

The H3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor  
August 2024

Letters

4 ... Garth Spencer

Hugo Aware Nominees

4 ... How I Voted and Why by Tom Feller

Novels

20 ... A Canticle for Leibowitz by Walter M. Miller Jr. ... Review by Pat Patterson

21 ... A Fine and Private Place by Peter S. Beagle ... Review by Mindy Hunt

24 ... A Princess of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs ... Review by Caroline Furlong

25 ... Blood Cartel by Nicholas Woode-Smith ... Review by Declan Finn

27 ... Call of the Rougarou by Kelly Grayson ... Review by Pat Patterson

27 ... The Case of the Haunted Chapel by Karen Kelly Boyce ... Review by Caroline Furlong

29 ... Ganwold's Child by Diann Thornley Read ... Review by Pat Patterson

30 ... Monster Hunter International, by Larry Correia ... Review by Declan Finn

33 ... New Worlds Quarterly #1 edited by Michael Moorcock ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

33 ... Politics Kills by Declan Finn ... Review by Jim McCoy

35 ... The Resurrection of Roger Diment by Douglas R. Mason ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

35 ... The Secret of Seavale by Blake Smith ... Review by Caroline Furlong

37 ... Space Cowboys 2: Electric Rodeo edited by C.V. Walter ... Review by Pat Patterson

38 ... Storm Between the Stars, by Karl Gallagher ... Review by Declan Finn

40 ... Titan by Robert Kroese ... Review by Graham Bradley

42 ... The War Revealed by Karl Gallagher ... Review by Declan Finn

44 ... Witchy Eye by D.J. Butler ... Review by Graham Bradley

Literary Criticism

46 ... The Wisdom of Walt Disney: The Themes, Ethics, and Ideas of His Greatest Films  
by David Breitenbeck ... Review by Caroline Furlong

Prose Bono

48 ... Keywords: Help your readers find your book by Cedar Sanderson

49 ... Marketing by Cedar Sanderson

# FREE BOOKS

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

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch  
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future  
The Brittle Riders  
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

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

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy  
The Chain Forge

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

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

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

Simultaneous Times

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

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

# Editorial

Are you an aspiring writer? Many authors wrote their first million words — the ones they wisely did not try to publish — by writing fan fiction, fiction based 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.

The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 and is distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. In most issues superb proofreading support was provided by Jean Lamb. Many of our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Some of them link from their reviews on the internet to Amazon. If you buy at Amazon.com via our reviewers' web pages, they get a modest financial reward.

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Tom Feller <http://N3F.org>

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

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

Jean-Paul L. Garnier <https://spacecowboybooks.com>

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

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

Bob Jennings

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

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

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

Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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

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

Pat Patterson [goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](http://goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

Heath Row <http://N3F.org>

Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>

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

Jessi Silver <http://s1e1.com>

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

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

To join the N3F: <http://N3F.org/join>. Submit articles to the editor, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net as text files or MSWORD files. The N3F claims no ownership on published submissions beyond the nonexclusive right to distribute the Review and its articles in all formats, including archival sites.

# Letters

Dear George,

Thank you for the recent /N3F Review/. I was particularly interested to see Robert Runte's review of /Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction/, as he and I have both been involved in the promotion of Canadian SF.

The article on prozines was a sobering think piece; I also have the habit of taking on too much reading material, and not getting through my online material in any reasonable amount of time. If this goes on ... Well, we'll have another story idea, won't we?

John Thiel's article "How to Make a Story: a Recipe" was pretty funny, in the same vein as "Training Combat Hamsters", a send-up of how-to manuals.

Declan Finn's "An Exercise in Creativity" was also good fun. Reading how Batman and Spiderman would adapt and cope in each other's story universes gave me a good evening's entertainment. Now it's 10:00 p.m. and I want to write a few comic think pieces myself!

Yours,

Garth Spencer  
Vancouver, Canada

# Hugo Award Nominees

Every year, N3F Review reviewer Tom Feller reviews all of the Hugo print nominees and reports his filings, complete with a comparison with the actual WorldCon Vote. We are pleased to present here his reviews of the 2024 nominees for work appearing in 2023.

## The 2024 Hugos: How I Voted and Why By Tom Feller

After the scandal concerning last year's Hugo Awards, I wasn't sure whether I still wanted to participate. However, I already had a supporting membership for the Glasgow Worldcon, so I decided I might as well. I read as many of the finalists as I could before the voting deadline.

### Novels

#### The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi by Shannon Chakraborty Review by Tom Feller

The title character is a 12<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic female pirate captain. She has been living in obscurity for

the previous ten years in a village in Oman with her mother while raising her daughter Marjana. One day she is visited by a rich, elderly woman named Salima who offers her a considerable sum of money to rescue her granddaughter Dunya, who, according to the grandmother, has been kidnapped. Salima's son and Dinya's father was Asif, one of her crewman until he was killed while serving under her. Taking the assignment, Amina travels to Yemen and Somalia to assemble the survivors of her former crew. They include Timbu, her first mate and a Hindu from India, Dalila, chemist and a Christian, although neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox, and Majed, navigator and a Muslim. Although it was unintentional, she also picks up Raksh, her husband whom she tried to kill just before going into hiding. He is a demon, which Amina did not learn until the morning after their wedding night, and Marjana's father, although he doesn't know of his daughter's existence. The villain is the sorcerer Falco, whom they call a Frank, but is really from Italy. It is the first book in a trilogy, and, although the first half was somewhat slow, I look forward to reading the later installments. My ranking was #2, but the other voters ranked it #3.

## The Saint of Bright Doors by Vajra Chandrasekera Review by Tom Feller

The title refers to a phenomena in this fantasy world of unused doors becoming portals allowing "devils" to enter this world from other realms. The main character, Fetter, studies them intensely at one point in this novel. When he was a baby, his mother, known as Mother of Glory, quite literally removed his shadow, although the shadow finally comes to the forefront of the story toward the end. Without the shadow, Fetter is able to float in the air and makes use of this limited form of flight on a few occasions. He eventually learns that only he can see "devils", little monsters that walk among ordinary people. His mother trains him to be an assassin, and his first kill is that of an uncle against whom his mother held a grudge. Her ultimate goal is for Fetter to kill his father. When he is twelve, he runs away and makes his way to the city of Luriat. He finds that he has a talent for filling out forms and makes a living helping people, especially newly arrived immigrants, navigate the city's complicated bureaucracy that combines government, religion, and a caste system. Unlike most fantasy novels, the technological level is comparable to ours including e-mail, social media, and television. Fetter makes friends, gets a boy friend, becomes peripherally involved with a group seeking to overthrow Luriat's government, and becomes a student of the "Bright Doors". Fetter's father, who left before he was born, has several names, but he is mostly known as The Perfect and Kind, the leader of a major religious cult called The Path Above. Their paths cross eventually. This is a very demanding book stylistically, reportedly loosely based on South Asian Buddhist mythology, but in the end, it is worth it. This was the Nebula Award winner, but my ranking was number 4, only because it was a competitive category, and the other voters ranked it #5.

## Some Desperate Glory by Emily Tesh Review by Tom Feller

In the far, far future, humanity has solved the faster-than-light problem using something called "Shadowspace". Unfortunately, we not only lost an interstellar war to an organisation of 19 alien species called the "Wisdom" and sometimes called the "Majodo", but the Earth itself was destroyed and fourteen billion humans were killed. Refugees are spread out all across the galaxy, including one planet inhabited by two million humans and another star system in which several hundred thousand live in the asteroid belt. Most of this novel takes place on a small lifeless planetoid named Gaea inhabited by two thousand people who do not accept the results of the war and engage in piracy and terrorism. One key plot point is that just prior to the beginning of the novel they captured a space yacht piloted by an alien known as Jiso. They become a major character. ((Jiso's gender is never determined, so the au-

thor uses “they” as their pronoun.)

The point of view character is Kyr, short for Valkyr, who is seventeen at the start of the novel. She cannot remember living anywhere else and has a twin brother, Magnus, aka Mags. Both were genetically bred to be warriors, and their uncle Jole is the commander of Gaea. They have almost completed their ten year cadet training and are waiting for their assignments. They have an older sister, Ursa, who escaped from the station years previously, and they consider her a traitor to her species. Although Kyr is the top cadet in her seven girl “mess” called the Sparrows, she is assigned to the nursery where she is expected to bear a child every two years until menopause or death, whichever comes first, and help raise the children of other women as well. Although this novel is set in the far future, they make babies the old-fashioned way. Lisabel, the worst soldier in their mess, but the prettiest, is also assigned to the nursery, but Cleo, short for Cleopatra, the second best soldier, is assigned to one of the combat divisions.

Magnus is the top cadet in his “mess” and is assigned to Strike, the terrorism division. His first and likely only mission is to kill a bunch of humans whom the leaders of Gaea consider collaborators. He is not expected to survive. Kyr rebels against her assignment and enlists Avi, short for Avicenna, a computer geek and friend of Magnus, to escape and follow her brother. This is a very readable, fast paced space opera that includes time travel and alternate time lines. The world building is excellent, and it has plot twists that are surprising, yet completely logical. It is the author’s first science fiction novel after first publishing two fantasy novellas. I ranked it number one, and other voters agreed with me to make it the winner in the novel category.

## Starter Villain by John Scalzi Review by Tom Feller

Charlie Fitzer is a divorced 32 year old unemployed business journalist living in his late father’s house in a Chicago suburb with his cat Hera. He is currently working part-time as a substitute teacher. Then he learns of the death of his uncle Jake, a reclusive billionaire owner of parking lots. Charlie has not seen his uncle since his mother’s funeral when Charlie was five, and his mother had been Jake’s younger sister. Their only contact since then took place when Charlie invited Jake to his wedding, and Jake sent a tacky gift. Charlie was Jake’s closest relative and stands to inherit Jake’s fortune, not realizing the parking lot business was a cover for Jake’s secret and illegal enterprises, including, but not limited to, genetic engineering, death rays, and cloning. The funeral takes place in the same facility where Charlie’s parents had theirs, and it reminded me of the funeral in the old Cary Grant-Audrey Hepburn film *Charade*. In both cases, the viewers checked the body to make sure the person was really dead. A man we later learned is named Tobias, for instance, attempts to stab the body. Before Charlie gets home from the funeral, his house is destroyed by a bomb. For his own safety, Charlie is transported by Jake’s assistant Mathilda “Til” Morrison to his uncle’s secret lair on a volcanic island in the Caribbean. Here, among other things, he meets genetically modified, potty-mouthed dolphins. Jake’s enemies are a coalition of Blofeld wannabees each with a pet cat. Known as the Lombardy Convocation, they deliver an ultimatum to either join them or die. This is a very entertaining spoof of the James Bond movies, but this category was so competitive that I ranked it number six and so did the other voters.

## Translation State by Ann Leckie Review by Tom Feller

This is the author’s fifth novel in her Imperial Radch series, which was the winner in the Best Series category. It is set in the far future when humanity has spread out into the galaxy and encountered alien



species. There are three point-of-view characters. Enae had been the primary caregiver for her abusive grandmother, but when the latter dies, Enae and her relatives discover that not only did their grandmother not have any money, but she had sold all the family assets, including their name, to an outsider. To get Enae out of the way, the outsider uses her connections to get Enae assigned to investigate a “cold case”, which requires traveling to other planets. No one expects Enae to solve the case, a kind of “missing person” situation, although whether the individual in question is a legal person is problematic.

Reet is an orphan who was raised in a loving and nurturing foster family. He was abandoned as a baby, and his DNA is so unique that no one can guess at his origins. An ethnic group called the Siblings of Hikipu believe, or say they believe, that he is a descendant of their ancient monarchs, called the Schan who are supposed to have died out. He is working as a guide and minder for visiting VIPs when he meets Enae. After getting to know him, Enae realizes that Reet may be the offspring of the missing individual, and he is promptly arrested.

Qven is a genetically modified human who has been raised to be a human translator for the Presger, an alien species so alien that they cannot communicate directly with other species. Instead, they took genetic material from humans they killed before a peace treaty was signed and combined it with their own DNA to create a species called Presger Translators to speak for them. Qven’s upbringing is the most interesting, but appalling, part of the book. Just before reaching adulthood, Qven is assaulted in a manner that resembles an attempted rape. Qven is thereby “ruined”, according to Presger Translator standards. However, a use is found for Qven, who is to “match”, a non-sexual form of mating, with Reet, who has been determined to not be Hikipu at all but rather the offspring or a descendant of the Presger Translator who disappeared.

I definitely recommend reading the previous books in the series before tackling this one. Another complication is that the author has created her own set of gender pronouns. For instance, Enae is a “sie” and Qven starts out as a “they” and becomes an “e”. Furthermore, the Radch have the arrogant habit of referring to everyone who is not Radch as “she”, which is confusing. The novel starts slowly and relies heavily on coincidence to advance the story, but really picks up toward the end when there is a space emergency. My ranking was number three, and the other voters ranked it #2.

## Witch King by Martha Wells Review by Tom Feller

The author is best known for her *Murderbot* series, but this is a completely different book. It is so different that the author might have considered publishing it under another name. First, it is fantasy rather than science fiction. Second, there is a lot less humor, but more violence. The narrator is Kailesteron, aka Kai, a demon prince. Unfortunately, he is not as engaging a character as *Murderbot*. He comes from a world known as the “Underearth”, but he lives on the human world by possessing recently deceased corpses. For many years, he lived with a clan of nomads known as the Saredi, and he was known as a witch. Then invaders known as Hierarchs conquered the Saredi and other races, but were eventually overcome. The main story begins sixty years after the Hierarchs were defeated. Kai and his friend and fellow witch Ziede had been imprisoned by unknown conspirators, and after they escape, they go off in search of Ziede’s wife Tahren. During their escape, they rescue a child named Sanja from human sacrifice and Tenes, another witch who has lost her voice. Sanja and Tenese accompany them on their quest. Along the way, they pick up Ramad, who claims to be an historian.

A secondary story is set during the beginning of the revolt against the Hierarchs and features Kai, Tahren, Tahren’s brother Dahin, and Ziede helping the human prince Bashasa in his rebellion. The magic

system is quite original, and the world building is excellent, but the pacing is rather slow. No sequel has been announced, but the ending is sufficiently open-ended to allow for a series. My ranking was number 5, and the other voters ranked it #4.

## Novella

### Life Does Not Allow Us to Meet by He Xi Review by Tom Feller

This story takes place in the future when humanity is just beginning to expand to the stars using wormholes to go faster than the speed of light. Genetically modified humans called “pioneers” are sent to colonize marginally Earth-like planets. Decades later teams are sent to those planets to assess their situations. It has an interesting premise, but it was poorly executed. I was tempted to rank it behind “No Award”, but decided to make it my number six in this category and so did other voters.

### Mammoths at the Gates by Nghi Vo Review by Tom Feller

This is the fourth installment in the author’s *Singing Hills Cycle* featuring Chih, a monk, and Almost Brilliant, a neixin, which is a kind of talking bird with total recall. “Singing Hills” refers to the monastery where Chih is based, and the first story in the cycle, “The Empress of Salt and Fortune”, won the Hugo for 2021. Chih goes around the countryside collecting stories, which they write down. (The character and all the monks are referred to as “they” during the story. Other characters are referred to as “he” or “she”.) In this story, Chih returns to the monastery for the first time in three years. This is the first story in the series to be set there, so the author’s readers finally get a look at its inner workings. Chih finds it besieged by two war mammoths and his best and oldest friend Ru in temporary command. (They had both been brought to the monastery as children.) In this world, mammoths are used for war, and two of them could easily destroy the monastery. Ru, who suffered from a disabling leg injury many years previously, is in charge because the permanent head, called the “Divine”, and most of the monks are out on an archaeological dig. The event precipitating the siege is the death of their old mentor Thien. Unlike Chih and Ru, Thien had had a life before becoming a monk, and two of their granddaughters, each riding a mammoth, are claiming their body, which is contrary to the monastery’s traditions. How this conflict is resolved drives the story’s plot, but also important are the stories told about Thien at their memorial service. It is a beautiful piece of writing, but it was a competitive category. My ranking was number four, but the other voters made it #2.

### The Mimicking of Known Successes by Malka Older Review by Tom Feller

This is another story in which humans no longer live on the Earth. However, there are no aliens to blame, but rather climate change got so out of control that the Earth became uninhabitable. There is no faster than light travel, either, so options are rather limited. The colonization of Mars was botched, but centuries later humans live in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter, although in the story it is called “Giant”.

Except for a prologue in which Mossa, a female police detective, is called in to investigate the disappearance of Valdegeld University scholar named Bolien Trewl, the story is narrated by Pleiti, a female scholar at the same university. Mossa and Pleiti had been lovers during their undergraduate days five years previously, but they broke up after they graduated. Nonetheless, Mossa requests Pleiti’s help to



determine whether the disappearance was suicide, murder, or something else. Among other places, they visit the Preservation Institute, aka the “mauzooleum”, a research zoo in which Earth animals and plants are alive and available for viewing by tourists. During their visit, they are attacked by a large cat. A definite murder takes place at the university and eventually it ties in with the disappearance. It is also related to Pleiti’s research, which is to figure out how to restore the Earth so that humans can return.

Stylistically, the story has the feel of a Sherlock Holmes story with Mossa as Holmes and Pleiti as Watson had they met when students and become lovers. (They frequently drink tea and eat scones.) It is quite readable and hard to put down. It is the first novella in a series, and I ranked it number three, and the other voters ranked it #4.

## Rose/House by Arkady Martine Review by Tom Feller

The title refers to an artificially intelligent house in the Mojave Desert which is not only the site of a murder but a suspect as well, especially since no one lives there and the house is kept locked 24/7. Only one person, Dr. Selene Gisil, is allowed inside, and she has a rock solid alibi in that she was half-way around the world at the time of the murder. The original owner, Basit Deniau, was a 22nd Century version of Frank Lloyd Wright and had passed away a few years previously. The house itself reported the murder, only because federal law on artificial intelligences requires it. Detective Maritza Smith is assigned to investigate, and she is assisted by her partner Oliver Torres. With Gisil’s help, Smith enters the house to examine the body and the crime scene, while Torres stays outside and encounters persons of interest. This story succeeds as both a mystery and a science fiction story and also has the feel of a haunted house story. My ranking was two, but the other voters really disagreed and ranked it #5.

## Seeds of Mercury by Wang Jinkang Review by Tom Feller

Chen Yizhe is a successful 34 year old businessman with a beautiful wife and a son when he finds out that he is the sole beneficiary of his aunt Sha Wu’s will. The estate consists of a small smelting facility and the intellectual property from her work as a scientist. This property is a non-carbon based life form that has no commercial potential and is designed to live on Mercury. With the help of a disabled billionaire, it is seeded on Mercury, and a good portion of the story takes place ten million years from now on Mercury. It is a good, solid hard science fiction story, and I ranked it number one in this category, but the other voters only ranked it #3.

## Thornhedge by T. Kingfisher Review by Tom Feller

This fantasy is a retelling of “Sleeping Beauty”, but from the viewpoint of Toadling, the person who cast the spell putting the girl to sleep and then supervised her imprisonment. Toadling is a human changeling who was kidnapped by a malevolent fairy at birth and raised by aquatic fairies known as the “Greenteeth”. They teach her to shape-change between human and toad, hence the name “Toadling”. Time passes differently in the faerie world and as an adult she is returned to the human world by a benevolent fairy to serve as the fairy godmother to Fayette, the faerie changeling for whom she was exchanged. Fayette is a beautiful princess, but an evil one with magical powers, including the ability to re-animate corpses. Her imprisonment in a tower is meant not as punishment but rather to protect the humans in the area. Toadling remains to guard while a hedge of thorns grows up to cover

the tower. The humans all depart over time. Centuries later, a Muslim knight named Halim comes by. He had read the story in a book and decided to embark on a quest to free the princess. He persuades Toadling, against her better judgment, to help him cut through the hedge and enter the tower. It is a good solid fantasy story retelling a classic fairy tale, but there was so much good competition that I ended up ranking it number five. However, the other voters made it the winner in this category.

## Novelettes

### I AM AI by Ai Jiang Review by Tom Feller

The narrator, called Ai, is a female cyborg who barely makes a living posing as an artificial intelligence ghostwriting books and articles. She lives in a slum below a bridge in a city called Emit, where her neighbors plug their electronic devices into her to recharge but in return give her a sense of community. The city is dominated by a corporation called New Era to whom Ai owes money. Whenever Ai gets a little money, she spends it on replacing organic parts in her body with electronic ones. She spends her days at Mao Tou Ying, an Internet café where she can work and recharge her electronic parts at the same time. The main conflict is between Ai's efforts to make a living and help her neighbors and her need to keep her humanity. This is a good cyperpunk story, and I ranked it number one. However, the other voters strongly disagreed and ranked it #5.

### Introduction to 2181 Overture, Second Edition by Gu Shi Review by Tom Feller

The premise of this remarkably efficient story is that cryogenic sleep is invented in the fairly near future, and the story describes how it changes the world in general and individuals in particular. It is written in the form of an introduction to a non-fiction book about the subject. It is really not much of a story, but not bad enough to rank it behind "No Award", so I ranked it number six and the other voters agreed with me on this one.

### Ivy, Angelica, Bay by C.L.Polk Review by Tom Feller

This is an urban fantasy set around 1980 about a witch, her apprentice, magical bees, and another witch who seeks to kill and replace her as the local witch of Hurston Hill, an African-American neighborhood. It is a sequel to "St. Valentine, St. Abigail, St. Brigit", and the protagonist Theresa Anne, aka Miss l'Abielle, is now a middle-aged woman grieving for her recently deceased mother. When she comes home from the funeral, a homeless woman named Livia is sitting on her front steps and asking for a house. Not wanting to grant the wish, Theresa Anne names as a price the woman's first-born, thinking that she will go away. Shortly afterward, a ten year old girl wearing rags and named Jael shows up. Theresa Anne takes her in to raise her as her own. Meanwhile a corporation called the Angelica Group is buying up property in the neighborhood with the intention of gentrifying it, and someone associated with it has magical abilities. This is a tightly plotted story with interesting characters, but the competition was so good that I only ranked it number four, and the other voters ranked it #3.

## On the Fox Roads by Nghi Vo Review by Tom Feller

Tonkin Jill, aka Lai, and Chinese Jack are Chinese-American versions of Bonnie and Clyde, even driving the same car, the Ford Model A. The title refers to some sort of spirit paths from Asian mythology that enable them to elude the police. The narrator is an unnamed teenage Chinese-American girl who stowaways in their car during a robbery. A bank in Indiana that the duo had robbed had previously foreclosed on the girl's parents' store, and they had taken the deed to the property along with the bank's cash. The duo take the girl under their wing, and she becomes their getaway driver. This is a very entertaining story, and I ranked it number two, but the other voters only ranked it #4.

## One Man's Treasure by Sarah Pinsker Review by Tom Feller

I don't recall ever reading a fantasy story in which the main character was a garbage man, but it makes sense. Even in a world similar to ours in which magic is routine, there still needs to be someone to remove the refuse. There are hazards, however. For instance, an inexperienced worker named Renner touches a discarded spinning wheel and succumbs to a sleep spell. Aden, the main character in this story, and his co-worker Nash, hear a call for help from a stone statue that looks like a gardener, and Aden takes it home to his magic-medical student wife Nura to check. This is another entertaining story, and I ranked it number three. The other voters ranked it #2.

## The Year Without Sunshine by Naomi Kritzer Review by Tom Feller

This story concerns a neighborhood in Minneapolis that bands together when the sun literally stops shining, caused by an unspecified disaster. One plausible disaster is that the dormant volcano at Yellowstone Park becomes active. The narrator is Alexis, a woman who lives alone and drives an electric car. There are lots of other characters, especially considering how short this story is. There is no phone service or Internet, but there is running water. Electricity is unreliable, and supply chains have been disrupted. Nonetheless cooperation enables the people there to solve every problem that comes up with emphasis on helping a woman with COPD who needs supplemental oxygen to breathe. The Nebula Award winner in this category, it is an upbeat story with a happy ending, but I felt it needed more conflict, so I ranked it number five. Nonetheless, it was the Hugo winner in this category.

## Short Stories

## Answerless Journey by Han Song Review by Tom Feller

The main point of view character of this story has amnesia, so they called themselves "Creature". The other character in this story also has amnesia and is referred to as "Same Kind", since they conclude they are members of the same species. They are on a spaceship designed for three people and refer to the missing third person as "Third". This setup had some potential, possibly as a science fiction version of *Waiting for Godot*, but it is not funny, and the ending, if you can call it that, is nihilistic. I did not think it was bad enough to justify ranking "No Award" ahead of it, so I ranked it number six and the other voters agreed with me.

## Better Living Through Algorithms by Naomi Kritzer Review by Tom Feller

I have never gotten heavily into smartphone apps. I have a few of them such as Facebook Lite, AOL, and the Internet Movie Database, but I have never tried a wellness app, which this story is about. The main character is a journalist who is ambivalent about her job. She has a friend who is enthusiastic about a new app called Abelique. Then her boss strongly recommends it, so she installs it. It actually has the beneficial effect of connecting her with like-minded people, including making real phone calls rather than text messages, and encouraging her to work less and take up hobbies like drawing. It has the drawback of being terribly invasive of her privacy and is eventually taken over by spammers and scammers. It is a charming story, and I ranked it number two. It was the winner in this category.

## How to Raise a Kraken in Your Bathtub by P. Djeli Clark Review by Tom Feller

This steampunk story is set in an alternative Victorian London where Captain Nemo is menacing the sea lanes and mermen work as dock laborers. Trevor Henley is a clerk living with his wife in a house paid for by her parents when he sees an ad in a penny dreadful. Thinking that this may be a way to get rich quick, he sends money to a Doctor Bundelkund and receives a kraken egg which he hatches in a bathtub reserved for the servants. The baby kraken is ravenously hungry, so they have to get daily deliveries from the butcher, and it grows rapidly. It eventually grows big enough to escape, and all hell breaks loose in London. This is a first rate morality tale, but the other stories were so good that I only ranked it number four. The other voters, on the other hand, ranked it #2.

## The Mausoleum's Children by Alette de Bodard Review by Tom Feller

Thuan Loc had escaped from slavery when she was a child, leaving behind her two younger sisters. She had worked salvaging the parts of a spaceship wreck called the Mausoleum, where they were guarded by robots called the Hunters. Her life as a free adult was not satisfying, because she could only find menial jobs. One day she returns with the intention of rescuing her two sisters, but discovers that "you can't go home again". It is a compelling, although sad, story, and I ranked it number three and the other voters agreed with me.

## The Sound of Children Screaming by Rachel K. Jones Review by Tom Feller

This story begins with a school shooter, called "The Gun", entering a school and starting to shoot. Michelle Dalton is a fourth grade teacher who leads eight of her students through a portal to a world where there are knee-high mice who ride ponies and carry blunderbusses. Their leader is called "Sir Miles", and he has an agenda, which is to recruit the children to fight in their wars. This story is too didactic for my taste, and I ranked it number five. The other voters ranked it #4.

## Tasting the Future Delicacies Three Times by Baoshu Review by Tom Feller

This story imagines how virtual reality technology could enhance the eating experience and the consequences that followed. The two main characters are the "Tycoon", who is among the first to test the new technology, and the "Youth" who discovers that the technology allows eating experiences to be

replicated. It is refreshingly old-fashioned, imagining an invention or discovery and extrapolating the consequences, so I ranked it number one. The other voters strongly disagreed and ranked it #5.

## Young Adult Novel (Lodestar Award)

I reviewed *Promises Stronger than Darkness* by Charlie Jane Anders in the March issue of the N3F Review of Books, and liked it so much that I ranked it number one. However, the other voters strongly disagreed with me and ranked it #6. I did not get to *The Sinister Booksellers of Bath* by Garth Nix, *To Shape a Dragon's Breath* by Moniquill Blackgoose, which was the Andre Norton winner and the winner in this category, or *Unraveller* by Frances Hardinge, which finished fourth, by the voting deadline so I left them unranked.

## Abeni's Song by P. Djeli Clark Review by Tom Feller

The opening chapter of this novel reminded me of the story of the Pied Piper. All the children in a fantasy world version of a West African village are irresistibly drawn by a song played on a flute, and the musician's motivation eventually turns out to be revenge. The second chapter takes place on the title character's twelve birthday, which just happens to take place on the same day as her village's harvest festival. (It is a different village.) Unfortunately, the party is interrupted when a group of female warriors with magical black ropes raid the village, capturing all the residents, presumably for the slave trade, and burning all the buildings. Abeni is rescued by the local witch, whose name she later learns is Asha, and taken to Asha's house in the woods. (The house is like the TARDIS in that it is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.) Abeni then apprentices to Asha, learning both magic and martial arts, but after Abeni's thirteenth birthday an event takes place that causes them to go on a quest to find Asha's sister. Along the way, they pick up Nyomi, a porcupine spirit, and Zaneeya, a panther spirit. They are both female and emotionally about the same age as Abeni. They later meet a man whose pet is a giant salamander. When they reach the place where Asha's sister is supposed to be, they get a surprise. This is a very entertaining book, although it does drag in places. It is the first book in a series, and I ranked it number three, but the other voters ranked it #5.

## Liberty's Daughter by Naomi Kritzer Review by Tom Feller

This novel reminded me of Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and his juvenile novels. It is set on a group of artificial islands in international waters west of California in the late 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The "seastead", as they call it, was originally founded 49 years prior to the beginning of this novel as a libertarian experiment and utilizes old cruise and cargo ships as well as sea platforms. About 80,000 people live on the six artificial islands. There is no government, although there is a governing council with little real power, and neither a standing army nor a standing navy. One of the islands has a three person police force, but otherwise security is provided by contract services. There are no public schools, but tutors and small private schools are available. Prostitution, any kind of cosmetic surgery, and almost all drugs are legal. There are no "citizens", since there is no government, but people are generally divided into "stakeholders", ones who own shares of a particular island, contract workers, who work for wages or salary, and bond workers. The latter are a kind of indentured servants which many people on the seastead consider to practically be slaves.

The narrator is Rebecca "Beck" Garrison, a sixteen year old girl whose father Paul is an important man on the seastead. (Beck does not discover how important or what exactly he does until well into the novel.) She has lived there since she was four and has been told that her mother is dead. She works

part-time as a finder of minor objects. For instance, if someone wants a female size eight pair of sandals, she will go door-to-door asking people if they have a pair and what they would want in trade. There are no department stores or any kind of chain stores on the seastead. Then someone asks her to act as a private detective and find a missing person, which leads her into the seastead's underworld. Another story line is that she is recruited to be an assistant on a reality show about the seastead produced by a company from the U.S. Then there is a plague. The plot is rather episodic, because the novel began as a series of interconnected stories originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and re-edited into book form. The society the author describes is fascinating, and Beck an engaging character who comes of age by the end. Unfortunately, that ending is rather weak. Nonetheless, I ranked it number two and so did the other voters.

### Series

I have been reading stories and novels in Seanan McGuire's *October Daye* series for years and reviewed the 18<sup>th</sup> novel in the series, *The Innocent Sleep*, in the March issue of [The N3F Review of Books](#). I ranked the number one, but it only finished fourth. I have also been reading Aliette de Bodard's *The Universe of Xuya* series for years and ranked it number two. It finished fifth. To my knowledge, I have read every novel in Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radsh* series and ranked it number three. It was the winner in this category.

### The Shards of Earth (excerpt) by Adrian Tchaikovsky Review by Tom Feller

This "excerpt" was 295 pages in the Nook edition. It is part of the first book in his *The Final Architecture* trilogy. "Architects" is the name given to Moon-sized aliens who take inhabited planets and re-make them according to their aesthetic principles, killing everyone on the planet in the process. Humans had discovered faster-than-light travel so there were a significant number of survivors, and other "normal" aliens suffered the same fate. Most of the excerpt is set 40 years after the Architects have disappeared and 120 years after the destruction of the Earth.

Idris is an "intermediary", aka "int". Many years previously, he had volunteered for a special program that modified him both physically and mentally so that he could use his psychic abilities to battle the Architects. One of the side effects is that he can stay awake when a spaceship entered "unspace", with which space-going species travel faster-than-light, without going crazy. (Humans who spend too much time awake in "unspace" eventually go insane.) Another side effect is that he cannot sleep, and yet another is that he does not perceptibly age. He now serves as the pilot/navigator of an independent salvage vessel called the *Vulture God*.

Another main character is Solace, a member of a race of beautiful human women who are called the Partheni, and they are conceived in test tubes. They are genetically designed and then trained to be warriors. She and Idris met during the Battle of Berlenhof, the planet with the single largest human population after Earth's destruction. While she was his bodyguard, Idris single-handedly drove off an Architect to win the battle. Since the war she has spent most of her time in suspended animation and has been awakened to recruit Idris to come and work for her people. Without a common enemy, tensions among the various human factions as well as other species are threatening to erupt into all-out war.

She finds him on the *Vulture God*, whose captain is Rollo Rostand, a human. Other crew members include Olli Timo, a human woman who requires prosthetics, Kittering, a member of the crablike Hanilambra species, Medvig, a collective of artificial intelligences residing in one robotic body, and Kris



Almier, a human lawyer good in knife fights and the Platonic companion of Idris. They constitute a found family for Idris, who does not want to leave them, and Solace becomes a member of the family as well. They have a series of adventures in which they discover valuable artifacts from a long dead species they call the Originators. This discovery causes them to become wanted by both the closest thing to a human interstellar government, personified by Haever, an intelligence agent, and by a criminal gang. The info dumps are well managed and that narrative compelling enough for me to want to finish the novel and seek out the other two books in the trilogy. However, this is a very competitive category so I had to rank it number five. The other voters ranked it #2.

### A Marvelous Light by Freya Marske Review by Tom Feller

Although the author calls magic users magicians rather than wizards, a few things about this novel reminded me of the Harry Potter books. First, there is a secret society of magicians living in parallel with our own mundane world. It is so secret that one of the main characters does not even know that magic exists prior to the events in this book. Second, they have a governing body called the Magical Assembly while in the Potter books it is called the Ministry of Magic. On the other hand, there is no school like Hogwarts for magicians. Instead, magicians have to be tutored, either by family members or with outside help. There are no “muggle-born” magicians, although by the end of the novel there are hints that they may be some, but there are members of magician families who have no magical powers, like the “squibs” in the Harry Potter books.

There are two main characters in this novel set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century England. The first is Sir Robert “Robin” Blyth, newly appointed to a position called the Liaison in the office of Special Domestic Affairs and Complaints in the British Home Office. Unfortunately, he is grossly UNQUALIFIED for the job, which is to act as a liaison between the mundane British government and the magical one, and he is the one who does not even know that magic exists. He is a graduate of Cambridge and a member of a boxing club, but his parents are recently deceased. They left him and his suffragette sister Maude a country estate that loses money and is mortgaged to the hilt, a large house with lots of stuff and a mortgage as well, an overabundance of servants, and little cash. Consequently, he needs a job. Although he doesn't know it yet, his predecessor, Reginald Gatling, is murdered in the novel's opening scene. His secretary Adelaide Morrissey is an interesting character in her own right and actually more qualified for his job, but being a woman, she is not even considered for it. Unfortunately, she only gets a few pages in this novel.

Edwin Courcey is the scion of a rich magician family, but his powers are the weakest of his siblings. His older brother Walter is a much more powerful magician and a bully. Edwin went to Oxford and is a serious scholar of magic. He meets Robin because he holds a comparable position in the Magical Assembly. They are both gay, but the sexual mores of the time require them to be discreet. While they each find the other attractive, they are both so cautious about revealing their feelings that their relationship is not consummated until halfway through the book. The sex scenes were not only more highly detailed than I cared for, but also too long. Even worse, they were boring.

The maguffin is something called “The Last Contract”, whose full nature is not revealed until almost the end. In search of it, they travel to Edwin's family home in Cambridgeshire where Robin meets Edwin's family and to a magical house called Sutton Cottage owned by the great aunt of Gatling, Robin's predecessor. It is rather slow moving, but a patient reader may find it rewarding. It is the first book of a trilogy, but I don't know if I will bother reading the other two books, and I ranked it number six. The other voters agreed with me on this one. To the author's credit, she included all three books in the Hugo Award packet.

### The Laundry Files by Charles Stross Review by Tom Feller

These stories included in the Hugo packet are about a British version of the *X-Files*, but with a larger budget and a much larger bureaucracy. They even have a SWAT team on call. The narrator of all these is Bob Howard, obviously a reference to *Conan* creator Robert E. Howard who was also a correspondent of H.P. Lovecraft, a major influence on this series. Bob Howard is a low ranking agent in the organization while not working in IT support, and his title is “computational demonologist”. All these stories are funny and entertaining.

“The Concrete Jungle” concerns the weaponization of gorgonism. Howard is woken up at 4 AM to investigate a possible outbreak, and one of his briefing papers is a fictional letter from Hans Geiger to Albert Einstein on the subject. They consider it a medical condition in which those infected burn people and other animals to cinders with his or her gaze. .

In “Equoid”, the monsters are carnivorous unicorns, and it includes a fictional letter from Lovecraft to Robert Bloch, best known as the author of *Psycho*, about an encounter he had with a unicorn when he was fourteen. Laundry is tipped off by a veterinarian, who is also part-time cryptozoologist, that there are possible unicorns in Sussex. Howard is assigned to investigate. It felt familiar to me and then I discovered that I had read and reviewed it in 2014 when it was nominated for the Hugo in the Novella category, which it won.

“Down on the Farm” reminded me a playing the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game decades ago. Your character was given a finite number of sanity points which could only go down or, at best, stay even from one adventure to another. When you ran out of sanity points, you had to retire the character and get a new one. The Laundry has its own mental hospital for people who have seen too many Lovecraftian monsters and gone crazy. Howard investigates the hospital after a letter is snuck out alleging patient abuse. In the last story in the sample, Howard does not get in his vacation request in on time, so he is required to work the Christmas holidays in “Overtime” as the Night Duty Officer and has to deal with a demonic Santa Claus. I ranked the series number four, and the other voters ranked it #3.

### New Writer (Astounding Award)

Xiran Jay Zhao was left off last year’s ballot, because the Hugo Administrators feared his inclusion would offend the Chinese authorities. I remember reading his novel *The Iron Widow* and liked it enough to rank him number one. The other voters agreed with me and made him the winner. I liked Ai Jiang’s novelette “I AM AI” so much that I ranked it number one in that category, so I ranked her number two in this one. The other voters ranked her #3 in a tie with Sunyi Dean. I did not get to any of Moniquill Blackgoose’s works, so I left her ranked. The other voters ranked her number two.

### The Book Eaters by Sunyi Dean Review by Tom Feller

The title is meant to be taken literally and refers to a secret society of six families in Great Britain. Most of them eat books instead of food and absorb the contents, but cannot produce content of their own. They cannot interbreed with humans and for no known reason most of the babies are male. Consequently, young females are treated as valuable properties. Another complication is that the females go through menopause at an early age and can bear no more than two children, by tradition with different fathers to minimize inbreeding. (Twins are unheard of.) No one knows their origin, but

there is a legend that they were created by an alien known as “The Collector” to gather information about humans. A minority of them can only eat human brains and are called “mind eaters”. Until a few decades prior to the events of this novel, they were put to death as infants, but one of the families developed a drug called Redemption to control their cravings. They are now called “dragons” and controlled by an organization of motorcycle riding younger sons called the “Knights”, who are also responsible for brokering marriages. Unfortunately, a war within the family producing the drug resulted in no more of it being produced.

The main character is a 29 year old female named Devon, and the plot is divided into two story lines. The first is set in the present, when she and her 5 year old son Cai, a mind eater, are fugitives, both from human authorities and from book eater society. At least once a month, she has to procure a human victim for Cai to eat. The other story line begins when Devon is eight years old and follows her until she and Cai have to go on the run. Among the people she meets are Mani, a human journalist, Ramsey, one of her brothers who becomes a Knight, Luton, her first husband and father of her daughter Salem, Hester, a woman with secrets of her own, Killock, Hester’s brother and instigator of the family war that has endangered Cai, and Jarrow, a video game enthusiast who is the younger brother of Devon’s second husband. Except for a few infodumps, this dark fantasy has a compelling narrative despite the contemptible actions of the main characters. I ranked the author number three, and the other voters agreed with me and ranked her #3 in a tie with Ai Jiang.

### The Godkiller by Hannah Kaner Review by Tom Feller

Normally I would consider the title to be an oxymoron, because gods, by definition, are immortal. However, in this fantasy world, it is possible to kill a god, even a major one. The title character, known as Kissen, actually makes a living at it. When she was a child, her family worshipped a sea god, but, except for her, they were murdered by worshipers of a fire god. Toward the end of this novel, she finally meets up with this fire god, so killing it “was personal, not business”. Although she survived her family’s annihilation, she loses one of her legs below the knee and has to use a prosthetic. Soon after her family’s murders, she was sold to an orphanage that was a cover for illegal activities as in *Oliver Twist*. As a teenager she apprenticed to a veiga, aka a godkiller.

Elogast used to be a knight, but is now a baker. However, King Arren asks him to come out of retirement and go on a secret mission for him. They had been squires together and best friends. Inara is a twelve year old noble woman whose mother and household have been murdered. Skedi is a rodent-sized god of white lies who bonds with Inara, but the nature of that bonding is never explained. Inara and Skedi meet Kissen early in the story and ask for her help. They later meet Elogast when they all travel incognito with a group of pilgrims to the ruined city of Blenraden. During their journey, they must fend off demons. The story is very hard to put down as it gets closer to the end. It is the first book in a trilogy and I look forward to reading the others. However, this was so competitive a category that I felt I could only rank her number four, and the other voters ranked her number 5.

### The Death I Gave Him by Em X. Liu Review by Tom Feller

When I was in high school, my senior English class studied Hamlet. I don’t recall ever seeing a live performance of the play, but I have seen several movie adaptations, including the ones starring Lawrence Olivier and Mel Gibson. This novel is a science fiction retelling of the story and is set in 2047 Denmark, but instead of a castle named Elsimore, it is a windowless laboratory. There is a point-of-

view character named Horatio, but “he” is an artificial intelligence running the labs, not only the computer systems but also the heating and air conditioning systems, electronic locks, and surveillance cameras.

The Hamlet surrogate is named Hayden Lichfield, who has been working with his father Graham on a life prolonging serum, called the Sisyphus Formula. It acts as the story’s maguffin. His uncle Charles (Claudius) is the lab’s administrator, but he has been kept in the dark about their research. Felicia Xia (Ophelia) is an intern at the lab and Hayden’s ex-girlfriend, and her father Paul (Polonius) is the lab’s head of security. A technician named Gabriel Rasmussen fulfils the functions of Rosenkranz, Guildenstern, and other minor characters. Hayden’s mother Helen (Gertrude) never actually appears, but she definitely haunts the story.

As in the play, Graham is dead before the story starts, but Hayden is the one who discovers the body late at night. It is definitely murder, but the police are kept out of the way by Charles leading them to believe that a virus has broken out at the lab. Graham does not have a ghost, but he does leave a recording telling Hayden to take the law into his own hands if he has been murdered. Furthermore, Hayden uses the Sisyphus Formula to re-animate the corpse. Unfortunately, this only works for about a minute, but Graham names Charles as his killer. A power struggle ensues, and it takes about 14 hours to resolve. The narration consists of traditional multi-character third person story telling supplemented by transcripts, interviews, memoir excerpts, and chat logs. The story does NOT follow the original plot scene by scene and makes a few changes. For instance, Felicia is a much more active participant than Ophelia ever was. This is a very promising debut novel, but again, this category was so competitive that I could only rank her number five. The other voters ranked her number six.

## Related Work

I only got to two works in this category, so I left the other four unranked. Neither of the works I read was the winner in this category, which was *A City on Mars* by Kelly Weinersmith and Zach Weinersmith.

## All These Worlds by Niall Harrison Review by Tom Feller

What struck me most about this collection of reviews and essays is how big the science fiction and fantasy genre is. I’ve only read some of the books he discusses! Most of these pieces originally appeared in *Strange Horizons* or *Interzone* and came out between 2005 and 2014. He is a big fan of Stephen Baxter, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Kelly Link, and one of the longest pieces concerns Chinese short fiction. He was twice a judge for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and another of his longer pieces reviews the short lists for the award from 2009 to 2013. It is a very illuminating collection, and I ranked it #1. The other voters ranked it number four.

## A Traveler in Time by Maureen Kincaid-Speller Review by Tom Feller

I was already familiar with this fannish reviewer who passed away prematurely in 2022, but I never met her in person. This is a collection of her work with introductory essays by her husband Paul Kincaid and friend Nina Allan, who edited these pieces which were mostly written after 2010. Unfortunately, the publisher decided to rely on the good will Speller built up over the years and included only an excerpt in the Hugo packet. This excerpt included an autobiographical piece and a review of the Christ-

mas episode of *Sherlock*. I ranked it number two, and the other voters ranked it #3.

## Semi-Prozine

*Uncanny* published two novelettes and two short stories that were Hugo finalists in their categories, so I ranked it number one and the other voters ranked it #2. (I also ranked its two editors, Lynne M. Thomas and Michael Damien Thomas number one in the Editor-Short Fiction category, and the other voters ranked them #2. Neil Clarke was the winner in that category, and I had ranked him number 2.) I did not get to *FIYAH Literary Magazine* so I left it unranked.

## Escape Pod Review by Tom Feller

This publication is actually a podcast, but for the Hugo packet they provided samples of written copies of the stories they broadcast.

Sam, the title character in “A Cosmonaut’s Guide to Talking to Your Parents” by Adriana C. Grigore, is an astronaut on a long solo survey mission. In his spare time, he hosts a radio show giving advice on how to relate to parents. Sam himself is not talking to his parents, two women he calls “Mom” and “Mama”. One of them has terminal cancer and is considering going into cryogenic sleep until a cure is found and the other is considering joining her. One thing I’ve noticed in fiction recently is that characters separated by millions of miles have real-time radio conversations without any time delays. I am used to TV shows and movies ignoring physical laws, but shouldn’t written fiction have higher standards?

The title character in “Zhao and the Flightless Crane” by A.J. Mo, on the other hand, has trouble relating to his daughter, who lives thousands of miles away. He works as a groundskeeper in a park, and his most meaningful relationship is with a robotic bird named Ah Bak who serves as a tour guide. He is a widower, and his estrangement with his daughter began with his wife’s death.

I believe I first encountered the term “cool hunter” in one of William Gibson’s novels. They are people who make a living by sniffing out what the next big cool things are going to be, and marketing firms pay them big money. Rocky Cornelius, the title character in “The Uncool Hunter” by Andrew Dana Hudson, on the other hand, observes the behavior of boring middle class consumers to figure out what they really want. At the beginning of the story, she has snuck into an Illinois Costco before it opens to stake out a spot to observe the shoppers. Then one of her competitors, Amherst Swarthmore, ten years her junior, walks in, and they get into a fight.

The two main characters in “Emotional Resonance” by V. M. Ayala, Arbor and Crowe, are giant mechs who have each sold themselves to a corporation for a thousand years to pay off debts they incurred while human. They fall in love and consider escaping, even if that means they can never go back to being human. Starships are grown, not built, in “Harvest the Stars” by Mar Vincent. The main characters are Tuja and Sif, her daughter, who live in a village whose main industry is starship farming. The story is really about their relationship, and it was my favorite in this sample. I ranked the zine number four and so did the other voters.



## GigaNotoSaurus Review by Tom Feller

This webzine publishes one novelette or novella each month.

Ren in “Old Seeds” by Owen Leddy has agreed to leave his two children and secure their economic future by traveling to a distant planet which an AI is terraforming. It takes him about a hundred years to arrive during which he is in suspended animation. His job is to solve problems the AI can’t and maximize the planet’s crop yield. However, Ren discovers that the planet already had life and has to decide whether to help or disable the AI.

There are two kinds of shapeshifters in “Fell Our Selves” by Aline-Mwezi Niyonsenga. The first is a kind of flying machine similar to a Transformer that transports Akesa, a visiting princess, and Dustin, the ship’s mechanic, on a tour of a continent. The other kind of shapeshifter is an organic one, a predator the menaces them.

George, a half-human half-fairy pharmacist, is the main character in “Once Measured, Twice Cut” by Anna Martino. He serves both human and faerie patients in post-World War II England. Luckless is a minimum wage warehouse worker in “Any Percent” by Andrew Dana Hudson, but his passion is an on-line role-playing game. It is not set in a fantasy world, but one that resembles our own. The goal of the game is to become the richest person in the world.

“Her Suffering, Pretty and Private” by Aimee Ogden is a retelling of Sleeping Beauty only with a seamstress as the main character. Adalene and the rest of her village were put asleep for one hundred years, but when they wake up the industrial revolution has taken place, making their skills obsolete. There is literally a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in “The Rainbow Bank” by Uchechukwu Nwaka, and Nezzie is determined to find it. One of his competitors is his own boss, The Family Man, who also happens to be the local crime lord. They live in a future Nigeria where magic has killed off most of the Earth’s population.

“Tiger-boy’s Theater of Shattered Truths” by Antony Paschos is a variation on *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Tilum bears a remarkable resemblance to a city’s prince, and there is a hint that he is the prince’s illegitimate half-brother. Historians at Cambridge in “On the English Approach to the Study of History” by E. Saxey conveniently have Elizabeth I and her courtiers in residence thanks to magician John Dee who has made them “undead”, but, fortunately, neither vampires nor zombies. Lydia, the main character in “Ghosting” by Kelly Lagor, has an experimental neural implant that allows her to alter and erase memories. Everything few months, she reboots herself, but eventually it catches up with her. I normally don’t like stories that include food recipes, but the ones in “Reconciliation Dumplings and Other Recipes” by Sara Noria each have stories behind them. I ranked this zine number three, but the other voters ranked it #6.

## Khoreo Review by Tom Feller

There were five stories in Vol. 3, Issue No. 1 of this e-zine. “The Field Guide to Next Time” by Rae Martz is not much of a story but a description of a textile. A mother in “For However Long” by Thomas Ha is separated from her son and his family by at least 35 million miles, because they are colonists on Mars. She is sad, because even with the ability for them to return to Earth for visits, their remaining time together is quite limited. A traveller in “The Land of Happiness” by Laura Wang has a grant to



study a foreign country and eventually assimilates into its culture by learning its language. An extremely atomistic society is depicted in “The Shadow and the Light” by Su-Lee Lin. People live in apartments by themselves, do not socialize, and have little to do with each other. The point-of-view character is a street sweeper. “In April, the Dead” by Natalia Theodoridou shows a world in which the dead come out of the ocean one month out of the year and visit their families. I ranked Khoreo number five and so did the other voters.

### Strange Horizons Review by Tom Feller

A predatory alien is searching for prey in Canada in “Locavore” by Kim Harbridge. “Undog” by Eugenia Triantafyllou refers to a ghost of an unloved dog who haunts a house inhabited by a woman who feels unloved by her mother. A replicant is menacing the narrator of “Maladaptive Camouflage” by Ann LeBlanc in a variation of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Although I live in Nashville, Tennessee, I have never visited the Patsy Cline museum here. However, two of the three main characters in “Patsy Cline Sings Sweet Dreams to the Universe” by Beston Barnett visit the museum in one scene. The narrator has a strong memory of listening to the singer’s “Sweet Dreams” while on a rock climbing trip with the mother of his son. That son becomes a scientist who uses the memory in a probe sent into space to communicate with extra-terrestrials.

Reincarnation is normal in the world of “A Name is a Plea and a Prophecy” by Gabrielle Emem Harry. However, the reincarnated person does not retain any memories of past lives. Kuyom, the main character, wants to remedy that situation because in her current life, everyone she loves dies.

“Nextype” by Sam Kyung Yoo is set in a future when medical school exams are conducted in virtual reality where the students simulate an operation. The main character, Mirae, has a neural implant that gives her a big advantage over students without them. However, the implant has tampered with her memories.

The zine’s Hugo Award sample also includes reviews and articles, but, like in my review of Niall Harrison’s reviews, the science fiction and fantasy genre is so large that I have only read or seen a few of the items reviewed, even the Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist for 2023. *House of Dragon* Season One was reviewed by Archita Mitra, although I only saw the first half, giving up after the show advanced ten years in the story. Mitra emphasized the mistreatment of women in both this series and *Game of Thrones*, and her remarks were quite insightful. Suzanne F. Boswell comments on “The Curious Case of Abortion in Science Fiction” and has some interesting observations. On the other hand “Out of the Damp and Dark: The Evolution of Mushrooms in Fiction” by Rosamund Lan really wasn’t all the interesting to me. I ranked the zine number two, and it was the winner in this category.

### Fan Writer

I only got to two of the writers in this category and left the other four unranked.

### Jason Sanford

His sample in the Hugo packet consisted of essays he wrote during 2023 on the influence of artificial intelligence on the publishing industry. One of his points is that “machine learning” is a more accurate term than “artificial intelligence”, because the supposed AIs use algorithms trained on human-created

content to produce what looks like writing or art. One of the controversies is that the content may be copyrighted and is being used without permission of the owners. Another is that AI-generated art may replace human artists for the covers of books and human writers for novels based on other media such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* books. Science fiction magazines are already overwhelmed by AI-generated submissions. I ranked him number two and so did the other voters.

Paul Weimer  
Review by Tom Feller

This fan writer was another of the people taken off of last year's ballot because the administrators felt his inclusion might offend the Chinese authorities. His sample for this year's voting consists of book and movie reviews. Once again, the fantasy and SF genre is so big that I have only read one of the books he reviews, *She Who Became the Sun* by Shelley Parker-Chan. On the other hand, I have seen the movies *SI mone* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. I have never seen *Babylon 5: The Road Home*, an animated version of the original show, but because I was a fan of the show, I was already familiar with the characters. The reviews are very rich and detailed. I ranked him number one, and he was the winner in this category.

#### Summary

According to my count, the other voters and I agreed on our rankings thirteen times. Our biggest disagreement was in the young adult category in which I ranked *Promises Stronger than Darkness* by Charlie Jane Anders number one and the other voters ranked it number six. I enjoyed the process so much that I went and bought a supporting membership to the Seattle Worldcon so that I can do this again next year.

## Novels

A Canticle for Leibowitz by Walter M. Miller Jr.  
Review by Pat Patterson  
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

After the apocalypse, here comes the apocalypse.

It appears that Brother Francis may be losing his mind, but that's rather to be expected; he is, after all, on a spiritual quest to see if he has a vocation as a member of the Order, and he is fasting AND isolated from other humans. So, when a little wiggle-spot appears out of the desert, and then turns out to be an Ancient Traveller, Brother Francis has his suspicions. Those aren't eased by the outcome of their meeting, which is Francis finding a heretofore undiscovered cache of pre-war documents and other items.

The question: are these artifacts related to the Blessed Leibowitz? Was it a miracle that revealed them? If too much froth accompanies the attempt to get Leibowitz canonized as a saint, it will set the process back.

So, Francis isn't permitted to take his vows, and has to remain in the status of a student.

That's worse for him than his eventual death, but you probably knew that already. His confessor knew

it:

"Bless me father; I ate a lizard."

"Was it artificially prepared, and was it a fast day?"

You have to be practical in matters like this.

Slowly, civilization rises from the ashes, but seems to have learned very little about how to get along with those of contrary ideas.

It will break your heart, but it might give you faith as well.

I read this for the first time in 1968.

**A Fine and Private Place by Peter S. Beagle**

**Review by Mindy Hunt**

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

As usual, I needed to go to a doc-in-a-box to have a checkup after a fall. I realized I had forgotten a book in case there was a wait. So when I was told that the next appointment was going to be an hour and a half later, I made the decision to go to a used bookstore to get something to read while I waited. I went to the science fiction and fantasy section. To my delight they had two short Peter S Beagle books. I have been a fan of *The Last Unicorn* and had recently read it. So I decided to pick one books to see if I would like his other work. I choose *A Fine and Private Place*.

This is Beagle's debut novel, which he wrote at the young age of 19. I knew it was his first book, but didn't find out how old he was when he wrote it will after I finished. I was shocked. The level of depth and insight Beagle has on life, death, and love at this age makes it more intriguing and possibly youthfully charming.

The story takes place in a cemetery in one of the boroughs of New York City. Mr. Rebeck has lived in one of the mausoleums for nineteen years. Over time, the idea of leaving and going back into the real world creates such an internal anxiety he made it permanent home. In his mind, he failed as a pharmacist and with that, withdrew from human interaction. The cemetery is a safe place for him to avoid human contact. His one consistent companion is a raven who steals food and other necessities for him. His other companions... well, they're the newly dead until they finally completely die. When a person dies, their spirit remains until they forget anything about being alive and simply fall asleep into a void — an easy way to put it. But as long as they remember and hold onto for that last remaining real memory of living, their ghost remains. He has the ability to see and talk to them until then. He knows that his companions are temporary, but he makes the most of it to help them – and himself. He befriends Michael, newly deceased, not ready to die and desperate to remember so he can stay "alive". Soon Laura joins them with a different attitude – ready to rest and sleep and be done with any sort of life. Then, in a twist for Mr. Rebeck, he strikes up a friendship with Mrs. Clapper, a widow visiting her husband's mausoleum.

The characters in this book remind me of Brooks and Red from *The Shawshank Redemption*. The speech Red gives when Brooks is released from prison and then retold when he himself was released; "the walls change a man, at first you hate them, then you get use to them. Enough time passes, you depend on them. That's institutionalized. They send you for life. That's what they take from you, the part

that counts, anyway."

That is what *A Fine and Private Place* is about. The life (and death) of these four characters within the cemetery walls.

Mr. Rebeck has given up on living and chosen a life of solitude in the cemetery. At first, it was to hide from his life's failures, but as the years have passed, it's become a fear of everything past the gates of the cemetery. The walls protect him and he doesn't have to live up to anyone else's expectations. When Mrs. Clapper tries to convince him to go past the gate, his anxiety gets the better of him. He can't get past his head.

But for the first time in his nineteen years at the cemetery, it's Mrs. Clapper that makes him question his reasons for hiding. They meet by accident while she visits her deceased husband, who had passed the previous year. Mr. Rebeck claims he's visiting a friend in the cemetery. They strike up a friendship as they discover a common awkwardness. Her life has been of routine and Mr. Rebeck is strange and doesn't quite easily fit into the repetitiveness she's created for herself. It takes a while before he tells her the truth about living in the cemetery and is surprised she accepts it, as strange as it is. But the truth gives her a reason to try to take care of him in little ways, like a wife for her husband.

When Michael appears and learns of his fate, he becomes determined to not forget living. He's constantly finding memories from his life to cling to, especially his wife, who may or may not have killed him. He rambles on about all the great experiences he had, his knowledge from being a scholar. So when Laura comes and wants to just have it all to stop, he doesn't understand. Why would you want to forget living?

Laura is disappointed that her "life" didn't stop with her death. But once she got past it, she discovered she was more alive dead. And falling in love. She knew that there would be no chance for her and Michael until he could have closure on his own death. And he does find that closure. Michael then realizes that any amount of time he and Laura may have left is enough because they love each other. It wouldn't matter if they forgot life in 30 minutes and disappeared, they still have those 30 minutes.

Their desire to love is a reason to have life in their death.

But what end for Mr. Rebeck? Due to events that happen in the living world, he's asked to do something for the love ghosts but won't because it would cause him to leave and lose the comfort of the prison he has created for himself. However, he has a change of heart, realizing his own fondness for Laura and wanting to do good for her and make her happy.

Like any relationship: it's complicated.

*A Fine and Private Place* may be a simple story but the complexity of the characters and their interactions are far from simple. It looks past the facades people hide behind like many other stories but when you live in a cemetery, it's hard to know who's really alive or dead. We become dependent on the walls that we create for ourselves. We institutionalize ourselves. Peter S. Beagle beautifully wrote our flaws before saying "Stop and go Live."

## A Princess of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What secrets does the Red Planet hold?

John Carter, gentleman from Virginia, sets out with his friend Captain James Powell to prospect in the Arizona territory. But their tools are not up to the task; to continue their endeavor, they need better equipment. Since Powell knows more of mining than Carter and has greater familiarity with the area, he is the one who sets out to collect the gear they require.

Unfortunately, Powell is captured and killed by Apaches. Feeling something amiss after spotting three dots on his friend's trail, Carter goes looking for him in time to rescue his body from the tribe. After a brief chase he manages to hide within a cave, where the adventure really begins.

The story

Falling unconscious within the cavern, Carter awakens to discover he cannot move. When the Apaches find him, he seems doomed to die, but something scares them off. Hours pass, with Carter unable to rise until one final wrench of his will brings him to his feet – or seems to do so. For on the floor of the cave lies his body, still clothed, while his consciousness or spirit stands looking back, completely naked.

Exiting the cave, he studies the sky until his eyes land on the planet Mars. Feeling called to that far-off world, he raises his arms and has a brief impression of hurtling through space. The next morning, he wakes stretched out on a dead seabed of the Red Planet.

John Carter is not there long before he encounters the Tharks, or Green Martians. Having sighted one of their incubators and gone to investigate it, Carter is perceived as a threat and the Tharks waste no time firing on him. They are surprised, however, when their prey leaps away – several feet away, to be precise. For Carter is of Earth, accustomed to a different gravity, where his strength and mass are the equal of most men on his homeworld.

But on Mars his strength and weight are different, allowing him to perform feats no Martian can accomplish. The Tharks, who are typically stronger than the Red Martians that also inhabit their dying planet, soon learn the gentleman from Virginia can kill one of them with a single blow.

Taken captive by the Tharks, Carter's strength and prowess prevent the Green Men from enslaving or binding him. For the next three days he learns more about their customs and way of life, nearly perishing in the process at the hands of a pair of great white apes. In the process he earns a loyal guard dog (calot) and the friendship of one of the female Tharks: Sola.

On the third day of his captivity John Carter watches the Green Men attack a convoy of flying ships. Three manage to escape but the rest are destroyed, and their crews killed. Only one woman survives the destruction: Deja Thoris, princess of Helium. It is love at first sight for Carter, who will find himself drawn into more and greater adventures trying to see his princess safe. Green Martian and Red soon learn that there is no threat on Barsoom more deadly than a motivated gentleman from Virginia, whose strange brand of courage, honor, and compassion has not been seen on the Red Planet for millennia.

## The characters

John Carter is the point-of-view character, so the story is told entirely through his eyes. A gentleman and a fighter, Carter never hesitates to enter battle and will often leap into combat for the sheer joy of it. A rare trait in the present, it is nevertheless a necessary one in a dying world where the denizens know only war, and it makes establishing an understanding with both the Green and Red Martians easier than many a modern novel would have readers think.

Deja Thoris is the space princess archetype to top all others. Kind, wise, entirely conscious of her position and her honor, she would outshine almost all other women to bear the title of princess on either Earth or Mars. It is not difficult to see how and why John Carter falls in love with her.

Tars Tarkas is a figure who commands respect. Cunning, strong, and a better politician than he lets on, the conclusion to his arc will leave one cheering. Sola has time to shine and Woola, John Carter's dog (calot), also receives plenty of characterization.

Kantos Kan rounds out the immediate cast and is absolutely one of the best characters in the book. Though sidelined a fair bit toward the end, he is nonetheless a memorable friend to the protagonists and one that readers will wish to see again.

## The world

Mars – or Barsoom, as its inhabitants name it – is a rich culture entering its twilight. Large parts of the first few chapters are spent explaining the beliefs of the Tharks, and it is too bad that Carter didn't learn Red Martian culture sooner. Theirs is less harsh than the Green Men's but it is still distinctly different from Earth's, with a set of austere conditions imposed by the planet's declining resources. A reader will marvel at the extent of the worldbuilding that went into *A Princess of Mars* and never want to leave it.

## The politics

The only politics are those related to the story's world. Edgar Rice Burroughs had no trouble ignoring the current events of his time to tell a story that is as entertaining now as it was when it was first published.

## Content warning

There is a tribe of Tharks that wear the heads and hands of their fallen enemies as both trophies and armor, and there is a disturbing scene at the end of the novel in a cave. Carter is also shut up in a dark dungeon for three days, nearly driving him mad. Oh, and everyone on Barsoom is naked except for the weapons and trappings of rank which they wear. None of these things are dwelt upon, though, and they pass quickly enough readers will barely notice them.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who loves space opera and sci-fi. *Star Wars* borrowed extensively from the pattern set by *A Princess of Mars*, so reading the book gives one a new perspective on the beloved franchise created by George Lucas. Comic book lovers will also enjoy the book, since it helped to inspire Superman and dozens of other superheroes. The science is well-considered, and those interested in a pulse-pounding adventure will love this story.



Why read it?

The book set the stage for modern pop culture to take off. Reading it will give one a better, deeper perspective of present-day stories. Besides this, it is a rip-roaring good yarn. Why not read it?

**Blood Cartel by Nicholas Woode-Smith**

**Review by Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In Part-Time Monster Hunter, we met Kat Drummond and her mentor Treth, the ghost of a monster from the other side of the dimensional rifts. Then, she only had to deal with zombies.

Now, she's attracted the attention of something else. It's evil. It's dark. It's colder than the dark.

And it is hungry.

The story

Kat Drummond can't catch a break. At the end of Part-Time Monster Hunter, her evolution brought her from being a glorified exterminator to taking down a necromancer that threatened to slaughter her entire college campus.

So of course, book 2, Blood Cartel, opens with Kat on trial for murder. Because you can kill all the zombies you like, but you kill one lousy human...

And that's just the opening sequence to reintroduce the characters and the world. The book only gets better from there. Surprisingly enough, the opening sequence makes use of a sequence from book 1 that I thought was a throwaway scene.

When Kat is allowed back on the streets, she discovers that people are going missing in the South African town of Hope City. It's not for the usual reasons. There's no blood from a vampire attack. There are no remains from a monster attack.

When it disappears one of her friends, the book turns into urban fantasy and we're off to the races.

The characters

In Blood Cartel, Kat's friends are allowed more development than they were in the other novel. They become important players within the world, and to the plot. At least one gets more back story, and definitely becomes more interesting. We have a pixie with PTSD. We have a ghost who can't enjoy being dead. There's a goth who turns into a girly matchmaker. There's even a possible love interest who has no magic, but does have the power of bureaucramancy, as Jim Butcher would put it.

Kat, herself, is still entertaining. Even if it's just for lines like "If I've learnt anything from my time as a monster hunter, it is to chase anything that runs away." Her commentary on fashion is entertaining ("A zombie could grab that dress way too easily. Even a non-mutant zombie could probably claw and bite through the thin fabric. It was a death trap!"). Her continued focus on budgetary issues is a welcome touch of reality.

I especially like lines of "I awoke with that terrible feeling that workaholics get when they don't have

anything to do."

And teaching her how to dance is ... special.

As I said in my first review, reading the Kat Drummond series makes me look back at Buffy the Vampire Slayer and see a lot of things that should have happened in a sane portrayal of similar circumstances.

The world

The world here is still cute. I don't mean cute and cuddly. I mean the sense when someone says "Don't get cute." It's the only way I can describe a segment of

"[This is a] principle held sacrosanct by the Spirit of the Law."

My lawyer was, of course, referring to the semi-sentient spirit that governed the constitution of Hope City. An elemental being crafted by lawmancy."

As I said, cute.

As we go along through the story, we keep getting glances and theories of the world, and the history of magic and monsters kicking around. Some of it is Kat's observations, some of it is her classwork, and some of it is her discussing with in-world theorists.

Nicholas Woode-Smith also keeps a nice variety of monsters on hand, including a case involving a mimic that learns. He has some nice variations on traditional monsters, even vampires. It's obvious he put a lot of thought into this.

With Nicholas Woode-Smith being from South Africa, we also get some nice touches of local color, like "Tokai manor," which is a real place, with a real ghost story attached to it. Like Tim Powers or CS Lewis, a ghost here is just the remains of the dead's consciousness, not the soul of the person in question.

It's also nice to find someone else who knows what holy salt is.

The politics

While the politics of this world are not ours, there is still overlap. To say this is pro-weapon would be an understatement. Kat even gets an appreciation of guns in this novel.

And the opening court case looks like a certain trial last month in Kenosha. And the laws around self-defense are just as stupid here as they are in real life America. (For the record, the book came out in 2019).

It is nice to see that "Government is stupid" is a universal constant.

It's still nice to see that author Nicholas Woode-Smith still keeps an emphasis on the importance of a budget.

Content warning

There's too much blood to give this to children. The youngest readers should be limited to late teenagers.

Who is it for?

This should appeal to the average urban fantasy reader. There is more of Larry Correia's Monster Hunters in Kat Drummond than Harry Dresden. To some degree, there is even a John Ringo-like air to some of the characters ("Detonation scrolls" are a thing). There are some great action bits here. For anyone who wanted more of Buffy, or more from Buffy, I can definitely recommend this.

Why read it?

Nicholas Woode-Smith has added a solid entry in the urban fantasy genre that's fun, action-filled, with some interesting, smart characters.

**Call of the Rougarou by Kelly Grayson**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**  
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

This ALMOST could have been a story about my childhood; growing up on a dirt road in Bibb County, GA, in the 1950s has much in common with growing up in rural Louisiana in the 1980s, I believe. One difference: Butch and I were several years younger than Bobby Joe and his friends, so we didn't have access to projectile weapons beyond the BB gun. Other than that (and the werewolf), it's pretty much the same.

Civilization's rules tend to go out the window when your female dog goes into heat, especially if she is a pedigree. You just CAN'T count on discretion and politeness to cover up for all the plaintive howling; but, if you don't want mongrel pups out of your pedigree, you HAVE to figure out a solution.

And that's all Bobby Joe is concerned about, at first: finding the runaway dog.

Well, finding the runaway dog, and getting high.

Since his daddy grows pot (for retail sale only; he's not a bulk supplier) Bobby Joe can solve the second part of the equation fairly easily. Solving the first part is complicated by the appearance of the werewolf (Cajun term: Rougarou).

All our actions have consequences, and Bobby Joe may be a young 'un, but he is man enough to face even the most unreasonable outcomes. Give thanks for such a responsible person, and hope that they appear whenever they are needed.

**The Case of the Haunted Chapel by Karen Kelly Boyce**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Five nuns just trying to conquer their bad habits. One old house with an interior chapel and some spooky noises. Who is haunting whom?

When nuns don't make it into the order they attempt to join first, they usually try to find another one that will accept them. But in the case of Mother Mercy and her nuns – Sister Krumbles, Sister Lacey, Sister Lovely, and Sister Shiny – they were not turned away for the usual conditions. They are all healthy, strong, and able to teach as well as support themselves. Their main problem is, they all have bad habits.

No established order will take them, with the records they have for disobedience, loss of temper, over-zealous cleaning, bad language, and the like. So what do they do? Start their own order, of course! They want to be the Sisters of the Rose.

But the bishop who approves their order has a better idea and gives them a different name: Sisters of the Last Straw!

Buy it here

## The Story

The story starts off with a lot of smoke. Poor Sister Krumbles is a very absentminded woman. She was in charge of making jams for the Sisters to sell to make money to support themselves. Although she got the canning started, she decided in the middle of that to go out and build the goat pen for the order's goats (which none of the other sisters – not even Mother Mercy – knew they were getting!).

While Sister Krumbles was out, of course, the jam burned and the jars overheated. Though Mother Mercy and the other Sisters arrive in time to put out the fire and turn off the stove, the jars all pop. Mere moments later, the kitchen looks like someone threw hot jam everywhere.

Sister Shiny notes once the last jar has popped and the kitchen has gone still that Mother Mercy is starting to turn red. Mother has the bad habit of a lousy temper, which makes her disobedient, and she thought that making herself Mother Superior of the order would help her curb that problem. It did – sort of. If she's in charge then she cannot be disobedient when she loses her temper. Nevertheless, spotless little Sister Shiny wisely makes for the cleaning cupboard as Sister Lacey and Sister Lovely try to find a way to defuse the volcanic Mother Superior. Unfortunately for them, Sister Krumbles returns at that moment and gets the full brunt of Mother's fury.

Not long after, the sisters get to work cleaning up the kitchen. It helps Mother burn off her temper, but once she is done, she starts to laugh. The kitchen may be clean, as is Sister Shiny, but the rest of the nuns are a sight!

And so life at the manor-turned-convent goes with one disaster after another. But the penultimate issue comes from an unexpected source: strange moanings and cries from the house's chapel. Is the chapel haunted? If so, what are the sisters going to do? They don't have anywhere else to go and they cannot afford to lose this house!

Is this truly the Last Straw? Or is something else going on?

## The Characters

None of the sisters are saintly: Mother Mercy has a temper, Sister Lacey struggles with "bad words" and so tends to stutter as she tries to find replacements for curses. Sister Lovely likes to smoke, Sister Shiny likes her reflection, and Sister Krumbles can't keep to a single blessed task if her life depends on

it. It is not hard to see why they were expelled from various orders before starting their own!

Yet these are truly just "bad habits" and they do not make the nuns either detestable or irredeemable. No matter how often they fall down in their efforts to improve, they get up and continue trying. It is not easy and every setback hurts, yet they continue despite the constant disasters that dog them. These are determined women who won't let their faults rule them, no matter how often they have to figure out how to fight them off!

The World

The worldbuilding focuses primarily on the nuns' house and does not expand beyond the neighbor's yard or the priest who comes to offer Mass, with a few mentions of the bishop made as time goes on. It is enough for a children's book and audience, but an adult will wish it could have been a bit meatier.

Politics

None. This is a children's book, after all!

Content Warning

There is a mention of smoking and bad words. Beyond that, there is nothing to concern parents about this book.

Who is it for?

Parents who want a clean, sweet read will like this novel. Children who like mysteries with adult rather than child protagonists or who just need a change of pace will also enjoy this story and find it amusing. The humor will appeal to girls as well as boys and parents will have fun recognizing some of themselves or other members of their families in the nuns' personalities. If mothers and fathers want a more mature book and something a little more challenging for their children to read, *Sisters of the Last Straw* is a good place to start. The humor as well as the window into religious life should lead to lots of interesting discussions and fruitful research for those curious to learn more as well!

Why buy it?

It is a fun, quick read that will give a child something to enjoy. Adults who want something light, fluffy, and entertaining will like it as well. Why not pick it up and keep it on the shelf for a rainy day?

**Ganwold's Child by Diann Thornley Read**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**  
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

Who owns your loyalty?

It's not a trivial question, under any circumstances. DT Read has chosen the field of military science fiction to illustrate some aspects of how loyalty is both personal and corporate, but I THINK that the implications are present in just about everything humans do, or think about doing.

The central character is a human boy named Tristan, who we briefly meet as a toddler. He is in the care

of his mother, Darcie. She teaches him what may be his first formal lesson in loyalty, by risking her own life to save his. I'm not sure if the significant emotional content in this brief first chapter is due to the talented writing, or if it's my own parent/grandparent/great-grandparent identity responding to the situation, but the action seemed particularly vivid to me.

After the intro, we skip forward enough years that Tristan is apparently an adolescent, in the company of a number of his non-human peers. Read gives us more to think about, along the lines of the value of loyalty, as there is CLEARLY some conflict within the group. It's difficult to say if this is primarily because Tristan is a member of an alien species with respect to his companions, OR if this is a function of age-appropriate competition for reproductive rights. Read doesn't waste the opportunity to address loyalty permutations, by merely addressing the procreation issues; in THIS society, the matriarchy takes precedence over almost everything else, with different levels of respect corresponding to age and child-bearing status of the females. The one POSSIBLE relationship that may require a higher loyalty than that males give females exists between paired hunting companions, but it's likely that this is relationship is subordinate as well.

The frame that the story hangs on, is the way on which Tristan's loyalty to Darcie drives him to abandon the safety of their isolated community, and seek assistance from his father, who he hasn't seen since he was a toddler. In this decision, loyalty figures prominently as well, but it's a case where the CULTURAL norms don't match up with his personal beliefs; in his adopted community, fathers serve ONLY as donators of genetic material, with no later obligations toward their offspring.

It seems to me that Read never misses an opportunity to show all the permutations of loyalty, both upstream and downstream. At the same time, she allows the context that Tristan was raised in to remain with him, at least in come part. For example, he is far more likely to trust the women he encounters than the men.

I don't want to give the impression that this is some dull academic work, or one of those thinly-veiled political tracts that slaps a coat of gunfire over a lengthy proof that this diet will lead you to despair, while that diet will lead you to paradise. That ISN'T the case; this is a lively, classic hero struggle, with good guys, bad guys, and an acceptable amount of exploding spaceships. If that's all you get out of it, you've had some great entertainment! However, I hope you will be as challenged as I have been to look at your personal loyalties, and come to a conclusion about your next step.

**Monster Hunter International, by Larry Correia**

**Review by Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In 2015 I kept running into a name on Facebook. It was vaguely familiar to me from trips at Barnes and Noble. He even popped up in one of my groups from time to time.

So after a while, I shrugged and said, Oh what the Hell? Why not? Being a bit of a cheap bugger, I decided to go for his Three-in-One collected work of his largest series at the time. And book 5 had just come out, so obviously someone likes it. And it was published by Baen Books, and I already read their top authors.

But I really just wanted to understand who or what was a Larry Correia, and why was he writing about the monster hunter video game franchise.

Unknown to me, I had started at the deep end.



I promptly went out and bought ... well ... everything else Correia has written, including the rest of MHI, his three Grimnoir and his Dead Six novels.

Seriously, these books are kinda awesome. I finished all of them in a matter of days.

One thing at a time.

The story

Five days after Owen Zastava Pitt pushed his insufferable boss out of a fourteenth story window, he woke up in the hospital with a scarred face, an unbelievable memory, and a job offer.

How can you argue with a plot description like that?

Yes, chapter one involves a brawl between the above mentioned Owen Pitt, and his boss, who has become a monster of a completely different stripe than he had been. Let's just say that I would have considered throwing him out a window before he became a large furry sociopath.

Yup. Pitt has to go toe-to-toe with a freaking werewolf. And he has no silver. But Owen Pitt is 6'7", and gravity kills.

After Pitt hands in his resignation the hard way, he has officially fallen down the rabbit hole. Monsters are real -- all of them. Pick a B-Movie horror film or a Lovecraftian monster. There are only two forces that deal with the legion of nightmares (that we see in this book). One is the Monster Control Bureau (MCB), a government bureaucracy that looks like it's run by either the Keystone cops, or whatever random thugs can be brought in off the street (though it'll turn out that they aren't random). The other group is Monster Hunter International, a private organization dedicated to collecting bounties as they exterminate the world's nastier pests -- including vampires, giant spiders, and a few creatures from the black lagoon.

And MHI offers Owen Pitt a job. The perks are good -- play with weapons, hang out with the stunning woman who recruited him, and the paychecks are insane -- and, well, why not?

Unfortunately for Pitt, his first day on the job is going to get messy. He soon finds himself being haunted by an old Jewish ghost, is getting visions of an ancient entity called "the Cursed One" who just arrived on US soil, is hip deep in ghouls, vampires, flying killer gargoyles that bleed magma, and did we mention that the Cursed One might be about to end the world?

This book was awesome from start to finish. It didn't really slow down. Despite the constant description of these books as "gun porn," I have yet to be bogged down the guns. Most of the time, the weapon details are critical to the plot, considering what fresh new horrors they run into all the time. The chapters that amount to a large training montage are detailed and interesting, and establish the characters better than heading straight into the action.

Then the shooting started, and didn't really stop for another three hundred pages or so.

And just remember: vampires only sparkle when they're on fire.

## The characters

MHI has a wonderfully colorful cast of characters. From a former Vegas stripper who is more vicious and bloodthirsty than the lot of them, to Julie, a member of MHI's founding family, who is also a sniper... and her physical description in the book reminds me a lot of Bayonetta, but we won't go there.

There is a wonderfully broad collection of folks here, from the high school chemistry teacher who had to blow up his school filled with spiders, to the poor guy who had to kill his zombieified students, to the explosive-happy Q-variant, to Earl Harbinger -- an old member of MHI's founding family with an interesting history. The characters are likable, the dialogue engaging, and I don't think I came across a single flaw in the execution.

## The world

For the record, MHI has nothing, repeat, nothing, to do with the Monster Hunter video game series. Thank you. All the books are fun. There's one novel in the series that you swear is going to be boring, it rallies at the midpoint, and ends with a demonic werewolf hellspawn and his legion of unkillable feral weres.

Imagine a fully-developed world for Buffy the Vampire Slayer, where the government has been aware of monsters for decades, and those civilians who have been dragged into the nightmare little world in the shadows have become Bounty hunters in their own right. Of five books, I saw only two punchlines coming ... only one of them was more like a feinted jab so we could be decked with an uppercut. That's not bad.

Now, there isn't a ton of worldbuilding in book one. Everyone is too busy trying not to die.

## The politics

The really, really, really short version about Larry Correia is that he is an unstoppable writing machine who pumps out books the size of Tom Clancy doorstoppers at least once a year, in addition to maintaining an almost daily blog, is almost omnipresent online, and has a BS tolerance threshold lower than mine.

Correia is, personally Libertarian. He prefers his heroes to be smaller, private groups, rather than sprawling government bureaucracies, though even the bureaucracies get a fair shake in his books (one of them at the very least). He also owns a gun range, so he likes his weaponry.

## Content warning

Monsters and gun violence. There may be a language warning. But I'd honestly give this to early teenagers. Granted, I read Tom Clancy novels when I was 14, so I may not be the best judge of that.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who likes, fun, innovative ways to use the forces of darkness as an enemy, and new ways to approach them.

Or, to paraphrase Correia himself, these books are for anyone who thinks *Cujo* should have been a five page short story, with three pages debating which gun to use.

Why read it?

Larry Correia sets the standard for fun insane action and vivid characters.

**New Worlds Quarterly #1 edited by Michael Moorcock**

**Review by Jean-Paul Garnier**

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

New Worlds magazine started in 1963 and was taken over by Moorcock's editorship in 1964. It sparked the New Wave movement and was known for publishing controversial material. Reading this collection one understands why. Almost fifty years later many of the stories contained in this collection retain their edge. While I didn't care much for the fantasy included in this collection (personal bias) the science fiction is top notch. Ballard and Disch never let down and their stories in this collection are no exception. John Sladek and David Redd's stories are fun and more light hearted than the others, but for me Barrington Bayley's "Exit From City 5" is the jewel of the anthology. I had not read him before and greatly enjoyed his existential look at the universe shrinking before our eyes, that space is truly nothing without containing matter. The book also contains some great illustrations by R. Glyn Jones. I highly recommend this one and look forward to reading the follow up volumes.

**Politics Kills by Declan Finn**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

[Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimbossffreviews.substack.com)

Oops. I almost started this review with a quote from The Godfather. It would have fit, but I don't wanna get sued. It should be noted however, that The Godfather 1-3 (and yes, I included number three in there. I love it and all who disagree with me are wrong.) is one of my favorite movie series and I probably thought of it because White Ops is becoming one of my favorite book series.

Of course, this is Book Two. Politics Kills is perhaps the most appropriately titled book I've ever read in my life. Being the guy with a degree in history and an interest in both Military and Political history, I can assure you that there are no two human endeavors as closely linked as politics and war. Wars are, of course, fought by killing people. Sean P Ryan, leader of a group of Rangers, which is also a business venture owned by his family, is no stranger to wiping out enemy forces when he needs to. And his need is frequent. Dude basically goes through a battle a day, or at least it feels like it.

Something you don't really get a great feel for with a lot of Finn's writing is the passage of time. There's usually so much going on that you don't have time to get bored and start wondering how long it's been since the last thing happened. The next thing is already happening, so why worry about it? I actually enjoy that aspect of it. Unless you're writing historical fiction and I'm picking it apart (and I'm not even one of the bad ones. I once had to read a thirty plus page paper about the historical inaccuracies in The Last Samurai for a Japanese history class) I don't really need to know what the date is. Just tell me what's going on and I'll take it from there.

I also like the fact that we get to see Ryan's shell crack just a bit. He's always (through the one whole book that came before this in the series) had this kind of unreachable quality to him. He was fiercely loyal, but there were times when it felt like his reaction to pretty much anything were either anger or loyalty. We get to see a lot of both in Politics Kills, but we get to see a softer side of the man himself and it's something that he has to come to grips with. The fact that he manages to do it adds a lot to his

character.

It's kind of mentioning this, but it kind of stuck out at me. Most of Finn's characters are intensely Catholic. His long, and so far best, series is of course the Saint Tommy, NYPD series and if a man is going to be a Catholic saint, the intense Catholicism is necessarily part of the character's personality. The first book in his Love at First Bite series is entitled Honor at Stake: A Catholic Action Horror Novel. Sean Ryan is definitely a Catholic character, but White Ops is not as heavily Catholic as his other work. It didn't really matter to the quality of the story. I'm not Catholic myself so it's not like it had to be there for me to enjoy the book, but it's definitely something different.

I also kind of figured I'd mention that for those of you who may have avoided Finn's earlier work because of its heavy emphasis on religion. I know some people don't care for that overly religious reading and so I thought I'd let everyone know that if that's how you feel (and you have every right to) that this is a good chance to try an awesome author without the overtones that you don't care for.

One wonders if parts of Politics Kills are based on Finn's opinion of the United Nations. There is a governmental body with a similar function and it is indeed called the United Planets. I find myself underwhelmed by both the intelligence and competence levels of the members of the UP council. They waste time like champions, but forget about getting stuff done. Of course, that may be because of an undet...

Nevermind, that would've been a spoiler. We have a very strong policy against spoilers at Jimbo's and sometimes we even follow it. Like now. And maybe tomorrow. Probably.

Of course, as in any Declan Finn novel, we have both heroes and villains. This is not some boring half-way crap where everything is in shades of gray. The good guys are good. The bad guys are bad. We have someone to root for. We have someone to root against. The reasons for our rooting interests are sound. In short, this is entertainment with stakes. I love it when I can get behind the hero because he wants to defeat the villain.

Of course, that's why I never cared for Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels (I much prefer her Brainship series). Thread is just dumb and there's really no rooting interest. It's mindless. It falls from the sky. It has no motivation. It just exists. Give me a power seeking, money-grabbing antagonist every time and I'm happy. Finn is good at that.

It'll be interesting to see where Finn takes this series next (there are three more currently out and I'm not sure if that's the whole series or if there are more coming. I'm a horrible fan, I guess) because most, if not all, of the horrible, terrible, not good, very bad people we've been rooting against are no longer threats. Of course, there could be someone even worse waiting in the wings. I guess I'll have to see.

I'm like that though. I made my daughter hate Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince because she fell asleep watching it (which was my plan all along) and I wouldn't tell her who the Half Blood Prince was. I told her to watch the movie. I guess I'm telling myself to read the book now. That's fine though. I plan to.

But heed my warning: Beware the earworm. A force like that is hard to stop.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Nuclear Space Mines

## The Resurrection of Roger Diment by Douglas R. Mason

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

This book was total schlock and I barely enjoyed it enough to finish reading it to the end. The story was somewhat of a Logan's Run rip off, with a happy, sedated population that is executed at the age of thirty and sent to the "organ bank". Naturally a few people being sent to the organ farms escape and find others that have been set free, banding together to cause a revolution against the androids who oppress them. The former description actually makes the story sound kind of fun, but it wasn't. The female characters are paper thin, and most of the descriptions focus on their anatomy, in poor taste. For a while I suspected that perhaps this was a bad translation, but nope, it is just a poorly written book.

## The Secret of Seavale by Blake Smith

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Things go bump in the night that shouldn't in this Regency romance!

Miss Elizabeth Markham has had quite enough of school, thank you. She intends not to stay another minute and, without alerting anyone who might be inclined to ask her where she thinks she is going, Elizabeth makes good her escape. Quite pleased with herself, she heads to her godmother Mrs. Brownhurst's cottage in Seavale. The lovely elderly lady will happily shelter Elizabeth there, as they have only been close.

At least, that was the initial plan. Elizabeth might have written ahead to ask for her godmother's schedule – Mrs. Brownhurst of Seavale Cottage is not present, having gone to Bath. Now Miss Markham must make do on her own, including worrying about the strange noises in the cottage basement!

### The Story

Captain Charles Randall, a Navy veteran, happens upon Miss Markham as she is walking up to Seavale Cottage. Among the other items Elizabeth forgot to account for were funds! She cannot pay anyone to drive her to her intended destination and so she must walk, carrying her light luggage as she goes. The Captain manages to convince her to accept him as her chauffeur, but she is very put out by his assertion that Mrs. Brownhurst is away in Bath and will not be there to greet her. This anger turns to chagrin when Elizabeth discovers he is indeed correct and the cottage is locked up tight.

The Captain goes to the gardener, who opens the cottage while Elizabeth travels with Randall to his own hall so she can borrow his housekeeper, Mrs. Greystock. Soon the two women have the cottage set to rights and all is well, at least for now. But Elizabeth is going to have the cottage to herself for the night as Mrs. Greystock must leave to go home.

All is well as ends well, one would think, and Elizabeth does. Then strange sounds from the cellar wake her in the night, none of which she has heard on her previous stays in the cottage. She goes to check on the noises but finds nothing out of order in the cellar. There is a "sharp smell" which also isn't natural to the house, but it fades quickly enough. How odd! But best to go back to bed all the same.

When Mrs. Greystock returns the next morning and hears of this midnight escapade, she becomes concerned and brings the matter to Captain Randall's attention. Sharing his housekeeper's worry, he subse-

quently comes to visit Elizabeth and inspect the place for her safety, though this irritates her. Still, when he suggests that she have Mrs. Greystock's niece come over to stay as her housekeeper, Elizabeth agrees to the company and help.

But the strange sounds continue at odd times in the night over the coming weeks. What could be going on? Is Seavale haunted? If so by what or whom – and for what purpose?

## The Characters

For all her faults, Elizabeth is a truly interesting character to follow. She tends to insist on having her own way and this can be annoying, but her independent spirit also enables her to take care of herself in ways a lesser woman wouldn't, such as knowing when to accept help and demonstrating the courage to stay in Seavale Cottage despite the strange sounds in the night. While she may not like seeking help, that does not prevent her from recognizing when she needs it and then accepting it to get the job done.

Captain Randall is a very likeable hero for his good sense and willingness to act, even if he is a bit of a grump due to an old war injury. His practical knowledge makes up for Elizabeth's shortfalls, and though he has a limp, he can still put up a good fight. Mrs. Greystock and her niece add a nice dash of social and sociable sense to the ensemble, keeping things running smoothly for Elizabeth and offering good advice when asked for it.

## The World

The world is Regency England and all that entails, and the book takes a good look at the nitty-gritty of how the world actually worked in that time and place. Manners are also important and explained, letting everyone know what is expected of them and why. This view is practical and not one often seen in the genre, making the world of Seavale even more intriguing than it would be otherwise.

## Politics

None.

## Content Warning

None. This is a very PG-13 friendly Regency novel.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer will enjoy this book. It is short and quick but still fun and will offer anyone who wants a sweet romance exactly what they are seeking. The most forward moment in the story involves a couple holding hands, so anyone who wants a story that isn't steamy will like this book. Cozy mystery enthusiasts will also enjoy it as Elizabeth seeks answers to the question of the strange sounds at Seavale. Meanwhile, romance readers and Regency romance lovers will have fun wondering just how soon Captain Randall and Miss Markham will decide to wed! There must be a wedding in their future, after all. This is the nineteenth century!

## Why buy it?

It's a quick, comfortable read that takes one to a time of refined manners and society. There is also the lure of romance and suspense. What's not to like or want to read?



## Space Cowboys 2: Electric Rodeo

edited by C.V. Walter

Review by Pat Patterson

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

This is Space Cowboys 2, and since I reviewed the original Space Cowboys recently, I'll not waste time repeating my affection for the genre. If you want to read it, you can find it here.

I discovered that almost none of the authors in the first book had stories in this volume, and at first, I didn't LIKE that; I thought that first volume was GREAT! It took a minute for me to realize that probably so many good stories were submitted that a second volume showcasing additional talent was necessary. WELL DONE!

The stories:

Rocky Rodeo, by Tuvela Thomas. Jonathan is 15, and although his age makes him a minor, he does the work of a man; it's what is required, and fortunately, he has the muscles and determination to get the job done. A different kind of job comes his way when his hidden telepath ability spots a cheater at the poker table. His talent is an asset in that situation; will he be able to succeed when the stakes are higher?

A Day in the Life, by Doug Irvin. Dreaming about the romantic life of the space cowboy is just FINE, as long as you are reading about it in a book while relaxing in your easy chair. I suspect Doug Irvin has seen reality, though, because here, he convincingly describes the attention to detail and broad-spectrum competency needed to punch cattle in space. NOTE: don't mistake this for an attempt to bring your dreams crashing down; the story is NOT a downer. It's just real.

Rodeo Libre, by Wally Waltner. Bull riders are crazy. Just reading the descriptions Waltner provides is almost enough to convince me of that, but I HAD to go to YouTube for some videos to confirm it. I suggest you do the same if there is any doubt in your mind. HOWEVER: it seems like there is always someone who wants to make it more dangerous. In this case, it's not only a competitor, but the system. An ouch is guaranteed, and death is a possibility.

Choices Left Unmade, by David Birdsall. Nobody expects life to be fair, but that doesn't mean you get to drop out of it. What can be tolerated are tough circumstances; what can't be tolerated is complete subversion of civilized rules. Even tough guys need SOME rules.

In the Ashes of Dawn, by Amanda Rein. This is the closest to a despair story in the book, a story in which no matter what you do, you are going to lose. However, keep in mind that sometimes the choices you make today will bear fruit WAY down the road.

Bad Blood on the High Plains, by Rick Cutler. Cutler is the only author to have a story in the first volume as well, and I'm glad that the editors chose to let him double-dip. Again, we are reminded that choices made today can bear fruit WAY down the road, and that not everyone is willing to be nice. What's that line, about survival triumphing over programming? It's difficult to know at all times how that is in effect.

Pard, by Sam Robb. If you encounter an economy driven by the fleecing of the poor, you need all the help you can get. Cab drivers who recognize honesty may be uniquely situated to poke the money-

grubbers in the eye.

Space Sheep and the Electric Cow, by A. Kristina Casasent. In truly wide-open spaces, expansion can bring some dramatic clashes of culture. Casasent gives us a way that space livestock can exist and eat, and serve as a source of income as well. Is the conflict between the sheep-herders and the cattleman doomed to repeat endlessly?

The Quick Brown Fox , by James Copley. I'm not familiar with this universe, which is populated by various uplifted animals, but it seems to be well-defined. Don't tell everything you know, and don't miss an opportunity to take advantage. And always remember: different species have different rules. Not better or worse, necessarily, but different.

Homecoming, by Kelly Grayson. Leave it to Kelly Grayson to put some depth to the insult Princess Leia dumps on Hans Solo. A nerf is a gigantic herbivore, which tastes delicious, UNLESS the nerf has been spooked. Since electromagnetic radiation spooks them, those who work them have to rely on ancient gunpowder technology to defend the herd. It's a nice idea; we need to have SOME reason for being Cowboy Action Shooters in a time of advanced tech, after all. Toss in large numbers of clones, and prejudice against them, and the story emerges. (No way is the protagonist self-centered or half-witted, though.)

**Storm Between the Stars by Karl Gallagher**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Anyone who follows my reviews knows that I've been a fan of Karl Gallagher's books. He delivers character and plot, even at times when you don't know which he's delivering on.

Torchship was a better Firefly than the actual product.

His Lost War series is criminally underrated, even though I think it's even better than Torchship.

And now he's back to a slightly harder SciFi, with a bit of a twist.

Storm Between the Stars: Book 1 in the Fall of the Censor is his latest release. I was worried about spoiling the key threat in this book... but the series title has already given that away.

The story

To begin with, Niko Landry is Captain of a family-owned and operated freighter. Like all shipping companies, he makes a lot of deals based off of what will sell better in X system over Y, and never leaving his cargo hold empty.

When Niko and his crew find himself lost in space, he finds himself in the midst of a great business opportunity. After three thousand years of a human diaspora caused humans to flee Earth and being subsequently cut off from the home system, they find themselves to be the first ones to have found a way back. Since the Landry family business is private, they don't have to report anything to anyone. They're the first ones back to the home system, and therefore, the first ones to find what new resources and technology may have been developed in the last three thousand years.

But Earth and the associated systems are now ruled by something called "the Censor."

Karl essentially unveils a system, piece by piece, that builds into 1984 / Fahrenheit 451 IN SPACE, and ends with an interstellar space chase that David Weber would have been happy to have written. It feels a little like the end of On Basilisk Station, only our heroes are being chased, and they don't have real weapons. Their only weapons? Physics.

The only problem with this entire novel? We could have spent five pages on the crew being a bit more impressed with "This is something no one on our side has seen for thousands of years." In the book, they were all business. Five pages would've been enough. It's a minor quibble, but I have to find a flaw somewhere.

In short, it's great world building. And I definitely enjoyed it. I recommend it. There's sequel bait, but since there isn't a cliffhanger. So this won't cause you to throw your book against a wall.

## The characters

The characters are sketched out well in this one. They appear to be simple stereotypes (the crank, the captain, the ladies man, et al), but they're all much deeper than they appear.

To steal a phrase, no one here is exactly as they appear to be.

Though to be perfectly fair, they get so much development in the succeeding books, it's not even funny.

## The world

Karl does a good job of developing a world. Many of the ideas are sane libertarian. I have to make that distinction because there are the libertarians I know, versus the ones I've seen in public. He has a smart and sane approach to extended families, marrying into a family business, barter to get around taxes, how to work around oppression, and a lot of cultural elements that would make some libertarians I know scream like a sunburnt vampire.

There is also a great bit of work on language. I haven't seen this much effort put in since John C Wright's Somewhither. It's not as extensive, but it works well for the story.

And there are nice little touches here and there. Character names that are very ... Welsh. Details on spaceship cargo loading. Human zebras (long story). Bringing back the zealots.

And what seems to begin as a system of bureaucrats is slowly revealed to be a creepy, terrifying system of oppression. Each new revelation makes the reader feel new levels of dread every time. It goes from "aw Hell" to "aw f\*\*\*\*" to "why aren't they running?"

## The politics

This varies between loosely interpreted libertarian, and social conservatism of the 1800s.

And, again, 1984.

## Content warning

It's as scary as 1984 should be.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes physics in their science fiction will enjoy this. Anyone who likes watching the development of a full world built up from the ground, like for Dune.

If you like Frank Herbert, David Weber, or most of Baen Books output, you'll want to give this a shot. Why read it?

I'm not the only one who likes Storm Between the Stars. If you don't take my word for it, check out our other review on Karl's work.

**Titan by Robert Kroese**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When a billionaire tech genius finds a way to pull mineral-rich asteroids into Earth's orbit, he keeps the U.S. government off his back by letting them in on the operation. The catch: America's debt-laden treasury will tie its currency to the future of the asteroid mining efforts. A saboteur steps in to throw a wrench in the works, and soon the world descends into chaos...

Author's note: I have a short story coming out in a MAMMON anthology later this year. This review reflects my opinion of TITAN independent of my connection to the franchise.

## The Story

Kade Kapur--a man who is not entirely unlike Elon Musk as far as brains, wealth, and ambition are concerned--runs an aerospace company called Ad Astra. He's pushing the known boundaries of human capabilities in space, lassoing asteroids from the cosmos and pulling them into Earth's orbit so that mankind can reap the benefits of space mining.

However, his timing couldn't be worse: the United States Congress just flipped to the asset-grabbing Left, and Kapur's company is at the top of the list for nationalization. In order to hold off the 800-lb gorilla, he pitches a plan to the president: attach the US Treasury's future to a space mining operation that can grab asteroids whenever it wants, guaranteeing an ongoing supply of rare materials like cadmium and iridium.

This is all well and good, however no government likes to be challenged by a power it doesn't control. Kapur is double-crossed in the coming years by a Federal mole, and the "High Frontier Mining" project is thrown into chaos. Without its success the American economy crumbles overnight.

And this is only the first volume in a trilogy. Buckle up kids, things are going to get ugly.

## The Characters

Kade Kapur, the son of an American woman and an Indian man who emigrated to the States. He's always had a sharp intellect and, due to his upbringing, an inability to yield to bullies. He gets his start in software and moves into his dream industry: aerospace engineering.

Rami Essak is an Egyptian hacker who crosses paths with Kapur, and though they are different in sev-

eral key ways, they share a similar drive and ideology. Essak becomes a key player in the success of Kapur's ventures over the years.

Valerie Munoz, a childhood friend of Kapur who held a torch for him throughout her life, and comes to his rescue decades later when he needs her the most.

Davis Christopher, an early investor in Kapur's genius, though he regularly warns him of the potential pitfalls of his ambitions. Through Davis we get a breakdown of the historic "Mississippi Scheme" that bankrupted several investors in 1720. Kapur's "High Frontier Mining" plan is scarily similar to it, and of great interest to the reader as well.

There are several other important characters, but these ones form the focal core. Overall Kroese manages to keep about twenty different people in the spotlight, and makes them distinct enough that they don't get mixed up in the complexity of it.

## The World

The key events of the story start some 10 years ahead of the current day, though we get regular flashbacks to Kade Kapur's childhood in the early 2000's. Federal spending and the national debt continue to explode, to the point where the US Treasury is on the verge of insolvency. If it cannot meet its bond obligations, the American experiment is over--especially with China and Russia waiting in the wings.

This is a world that is maybe 10% different from ours, due largely to time and technology. While the companies and people in the story are fictional, pretty much everything else is real and current.

And that oughtta scare you.

## The Politics

Again, realistic to our world. Kroese doesn't mix metaphors or use euphemisms for Republicans and Democrats. There are definitely more collectivists than conservatives in power, and they control the culture even more than they do now.

As for the protagonists, the reader ends up cheering on the individualists who want to keep what they make. The enemy is the statist thief. We're treated to frequent monologues (though not so preachy) by characters who understand the mechanisms of the economic collapse, and how to lessen the impact that it has on those around them.

Many times this book shows itself to be an informative lecture on various topics like finance and public policy, and then it puts on a fake nose and glasses to carry on with the entertainment.

## Content Warning

"R" rating for language, and while there's some violence, it's not excessive or graphic. We see some deaths and some mobs. There are allusions and references to sensual scenes, but we're never "in the room" when it happens.

## Who is it for?

Personally I recommended it to a friend who's much more familiar with cryptocurrency and blockchain

than I am. What I know of these things comes from a series of Internet lectures, and while it all lines up with what I've heard, I'm sure someone who deals with it daily might have a different opinion on the details. Nevertheless if you've got any interest in crypto, finance, resisting government overreach, space navigation, or high-orbit mining, this book has plenty for you.

There's also a bit of "how to survive an economic collapse" to it, as Valerie takes her daughter Sophie across the country once the dollar falls apart. The third act of the book was perhaps the most tense, but instead of devolving into a blackpill narrative, the story remained hopeful against staggering odds.

Why read it?

Because it's highly relevant and informative. It takes a great deal of information that would otherwise be too dry to read, and wraps it up in these characters that are admirable, characters you root for and want to see win.

I'll admit it got my blood pressure up a little bit at times, only because I listened to it the same day that Russia invaded Ukraine and Biden announced we were throwing our hat into the ring. Everything happening in our economy today could easily be a prelude to Kroese's Mammon timeline, and that's not the happiest thought in the world. Hopefully Elon Musk starts roping space rocks soon...

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

In Karl Gallagher's *The Lost War*, an SCA troop is sucked into a fantasy world as one wizard's way to solve an orc problem.

But you really shouldn't piss off the humans.

The story

In the first book, we saw the emergence of magic just beginning to settle in among the folks of the SCA troop transported to a fantasy world where magic is common ...and so are orcs.

This book goes far deeper into the mechanics of magic. I'm trying to recall when the last time I saw magic being executed this practically. In the previous novel, a lot of time was spent on logistics and how things work. This novel centered around how magic worked. There's Chekov's gun, and then there's Checkov's SAW. There were even some uses of potential energy that read a little bit like old-school philosophy (IE: Ancient Philosophy). And some of it boils down to "Magic is weird."

But yeah, there's a lot of how things get done, only with magic. Call it "hard fantasy" if you must be picky, but it's interesting and readable for well over 30% of the book.

Then there were the elves. The mother. Flipping. Elves. Who are nasty, brutish and .... tall. The following exchange from the book sums it up rather nicely.

"It's an Elf."

"Don't call it that. We don't know anything about it. If you call it 'elf' just on its looks, you're making assumptions about its culture, morals, everything. That could bite us."



"I'm not going by his looks."

"What then?"

"The arrogance."

The book 1, the reader was made aware that our heroes were brought over to help with the orc problem -- the humans are the exterminators. Here, our heroes are told the "why," and then things become fun.

Once again, the moral of the story is "Don't screw with the humans."

About a third of the book is focused on magic and how it works. Twenty percent is on the elves. And the rest of the novel focuses on and gears up to The Big Battle.

Also .. yeah, I'm going to make one or two more comparisons to John Ringo. Why? Because of lines like "The reply that sprang to mind was It's my job to be an @\$\$\$hole. But this wasn't the army, he wasn't a sergeant." Then there's an entire scene where someone is counting coup, only with orcs... because infantry, apparently.

### The characters

I still enjoy how easily Karl does character.

Ignoring that some of the names are a tad on the nose ("Autocrat Sharpquill" is my favorite subtlety hammer), when Karl does character, he can do it in a few lines.

I especially like the head of the camp, "King Ironhelm." ("I played Othello and Richard the Third in front of a thousand people! I can keep a f\*\*\*ing poker face.")

I do enjoy the lines. Karl even gets in good coinage. Like "I'm a Metatheist. I don't believe in God, but I believe I should." I'm sorry, I just like the line.

And screaming "Cannae!" to order an encircling maneuver. That was fun.

I have one problem with The War Revealed ... there might not be a third book.

So buy book one and two, read them, review them, and make sure I get a book 3, damn it.

### The world

The world is vivid is well-drawn. It's not Tolkien-level deep, with the backstory on every root and tree branch, but one suspects that there might be an iceberg under that tip.

### The politics

The entire situation is "work together or die." This is less of a meritocracy, and more a "We don't care what you are or what you think, just do your damn job and try not to get anyone else killed."

You could called it based.

Content warning

Violence, implication of rape, and additional nightmare fuel.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who wants to see the "competency porn" or a John Ringo novel set in a fantasy world that is more treacherous than anything George RR Martin could have come up with.

Why read it?

This is a great fantasy military novel with tactics and fun characters.

Witchy Eye by D.J. Butler  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

An epic American fantasy saga of Biblical proportions

Imagine, dear reader, an alternate America where arcane Appalachian magic and religious revivals both grapple for converts to their cause. In the middle of it all, a teen girl learns the truth about her birth parents, that she's the heir to an Eden-esque empire, and now she has to navigate treacherous political waters with a new set of powers that she doesn't understand. Throw in a cast of varied and charismatic characters, and you have D.J. Butler's Witchy War saga.

The Story

Sarah Calhoun is an Appalachee farmer who likes to poke fun at the local "New Light" preachers whenever she and her family take their farm goods to market. At the start of this story, she ends up pissing off the wrong guy, who takes notice of a birth defect that Sarah often tries to hide: the eponymous witchy eye. She doesn't know why she has it, only that she always has, but this preacher seems to be very interested in it, in the worst way.

Soon Sarah is caught up in a struggle between two factions, one of which wants to control her, and the other of which wants to restore her to her birthright on a throne in Eden. She's got to learn fast or things will go permanently sideways for a lot of people.

While this may seem an overly common storyline, it looks tremendously different with the Biblical lore behind it, as well as the various interested parties that Butler introduces to the tale. More on that in a moment.

The Characters

Not only does Sarah find out that the New Light preachers want to capture her, she's adopted, and she's a triplet. Somewhere out there she has a brother and a sister. They each bear marks of powerful magic from their parents—in her case, the eye—that allow them to interact with the magical forces of the world they live in.

Sarah sets off to find her siblings with the help of her nephew Calvin who, thanks to Appalachee family trees, is roughly the same age she is (they're both mid-teens.) And once Calvin finds out she's not actu-

ally in the family tree, well, side-eye tiiiiiiiiiiiiime. But he doesn't make himself a nuisance with his new-found affections; he's useful and loyal, as well as a believer, which he'll need to be as he too learns more about the forces that want to capture Sarah.

They're both helped by Thalanes, a traveling monk who finds Sarah and explains her ancestry, the war between mortality and the spirit world, and the need to reunite her with her siblings to stave off a paranormal invasion into our world.

My personal favorite is the gentleman swordsman for hire, Sir William Johnston Lee, known to the Louisiana criminal element as "Bad Bill." He and Thalanes were part of the team that hid Sarah and the other children 15 years ago. Although he has debts to pay and a job to do, the moment he hears about Thalanes and Sarah, he saddles up to join the cause. He's a man beset by vices and temptations, a sinner constantly in the act of repentance, and I love seeing his spiritual victories alongside his temporal ones.

The main baddie is the Right Reverend Father Ezekiel Angleton and his henchman, Obadiah Dogsboddy—two names straight out of the Standard Guidebook For Villains. Angleton is the "New Light" preacher who's actually working for the dark powers who want to kidnap Sarah. Obadiah is the idiot brute who does his heavy lifting. Sarah and Calvin will have to deal with both of them in different ways.

## The World

Equal parts recognizable and distinct. This is a North America that refers to familiar places by different names— 'Pennsland' for Pennsylvania, for example. But the uniformity that we enjoy in our timeline doesn't quite exist; nothing was homogenized to the extent that it has been in the real world, each different culture has its stronghold and Butler shows that he did his homework in shaping it. You've got your English, French, Cajun, the Igbo and other African tribes, Native Americans, and some fantasy species besides.

Behind the curtain of it all, you've got angelic and spiritual powers vying for their own little piece of it all, and they exert their influence over the mortal realm as they play their game.

## The Politics

In-world only. Nothing "Current Year" in these pages.

## Content Warning

Butler presents the less-savory elements of a 19th-century America with prose and tact; sensitive subjects like sex and violence are dealt with in classical vernacular, and the profanity stays on the softer side of PG-13.

## Who is it for?

I always invoke Tolkien and Herbert for books of this scale, with worlds of detail pinning them up, details that enrich the story and reward the reader for multiple excursions through the pages. I've read WITCHY EYE three times and found this to be the case myself.

## Why read it?

For one, this epic fantasy trilogy is actually finished. A fourth book has been written, and if it sells enough, a second trilogy will conclude. Butler isn't going to George R. R. Rothfuss you on this one; he's doing the writer part, he just needs the reader part.

Second, it's an epic fantasy with the weight of biblical lore behind it, as Butler studied several real-world cultures, their languages (dead and alive), and their iterations of Judeo-Christianity to create something rich, vibrant, and spiritually moving.

You can pick up any number of 600-page fantasy doorstops that drag you through the swamp of overly explained worldbuilding, or you can pick up WITCHY EYE and find yourself in an epic fantasy world that is much more like our own than you might suspect.

I think I'm ready for a fourth reading, myself.

## Literary Criticism

The Wisdom of Walt Disney:  
The Themes, Ethics, and Ideas of His Greatest Films by David Breitenbeck  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Wisdom comes in many forms....

The Disney Corporation's spiral into bland, banal storytelling while pushing tired talking points on viewers is a sad sight indeed. What is there to like about Walt Disney, now that the House of Mouse has become the House of Mildewed Cheese? Plenty, if one knows where to look, as this collection of essays demonstrates.

In this short book, one will reconnect with the foundational films produced by Walt Disney himself. From Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to Sleeping Beauty, there is no way a reader will walk away from this book and see the movies described herein the same way again!

The story

A collection of essays written on a variety of early Disney movies, The Wisdom of Walt Disney explores not only the animated features that made the man and his company famous, but the live action films as well. From the breakout hit that was – and remains – Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to Song of the South, Old Yeller, and Bambi, each chapter offers penetrating insights into the stories that provided a nation suffering from the Great Depression and the specter of modern war with diversion and hope. This is particularly interesting since most of the live action films Disney created in his lifetime are ignored in favor of the animated ones.

In this collection a reader is brought through the films 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea as well as the aforementioned Old Yeller and Song of the South. The original Treasure Island and Swiss Family Robinson Disney films are discussed in detail as well, providing overviews of the language film has to use in place of the written word. A movie has to accomplish through visual presentation in a short amount

of time what a novel can achieve in a longer time frame and with more depth. Disney couldn't just slap together costumes and sets to go with a script that, necessarily, had to cut scenes and dialogue from the books he chose to adapt. He had to create scenes and costumes to emphasize the themes and ideas that were in the books, which he then had to transmit for a film-going audience.

None of this is to say that the animated films do not receive the same type of care. They manifestly did. Ever wonder how a children's film like *Bambi* could be so dark and leave such an impression of foreboding in viewers? What about the symbolism inherent in *Sleeping Beauty*? The core conflict between Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*? The strange yet mesmerizing madness of Captain Nemo in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*? What about the further messages embedded in *Cinderella*? Is there a theme and a message to the myriad animated tales in *Fantasia*, or is it a chaotic series of musical videos strung together for no reason?

Mr. Breitenbeck takes a reader on a swift, pleasant journey through these films and more to look at the mind of the man who created them. In the process, readers will find themselves experiencing – or re-experiencing, as the case may be – the quiet serenity and the simple joy of a good story well told.

## The characters

The characters are all Disney's, but they are not dissected within the essays. Rather, the author points out what made the characters in these films engaging on an instinctive level for the audience, allowing a reader and fan of Disney to appreciate them more. One will never look at Princess Aurora or the other cast members in *Sleeping Beauty* quite the same way. Even the largely silent characters in *Fantasia* are given a voice through these dissertations, making them more memorable and better understood than they might have been on a first or a millionth viewing of that beloved film.

## The world

Each world Disney created or brought to life is given time and attention. Again, these settings are not vivisected for the author's amusement. A reader is simultaneously transported to and shown the vibrant symbols that make the worlds of the movies turn. It is an enjoyable look at an era that, while it may be past, still has some gentle admonishments to provide for the present.

## The politics

There are no politics in this book. Only the timeless stories remain, to be enjoyed for themselves and reflected upon in peace.

## Content warning

There is absolutely nothing objectionable in this book.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Walt Disney and of the stories he transliterated for film will love this book. Anyone who has read the classics that he brought to the screen will find a new appreciation for them as well as for Mr. Disney's work. Those who wish to learn more about the craft of storytelling and fiction in general would be remiss in their education if they passed it by, while those who seek to learn the art of critique will be served well by reading it. Anyone interested in the history of film, or the history of American culture and the United States, will find this book enjoyable.

Why read it?

It is a serene, reflective, calming read. In this climate, that is recommendation enough!

# Prose Bono

Keywords: Help your readers find your book  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

digital marketing, discoverability, keyword-research, keywords, marketing, reader search strings, search-engine-optimization, SEO

This is part of the series of updates to the Navigating to Publication list. Last week, we covered setting up categories for your book, this week we'll give you some resources for setting up the most important factor in getting your book in front of readers who will enjoy it, and that is keywords. Categories are the big buckets. Keywords are what filter that search down to results the reader really wants.

>From the time the internet became a marketplace, search engine optimization (SEO) has been around and keywords have been the way the game was played. The rules change from time to time, as bots play with the algorithms trying to massage the wins and sales in their favor. However, keywords have always been the secret to real success. Amazon knows this, and it gives you fields to use to set up limited amounts of keywords. You see, seo doesn't actually work if you load up thousands of keywords. Sure, your product might pop up in every search, but that isn't the result the consumer wants, nor do you. Not really. Your product – your book – won't appeal to every reader. You want to pop up in front of the right sort of reader. So, keywords selected with care and discernment.

The best place to start is with Amazon itself, and their guidance on keywords. Pay particular attention to their keywords to avoid, as this can help you stay out of trouble, and will give you better results.

There's a tutorial at Kindlepreneur for keywords which I recommend, because if nothing else, it will get you thinking in the right directions. Yes, there's a paid service, and yes, once you are writing as a business it's worth investing in. Don't spend money until you can afford to, though, you can do this on a shoestring budget to start, and spend later when you start earning. But that's likely a whole different post. In the meantime, there are ways to do it manually and if you take the time to learn how and why keywords work, you'll be the better off for it.

Earlier this year, I did a walkthrough of what I was selecting for keywords and categories as I was publishing and you may find that helpful: The Fiddly Bits.



## Marketing by Cedar Sanderson <http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Ah, such a complex and fraught topic. You have a product – in this case, most likely a book – and you want to put it in front of potential purchasers. You can't make them buy it. You can pique their interest, and having hooked them, they will make their own decision. So. How to lure them closer and get them to bite? With fish, this is generally achieved with bait, be that a wriggling worm or a delicate and intricate 'fly' made of bits of feather to look like a real insect. A book isn't quite like that, is it?

In some ways, it is. You have to understand who you are going to sell to, in order to present the book in an appealing way. Study the market. What are people looking for? If you have the budget, buying K'lytics data and analyzing it. If not, just looking at the best sellers on Amazon – NOT the best selling list of things like in the newspapers, as they do not reflect what is actually selling well, they are more editorial selections no matter what they claim – will help you gain a better understanding. Don't do this just once. It will take time to see the patterns. In the meantime, be writing. Perhaps even be publishing, knowing that casting books out might not get an immediate catch – but unlike a fishing lure, your publications make up your backlist, so when you do get a reader, they can binge through all of your stuff. You will learn, with every book release, if you are paying attention and keeping notes. You can also learn from others, like those of us writing here, groups like the Writer Dojo on Facebook (the podcast, of course, although it is not focused as much on marketing as the hosts are traditionally published and don't necessarily go about it in the same way as Indie authors). There are other places, some better than others. Observe, ask questions, and keep in mind – this will take time. There is no get-rich-quick.

Casting out your bait can be as simple, and unpredictable, as word-of-mouth, which as Dorothy recently laid out, isn't an easy thing. It is the best thing, ultimately. All the other paths lead to that, in time. The more people talking about the book, the more interest, the more sales. You cannot force this. You can put the book in front of more people, through content marketing, and through advertising. Creating content takes time, but it can be done cheaply enough, the only real cost being your time – do not devalue this! – and it can be powerful over the years.

Advertising is paying to put your book in front of interested searchers for reading material. This seems like a simple concept. It can be deceptively so. You must be ready for this – a solid book cover, a hooky blurb – or it will be a waste of money. This short tutorial video is a great intro to how to set up Amazon ads for success. I have bought ads from YouTube creators – mixed success. That's more a branding thing. I have not dabbled with Facebook ads, and I suspect their time has passed if most people have the reaction I do to them, as they are filled more often than not with fake products or at least wildly mis-represented, and I don't want to paint my books with that brush. Your mileage may vary. The big ebook mailing lists are faltering, due to Amazon's changing algorithms. Some (BookBub) have gotten very expensive indeed, others are less expensive to break into. All work best with a book on sale\* and you should never use that as a promotion unless you have multiple books in a series you are trying to sell. Cross-promotion on other blogs can be a good push, although usually a small one, but that depends on the blogger and their audience. If it's writers, not so much. If it is readers who have learned to trust recommendations by that blogger, you'll see sales.

Organic growth takes time, and patience. Practicing the 'flick' of a cast is a necessity in fly fishing. Learning how to advertise is likely like this. On the other hand, setting a trotline for catfish requires knowing where they live, stinky bait, and a long lazy afternoon waiting for them to bite on. This is content marketing. Unlike fishing, though, where you pan-fry the fish and that's the end, the best way to

keep selling books? Consistently and regularly publishing stories your readers want to read. They will learn that this is the good stuff, tasty, and not only will they come back for more, they will tell their friends about it – sort of like putting out a birdfeeder and suddenly you have sparrows and doves and the squirrels! You are building a relationship with your readers, coaxing them into trusting you to give them enjoyable reading material. This is a slow process, and one that takes care to maintain. There is no easy way out. Make yourself discoverable, through links in the back of your books, a website that is clearly shown in search engines and is kept up-to-date, and some kind of online presence. Put in the time and effort.

\*free books are no longer a really effective lure for readers. There are so many of them, if you send out your book with hundreds of others in one of the big mailing lists, 'readers' will download them all, adding them to the thousands already in their hoard. They can't read those in their lifetime or ten more, so it's very little chance for your book, and sometimes the free-readers can't or won't pay for books, so converting the freebie into a backlist buy is also unlikely. A short-term free book can be useful, just not here in this context of a mega-giveaway newsletter.

~Finis~