too easy. There needs to be more plot than just that. So I have been reading cozy light novels, sometimes romance, but more often tales of people and family and their little village. In short, I've turned to an old favorite author for retreat from my own troubles, and also for possible inspiration on my work. I've been reading DE Stevenson for most of my life (since my teens, anyway) and I think I've talked here before about her stuff. I've finally run through all of her books, even splurging on the expensive ebooks, and then I was trying to figure out what next? Amazon to the rescue. The helpful bots suggested Molly Clavering, who it turns out was Stevenson's friend and neighbor in the Scottish town where both settled after the second World War to live out their days. I tried one of hers as an ebook, discovered that it was similar but not the same, and settled in with delight to read through her catalog. At the same time, Amazon suggested Susan Scarlett, which is the penname of Noel Streatfeild. Now, Streatfeild is best known for her children's books, of which the most popular was Ballet Shoes, which should have given me a clue.

Stevenson's books are full of very human characters living in interesting villages or towns, and they are compelling reads, mostly. I've always enjoyed them, and likely they have shaped my writing. Clavering, while writing about similar towns, has a different flavor to her writing, more earthy, more bitter-sweet, and I really enjoyed these. Scarlett, however, does a heavy dollop of treacle in her stories, and there is no doubt at all what the resolution is going to be for the main characters – boy and girl – and I find myself not enjoying them nearly as much. I've read, I think, three, and won't bother buying more. I want there to be more substance and not nearly so much saccharine in my reading. I want there to be that acid touch of sarcasm, without being cutting (I don't care for Cold Comfort Farm, for instance, and so haven't tried any other Stella Gibbons). I want warm relationships alongside the catty village gossips who make so much trouble even when the main character is strong enough to just roll her eyes at it. If you'd like to try Scarlett's work, I liked Babbacombe's best because there is this wonderful family in it, content with one another as they are, working together to succeed in life. For Clavering, you might try Dear Hugo, which was unexpectedly twisty through the story, but warm-hearted and lyrical in its descriptions of the countryside the author obviously knew and loved. For Stevenson, the Drumberley series, which begins with Vittoria Cottage, is my favorite.

I started reading at night, when I climbed into bed, to make sure that I was making time to read, a few months ago. I even have a reminder notification and timer set on my phone – twenty-four minutes of reading every day – so I don't forget. There are days I fall asleep in the middle of it. There are nights I've gotten caught up in the story and regretted the lack of sleep in the morning. I haven't only been reading fiction, I've managed to work my way through a number of non-fiction books as well. It has been very good for me. This is time I could spend elsewhere, sure. I think I need the reading, more than other things, yes, even putting words into a story. When life is stressful you need to keep your mind sharp, and sometimes a little escapism gives your body time to relax and heal a bit. My plot predicament will come right at some point. The words are filtering into my mind again, slowly. The well runs dry easily these days, because stress cortisol is a heckuva drug. I'll manage. And in the meantime, I'm loving the ability to find authors I missed, and read books that make me happy. Books that fit with my quirky sense of humor. Now all I need is a book with a coffee-drinking, death-dealing black cat... ooh. I could write that into my story!