

The R3F

Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

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

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by Caroline Furlong

FREE BOOKS

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Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

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

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

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

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

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

Simultaneous Times

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

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

Editorial

Are you an aspiring writer? Many authors wrote their first million words — the ones they wisely did not try to publish — by writing fan fiction, fiction based 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 privately to people, some of who may give you polite, useful advice.

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

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Novels

86--EIGHTY-SIX by Asato Asato
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What would a war with no humans look like? Depends on how you define “human.”

If something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is too good to be true. The Republic of San Magnolia has been locked in a war for nine years with the mechanical Legion – drones that fought for the destroyed Giadan Empire. In order to counteract this threat the Alba, the majority race in San Magnolia, created their own drones: the Juggernauts. They did this after they banished the Colorata, races who were non-Alba (that is, they didn’t have the silver hair or eyes of the Alba race) to the 86th Sector as traitors to the Republic. But don’t worry, everything is fine....

Only one young woman, promoted to Major despite her tender age, knows the propaganda is a lie. The Juggernauts are not drones. They are spider-type mechs designed to be piloted by the Colorata of the 86th Sector who are known only as “processors” or, more colloquially, the 86.

The Story

Major Vladilena “Lena” Milize is a Handler, a member of the Republic military who commands the Juggernauts in battle against the Legion. Her position is only one reason why she knows that the mechs are piloted by teens about her own age or younger. These pilots are known by numbers or, more infrequently, by earned names. For an Eighty-Six to be a “Name-Bearer,” that is, someone with a call sign, means he or she has lived and fought well enough to survive where most other Eighty-Six fall.

Reassigned to the handle the Spearhead Squadron, an elite unit of Name-Bearers, Lena makes contact with their leader, who bears the “Personal Name” of Undertaker. Also known as the Reaper among the other 86, his real name is Shinei “Shin” Nouzen, and he is the captain of the squadron. Shin and the rest of the squadron tolerate Lena’s nightly calls to talk to them, but they know something she does not: no Eighty-Six ever survives the battlefield. They either die in the 86th Sector or fighting the Legion. Her words and kindnesses make her feel better but ultimately mean nothing.

This matter comes to a head when Lena learns she has bought into some of the propaganda – specifically the part that says the 86 can earn their citizenship back by fighting in the war. In fact, they cannot, which means all her pretty promises of victory and attempts at kindness have been nothing but patronizing, empty words.

Ashamed of her earlier behavior, Lena starts trying to be a better person as a result of this revelation, surprising all of Spearhead. But none are more surprised than Shin, who turns out to have a very personal connection to Lena. When she was much younger, Lena’s father took her to view the battlefield. He was killed but she survived thanks to the help of a young man named Shourei “Rei” Nouzen: Shin’s older brother, who died sometime later.

But that does not mean he is at rest. The Legion are more than drones and many ghosts haunt the battlefield. One in particular holds sway in the eastern front...

...and he and Shin have a date with destiny.

The Characters

All of the characters are well-drawn; the book could easily be used to teach character writing in schools, as the skill Asato employs in presenting her protagonists and antagonists is superb. Lena shines as a naive, kind young woman who has to learn to put her money where her mouth is the hard way. Meanwhile, Shin's curt coldness hides a little boy's heart frozen in pain, with his mind on the very brink of insanity as a result. The rest of Spearhead Squadron come through as highly individualized characters, but many do not survive this massacre masquerading as a war.

Other Alba who lack Lena's drive also receive vivid characterization, though much of it is far less flattering than the heroine's, for obvious reasons. Her determinedly despairing "uncle," a friend of her father's, makes a particularly poignant impact as he tries to lure her to his position of hopelessness. It makes him all the more memorable, albeit not in a positive way.

The World

The world is bleak, given the setting is a corrupt republic sending millions of people to their death just based on their skin color. Alba citizens can pretend the war is far away as long as the 86 are fighting and dying but the truth is that their nation is already dead. The bright front they put on hides a death's head and only a few are willing to admit that inside the safe zones. It gets bleaker still when the Legion's deadly secret is revealed, making this one of the scarier dystopias written in recent memory.

Yet even with all that, there is hope. Faint hope, perhaps, but it is there. The finale of the book hints at the hope only explored later in the series.

Politics

No politics are present that do not relate to the story.

Content Warning

Beheading, death, dismemberment, brain scans being taken from the dead or dying, sexual exploitation, slavery, organ harvesting, and human experimentation are just some of the gruesome things discussed in this book. There are also moments such as peeking in at the girls while they're bathing or contacting a guy while he is in the shower, though these are far more lighthearted than the rest of the novel and help break up the otherwise bleak tone. It is not for little children, and you may have to talk to your teen before, after, or while they read the light novel.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes dystopias and wants a realistic one to chew on will want this book, while those looking at the next generation of human warfare will find value in it as well. Romance lovers who enjoyed *The Hunger Games* will find this light novel will scratch the same itch, though in a far different manner than Collins' trilogy did. Those who like anime or who watched the 86 – Eighty-Six anime will want to give it a try, too. History buffs will find the book hits the spot, and if one wants a novel to start conversations about true history with their teen or college age child, 86 – Eighty-Six should do the trick. Readers of horror will definitely want to get their hands on this book, as it has plenty of horror to spare!

Why buy it?

It is a good story with a happy ending after all the trauma and horror. The love story at the center keeps things from getting too dark and the series is thought-provoking while being entertaining. Why not buy it and give it a read?

Bookshops and Bonedust by Travis Baldree Review by Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It's time, once again, for a relaxing ride down Fantasy Lane with Travis Baldree. He refers to his latest release as *Bookshops and Bonedust* and, I have to say, it's a worthy prequel to his previous work, *Legends and Lattes*. In this latest release, our heroine, Viv the orc, is forced to take some time off to rehab a leg injury and comes across a new friend who owns (you guessed it) a bookshop.

The Viv of *Bookshops and Bonedust* is much younger and more action motivated than the older, retired (from the adventuring life at least) Viv of the original novel. She gets her wound in combat because she won't listen and stay where she's supposed to. She gets out too far out in front and gets herself surrounded because she won't listen to older, wiser people who have been there before. I like that though, because that's pretty much the standard text-book definition of "young orc." This is a Viv who still craves battle and loves the adrenaline rush that comes with it. I can still see enough of the Viv I know and love to recognize her, but she reminds me a little too much of me when I was a teenager and used to speed around the outside of the mall so I could hit the hill by the bank and catch air. (Thankfully, my mom doesn't read my blog so I'm safe revealing that here.)

This time, instead of former comrades looking for treasure, Viv's crew has a new target, a necromancer. The astute reader may believe that the "bonedust" reference comes from there, but I'll never tell.

Anyway...

Baldree knows his shtick and he knows his audience. *Bookshops and Bonedust* is nowhere near a carbon copy of *Legends and Lattes*, but it does contain a whole bunch of what made the first book a success; a relatable main character, a business to be built back from basically nothing and a supporting cast of stars with just enough of an outside threat to spice things up a bit. The type of business he uses this time just adds to the fun.

I don't care who you are or what you looking like, there are three types of readers in the world; the type who wants to own a bookshop, the kind who wants to be a librarian and the undecideds who want both (for the record, I'm number three) and Baldree taps into that desire here. Viv doesn't actually own the bookshop in question but she gets to spend the day there helping out and reading for free. It sounds like a good life to me.

If you've read the first one (and if you haven't your wrong. Hie thee off to Amazon and pick up your copy.) then you know that the central problem of the story is Viv and her attempt to open a coffee shop in a town that has never heard of coffee. She shows a surprising level of business skills for a person who had led an adventurer's life before opening her place. I hadn't thought about that before, but *Bookshops and Bonedust* is where she learns those business skills, slowly and by guessing mainly.

Fern, the owner of Thistleburr Booksellers (and why does the word Thistleburr remind me of

Dragonlance character Tasslehoff? I mean, other than that he'd definitely have "borrowed" some books from there.) is not doing as well as she might wish she was and Viv finds ways to help her out. It's a lot of fun, but it also lays the basis for what comes later the way a proper sequel should. Bookshops and Bonedust also reveals why Viv was in such a hurry to get pastries set up in her coffee shop later. I like that part.

There is a hint of a romance angle here, but it's a pretty relaxed one. When I think of romance literature I think of smut and there is none of that here. It's enough to make one's mind wander, but it's subtle enough that I would have absolutely no problem recommending Bookshops and Bonedust to my twelve year old daughter. Seriously, what's there is there but it fits with the relaxing theme of the book.

Being a cozy fantasy, there's not a whole lot of violence. That's not the point. Don't get me wrong. I've been known to read Warhammer novels. I don't have a problem with mass battles and extreme violence but this isn't that kind of book. There is, however, a bit. The story starts with the fight where Viv gets her wound and there is a bit of a dust up at the end of the book. It's well done and easy to follow but Baldree keeps things where they belong and manages to keep the feeling of this thing cozy regardless of what little bits of fighting jump out at you.

The majority of Bookshops and Bonedust is set in the town of Murk and it kind of feels like a cool little port town. You know, it's that one town you wish you had homebrewed for your Dungeons & Dragons campaign and didn't. It feels just right with the docks, and the inn and all of the other little businesses thrown in, right down to the pain in the butt town watch captain. (And, trust me, every town needs one of those, either to drag your players into a fight they don't want to defend the town or to be a thorn in their backside when they're just trying to mind their own business and buy some spell components.) Honestly, given the fact that Hasbro/Wizards allows others to profit by releasing D&D related content, I could see a module featuring Murk as its setting bringing in some decent loot. Seriously, if Baldree ever decides to start a D&D podcast set in one of his towns I'd love a chance to run a character there. I'm just sayin'...

The one thing I was hoping for and didn't get was Viv's first drink of coffee. Granted, it's not the town where Viv ordered her coffee from in the first book (the name of which I'm drawing a blank on, but it was a gnomish town that doesn't get much screen time but feels like it would be a lot of fun) but it still would have been nice to see our friendly neighborhood coffee fiend with fangs take her first sip.

I don't want to spoil too much, but there is something that happens in the book which leads me to believe there will be a sequel. I can't wait to read it, if so. If not, I'm going to go into my bedroom and pout and suck on my thumb. I might even chew the nail a bit. So, anyway, here's hoping.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Satchels

Burning Lamp by Amanda Quick (pseudonym for Jayne Ann Krentz) Review by Tom Feller

This is the eighth book in the author's Arcane Society series about an organization in Victorian London devoted to the study of the occult. It is also the second book in her Dreamlight trilogy, although I can gladly attest that while the ending is open-ended, it is not a cliff hanger. The title object, known as the "Dreamlamp", was invented by Nicholas Winters, one of the society's founders. His descendant Griffin Winters is afraid that he has inherited a curse that originated with Nicholas. The curse is that all of Nicholas's male descendants will develop multiple paranormal abilities and go mad. His parents were murdered when he was sixteen, and twenty years later, he has become one of London's leading crime

lords, although what crimes he commits is left unsaid. He is involved in neither the drug trade nor prostitution, and gambling is legal in this time and place. Griffin lives in a former abbey with his associates/bodyguards Delbert, Jed, and Leggert.

Adelaide Payne, a powerful psychic, actually possesses the Dreamlamp, and Winters asks for her help in avoiding the curse. They fall in love, of course. She had come into possession of the lamp at a young age. She was orphaned at fifteen and sold to a brothel where her first client, known as Mr. Smith, brought the Dreamlamp with him. Using her paranormal abilities, she managed to escape before losing her virginity and took the lamp with her to America, where she became rich as a fortune teller and wild west show performer. She returned to England 13 years later and became known as "The Widow" whose mission is freeing women from prostitution. It is a fun read.

Christmas In the Stars by Sarah A. Hoyt

Review by Pat Patterson

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

It's March, and I'm reviewing a collection of Christmas stories. Why? I don't even LIKE Hallmark movies, and I also don't like those songs and stories that tell us something schmaltzy and then ask "why can't we have Christmas all year 'round?"

I hope you will believe me when I say that there is no hidden agenda in this review. The reason I'm reviewing Christmas in March is because March is when I read the stories. Nothing more. Boring, I know, but there you have it.

Home Star. John is LOST IN SPACE, and on Christmas Eve, too. Back home, they will soon be opening presents; meanwhile, he is trying to figure out how long his supplies will last. The pesky AI which is largely responsible for getting him around the universe has posted him in an unknown area, and stubbornly refuses to do anything to resolve the problem. So, when his supplies run out, John will die. Don't think he's the sort to only be concerned for his own well-being, though; his mind is back with his family. His dad is still trying to find a way to live after the death of his life partner, and his nephews are trusting their Uncle John to find a new star to name after them. He is burdened by thinking of the new grief that will be coming their way, courtesy of his demise.

If only they could put a candle in the window, so he could find his way home.

Good Will to Men. Brax and Drav refused an obvious suicide mission, and headed for the hills, making them deserters. Three years later, they have a survivable situation, which is disrupted by the emergency landing of a craft not far away. Long-range observation provides evidence sufficient to persuade Drav that the newcomers are involved in enslaving children for sexual exploitation, but Brax isn't convinced. Drav's rush to take action has now resulted in his death, due to careless handling of a sword. Somehow, though, he speaks to Brax, who has no alternative but to listen.

On Christmas Day in the Morning. There is a reprehensible act of abandoning pets in the wilderness, performed by the self-centered who can no longer be disturbed by being responsible for their charges. This story is not about an abandoned puppy or kitty, but about a robot servant who has been replaced by a more capable unit. Not everyone agrees that freeing the older model was the right choice.

The Christmas Cat. Take the opening scene in John Wick 1; swap the dog for a cat; don't include the evil Russian gangster plotline. What you have left is a lovely little story of love transcending the separation that comes with death. Yes, it IS a miracle, but the kind that people can make happen. Even when it ISN'T December, this is a good read. Go for it.

Disgardium Books Two Through Twelve by Dan Sugralinov

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It's no longer very often I get carried away in a series and just can't put it down. I've gotten a bit jaded in my old age and being a book reviewer I try to skip around between authors and end up not coming back to a series I swore I was going to finish because not it's eight authors later and I've got a ninth to read and well...

You get the idea.

The fact remains that I love to get swept away by a series. I just spent an entire month reading Dan Sugralinov's Disgardium series. I loved every minute of it and I will get back into this one when the next books come out this su...

This s...

Thi...

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!
IT'S NOT FAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIR!!!!

I thought that this was a twelve book series. It's supposed to be a twelve book series. It said it was a twelve book series. It almost is a twelve book series. But...

But...

Book Twelve, appropriately titled Unity, got too long and it got split into three parts and now I have to wait till this summer for parts thirteen and fourteen. I'm gonna freak out here. I can't wait that long to find out how this thing ends.

I mean, it's not like it's my first time here. I've been following David Weber's Honorverse since the reign of Bush the Younger and I've had some fairly significant waits there. Don't get me started on how long I had to wait for the end of Jean M. Auel's Earth's Children or what I had to say about the last book afterward. But dude...

I thought this thing was going to end at twelve. I was prepared for the big denouement and it didn't come. I feel like I just went on the most awesomest date in the history of ever, go the girl to her front door, leaned in for a kiss and she was like, "Totes wanna kiss you but I gotta pee. Hang out here for a sec." and then took off and left me holding her purse. I mean, I know she'll be back but the suspense is killing me.

I reviewed the first book, Class A Threat, here. An awful lot has happened since then and most of it is only good in the sense of how entertaining it is. The main character, Alex Sheppard AKA Scyth - his character in the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game known as Disgardium, is one tough kid. And yes, I do mean kid. He starts the story as a fourteen year old and by the end of the twelfth book is only sixteen. At that age though, Alex is hardcore.

He does battle against everyone and everything in the game world of Disgardium and that's a game where the players have in game pain transferred into their real life bodies. He also faces massive challenges in the real world both from people who wish him harm and from those who wish to bribe him. He's an honest man though, and he manages to not fall by the wayside. I like this kid. He could date my daughters. Well, maybe my oldest. My youngest is only twelve so she's still a bit young.

Alex, as the name of the first book Class A Threat implies is a Threat in the game of Disgardium, meaning that he has a highly imbalanced power that can change the whole game. How that works/what it means in precise terms is a spoiler. Go read the books if you want to know. What it also means is that he has to hide his status to protect himself from others in the game who would kill his character in order to collect a bounty. It also endangers him in real life, as players and the Snowstorm, the creators of the game, can control his character and how he uses his powers if they can control him.

Alex is not, however, afraid to use his abilities as a Threat to treat himself to acquire some benefits in the game. He gains levels - a measure of how powerful his character is- at a breakneck pace. He brings in unbelievable amounts of in game money (gold) in the process and that's a big deal. In Sugralinov's world, anyone who has reached the age of majority (sixteen) and passed their citizenship exams can take their gold out of the game and covert it to phoenixes - real world money - and some get extremely rich in the process. With Alex's in game wealth, he can do exactly that IF he takes and passes his citizenship exams.

And I'm not going to tell you if he did or how it went if so. Read the books.

Alex also manages to use his in game wealth to hire a bunch of non-citizens to work for him in-game. Most of them are of legal age and can cash out a small amount of their gold monthly. For most of them, Disgardium is their only source of income. Alex does right by these people and does his best to take care of them both in and out of the game. He takes on more responsibility at the age of sixteen than most people do in their entire lives and he thrives while doing it. Of course, this causes problems in the real world as well. Not everyone can be trusted and not everyone who sells him out means him ill. The world is a big, confusing place for me at forty-seven and this is a kid with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The fact that he can keep moving forward says a lot about him as a person. The fact that I can keep reading and so easily suspend disbelief says a lot about Sugralinov as an author.

The world building here is impressive and leaves me a bit confused about Sugralinov's politics. There is enough here to anger members of both parties in the United States, but that's part of what makes it good. I slide back and forth with my reactions to what his characters think and do but they are always believable. Sugralinov appears to be a political writer with his own agenda and no one else's. Also, he doesn't harp on the politics for the most part.

The action sequences in the real world in the book are intense and fast paced. They make me wince at parts and at many points trying to figure out how Alex and friends were going to get out of what was thrown at them. At least one thing had me convinced that the rest of the stories were going to be written about ghosts but they got out of it alive and somewhat well-ish. At least alive.

His in-game action sequences are what really got me worked up though. I've played World of Warcraft and Everquest and have literal years invested in game time played. My WoW main had over eighteen months online all by himself. I haven't played in awhile, but Disgardium almost has me back into it. Alex/Scyth are involved in some of the most intense player versus player combat sequences imaginable. I've fought encounters in WoW and raided cities. I've never done anything that comes anywhere

near what happens in these books. I'd love to just see something like this happen on Twitch or something and I don't even watch Twitch. Alex and friends also do multiple instances and down multiple bosses for the first time ever. This guy has a gaming career that most players three times his age can't even dream of. These are probably the best parts of what would be an awesome series without them.

Disgardium is my new favorite LitRPG series. I can't wait for the last two books.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Rainbow Crystals

Apostle of the Sleeping Gods, The Destroying Plague, Resistance, Holy War, Path of Spirit, The Demonic Games, Enemy of the Inferno, Glory to the Dominion!, Clear Threat, Out of Play, Unity
Dan Sugralinov

Frank Herbert's *Dune: The Graphic Novel, Book 1*, by Frank Herbert Review by Thomas E. Simmons www.usd.edu/research-and-faculty/faculty-and-staff/tom-e-simmons

Dune, serialized in *Analog*, was first conceived as three shorter works. Chilton Books (the auto repair book publisher) took the consolidated tale, *Dune* (1965) to press. Initially, sales were dismal. Gradually, the book found an audience. Eventually, it became the most popular science fiction novel ever. Its sequels and prequels (comprising the Diverse) are legion. Adapting such an enormously popular work can be tricky. Denis Villeneuve's two-part film has succeeded where few others have.

A recently published three-part graphic novel adaptation adheres to Herbert's original triple division. This book, the first comics entry in said trilogy (titled *Dune*), covers the timespan through the Arrakis *coup* and Duke Leto's son's escape to a community of desert-dwelling Fremen. (The next two graphic novels are titled *Muad'dib* and *The Prophet*.)

According to the short preface (by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson), the intent was to stick closely to Brian's father Frank's source material: "We decided ... that this must be a definitive graphic novel treatment, a truly faithful adaptation of Frank Herbert's classic...." In other words, it's less an interpretation than a translation. "We wanted this to be pure *Dune* – chapter by chapter, scene for scene," they add.

That sort of pledge will comfort *Dune* fans. It's safe to assure fans that the canon will be unadulterated. It helps sell comics (and support the film franchise). But it doesn't necessarily presage an artistic effort. It recalls to mind the paperback "fotonovels" that peaked in the 1970s.

Original *Star Trek* episodes repeatedly received the fotonovel treatment. So did *Grease* and *Jaws* and other hit films. A fotonovel reader was assured that authentic dialogue placed within cartoon bubbles over film stills would recreate the experience of watching the film. Nothing would be added. Nothing subtracted. The fotonovels were exact, but they were tommyrot. Reading them was like watching the movie only much worse.

On the other hand, just because an adaptation, say a serial-graphic adaptation of fiction, is meticulous does not guarantee a fotonovel. Sometimes the result is quite good.

Robert Crumb's comic-book adaptation of *Genesis* is word-for-word, but it's creative, controversial, and fascinating. Tony Parker's 544-page comic book adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids*

Dream of Electric Sheep? (also word-for-word) is just brilliant. Simply because an adaptation imposes discipline on itself does not mandate the manufacture of a replicant (see what I did there?). Herbert and Anderson could not hope to replicate *Dune* dialogue word-for-word anyway. It's much too long. They necessarily edit and condense.

Still, I approached *Frank Herbert's Dune: The Graphic Novel, Book 1*, with trepidation, given its adapters' promise "to bring Frank Herbert's original novel to life in exactly the way he envisioned it." That sounds like a recipe for hogwash. If I want *Dune* in its unblemished state (and I often do), I re-read *Dune*. I don't need a graphic novel for that.

Many of the internet reviews of this graphic novel are by readers who couldn't finish the novel but loved the comic book format. They're not exactly ringing endorsements, although if the Illustrated Classics version of *Moby Dick* is what allows you to first experience Melville, you could do a lot worse. A whole lot worse. Take the *Goosebumps* franchise, for example. Please.

An adaptation, even by a great artist, can misfire. David Lynch, the first director to tackle *Dune*, is arguably the greatest living American director, and he met his match with Frank Herbert's material. *Dune* (1984), has its fans, but not many. Most deem it a failed enterprise. It stalled because (among other shortcomings) it utilized voiceovers to faithfully reproduce the novel's text. When Paul, telepathically ordered to approach the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother, thinks to himself, "She's using the voice!" it feels contrived and campy.

Ridley Scott's adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* can be faulted for the same missteps; the director's cut of *Blade Runner* (1987) – sans Harrison Ford's flat voiceovers – uses less to deliver more.

In this graphic novel adaptation of the first third of *Dune*, we get the same stiff internal dialogue (in the same scene as Lynch's attempt) but in the form of an inset box: Paul worries to himself: "Using the voice on me! Can't ... resist." It's tricky to portray exposition. It works in the novel, but translating into a visual medium is tough.

The first of the three-part graphic novel adaptation is well-executed and faithful. Despite the foregoing example, it avoids camp. It's precise.

Herbert's epic tale only really takes off in the next two parts of the novel. Perhaps the next two graphic novels in this three-part series will find some traction to give life to aspects of Herbert's great tale that to date have not been sufficiently examined. We'll see. Stay tuned.

Horus Rising by Dan Abnett
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

I have a confession to make. This is my Science Fiction and Fantasy Review blog. I've had it for eight whole years now. I like to consider myself an expert in all matters Science Fiction and Fantasy and, if you're not one, I can probably fool you into believing it, too. One of the reasons I say "fool" is that, before very recently, I had only a concept of the whole "grimdark" sub-genre. I mean, the name is pretty much self-explanatory but I hadn't actually read any of it for myself.

When considering what I should read to acquaint myself with such a sub-genre a pretty obvious candidate arose: The Warhammer 40k universe is the original grimdark universe and it is very easily availa-

ble, as long as you don't mind robbing a bank to get it. I mean, it's not as expensive as buying the minis, but I've never played the game. I just know what the books cost. But that led me to another problem: 40k is a freaking gargantuan universe. I mean, I've seen bit universes before. I'm a fan of the Four Horsemen Universe. I love pretty much any Dungeons & Dragons fiction, but I'm a bigger fan of Dragonlance than pretty much anything else and the amount of fiction in that universe alone can be just a bit daunting. Neither of those, both of those put together, don't come near the amount of fiction in the 40k universe. I didn't want to randomly select whatever. That's just not me, so I went researching.

In researching my choice of a starting point, the one constant suggestion was The Horus Heresy, but the one thing every person who made a list recommended not reading was also The Horus Heresy. Apparently, fifty-four books (plus, I gather, a few more anthologies) is too much for some of these lightweights. But not Jimbo. Oh, no. The 4HU is almost that size now, and Dragonlance is even bigger. BRING IT!

So, off I went in search of tasty treats to my local Amazon website and found the first book: Dan Abnett's Horus Rising. It wasn't hard to find. Type the name in, up it pops, there goes my money and BAM! I'm lost in space riding along with the feared Luna Wolves on their mission to make planet Sixty-Three Nineteen compliant with the edicts of the emperor.

What followed was a lot of fun. If you're as into giant space battles and armored troops charging face first into gunfire, you can't miss this book. If you look a little bit of political intrigue to spice things up you can't go wrong. If you look for the bond between brothers that have faced combat you're in the right place. I was carried along right from the beginning and finished the whole book in basically three days. It was amazing.

What I hadn't counted on was the way Horus Rising and its author, Dan Abnett, dealt with the moral implications of making war. There is a lot more to this book than its awesome action sequences. The Warmaster, the aforementioned Horus, has a collection of captains under him which form the "Mournival", a group of men which act as advisors and the collective conscience of the Luna Wolves. I was a bit surprised by this. It had an almost Japanese air to it, like an idealized samurai drama, only the code of the Legions is nowhere near the Code of Bushido. It's more like the warrior-philosopher thing, the feeling that the code makes things right and that it's what a warrior should live for.

The warriors, the Luna Wolves and their brothers in the other Legions, are dedicated to the truth as they see it. This is a philosophy of pure science. It is openly derogatory toward religion and I can't say I was all that happy with it. I'm a Christian, after all, and Christianity is no more welcome in the Legions or on Terra than any other religion. I can live with it though, because it's fictional. Still and all, it led to a bit of a villainous air to this story's heroes. I kind of like that though. Even the good guys aren't good. That's grimdark, right?

Missing from the first novel were the references I had gained from others. The Luna Wolves travel through space to fight a fierce enemy upon receiving a distress call but I don't remember any reference to "psykers" (assuming that I spelled that right) being burned alive. Clearly, there is more to this story and I need to keep reading, but I'm okay with that.

I've heard people wonder if it's possible to enjoy 40k fiction without playing the game. I can honestly say that I've never sat a 40k table and I've never read a single one of their rulebooks, but I loved Horus Rising. There is so much here. I don't feel like I've missed a single bit of background necessary to understand what's going on. I do feel like Abnett went out of his way to make sure he included what was

there, but he does it without making his world building overly obvious. Some would refer to this as "Heinleining" in the details and they're not wrong.

I have to admit that I have seen several posters with 40k troopers carrying swords and chainsaw swords alongside their guns. I always thought that was leaning heavily on the goofy side, but if you read *Horus Rising* it suddenly makes sense. These are troops that use their weapons effectively and their swords are no exception. If some of them seem to like sword work a little too much that's okay. I enjoyed that part of the story and it's not like they don't have other ways to combat the enemy when a sword isn't what's appropriate.

I'm forced to admit that I can't wait to get and read the sequel. It's my understanding that this is a shared universe, but I've read plenty of those (to include the 4HU and *Dragonlance*) and that just makes me enjoy a series more. There is something about reading a long series by a single author that I really enjoy, but a new voice keeps things fresh. I'll be headed to download *False Gods* soon. I can't wait.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Cracked Carapaces

The Icarus Job by Timothy Zahn
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What do you do when the assassin you're transporting is being hunted by the whole Spiral?

It starts with a bar fight – a rather one-sided one. Gregory Roarke has to dodge the blows of a bounty hunter named Oberon, who is angry at him because Gregory freed a couple of aliens he was planning to sell into slavery as gladiators. Luckily, Gregory has help from another bounty hunter, one Sebastian Trent. Trent hired him to distract Oberon so that he could bring the vehemently disliked bounty hunter in.

After that is done, Trent sits down to drink with Roarke and admits that he is also looking to hire Gregory to help him on a hijacking job. Since his bounty hunting license got reactivated, the job is one that should be in Roarke's wheelhouse. While Gregory is tempted by the offer, he ultimately turns it down, instead taking a call from mob enforcer Floyd. Formerly in the service of Luko Varsi, Floyd now serves his successor, Mr. Gaheen. Mr. Gaheen has a job for Gregory and Selene that requires them to talk to his own subordinate, one Mr. Chernov....

The Story

Floyd takes Gregory and Selene by a circuitous route to see Mr. Chernov, who has the details of Mr. Gaheen's proposition: if they take a passenger in his employ to a job, then he will give them a portal. Not just any portal, either – the portal he wishes to give them is a Gemini, one of two connected portals. It only has one partner and does not connect to the wider network.

Selene and Gregory take a look at the device to confirm that it is the real deal, but Gregory quickly realizes something important: the portal is the same one he saw the Patth take from under the Icarus Group's nose. Furthermore, Trent was talking about running a hijacking operation. Does that mean he stole this portal for Chernov? Or did Chernov get his hands on it some other way?

It almost doesn't matter, since they cannot allow this opportunity to pass. Despite the concern of the

admiral in charge of Icarus, Gregory takes the job from Chernov. It requires a trip back to the planet where he and Selene had to leave the Ruth, followed by a jaunt to another world to pick up their passenger, during which time Trent contacts Gregory again to see if he would be interested in that hijacking job. Suspicious of a trap, Roarke ignores the message.

Once he arrives to pick up the passenger, however, Gregory starts regretting agreeing to the mobster's deal. Floyd warned him that he wouldn't like it, and now Roarke knows why: the lovely lady they have to transport is named Piper, and she's an assassin. Meaning he and Selene have been called upon to be accessories after the fact to a murder. Only Piper isn't the woman who comes aboard the Ruth. That is a different woman named Nikki. Same job, same person hiring her, similar clothes.... But what is she hiding? And why does every bounty hunter in the Spiral suddenly want her, dead or alive?

The Characters

Gregory and Selene return in a more relaxed position this time, as they seek to unravel the puzzles that they have been handed without first being made prisoners aboard their own ship. Not only do they have more time to shine, this relatively quiet beginning gives them time to show off their intelligence in relaxing interludes. Dealing with an assassin who will shoot to kill if threatened and has a cold demeanor about her work means the duo are also on edge for an entirely different reason this time, as while they are not prisoners, the person they are dealing with is deadly.

Nikki herself is an interesting character. She is cold-blooded but not without honor. While she kills as a job, she only kills the target, not those close to him in some way; she considers such butchery contemptible. But being with two moral people like Gregory and Selene still manages to throw her for a loop, cracking her professional facade in ways she did not expect. This makes her much more intriguing than the average assassin presented so often in media these days.

The World

This time readers get an archaeological treasure hunt while the story builds upon the known bounty hunting and heretofore unseen assassin laws of the Icarus series. The criminal empire that Varsani ran receives more screen time, too, as it has started shifting and changing now that the boss is dead. Sometimes straight crime pays less well than crime with a more legitimate sheen. There is also some interesting speculation about just who built the strange portals and where they went, as well as why the original portal was set for one direction while the others were not. It is a mystery the heroes will have to solve if they want to get out of this mess alive!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

There are deaths but none are described graphically. There is a mention made of gladiatorial slavery, but other than that, nothing disturbing is in the book.

Who is it for?

Fans of Timothy Zahn who want a new material to read will, of course, want this novel, as will thriller fans. Anyone wishing for more worlds where archaeological expeditions are thoughtfully considered

and looked at in a creative light will also enjoy this book. Mystery enthusiasts and thriller fans will also like the story for the heroes' answers to various conundrums, including their creative way of getting out of an impromptu siege. In fact, if a reader is actively seeking heroes and heroines who think outside the box, then the entire Icarus series but particularly this book will be a must-read!

Why buy it?

It is creative, it is fun, and it takes a reader through a twisting web of possibilities without putting a single thread out of place. Who could resist purchasing a book that has so many good things in abundance?

Life Support by Tess Gerritsen Review by Tom Feller

What struck me most about this medical thriller is that Brant Hill, a continuing care retirement community like one my wife and I live in, is central to the story. However, the one described in this book is much more expensive. It is so expensive, in fact, that it can afford to have medical doctors on staff while we only have registered nurses. The chief medical officer Dr. Carl Wallenberg, however, is not a specialist in geriatrics. Instead, he is an endocrinologist well known in the geriatrics field for using growth hormones to extend and improve the quality of human life. Brant Hill provides him with an abundant number of volunteers to participate in the human trials of his latest anti-aging protocols. His research is so advanced that I think the author crossed the line into science fiction. There are negative side effects, of course.

The protagonist is Toby Harper, a 34 year old female emergency room doctor in a Boston suburb. Never married, she lives alone with her mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's. Toby has to employ a baby sitter when she is working, which is usually the graveyard shift. One night they admit a naked elderly man who displays the symptoms of dementia. While the staff is dealing with another emergency, he manages to slip away. They did manage to identify him, however, and discover that he was a resident of Brant Hill. A few weeks later another resident of Brant Hill is admitted, also displaying the symptoms of dementia. He passes away after a week. Concerned that there may be an unknown toxin at the facility, Toby insists on an autopsy. It is performed by Deputy Medical Examiner Dr. David Dvorak, a good-looking divorced 45 years old man with a fourteen year old son. The ME becomes Toby's love interest. He discovers that the second man died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), a rare neurological disease for which the symptoms resemble dementia. Another story line involves a pregnant sixteen-year old prostitute, and it eventually merges with the CJD one. This is a very compelling story that is hard to put down, although the ending felt a little rushed.

Light Unto Another World by Yakov Merkin Review by Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What would you do, if you were transported to another world?

Soldiers have to be ready to improvise, to face changing threats and chaotic situations without panicking or being driven by their emotions. This ethos serves well on the battlefield and in civilian life, but it has its limits.

Thus, when Uriel Makkis is pulled through a mysterious portal to another world, he does not panic. But he does realize there is no easy way out, and that he has several disadvantages, one of which is lack of ammunition. Nevertheless, he is here for a reason, and he intends to see it through to the end.

The story

Arriving at base to prepare for two weeks of training, Uriel is looking forward to spending time in the field with his tank crew. Until he is yanked through a portal into a new world. Not long after, Uriel saves two women from goblins.

The women thank Uriel for his help and the young man strikes up a friendship with the demi-human, Kirala. They take him to the nearest town, where he learns that the goblin menace has been growing but that the military has no apparent interest in eradicating it. Uriel also discovers that he is the only human in the village - a fact that tantalizes readers but matters little to the protagonist himself. He decides to help the locals with the goblin threat before going to the capital to retrieve his sword and learn more about the reason he was summoned,

Merkin makes some nice changes to the Isekai formula. After falling through the portal, with no obvious way home, Uriel decides his best course of action is to shoulder his gear and start walking - a welcome respite from the expected episode of pure panic which many portal fantasies leave their heroes to experience. There is no language barrier, but that makes the adventure flow more easily.

Uriel takes his time leaving the village, allowing Merkin time to introduce the world. Isekai typically prefer to skip to the plot but this tweak to the formula allows Uriel to make friends naturally at the same time he learns more about this world through observation. That gives him the chance to gain the nagging feeling something more sinister is going on. Something no one really knows about – or which they would prefer not to discuss.

The characters

Uriel Makkis is a man of action in a situation that does not allow action to be taken often. So being transported to another world where decisive engagement is not only necessary but makes an actual difference is extremely satisfying for him. Unlike isekai protagonists left wondering what they should or should not do next, panicking at the thought of never returning home, Uriel takes one day at a time and refuses to let anxiety win. His practicality, curiosity, ingenuity, and willingness to do what is right are refreshing, not to mention enjoyable.

Kirala, the young demi-human mage whom Uriel saves when he arrives in this new world, is a well-drawn and sweet girl who may be a touch starstruck by the new Sword of Light. Nevertheless, she proves to have mettle, following him into combat and demonstrating her competency as well as her strength. The fact that he has someone kind who is genuinely concerned about him means Kirala's presence is a balm for both the reader and Uriel.

The world

Picture *The Rising of the Shield Hero* or another isekai (portal fantasy) with Biblical overtones, add a healthy dose of common sense from the protagonist, and you have the general idea of *Light Unto Another World, Vol. 1*'s setting. Merkin doesn't drop readers in with no idea what is going on nor give information dumps throughout the narrative. The story flows naturally, sharing information as Uriel learns or guesses it, so that the audience is never left wondering or wandering.

The politics

Uriel makes mention of politics on Earth that annoy him but these are brief and used primarily for comparison to the politics he is dealing with in this new world. Beyond these, there are no political arguments within the story.

Content warning

None. There is no objectionable content in this book. It is very PG friendly.

Who is it for?

Young readers looking for a fun adventure in another world. Parents who want to find such a story with a Judeo-Christian perspective for their children to read will discover that this novel satisfies that requirement elegantly. Those tired of modern isekai conventions will cheer this tale, which takes a more mature view of the tropes that have become ingrained in the genre. Fantasy readers of all ages will find this book entertaining, and the idea of a knight who carries an M4 into battle will likely intrigue them as well.

Why read it?

It's a good book with good characters on the adventure of a lifetime. Why not pick it up and give it a read?

Main Street, DOA by Declan Finn
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Sean can't go anywhere without blowing something up.

What do you do after you stopped an alien invasion, ended a civil war, deposed a dictator, helped unite most of the galaxy? You take a vacation, right? That's what you and I would do.

For Sean Ryan and his White Ops team, that doesn't really fit their style. However, when their new boss, Calinn orders them to take some downtime, the crew finds themselves on Yisden, a planet-sized amusement park. Of course, Sean can't go anywhere without blowing something up.

The story

The galaxy is safe from the threat of the Anima, the Renar have been spared a lengthy civil war (and had a new valley installed), and President Douglas Wills is in hiding. You would think that Sean Ryan and White Ops would be able to settle down and begin training future generations of Rangers.

That's certainly what they thought until Sean inadvertently snarks his way into an unwanted trip to an overgrown amusement park.

The team begrudgingly goes along with it, expecting the whole thing to be an exercise in controlling their more violent impulses, impulses that are tested repeatedly until they discover that the park is not

what it seems. In fact, it's under the control of one William Smythe, head of security for former president Wills and he has plans for the planet and its many, many tourists.

In the meantime, Father Healy of the Holy Order of St. Patrick is putting together a team of his own, a team made of former White Ops members and others on a par with Ryan and his associates.

The characters

While it's a big galaxy out there, Declan Finn's Main Street DOA stays mostly confined to the amusement park.

If the idea of a planet-wide park controlled by a sociopathic genius sounds nuts to you, I can assure you that you have no idea. Just imagine what could be done with genetically engineered dinosaurs, undead pirates, and superheroes programmed to fight and be able to take on massive damage. All of that is just for starters.

If nothing else, Finn shows that when the situation calls for it he is more than willing to lean into the crazy. The result is an absurd amount of mayhem and fun.

The world

How does a team of accomplished killers relax? What's more, what if they are the kind of killer that takes glee in being the fist of justice sent to punish the wicked? They fall in love and argue with robots of course.

Following on the heels of Politics Kills, Sean and Kami begin exploring their relationship as do other members of the team, even the less normally than affectionate Renar on White Ops. If you thought they were dangerous before having significant others to care about, you're right. But give Sean Ryan a woman to love and... well, let's just say getting in his way would be a bad idea.

There are others as well. Like John, the unassuming best assassin in the galaxy who is trying to clean up a loose end with the last name of Wills.

Of course, there is a new bad guy. William Smythe is one of the remaining loyalists to President Wills, the human villain of the last two books. He's also a loyalist who wants to get paid. To make sure that happens, the brilliant psychopath has concocted a plan to use Yisden and every tourist on the planet as hostages. He also has a nasty history with one of the additions to White Ops, a history that is going to get someone killed.

The politics

The title of the previous book is Politics Kills. One of the themes in this one is that politics is petty and vicious. Yet, usually all it takes to take down the bad guys is good men and women willing to stand up to them. If you can bring an arsenal to help, it's just more fun.

Content warning

I suppose if you don't like watching Ryan and company smacking down krakens, dragons, and animatronic superheroes in the service of the good, true, and beautiful then this might not be for you.

Who is it for?

If you liked Reacher but wish the guy had more personality and stood for something other than his own interests, this is definitely your book. Or you can think of it as Flash Gordon meets Die Hard 2. Or maybe Die Hard 4, the one where John McClane beats up an F-35 and kills a helicopter with a car. It's that level of insane kick-assery.

Why read it?

Did you read the above paragraph? If that sounds good, what the hell are you waiting for?

One October Night: 31 Illustrations and Their Stories by Sam Robb
Illustrations by Cedar Sanderson
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

(Listen folks, I'm going lazy on this one. I will grant you that I don't do many anthology posts, but that's because they take too long to write. I usually do a brief review of each story. Here's the problem: It's Sunday night. My Lions are playing in less than two hours and have a decent chance to win their first playoff game in three decades. Last time they won one, I was a high school kid, working at the local grocery store and I missed the game because I was at work. The one review per story dog isn't going to hunt and I need to get this done tonight. So buckle up and put your hardhat on, sweetheart because we're on a trip trying to do this thing justice in less than the two and half hours I average for reviewing an anthology. No, that's not a typo.)

When Cedar Sanderson wandered by my email one day inquiring as to whether I would do a review for her latest work I was intrigued. Cedar is, after all, one hell of a writer and artist and I've reviewed a ton of her stuff already. That's because I enjoy it. She's really good at what she does. So of course I perked up my ears when she mentioned the word "experimental." Cedar works in a lab. I was excited. I thought maybe she used her powers of science and finally conjured up the evil spirits from the Nethervoid of the Shadowwalker and we were going to utilize the power of The Dark to level cities and invent popcorn that won't burn in the microwave or something...

Right.

Like popcorn that won't burn in the microwave will ever actually exist.

But then she told me that she had a project with a guy named Sam Robb, whose work I am new to reading, and that it was really cool. I had known that Cedar had participated in Inktober (it's a challenge graphic artists take to do a drawing every day in October) and I was watching her post stuff on Facebook. What I hadn't known was that Sam Robb was doing a story every day based on whatever she drew and also the prompts (provided by fans. The process is explained in the book.) that she used to draw them. That sounded just crazy enough to work.

Which, admittedly was not assured. I mean, Klinger thought that wearing dresses was crazy enough to get him discharged, right?

Fortunately though, it did work. It really works well. It worked so well that I managed to read all of *One October Night: 31 Illustrations and Their Stories* in one freaking day. I don't read entire anthologies in a day ever. They don't flow like novels and it's usually pretty hard to focus on the book when it keeps changing up on me like that. Here's the thing: These stories were so good it didn't matter.

There is a whole ton of stuff here. At least one story was heavily influenced by HP Lovecraft and written in the same vein as "Call of Cthulhu." It was great. There was another about a girl who got an epic birthday present even if it wasn't quite what she expected. It had me chuckling though, even if her father wasn't, at least at first. I've got to admit too, I've never quite seen death portrayed as a wolf before. Although, there was a bit of Pandora (from Greek myth, not the music app) mixed in there as well.

There is also a story known as "Coffee Failure". I don't want to spoil the story, but any picture with the word "decaf" written on the side of a coffee mug clearly deserves the name. I mean, seriously, who drinks decaffeinated anything? Ok, so I bought a box of decaffeinated tea bags once but that's because they looked like the good stuff.

Of course, small planets need saving too, and that's the theme of one of the other stories. That's a crazy one because it sounds like the main character is almost bored by what he discovers before he works it out and finds out what's important. Seriously, it's clearly not meant as a Christmas movie but it has a sort of *Miracle on 34th Street* feel to it in a way. Kinda. Then there's the coffee shop story. That's touching. It's also cool because it involves a girl who reads books. Who doesn't love girls who read books?

Anyway...

Cedar's work is excellent as always. She has a definite style about her that really needs a proper art critic to describe it. I hate to disappoint you all, but this is Jimbo's and we don't have a proper art critic. I guess her defining things are a kind of sweeping strokes with lines that don't always finish. If you don't believe me about the lines try coloring one of her line drawings in *Recolor*. One click and half the picture is brown. I was kinda mad about that one because those baby dragons on that bookcase needed some color and..

I'm off topic again. That wasn't even one of the pics from *One October Night*.

I'm not doing her work just because I can't. Just know that if you're in to science fiction and, especially, fantasy artwork Cedar is worth checking out. I know she does covers and that's terrific but I almost like her daily stuff more. There's something about the simpleness of the work that just appeals.

I did take an art history class once. You'd think I'd be better at this. It's not my fault. Words like "Byzantine" and "Baroque" just don't work here.

Whatever. Listen. There's a lot more to this book than what I'm showing here.

I never, ever in my life even think about discussing forewords in my reviews.

However...

Both Robb and Sanderson did forewords for *One October Night* and they talked a bit about the process of how they conceived the stories and images in the book. I almost skipped them (GASP!) but I'm glad I didn't. Reading those forewords changed the way I read the book. I didn't have access to the prompts,

obviously, but I did stop at each pic (they precede the story they inspired) and try to figure out what the story was going to be about. I was wrong every time, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I got enjoyment out of trying to guess what was coming. It was like one of those assignments I had in school where I had to write about what happened next in the book we were reading except that it didn't suck and I didn't have to hide that I knew what was coming because I had gotten bored and read ahead. It was great.

So seriously, give this one a try. I'd like to see someone else try something like this in the future because I feel like this is the type of thing that could become a thoroughly enjoyable trend if we could get enough people signed on to do it. It's that much fun.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Sacks of Roc Food

Pack Dynamics by Julie Frost
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Urban Fantasy Medical Thriller, now with more gunfire.

After going through Julie Frost's short story in the Planetary: Venus anthology, I wanted to see more of where her characters came from.

I didn't see this rabbit hole coming.

The Story

Before our story begins, Private Investigator Ben Lockwood was an Army Ranger, held POW in Afghanistan for seven months, being tortured in new and creative ways that I wonder if the cave dwellers were smart enough to ever actually use. Now that he's back stateside, he works a desk job at the PI firm owned by his mother's girlfriend. It's a nice boring desk job. His latest case is a nice boring investigation into possible pharmaceutical espionage.

So why does page one see Ben being kidnapped and tortured for information on the case? Good question.

Ben's client is Alex Jarrett, a CEO of Big Pharma that specializes in nanotechnology medications and treatments. But, he will not deal with the supernatural, so vampires and werewolves are just plain out of luck. This includes his nearest competitor, a werewolf married to a vampire, who may be dying—for good.

Yes, we have science fiction medical technology, werewolves and vampires.

For the record, no, I haven't spoiled anything. This doesn't even get us to page 50 of a nearly 300 page novel.

This boils down to being an urban fantasy medical thriller, now with more gunfire. And kidnappings. And torture. Seriously, this feels like if Jim Butcher had a Harry Dresden book set in a hospital, yet the building was still standing when it was all over, and not on fire.

It is strange at how much of this book is character driven. It's hard to tell given how much is going on. I'm not even certain that this book even thought about slowing down at any point. But don't worry, if it did, like a Flash Gordon serial, something else happens.

The Characters

Pack Dynamics boils down to four main characters and two antagonists, who are also mysteriously well-drawn. I almost expect the villains of this piece to have their own prequel novel at some point.

PI and veteran Ben Lockwood ... this poor bastard cannot get a break. He has a raging case of PTSD that's "getting better" when this book hits him. Afghanis stuck him with heroine, got him addicted, and then forced him into cold turkey withdrawal, leaving him with needles as his biggest trigger. Guess who is this novel's central guinea pig? But he keeps bouncing back.

Ben's girlfriend/coworker Janni Miller is one of the few things keeping Ben together. She's your standard short person

Alex Jarrett is Tony Stark if he went into nano-pharmaceuticals instead of military hardware. Megan Graham is Pepper Potts if she were a werewolf in her spare time—both needing to manage her boss while trying to care too much for him.

The World

While this is a traditional "secret history" sort of world, an open secret among certain classes. Society won't acknowledge it, the Supernaturals won't openly talk about it,

Surprisingly, much of the action takes place around one estate and a few outlier buildings scatter throughout the LA area.

Politics

Not applicable.

Content Warning

Torture.

Lots of torture.

It's all in flashbacks, so I don't think it goes much about PG-13. Or maybe I'm just jaded.

Who is this for?

If you liked James White's Sector General, but wanted medical mysteries in fantasy, this is for you. Especially if you don't mind a lot of Jim Butcher-level character development.

Why buy it?

Because it was a fun novel that you can enjoy even if just to appreciate the character byplay. The story is tight, the characters are fun, and I guarantee you will want to see what happens next. The writing was

smart the premise was unique. And I want her to write more in this series, so please buy more so she'll write other novels.

Sword's Edge by L. S. King
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Sci-fi/fantasy with an excellent twist!

A girl can never be a Ranger. This is the lesson that Tamissa "Tam's" father has driven home to her for fifteen years, even as he has trained her in the ways and laws of being a Ranger. The only child of Valdhor, a Ranger Chief, Tam has lived with him in a cottage all her life but Valdhor has never found her good enough to keep up with him or to be worthy of being a Ranger.

Today, however, things change. Alcandhor, Thane of the Rangers, is coming to talk to his older brother. Treachery is afoot and shadows move, not only among the nobles, either. The Rangers may be compromised. He has need of a spy whom none will suspect, a spy Trained as a Ranger. In short, Alcandhor needs his niece. He needs Tam.

Unfortunately for him, she has no idea that they are family.

The Story

Having been told all her life that she will never live up to her father's or the Rangers' standards, Tam is flummoxed when she reaches their capitol with her father and the Thane, where she is not only Presented to their conclave, but Confirmed as a Ranger. What surprises her more, though, is that her father is not – as he had told her – the last of his line. The whole conclave is made up of her extended family! She has family who love her and see more in her than her father will admit.

But this happiness is short-lived, as Alcandhor must take her to the capitol of their nation, Lairdton. Lairdton is home to the Laird (Lord), the leader of their country. Alcandhor fears several nobles plot to overthrow him; he wants Tam to discover the ringleaders of this conspiracy against the Laird and his heir, the Aethling. Since she is a girl, they will never suspect her as a Ranger spy. Tam accomplishes this but learns that her uncle has moved too late. Tam watches the conspirators confront the Laird and tell him that they have the Aethling. The traitors promise to release the prince unharmed if the Laird will step down and allow them to rule their provinces as they see fit.

But the Laird knows their proposition is a flat out lie and refuses. Tam has a front row seat to his murder, then has to fight to escape when the conspirators try to hide the Laird's body. Meanwhile, Valdhor has gotten news of the Aethling's capture along with the location where he is held to Alcandhor. When the brothers and their escort are ambushed soon after, however, Tam arrives in time to watch her father die. Alcandhor is left seriously wounded, and since she is closest, he gives her this command: go to the Forbidden Peninsula. Find the Aethling. Get him back alive.

Tam will have to face her own doubts about her abilities if she hopes to not only accomplish the mission, but to save her world. That is just the start of the mysteries that surround her, for Tam has secrets even she does not know she possesses. When these come to light the world of Sword's Edge will never be the same.

The Characters

For all her skills in fighting, wilderness survival, and tracking, Tam is sorely lacking in knowing anything about being female. Alcandhor literally has to tell her how to dress as a mountain girl, turning beet red when he finds she cannot put on her own female undergarments, since she has only worn men's clothes. Tam has no idea when boys her own age or a little older are sexually interested in her or what sexual innuendo and threats even mean. Her uncle is not wrong to label her an ingenue, at least in this area, one that may be more dangerous than all the fighting she must do in the novel!

Alcandhor is a loving father and uncle stuck in an unenviable position. Foresight prophecies are given weight of law, so when Alcandhor's father told him not to interfere with his older brother's raising of Tam based on foresight, the Thane did as he was told. Once he learns just how little love Valdhor showed his daughter, how much he didn't teach her just because she was a girl, he both wants to pound his older brother and beat his own head on a wall for not interfering earlier.

Side characters in the novel all jump vividly to life, from tradition-bound Valdhor to Loki-like prankster and good friend Marcalan. Even the villains attempting to wrest control of the government for themselves have personality. Only Valdhor seems to be a bit one-note, but his death scene is nonetheless moving as it hints at the person hiding behind this intent silence.

The World

While presented primarily as a fantasy world, the location is soon revealed to be a planet where an alien species known as the Enaisi put mankind. These Enaisi also interbred with humans, which is why the Rangers often have darker than average skin and golden eyes, as well as beyond-human abilities. There is also a knowledge of genetics, portals, and space that would be out of place in a straight fantasy setting but which works well here. The world abides by a Medieval style of governance and technology, but knowledge of higher technology exists, even if the species that brought it is considered elvish by many and godly by some.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

There are murders and executions. None are especially graphic but they are adequately sketched out and leave the imagination to fill in the blanks. A few frank but delicate discussions of sex and female attire are also part of the narrative.

Who is it for?

Young readers looking to sink their teeth into a good story would be remiss not to buy this one, and those who love deep world building – or good world building in general – will definitely want it. Fantasy and sci-fi lovers will enjoy this novel wholeheartedly, as will those who like coming-of-age tales. People who would like to read more stories with heroes and heroines who have extended family will want this book. Those who seek some honest consideration of a world under a Medieval-style government chafing as change comes, but is threatened to come too quickly, will enjoy it as well. Anyone looking for a female-led book that does not browbeat men will also want this book, too, as Tam never thinks herself better than the men around her. In fact, she often thinks the opposite, and thus she tries to prove herself their equal...even when that is impossible.

Why buy it?

It's The Lord of the Rings in space. The book will keep a reader seated all day or awake all night. A novel that will do this is rare, so why not buy it?

Storm Surge by Blaine Lee Pardoe
Review by Declan Finn
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

In Splashdown, the aliens arrived.

In Riptides, the war began in earnest.

In Storm Surge, the humans strike back.

The alien horde that have been dubbed “the Fish” are still swarming from the world’s oceans. Every city on a shoreline is under siege. The water itself are the siege lines.

But humans are creative, persistence predators. And these aliens aren’t the only ones who know how to adapt.

It’s time for a Fish Fry.

The Story

If you’ve been reading the previous volumes, you know the story. But the short version is that aliens have been hiding in Earth’s oceans for at least five years, building an army under the sea. Without any warning, the aliens have struck, everywhere all at once. They seem to be on an extermination campaign—kill all humans, take their cities, and dismantle the cities. Without a name, they have been simply dubbed “the Fish.”

Meanwhile, in the background, the world’s biggest businessman, Jay Drake, is making moves of his own. Everyone else is fighting for humanity. He’s working on world domination.

Unfortunately, the aliens are always developing more tricks to throw at humanity. And the next trick is going to be a big one.

Again, Blaine Pardoe has managed to balance a collection of characters in such a way that it’s not confusing or disorienting. And it’s fun when several main characters finally intersect, with some interesting results.

The Characters

One of the reasons to read Splashdown, Riptides and Storm Surge back-to-back is for the character arcs of practically everyone.

Major Ashton Slade, once just a lowly DIA analyst, is now the brains behind the war, and he most of the nerds in his own personal fishbowl in the desert, developing the emerging technologies for the war. And you know there are nerds involved when there are multiple applications for chainsaw bayonets.

Reid Porter, side character in book one, became a medal of honor winner in book two. He doesn't think he's earned his medal, but he's going to—preferably, without the accompanying postmortem AAR. The army wanted him to be Audie Murphy, and he's going to live up to standards.

Captain Titus Hill, our submarine commander from book one, is about to get a new boat, and he's looking forward to ramming it down the Fish's throats.

Jay Drake is evil Tony Stark, only he can't be bothered with getting his hands dirty. He's a manipulative SOB who prefers to lurk in the shadows. He makes Lex Luthor look positively civil.

Anton Colton, who had started this series as a drug dealer and veteran, has emerged as a leader of his own militia against the Fish incursion. His ragtag band of warriors are a collection of those who simply had nowhere else to go—the homeless, the destitute, the prostitute, the criminal, and those who simple just don't want to leave their homes.

Cassidy Chen is newly orphaned in the Fish attack on Los Angeles. On her own, she has reached Colton's militia. And this teenager is quickly getting the hang of “payback.” She's gone from little girl lost to rigging claymore mines.

Dana Blaze, of course, just drives me crazy. Especially because she's doing the job of an actual war correspondent, but is concerned that if she doesn't look the part, no one will believe she's doing it. Things like that. There are even moments where it looks like she may even become a real human being.

The World

This world is heavily detailed and sketched out. And it continues to have evolved, as humanity has a learning curve against the Fish. The Fish have their own learning curve, and it is going to be a doozy.

While this is a military science fiction novel (because, well, aliens) this is still very heavy on the techno-thriller aspects as new Fish frying technologies emerge. There is a surprising amount of tech dropped on the audience, but it's never a data dump. It's all presented to the reader as it is presented to the other characters.

Every block of chapters is broken up with “cycles” that give readers snapshots of other parts of the world. And it's nice to see that no matter what happens, no matter what alien horrors come from beyond the stars ... you still Do Not F*** With The Gurkhas.

The Politics.

None, really. I'm sure you can find them if you wanted. And if you think that having the military as the heroes leans immediately to one side. Sure, if you're an environmental psychopath who thinks that Gaia demands that humanity must be exterminated, this is not the book for you. Otherwise, have at it.

Content warning.

It's War. POWs are tortured and experimented on. There isn't much in the way of a language warning. The violence usually isn't graphic. There is nothing on par with the opening of Saving Private Ryan. Overall, it tends to be PG-13.

Who is it for?

Take the complex technothriller of Tom Clancy, the solid writing of an early David Weber, with the genius of Timothy Zahn, and the scope of a John Ringo war, you have this book. If you like any of those folks, you should be reading this series.

Why Buy It?

It's an epic military science fiction that's on par with the best of anything else in the genre, sci-fi or military sci-fi.

TIER 1000 by Jason Anspach and Doc Spears
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A training camp novel

A soldier in the American Special Forces dies during a war with China in the near future. When he wakes up in the afterlife, he learns he's been selected by ancient gods of war to join an elite combat squad called the Ultimates, in preparation for a world-ending threat.

The Story

While this concept is not altogether unfamiliar, I really liked this particular take on it. TIER 1000 is the kind of book that I've branded as a "training camp novel," where the protagonist and the reader are simultaneously walked through an initiation into a larger world, specifically via the mechanism of a school or boot camp. At times this can slow the story down, as Ragnar goes through exercise after exercise, because the outcome is kind of a given--he'll learn something minor, and then hit the barracks for some sleep.

But I liked that he wasn't idle, that he eagerly wanted to peel back the curtain of the afterlife and see what this whole mess was really about. I also liked the addition of death-gods and war-gods from mythologies around the world, which established the potential for lots of exploration in the future. Very cool world and a satisfying first step into it.

The old gods of Earth may have stopped dealing with humanity at large, but they haven't gone away. Maybe they're gods, maybe they're hyper-advanced mortals, maybe they're space aliens. The reader goes on a journey of discovery alongside the protagonist, Ragnar Beck, whose soul was plucked from death and dropped in Valhalla, where he gets to prepare for the war to end all wars.

In Valhalla, Ragnar meets a lot of other warriors from different times and places in Earth's history, most of whom are from his past (downtime.) There are very few people from "uptime," (Ragnar's future), leading him to believe that time passes differently in Valhalla, and that some kind of world-ending threat is coming to Earth in the very near future.

It'll be up to men like Ragnar and his company to train with different weapons and different tech from around the world, shaping themselves into the most fluid fighting force ever known. Such is the demand of their new god, Mars Augustus, the literal Roman god of war.

But not all is as Ragnar has been told. As he struggles to trust his superiors, he'll make even stronger alliances with his new friends, and before long he'll have to decide who he actually trusts in this strange new existence.

The Characters

Ragnar Beck, a Special Forces soldier from the somewhat-near future, who dies in war with a new Chinese nation. He's the first-person main character, and we experience most of this book through his eyes.

Will Jensen was a soldier in World War 1 under Blackjack Pershing. He becomes Ragnar's first friend in Valhalla.

Mars Augustus is the Roman god of war, and he's in charge in Valhalla.

Michael and Gabriel, the angels from the Bible, are also in Valhalla. They serve under Mars.

Then there's Mictlantehcutli, the Aztec god of death, who just might be up to something really sinister...

The World

Our world, another generation or two down the road. The United States and China no longer exist by those names or their present banners, but they're still engaged in the same conflict over culture and resources, which has now become all-out war.

The Politics

Like today, plus a few more decades of Mandatory Sensitivity and Forced Equity stuff pushed onto us by our moral superiors. The Armed Forces have been fully neutered by political and cultural forces that demand "inclusivity" at the expense of combat efficacy, right up to the moment when the free Western world is attacked by an emboldened China that expects little resistance. It's under these conditions that Ragnar initially dies, and he has plenty to say about it.

That said, the perspectives put forth in this book have very little to do with politics at all. Anspach and Sears have some observations to make about the Armed Forces from a practical standpoint, and whether you're right- or left-wing will heavily influence how you receive those observations.

Content Warning

Nothing above a mid-range PG-13 as far as language is concerned. Abundant combat violence, though the most grotesque examples are reserved for the final battle against the main enemy.

Who is it for?

This is definitely a book for fans of military science-fiction, as it's heavy on details about a soldier's mindset, coming from a family of soldiers, and living a soldier's life. Anspach and Sears also dedicate a fair amount of page space to describing the mechanics of Mars' organization, and the day-to-day life of someone who was resurrected to fight in an eternal war.

Why read it?

Initially I asked myself the same question. I've read plenty of "training camp" novels where the reader spends a lot of time following the MC around so the author can explain everything to them in context. I sensed that this might be the same thing, but I was relieved at how light the treatment was. Sure you've got some ropes to learn, and you get to do it while enjoying plenty of dynamic movement along the way.

Ultimately I kept reading because there was a good balance between answering old questions and revealing new mysteries, letting the reader see this well-developed plot and well-developed world reveal themselves in good time. In addition to being a good genre piece, I think TIER 1000 has a lot of interesting subtext about the need to be prepared for war, no matter who you are.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering by L. Jagi Lamplighter
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Here we go again.

If you haven't seen the other books of Rachel Griffin ... this is a very long story. And I have other reviews that you're going to want to look at.

Book 1: The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin

Book 2: The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel

Book 3: Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dream Land

Book 4: Awful Truth about Forgetting

By this point, we should all realize that I'm still reading them at book five, so it's a good assumption that this book, too, was awesome, and you should read it.

For those of you who are not up to speed on this series: we have a magical girl from a magical family at a magical boarding school with her magical friends. Her best friends include how a Dickens character should look after going through the foster care system (less like Oliver Twist, more like the Artful Dodger), a magical Australian with a magical stick up her ass, and Victor von Doom -- I mean Vladimir von Dread.

Imagine if JK Rowling had done a deep dive and actually built a world from the ground up, and every character had a full range of emotions and conflicting thoughts and agendas, while there are actual stakes that amounted to more than just the existence of the school, but existence itself.

That's the Rachel Griffin novels.

Also, it's so nice to find a fantasy novel that includes other magic traditions and mythology outside of the UK and continental Europe. If there's a myth or lore or type of fantasy magic that Jagi hasn't thrown in yet, I haven't heard of them.

I'm going to avoid posting the description of the book here for one simple reason: It spoils events in the second half of the book, something I've found jarring since as long as I can recall.

The story

When Book 5 opens, Rachel's school, Roanoke Academy, has a problem: the local wild fey are loose. The wizards were supposed to keep the local wild fey psychopath under lock and key. But now it's escaped, and the local fey no longer need to adhere to their bargain. If the Heer is not imprisoned again, and the fey put back in their place, Roanoke Academy will close.

One must admire Jagi's restraint with book five. It opens a whole two days after the end of book 4 — usually the next book will open the same day as the last book ended, giving Terry Goodkind a run for his money on "the morning after" opening of *The Sword of Truth*. And there is so much blowback here, yikes.

The pace is only slightly more relaxed than usual. The opening threat wasn't lethal, which is about as relaxed as the book gets. The rest of the novel has an undercurrent of multiple threats, spread out along the length of the book. The pacing hurries along at a quick gallop, slowing here and there for world and character building. And then get out of a way before you get run over. As I've said in previous reviews, if Rachel's days go any faster, she'll have to change her name to Jack Bauer. Hunting fey on the Roanoke Academy grounds makes for a wonderful subplot. It ties in nicely to the second subplot later on.

No, I'm not sure if there is a main plot anywhere here. There are basically two major subplots jammed together, but they fit so well you don't care that the only main thread is the series plot, not a main plot for the novel.

We have Ankh-Morpork style football, a magical government that makes sense, sports team names that don't (show of hands: who wants your sports team to be named *The Maenads?*), Jim Butcher Scooby-Doo jokes, and students armed with a Bowie knife... which is an odd complaint given that they're all armed with wands, but seriously, who let that guy have a Bowie knife? Heck, Jagi even spells out the difference between the Seelie and the Unseelie... which I don't even think Harry Dresden explained.

It's so nice to see that in a world of magic, hydrogen peroxide is still used to remove blood from clothing.

Oh yes, and Death? Death shows up. And of course, HE SPEAKS IN ALL CAPS. BECAUSE OF COURSE HE DOES, TERRY PRATCHETT HAS PROVEN IT TO BE SO.

The characters

What can one say about the book that I haven't already in prior reviews? Her brother is Lord Peter, her family estate is in Dartmoor — they have a local beast that is not specifically referred to as a dog, a hound, or even a Great Dane. Rachel's family use microexpressions both to read people and to mislead them.

There are problems, of course. Mostly with some of the characters being ... themselves. At least one magical princess needs to be smothered with a magical pillow; then they issue her a bodyguard with Omega beams. Rachel's best friend (of her own age) might be one kid who needs mild sedatives for everyone else's safety ... or he need to learn restraint, perhaps with a butterfly net.

I think the problems of the book can all be summed up as, well, high school is one big problem.

Rachel also has flaws ... largely in that she has to stop reading classic romance novels; when she starts thinking romance, the narrative voice goes into prose so purple, I swear the text color changes. And she is such a kid. Despite saving the world enough times that even the adults listen to her when she says there is a problem, Rachel has very definite ideas of what should happen. She has this idea that she should have a womanly figure ... at 14. (pardon me while I head desk).

And then her PTSD kicks in, because really, after the skeleton baby incident, we should be worried if she didn't have PTSD.

Also, seriously, in a world where magic is a day to day thing, you'd think someone would have taught them to be really REALLY careful, and very specific, about the wishes one makes.

But you can say one thing about their characters flaws -- these people characters have characters to actually develop, which is more than I can say for certain other books. Heck, there are some characters in this series who I didn't know they had characters to develop.

The world

I have often noted in my review of Chuck Dixon's time travel action books that he will not only go into world building, but will build three worlds at once: the present, the past, and either another part of the past, or part of the future.

Jagi is dealing with a multiverse, so she not only builds the world we're reading, but worlds that other people have been evacuated from. Forget 6-dimensional chess, she's literally doing multi-dimensional world building.

Line up every mythology known to man on a dartboard. Throw a dart to a random section. Odds are, that dart will hit on a mythology that Jagi has built into these novels.

The politics

This book is not politically on the right. Philosophically, definitely, but politically ... the local politics are very local. But consider that everyone is armed with a deadly weapon, God is an active physical presence (and makes for an adorable mini-lion) and while there are some shades of gray, there are whole swaths of black and white.

Content warning

The Lord of the Rings films are rated for "fantasy violence." That sounds about right.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who wanted more Harry Potter ... or more from Harry Potter. It's in the same genre, but this is so much better.

Why read it?

Because it's just plain fun.

Year of the Unicorn by Andre Norton
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The war is over, but the price to end it must still be paid....

The war with Alizon is over. High Hallack – the western continent of the Witch World – is finally free. With the loss of the alien Kolder’s machines, the men of the Dales of High Hallack put their unified forces to good use, driving the Hounds of Alizon back across the ocean. In spite of the damage wrought by years of war, the Dales belong to Dalesmen once again.

But victory comes with a price. Pushed to the limits of their strength, the Dalesmen made a pact with the mysterious Were Riders. Able to assume the form of animals, the Were Riders agreed to help the Dalesmen on one condition: When the war ended, they would be provided thirteen brides. For there are no female Were Riders, and if the “Pack” is to survive, they need mates.

When one of the prospective wives-to-be refuses to accept her assigned marriage, another girl sees the opportunity of a lifetime. But will her choice bring good fortune, or a fate worse than death?

The story

The heroine of the novel, Gillan, begins the story working in an Abbey of the Flame in Norsdale. Run by the Dames (nuns), the Abbey served as a shelter for refugees from various Dales during the war. Having come across the sea as a captive of the Hounds of Alizon, Gillan was rescued by a nobleman named Lord Furlo. He and his wife, Lady Freeza, fostered her until the conflict began. Furlo died in the war and the strain of fleeing to Norsdale, coupled with the loss of her husband, cost Freeza her life.

From that day to this Gillan has remained at the Abbey. While grateful for their protection she has also begun to chafe at the confining routine of the cloister. It is a good life, but not the one she desires. So when guests arrive at the Abbey to collect a pair of young noblewomen to fulfill the bargain with the Were Riders, Gillan takes notice.

One of the women chosen, Marimme, becomes hysterical at the idea of marrying a man who may or may not be human. The Were Riders’ magic allows them to shift between human and animal; no one among the Dalesmen knows for certain whether they are human, animal, or some mixture of the two. Thus, Marimme has good reason for her fit of panic.

Unfortunately for her, she meets the requirements the Riders set: She is of an age to wed, has no blemish or illness, and is quite pretty. Moreover, her uncle is the man tasked with delivering the twelve and one brides to the Throat of the Hawk, the place where the Were Riders await their women. A nobleman of no mean intelligence, he has political ambitions which Marimme may have helped to further, but the fact that they need brides for the Were Riders has put those plans to flight. Marimme’s screaming fails to move him; it simply embarrasses him.

It does, however, give Gillan an idea. Marimme has no stomach for the unknown – send her to the Were Riders, and she will likely die of fright before she even arrives. Gillan, on the other hand, has no family and no future in the Dales. She uses a sleeping potion to knock out Marimme and takes the girl’s

place, setting off with the other women to the Throat of the Hawk. By the time her deception is discovered, sending her back is not an option, and there is no time to seek a replacement.

At the Throat of the Hawk, the women select their husbands. Gillan chooses Herrel, the youngest Were Rider and the only half-blood in the group. Realizing his new wife can see through the magic he and his fellows use, Herrel cautions her against revealing this fact. Due to his half-blood status, he is considered the weakest of the Were Riders, some of whom will stop at nothing to hurt him – even if they have to go through Gillan to do it!

Will the newlyweds survive the journey to the Were Riders home? Or will the Pack – and their own misunderstandings – tear them apart forever?

The characters

By far, Gillan and Herrel are the most interesting characters in the narrative. Unaware of her Witch heritage and what it means, Gillan nonetheless has all the willpower and tenacity of her people. She chooses Herrel freely and despite the misfortunes that befall them, she does not waver in her determination to remain by her husband's side.

For his part, Herrel is every inch the knightly beast. Berated and abused for most of his life by the majority of the Pack, he holds a very low opinion of himself. That being said, he will not stand by and let his wife be mistreated or taken from him. It is one matter if she chooses to leave him of her own free will, but those who try to drive them apart will find they have bitten off more than they can chew.

Among the side characters in the novel, the one who has the most to do with the couple is Lord Hyron. Leader of the Pack, Hyron's animal form is a white stallion. He holds firmly to the laws of his people and does not play favorites, even with his own son. Detestable as he may be, you have to respect the fact that he knows how to lead and will not back down from a position he decides to take.

The world

With characteristic aplomb, Andre Norton builds the continent of High Hallack. Subsequent novels in the Witch World series would explore this part of the world and its lore further, but Year of the Unicorn is undoubtedly one of the best places to enter the continent. The monsters, ancient ruins, and wild landscapes that may or may not exist in the mortal plane of the Witch World are all presented with a deft touch to draw readers into the story.

The politics

Beyond a few references to female empowerment that are fairly banal by modern standards, no politics appear in this book.

Content warning

There is a case of wife-stealing and body/soul splitting, as well as discussions of rape, but those are probably the worst things to happen in the entire novel.

Who is it for?

Fantasy lovers, Andre Norton fans, and anyone who likes retellings of Beauty and the Beast. Ms. Norton cited that story as the inspiration for Year of the Unicorn, and this rendition of the original fairy tale will be quite satisfactory. Romance readers will enjoy the love that blossoms between Herrel and Gilan, cheering them on while booing their enemies as the two fight all attempts to separate them. There is also enough action and adventure to keep a reader guessing, wondering what will happen next, while hoping there is a way to get out of it so the hero and heroine can have their happily-ever-after.

Why read it?

It is a beautiful romance in a fantastic setting written by the Grande Dame of Science Fiction and Fantasy herself. How could anyone resist purchasing it?

Literary Criticism

Why Aren't Men Reading? Why Are People Reading Less?
Literary Criticism by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Perhaps these are the wrong questions....

Quite some time ago, this tweet from Publisher's Weekly was making the rounds in writers' circles. It led to this article over at Dazed Digital, which had the provocative title, "Why don't straight men read novels?"

The subtitle was the equally provoking:

"Men often read non-fiction books in the name of self-improvement – but many are reluctant to pick up works of fiction."

We here at Upstream responded accordingly in the Twitter/X thread, but this lament that Dazed Digital published and which Publisher's Weekly broadcast is hardly new. Various outlets have decried the decline of reading or the loss of a "book loving culture" over the last decade or more.

Although plenty of these cries revolve around a general loss of interest in reading among children (as they simultaneously state that reading to children unfairly advantages them), more focus on the male demographic's apparent lack of interest in fiction. When they do so it is always presented in an unflattering way by suggesting that men only read "gore."

Since any number of the books reviewed here at Upstream are written by men and just as many of our readership are men, we know this broad declamation misses the point entirely. Men and women read different types of fiction and non-fiction, whether the women in charge like it or not.

As Ms. Hogarth says in her tweet, linked above:

“What I object to is women (right now controlling the tradpub bubble) saying that men don't read, when the truth is men are reading, just not in a way visible to women in tradpub. That's just offensive to me from a [sic] "observing reality accurately" standpoint. It's not "men aren't reading," it's "men aren't reading the books we have statistics for, that we're mostly writing to our own tastes anyway.””

Various surveys back up Ms. Hogarth's assertion as she is not the only author to notice that men prefer certain genres to those that women typically read (though she is not one of those to sneer at this sex-linked trait). Other writers have made their own surveys to determine who likes which genre more, and some groups have surveyed their own followers to discover how many are men and how many are women. Many do not like these results and state that women are marginalized by so-called “girly covers,” neglecting in the process the fact that authors in traditional publishing have no control over what type of cover their publisher gives them (an advantage many independent authors do possess).

Furthermore, of course, this whining ignores the fact that men and women simply prefer different genres. There is no way in which to force one sex to enjoy the genre that they find boring. Not without causing the great harm that occurs thereby, at least.

It is worth noting that not all of the surveys linked above even agree on which genres are the preference of which sex. In some surveys, the sexes are almost even in their engagement with one particular genre, whereas others have one sex ahead of the other in preferring a type of tale. This may be due to sample size, as many of these people are surveying their own readers. Statista's website may have a slightly more realistic view, but one must still account for the fact that the respondents may have misunderstood their questions based on how they were phrased, or they didn't tell the truth because they distrusted the people calling them by phone to ask about their reading habits.

Furthermore, one of the items that these articles on men “not reading” overlook is that boys are reading less as well, mostly because they cannot find books they like to read. It has been widely reported that children in schools cannot read or cannot read well, even those attending college. The reasons for this range from the present and ongoing poly-anti scholastic resistance to proven methods of teaching, to declaring some children “mentally deficient and unteachable,” to outright malpractice on the part of curriculum writers and teachers. The dire straits of the three Rs are well known. Not only is this loss preventable among students, the greater issue is that this loss means fewer people, particularly young people, are reading for pleasure.

But as noted in the Scholastic survey cited in Psychology Today, what is being produced for children and particularly boys to read by traditional publishers really isn't encouraging them to continue the practice.

Most news outlets and researchers like to blame smartphones, but when you can get porn in school or on your phone, what is the big difference? At least on your smartphone, the porn you see is what you choose to view, not what the school decided to feed you today.

People wonder and worry about why children are reading less but they seem unwilling to dig into the real reasons why they are reading less. While parents are willing to fight to get discouraging books out of schools, they are generally deprived of any good idea on where to turn to find better content that their children will want to read.

It's not a lack of empathy on boys' and men's part that makes them unwilling to read – it is the publishers' and many writers' refusal to produce material for the male half of the human race to read.

The sexes like what they like from the start, and there is nothing wrong with that, no matter what some will claim. The problems we are confronting run deeper than even lack of time to read: men are reading less because most of what traditional publishing is producing for them to read is either geared toward women or is intended to degrade men. It is also intended to degrade boys, as any perusal of presently-on-offer YA novels or middle grade novels will show a shopper, if they check the blurbs. Most of the books focus on female leads, relegating men or boys to supporting roles where they are abused, corrected, or could just as easily be replaced by a girl, while giving all the glory to the female characters – particularly if the female characters enter into combat.

The general dereliction of duty in teaching children how to read means that not only does the task become a chore for most of them, but to get past that barrier or learn to love reading in spite of it, children are left with either actual porn to read or stories that show those children a twisted vision of the world around them. If adults won't read it, why should anyone expect children or teens to bother?

This is the part of independent authorship no one knows about or recognizes, including conservative outlets like the Daily Wire. Matt Walsh can make movies like *What is a Woman?* and *Am I Racist?* that may aid in revealing the hypocrisy of absurd, academic-induced trends that have hopefully reached its zenith, but these films do not replace the trash that present-day audiences must wade through.

Chris Rufo and others lament conservatives' "inability" to create, but what have he and other conservatives actually created to counter the rot we have to surf through on a daily basis? *Am I Racist?* is doing well, but it is not going to beat entertainment like *Deadpool* and *Wolverine*, or *The Boy and the Heron*, or any other good movie that manages to squeak past the liberal censors of Hollywood's nightmare factory.

The Daily Wire and other like-minded conservative outlets' issue is that, rather than creating, they take the Left's tactic of "propagandize everything" and run it counter to them. That is fighting back, yes, but it is not a creative endeavor. It may be effective in the short term, as much of politics may be, and it might have some historical value in the future for educational purposes. But it is not creating stories for the screen.

It is not what we at Upstream Reviews are trying to do, either with our own books or those books we review and promote. What true creatives on the right do is write stories following the universal, time-honored understanding of the craft of writing that the Left has done its best to erase. Like teachers bringing phonics back to the classroom, we are less concerned with making countersigns to the bad and poorly produced stories of the Left and more interested in showing that what the past has taught us works, while the destructive actions and nature of the Left do not.

Matt Walsh is a good satirist and a good documentary maker. He is, however, not a good storyteller. If he worked a little at studying the techniques of story craft, which the left has done its best to bury over the past sixty plus years, then he would probably improve his future creative enterprises. But as long as he adheres to the flawed pattern which he received from the Left, who cut out the connections that make the whole story work so those reading the pattern would fail, he is going to continue to disappoint as a storyteller even if he rises as an expert satirist.

The same is true for Rufo and those who claim "the right cannot create," as well as those who claim "men don't read because they have no empathy" or other associated drivel. What standards are each camp using to make these claims? The right cannot create? According to what criteria do you judge this to be true? We know the Left has absolutely mangled standards where they have not destroyed them. That being the case, why would you use their metrics for anything? Isn't the entire point of *What Is a*

Woman? and Am I Racist? to produce evidence of just how badly the Left has wrecked the objective measurements Western civilization utilizes? If that is not the point of these films, then what IS the point?

So “men don’t read.” What? According to whose standards do they “lack empathy”? What metrics are you using to measure that statement by? “Men don’t read” bodice rippers? Harlequin romance? They lack empathy for women who read these types of genres? Are you sure the female characters in these genres have a healthy sense of empathy? There are women who doubt that the female characters in these works have any good sense at all, let alone empathy.

Do men lack empathy for the latest political autobiography churned out and stacked up on the box store floor? How does one measure men’s lack of interest in reading or their “lack of empathy”? What standards are being used? Does it just mean that “Men don’t read what I want them to read”? Or “Men don’t read what I like to read”? Or perhaps “Men won’t read my latest bodice ripper”? Do men “lack empathy” because they don’t want to read Jane Austen’s books? If one is a female author and men are not in her target audience, why would they WANT to read the book? A female author is trying to sell her book(s) to other women....

Isn’t she?

If one is writing strictly for women and a small number of men, then the majority of male readers are not in the “niche” and, furthermore, they will not enter it. You can scream and rail at them all you like, even teach them to read poorly so that they never want to crack open a book again, but you will always fail to make them like what you enjoy writing and/or reading.

If, however, you want to appeal to a wider audience that includes a commensurate number of men and women, maybe you need to adjust your focus to attract greater male readership.

That is, at the end of the day, the real issue. A great many publishers are interested in abusing their readership like a narcissistic spouse, claiming they are being abandoned by readers. These publishers then claim they did nothing wrong. Except these publishers have been actively driving readers away. The publisher’s misdeeds are either actively ignored, or hidden via “gaslighting,” as shown in the resistance against parents protesting pornographic books in schools and in those who use the juvenile claim that men “lack empathy.” Erin Boyd notes this fits a world run by a de facto matriarchy and, with the general failure seen from schools to publishing, it seems all too reasonable to guess that the “matriarchy” is on its way out the door.

What will come after? That depends on what happens once the current fashions have been flushed out of the culture. “Men don’t read,” “the right can’t create,” “children aren’t reading because they have smartphones” are all the current zeitgeist, but they are wearing their welcome out as quickly as a fever would with the human body. The problem with what the spirit of the age offers is not only that it promises much but delivers nothing, it does so that it may feed on your despair. As Chesterton noted, the “nameless sin” (despair) prefers to remain unnamed. That gives it more power than it would otherwise possess.

So do not abandon all hope, ye who enter here. Take a quick look through our backlog of book reviews and see what you can buy or recommend that might help reignite someone’s spark of passion for a good story. The Daily Wire has the means of promoting good works by conservatives but won’t notice us. They can’t notice us, because to acknowledge the books we review would collapse their business

model. The Daily Wire exists by claiming there are no other right-of-center creators, so the audience is trapped with what they give them.

You noticed us. You're reading this article and/or subscribed here. Share our site around. Let's give the spirit of the age a good swift kick...

...and prove that men do read, phones are not the main issue, and conservatives CAN create. People just need the skills to read and write, as well as something worth reading and writing about. Go forth, and share! To paraphrase the song, let's light a candle even though it's harder than cursing the dark. Lighting a candle is more productive, and production hurts. It is how you know it is working.

So let's get to work. Grab the gas can and some matches, and light up the dark.

~Finis~