

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

Fiction

- 2 ... A Beautiful Friendship by David Weber ... Review by Jim McCoy
4 ... A Nation Interrupted: An Alternate History Novel by Kevin McDonald ...
Review by Jim McCoy
6 ... An Alien Heat by Michael Moorcock ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier
6 ... The Chosen One's Assistant: Never Meet Your Heroes by Kimber Grey ...
Review by Jim McCoy...
8 ... Dwarves of Ice Cloak, Books 1-4 by A. Trae McMaken Review by Jim McCoy
9 ... The Futurological Congress by Stanislaw Lem ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier
10 ... Into the Real by Ringo and Lydia Sherrer ... Review by Declan Finn
12 ... Let Sleeping Gods Lie, by David J. West ... Review by JE Tabor
14 ... Message for the Devil: A King Roger V Adventure by Jason McDonald
and Stormy McDonald ... Review by Jim McDonald
16 ... Murtagh by Christopher Paolini ... Review by Mindy Hunt
19 ... The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and High
Adventure by William Goldman ... Review by Jim McCoy
21 ... The Romanov Rescue by Tom Kratman, Justin Watson, and Kacey Ezell ...
Review by Chris Nuttall
23 ... Space Pirates of Andromeda by John C. Wright ... Review by Daniel M. Bensen
25 ... The Stepford Wives by Ira Levin ... Review by Jean-Paul Garnier
25 ... Tales Yet Unsung by Denton Salle ... Review by Becky Jones
27 ... Tenure by Blaine Lee Pardoe and Mike Baron ... Review by Declan Finn
28 ... The Wizard's Way by H.P. Holo and Jacob Holo ... Review by Caroline Furlong

Literary Criticism

- 31 ... Fiction: What is it good for? by Cedar Sanderson

FREE BOOKS

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

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

Become the Hunted
Not In Our Stars
The Captive’s Rank
The Universal Prey
The Praesidium of Archive
The Empire’s Legacy
Voyage of the Planetlayer
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

So I pose a riddle: Are Tom Clancy's books science fiction?

I would say that, for the most part, they are. They extrapolate to near-future events with near-future technology that might not happen, like Birkenhead's *The Great War of 1938* or Orwell's *1984*. As many American readers do not appreciate, life in 1984's England is not entirely different from life in World War 2 and 1948 England. In this issue we review Pardoe and Baron's *Tenure*, yet another near-future dystopia.

Near-future SF seems fond of dystopias.

Next issue, we are trying a different format.

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

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

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

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Novels

A Beautiful Friendship by David Weber

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

All of this to say that I recently read David Weber's novel A Beautiful Friendship. You purists out there may be tempted to point out that I did it because I was going to a meet up with a couple local chapters of The Royal Manticoran Navy: The Official Honor Harrington Fan Association. You may even be right. The fact remains that I helped plan the outing and I picked out the book (along with my buddy/Commanding Officer David) so neener, neener, neener. I read it. I loved it. And, put bluntly, who needs purists anyway?

So, right, the book...

This is the third time I've read the thing, and the first time I've reviewed it. My excuse is because this book is so old that I read it twice before I started my blog in 2015. No system's perfect, right. Better late than never?

I mean...

Yeah, the book.

A Beautiful Friendship is part of the Star Kingdom series which is in and of itself a part of the Honor Harrington universe aka the Honorverse. I've been following these books for about twenty-ish years now, going back to right around the time I met my ex-wife and before I had kids. My oldest is eighteen now. Suffice it to say that I'm a huge fan.

A Beautiful Friendship is a prequel leading back to the origins of the Star Kingdom (later Star Empire) of Manticore and also of the Harrington clan's beginnings as citizens therein. Stephanie Harrington, our heroine and all around likeable young girl, is on a quest to find something to do. Her family has recently immigrated to the SKM after living on a much older, more settled planet with a larger population, more forms of entertainment and people her age who aren't boring. The planet Sphinx is largely still wild with a small contingent of humanity on the planet, trying to make their way and build something.

Enter Stephanie who, quite frankly, is everything I taught my daughters to be; strong, smart, proud, tough and brave. She has a bit of that teenage brashness about her as well but that makes sense because she's a teenager. So when human settlers start reporting that celery is being burgled from their greenhouses (Sphinxian winters last a long time) she is intrigued. When celery starts disappearing from the Harrington greenhouse, she sets out to find out who or what is doing it. And what she catches on camera...

Fans of the mainline Honorverse books all knew what I was when they read the word "celery." What she discovers is the first treecat known to humanity. And when she finds out it has and uses a net made of local fibers, things start to get interesting. Treecats aren't the first sentient species known to humans,

but there haven't been many and she's a kid. She's also afraid her parents will find out that she snuck out after dark, in the rain...

As adults we sometimes forget how badly it sucked to have to listen to parental instructions about everything. As parents, we know why they were necessary but that doesn't change the fact that we hated it. Weber does an awesome job of putting us back in that teenage mindset, wanting to do more than we're allowed to and frustrated because we can't. Of course, Stephanie is a Harrington and doesn't lack for personal initiative. She's also quite a bit less disciplined than her more famous descendant and finds ways around rules.

Seriously, I had to pull out my copy of *Better to Beg Forgiveness* and make sure that it was indeed written by Michael Z. Williamson and not David Weber, because little Ms. Harrington lives that philosophy to its fullest. And, if it gets her in trouble from time to time, that just makes the whole experience more fun. Every story needs conflict after all.

I don't want to spoil too much of the book, but this isn't just a book about Man(girl) vs. Nature or Man vs. Parents. There is some serious villainy here and some more subtle danger emanating from pretty much everywhere around Harrington. She deals with it with equanimity for the most part. Stephanie Harrington is a girl who can keep her cool during a crisis. She's the kind of person I'd want along with me if I were doing something requiring guts and a calm mind, even if I might wish for a person with a bit more life experience.

There is a lot of really cool stuff here about the first few humans who bond with treecats, becoming almost the equivalent of a Treecat and their spouse. It's pretty cool if you've been following the series for a long time and maybe even cooler if you haven't. Those of us who are familiar with Honor and her treecat Nimitz take certain things for granted. Having read the later books, I know how smart treecats are. I'm used to the fact that they can bond with people and some very clear indications of the psychic abilities of treecats and their utility are listed in the later works.

If you haven't read those books though, a lot of it will come as a surprise. It's a voyage of discovery for Stephanie, her treecat Lionheart and indeed the entire human and treecat species. No one had a way to anticipate what was possible before Lionheart accidentally bonded with Stephanie, and the world takes a weird turn afterward because neither one of them know what to expect, either. As experienced readers we know some of what's coming, but even then, not all of it and the human element in the book leads places I never expected it to go.

A Beautiful Friendship was one of the first books I managed to get my hands on and read after my divorce in 2012. Times were rough then, and it helped me get through a pretty rough time. It's a lot easier to enjoy it this time and I'm glad I took the time to reread it. The writing hasn't changed but I have. This is exactly the right type of book to read if you need a quick distraction from life to make you feel better. People are surprised when they find out that I didn't turn to drinking or drugs when my depression got bad. It's thanks to writers like David Weber and books like *ABF* that I'm not stuck in lifelong drug/alcohol rehab. If a pick me up is what you need, hie thee off to the bookstore and pick yourself up a copy. If not, buy one anyway. It's a good book regardless.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Carry Nets

A Nation Interrupted: An Alternate History Novel by Kevin McDonald

Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

So, what happens when the Confederate Army finds out that their plans have been intercepted at Antietam BEFORE the battle, changes their plan, wins the war and the Confederate States of America becomes an independent country? How does the future change? World War I? World War II? Think about it: It took the United States and the engineers that built the Transcontinental Railroad to dig the Panama Canal. What happens if the United States doesn't do the work? What then?

ESPECIALLY World War II. What happens when the United States are not united anymore? What changes when the country that needs to save Britain isn't as big a nation and doesn't have the same population, wealth and industrial base? What happens if the United States makes a more tempting target than the Soviet Union? What then?

Those are the questions answered by Kevin McDonald in A Nation Interrupted. It's well written and, in places, terrifying. I could see this happening. He's done his research and it shows. And it's weird because a solid grasp on some of the problems his Germans would face, but he doesn't let that stop him or them. He finds a way around things the same way a real world general would have to. He makes it believable. His grasp on the effectiveness of strategic bombing is spot on as well.

This is a book with an epic cast, although they seem to all be Americans. That works though, especially in today's day and age where many people would be offended if he had included the German point of view. It does lend a certain cardboard feeling to the villains of the piece but, let's face it, they are literal Nazis. Still and all, things may have worked a mite better if we had gotten an opposing viewpoint.

On the other hand, it's good to see an author who doesn't kowtow to the Leftist stereotype of Americas as Nazis. The Americans in the book, for the most part, are strong, patriotic and opposed to the assholes that have invaded their shores. (Oh, did I fail to mention that the Germans invade New York city? I guess I should've mentioned that little tidbit earlier. Forgive me. It's Monday.)

McDonald pulls no punches in his depiction of Hitler's Final Solution to the Jewish Question conducted on American soil. There are chunks of that part of the narrative that are quite frankly heart rending and more than just a little disgusting. That's why they work. McDonald has done some real research here. He also does his best to resolve a real-world controversy about how the Allies should have responded to the death camps. I like this. First, because it's necessary but also because his resolution matches with my own take on the issue.

I have a sneaking suspicion that McDonald may have consumed more than one Harry Turtledove novel because A Nation Interrupted has a very similar feeling to a lot Turtledove's work without the repetitive dialogue. The shifting viewpoints, the strategic acumen and the grittiness of the characters and situations remind me a lot of Turtledove, whose work I've been reading for over twenty-five years now. I enjoy Turtledove's work and, honestly, there's not really a bigger compliment that I could pay to an Alt-Hist novel.

Don't tell him that. He'll think I'm calling him old. Nope, the old dude in this story is moi.

Anyway...

The action in this book is intense. We find ourselves flying along with bomber crews. We find ourselves sneaking past Nazis. The tension level in *A Nation Interrupted* is sky high and it stays that way. This is a very quickly paced book. It builds and builds and if you're not squirming in your seat for the majority of the end of the book you're not paying attention. There is a lot here and the possibility of catastrophic failure is never very far away.

That's once it gets started though. *A Nation Interrupted* takes a minute to get started. When I first started reading this, I kind of assumed that it was the first book in a series. It's not. It's a standalone novel, but it works well that way. I do kind of feel like McDonald could have slowed down the pace a bit and given us a trilogy here though.

There are large chunks of time skipped over with a quick overview of the progress of the war. This works because it keeps things moving and tells the reader what they need to know. It is, also, a missed opportunity in my opinion. It kind of feels like McDonald was in a big hurry to finish a story that probably could have made him a bunch more money if he had allowed it to develop further and turned it into a series.

I don't want to take this too far though. My favorite season of *Babylon 5* was the fourth season. What made it so great was that J Michael Stracz...

Strazi....

Strazy...

Uhh...

The guy who wrote the series didn't think it would get renewed for its fifth season, so he condensed the last two seasons into one season and it was freaking amazeballs. When the action gets thick, fast, and furious my eyes light up. There was a lot in *A Nation Interrupted* and it happened very quickly. I liked that.

And, let's face it, there are a lot of things you can say to an author that are worse than, "Well gee, Mister, I really wish I had more of your work to read, and I would've paid to do it." It's also not like McDonald hasn't published other stuff. I definitely plan to read it. I just kind of wish that it would've been more of this story instead of a completely new one.

Truth be told though, I'm a little bit bitter. I just read a book that went with one of my favorite books of all time and not only did I spend my whole weekend reading *A Nation Interrupted* instead of reviewing that, this review forced itself out of my head before I could get the other one written. I blame McDonald for it. As punishment you should all buy his book and make him figure out who to spend all of that money. That'll show him!

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Fiery Crashes

An Alien Heat by Michael Moorcock

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

A wonderfully brilliant and hilarious books! This one had me laughing out loud at times. It's the first book of the Dancers at the End of Time trilogy and I can't wait to read the others. Satirical and sardonic, sassy and sarcastic – the book pokes endless fun at the bourgeoisie. It is tempting to include this in the canon of decadent literature instead of science fiction as it brings to mind Huysman's "Against Nature" although much lighter and without the dark side or tedious passages. Time travel, aliens, the end of the universe, this book has it all. Highly recommended!

The Chosen One's Assistant: Never Meet Your Heroes by Kimber Grey

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Before I even get started reviewing Kimber Grey's *The Chosen One's Assistant: Never Meet Your Heroes*, I would like to point out that, not only was it based on Mikey Mason's (Not Quite) *The Chosen One*. His music is epic and I highly recommend listening to it either on Spotify or Bandcamp. I loved the track the first time I heard it and I love it still.

The Chosen One's Assistant is every bit as good as the song except better. There is a lot here and that makes it more fun. As opposed to five minutes of music we get over three hundred pages of story. And it's a lot more of a developed story in the book. There's just more time for it.

And time is something that Tiberius (that's our main character) and *The Chosen One* (Who has no name. He's just *The Chosen One*.) don't have as something seems to have gone wrong and is causing the appearance of vampire stoats in an few days away and we're not sure where they're coming from but this can't be good and we need to put a stop to this...

And Tiberius, who has only been Tiberius for a short while (his gave up his old name when he signed on to be the *Chosen One's Assistant*. Now he is Tiberius like all of the other assistants before him and all of the ones who will come after.) and he's still learning. And listen, there's a lot to this whole Tiberius thing. He's got to handle all of the chores and all of the healing, meet with people, pray a lot...

And there's no training period. He just has to learn everything all at once. With no real help, since the *Chosen One* is rather self centered and apparently not overly fond of breaking in a new Tiberius every two years. There is a bit of hostility there.

It's awesome though, because it makes sense. There is a bit of drill sergeant to *The Chosen One* who doesn't always have time to screw around explaining things. He's a man of action. He kills things for a living. He makes good money doing it, as does Tiberius, but there is a lot to it.

Tiberius has a lot to do outside of cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc. He's the one that's in charge of anything academic. He has to research the route to travel, research the threat once they get there, etc. He also has to meet with the townspeople to coordinate the big party when they get there and to figure out where to stay and whatever else. Tiberius works harder than I do and that's saying something. I respect this character.

I respect the Chosen One too because, although he can be a bit arrogant at times, he is a true hero and he cares. He doesn't just face down threats for the glory or the loot. He does it to protect the people he serves. He does it because he is indeed the Chosen One and it is his duty.

He's also a goofball. There is some serious humor in this book and it comes from the Chosen One more or less wimping out. This is where the book is the most like the song, which was a comedy tune about how badly life sucked for the Chosen One's Assistant (he's not referred to as Tiberius in the song.) There's nothing here that you would have to read the book to get per se, but if you've listened to the song a few times (like I told you to earlier) then it goes from hilariously funny to "Oops, I think I dislocated a rib laughing at that one. Bonus points if you listen to the song after you read the book and realize all the stuff you missed the first time and start laughing all over again.

The Chosen One is also a man of faith. Now, it's not a real world religion. Grey created a fantasy pantheon which she has done a fairly decent job of fleshing out and assigning roles to. There aren't a whole lot of interactions directly with gods, but I like what I see so far. I wouldn't mind seeing more about both the gods and their servants, but there are more books coming, so I guess I'll have to wait.

But it's the actual exploration of faith in the book that has me hooked. Pretty much every fantasy universe has its pantheon. Most even have clerics or paladins. Very few (The Chosen One's Assistant and R.A. Salvatore's The Cleric Quintet are all that come to mind in High Fantasy. Declan Finn's St Tommy NYPD series is an urban fantasy that shows faith as well but that's about all that I've got in the world of Science Fiction and Fantasy literature.) that actually show acts of faith. Not just praying, but believing and trusting in the god you serve to see you through whatever it is that you're going through. There is strength in faith in the real world and for the Chosen One. Tiberius is working on his. I love the Chosen One's belief and his act of sharing it with others. That's not to say that this is a preachy book. It merely shows the champion and his faith and how he shares it with others to encourage them. Major Kira would be proud.

There are some really awesome action sequences in the book, too. Tiberius isn't really up to snuff with all of this hand to hand combat stuff, but he's got balls. Big brass ones. I don't think I'd want to go into combat armed with the level of knowledge Tiberius has. I mean, it's good to have a dagger but it's better if you know how to use it properly. The Chosen One is, of course, a badass. Except when he's not. Nice foot guy. But, for the most part, the Chosen One can deliver a beatdown like few others.

Grey's worldbuilding is first rate as well. She's got a good grasp of what is needed to make a fantasy town work and how trails worked in the Medieval world. She throws in just enough gut wrenching awful to make the totally awesome work even better and I like that about her. This is the first of her books that I've read, but it won't be the last.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Cramped Toes

Dwarves of Ice Cloak, Books 1-4 by A. Trae McMaken

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

(Author's note: The author of this review loves dwarves. The author of this review wishes he was a dwarf. The author of this review writes his own dwarf based fiction. You will see the words, dwarf, dwarves and dwarven a lot, although I think I only used the word Dwarfdom once. For that you should be thankful. Unless you love dwarves like I love dwarves in which case I'm sorry I didn't up the dwarfness. For those of you bothered by this phenomenon, I have the following to say. "DWARF UP AND READ THE REVIEW!!")

I have, in the past, been told that epic fantasy stories can only take place in worlds with high magic. I don't think I've ever believed that, but I've always seen it as a wee bit of a challenge to refute. That is the case no longer. A. Trae McMaken's *The Dwarves of Ice Cloak*, a four book series, puts that argument to rest. This is fantasy as epic as I've ever seen. It's got dwarves. It's got trolls. (and not the internet kind) it's got a dragon at one point. And no dwarf story is complete with goblins as an enemy, even if the author decides to use the dwarven word for the instead. I'm perfectly good with seeing an ursi get a spear to the chest. I mean, it's less typing for the same effect, right?

Good stuff, that.

But that's not what makes *The Dwarves of Ice Cloak* epic. Reading McMaken's series is almost like taking a history survey course (IE American History 1877- present or Japanese history since the Meiji Restoration) only it's taught using memoirs of the most important people during the time period. Imagine taking American History by reading four books: One about Washington, one about Lincoln, one about Reagan and one about like, Biden or probably someone later but I don't have anyone later to mention. (Oh, and for the record I have a BA in History and love reading that, too)

This analogy stuff, it's difficult okay. And yeah, it's actually a simile because I used like but whatever.

Listen, this is epic fantasy at its finest. The first book, *The Crippled King* starts out with one lone, poor, dwarven prospector on his own. During the series (of only four books) we see the rise and fall of a proud dwarven kingdom and a potential resurgence. A lonely mining claim becomes the capital of all Dwarfdom. It fights battles. It increases in size and wealth internally. It becomes someplace worth living and a capital worth having.

And the Ice Cloak dwarves are the dwarfiest dwarves that ever dwarfed. They work hard. They fight hard. They live underground for the most part, but have the inevitable surface dwarves that do the boring stuff like farming and husbandry and also the exciting things like scouting and ursi-slaying. But their miners mine, their crafters craft and dwarf-wives and maids can craft just as well as the men with none of the facial hair.

The Dwarven society presented in the books works is amazingly well crafted. I'm guessing that McMaken has done some studying in anthropology in his time. I'm also guessing that there is a huge pile, possibly digital, of notes that McMaken made to be able to keep everything consistent. *Ice Cloak* is home to a living, breathing group of people whose lives change over time. I got a sense of a grand history while reading these, but it's still undeveloped in most cases. A lot of the time when I started a new book I was wondering how we got here. I had to do a lot of the imagining myself and I like that

because it's an excuse to write my own story. I just can't use the words "Ice Cloak." I'd even like to think I could do these concepts justice but we'll see.

As I alluded to above, there is a huge time gap between stories and the characters from one don't really carry over to the next. This kind of threw me when I first picked up Book Two, The Mouth of Fire. None of the dwarves I expected to see were there. It took me a bit to get into Mouth because of that but once I did I was off and running. For Book Three, The Second Gate and Book Four, Bones of Stone I didn't get that effect because I expected it.

And that's probably another one of the strengths of The Dwarves of Ice Cloak. Although I recommend reading the books in order and all together, this is the kind of series where it wouldn't be at all hard to read the books individually or even pick up one of the later books by itself if you wanted to. There are occasional references that people who have read the prior books will enjoy and can hearken back to but they're not overly long nor are they all that important to understanding the story. They're basically just there as incredibly obvious Easter eggs.

None of the books end on what I would consider to be a true cliffhanger, but all of them end up somewhat unresolved. The reader is left to fill in the rest of the stories themselves and even reading what comes after (in the case of the first three books) doesn't fill in many of the details. I'm reminded, in a way, of the Dragonlance Chronicles, and how they skipped important parts of the story but then, the DC are much closer together in time. The gap between books is literally centuries. They still tie together nicely, but you don't have to know every word that has come before to enjoy the book in your hand right now.

I'm sad to say that there doesn't seem to be a sequel to Bones of Stone. I feel like there was plenty of room to continue the story and that it hasn't happened. I'll be looking for it though, and I'll be following McMaken. He's got some other stuff out there and most of it appears to be fantasy, I'm sure to pick up another McMaken book sometime soon.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Living Steel Mining Picks

The Futurological Congress by Stanislaw Lem

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

At first I wasn't enjoying this book but it was one of those stories that got stronger and better as it progressed. Absurd and satirical with tons of interesting word play (how did the translator do it?) all of which paint a picture of a world fully controlled by pharmaceuticals. I can't help but think that some of the satire was culturally over my head, but none the less the book was quite funny. The first half almost seemed stream-of-conscious and I didn't think it was going to go anywhere, but Lem ties it all together and we see, as the story unfolds, that it was deliberate after-all. Having read a handful of Lem's books I am impressed by the variety of his themes and subjects, proving again and again that he is a writer who can smoothly transition between styles. One has to wonder how the Soviet writers were able to slip their criticisms through the walls of censorship, and it makes me think that science fiction was probably the perfect platform for dissent since it imagines "other" societies. Worth a read if you want something different and strange.

Into the Real by Ringo and Lydia Sherrer
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Ringo took Pokemon Go and turned it into Ender's Game.

Some years ago, when the augmented reality game Pokemon Go first came out, I mostly heard about it from its biggest fan: John Ringo.

Like every good author, Ringo took something from his life, and weaponized it for a novel.

And, it being a John Ringo novel, that requires weaponizing it on multiple levels, including as a real weapon.

In the case of Into the Real, written with Lydia Sherrer, they took Pokemon Go and turned it into Ender's Game.

The story

Larry "The Snake" Coughlin is an internet mercenary, a top tier game player for hire. Hire him to rid yourself of annoying opposition in your online video games. Except "Larry Coughlin" is really Lynn Raven, a 17-year-old high school girl. When the CEO of the biggest video game company in the world reaches out to her to beta test his new Augmented Reality game, she is hesitant. An AR game means she has to go outside and deal with ... people. Even worse, Lynn eventually has to work in teams, especially when the company offers a contest where the grand prize is five million dollars and a guaranteed job in the game industry.

I must admit, "John Ringo" and "YA" do not fit easily together in the brain. But it's executed perfectly well here. I have no idea how much is Ringo's concept or Sherrer's execution. Either way, it works perfectly.

Despite the fact that there are no mortal stakes involved here, Into the Real keeps up the pace admirably. There is no threat to life and limb, and a very rare threat of bodily harm, but for the most part, there are no slow bits. Sure, some fight scenes drag on too long, mostly because the reader understands that there is no genuine threat to our characters... that we know of.

If there is one big problem to the novel, it's that the reader knows what's going on, though the characters haven't put it together. When the monsters of the Into the Real game feed on electricity, and there are power fluctuations and blackouts throughout the entire country, it's easy for us to put two and two together before a third of the way into the book. It ends on a To Be Continued without more than hinting at what the reader suspects.

And only 40% of the way into the book, we get an exchange that goes

"When we say these entities.... are unknown, we mean we don't even know what they are. The data is encrypted and how the AI assigns them is also unknown."

On top of everything else, all one can think is "Gee, what can go wrong?"

Trust me, these aren't spoilers. The overall story of the "TransDimensional Hunter" novels is advanced entirely by seeing Lynn on her journey from gamer to leader, and it's quite fun. It suffers a little from feeling like it is only the first part of a novel... until you realize that there is no way the events of this book could have been handled any other way. You're just going to have to buy another Ringo novel to see how the story pans out.

The characters

Lynn Raven is an unusually likeable teenager. The daughter of a widowed single mother, Lynn has long ago monetized her video game exploits, generating a steady income via microtransactions. She is smart, capable, and even her foibles are relatable. Seriously, who likes interacting with teenagers or people?

It is also fun watching Lynn's character develop over the course of the book, going from gamer physique and finding out how sunburns work, to someone more formidable.

The second main character is Hugo, the AI that comes with the Into the Real game, and is basically Jarvis from the Marvel films, complete with British accent and snarky dialogue.

As for the others characters, there are none of the usual YA formulas in Into the Real. The school bully isn't some copy and paste reject from Mean Girls, she is her own unique brand of psychotic.

The only thing that felt formulaic may have been the introduction of Lynn's friends. Mercifully, they turn out to be deeper than they appear.

The only irksome protagonist is one character who insists "Girls can't game," despite all evidence Lynn presents to the contrary. (As I grew up having to fight my mother and sister for control of the Game Boy growing up, the stereotype never made sense.) Push through these sections, and you will be rewarded. Like the rest, he is no shallow stereotype, as one might expect from a YA novel.

The world

Easily half of this book is world-building. Lynn's beta testing involves a lot of explanation as she pulls and prods the inner workings of the game in her attempts to push it to its limits... and as Lynn tries to find glitches to exploit and hacks to the game, like every other gamer. Lynn's exploration covers both the technology of gaming as well as the world-building of the game. Of the first 20% of the book, easily 14% of the book is the game and the mechanics.

If you're not into technology or the world-building... then why are you reading science fiction?

One of the major, obvious Ringo touches is that the book gets into the nitty gritty of just how things work. The game IA monitors the gamer and can contact emergency services if things go wrong. There are a lot of details on weapon classes and armor sets, and how microtransactions now work. It's also a game that comes with customer support and tactical support.

The world contains an element that pisses me off in that it has long-lasting impacts of Coronavirus lockdowns--all modern theaters are dead, replaced by VR movie cafes, half of education includes VR automatons, and doctors are always looking for the next novel virus. I don't hate that Ringo and Sherrer have this view of the future, I hate that they might be right.

And some of the game is cute. Healing capsules are called Oneg. The werewolf like monsters are the Varg (paging Jim Butcher). There is a shotgun referred to as the Abomination, which I think is the second Larry Correia reference (the first being, I believe, Larry Coughlin).

The politics

As this book does not spell out anything too clearly by the end, you can garner a message if you squint real hard, tilt your head sideways, and stretch like a pretzel: That big business and civilian individuals can do a job better than the federal government.

Also, part of the moral of the story is that you should pay attention to current events.

Content warning

You can tell that John Ringo didn't write the bulk of this novel for the simple reason that it is obviously YA, and this includes the content.

If you're worried about "video game violence" ... then I deeply worry about you, since there is no correlation between video games and violence. Since a third of American households own a game console (not counting PCs) if video games meant violence, we'd be hip deep in blood.

Who is it for?

If you liked Ender's Game, or even video games, you're going to enjoy Into the Real.

Why read it?

Ringo and Sherrer have created a modern day Ender's Game using the technology of Pokemon Go. The characters are vivid and interesting, and the action is strong enough to carry you along.

Let Sleeping Gods Lie by David J. West

Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

H.P. Lovecraft meets Louis L'Amour

When Porter Rockwell's friend dig up an ancient book in Wild West California and offer to sell it for cheap, he thinks he's made a great deal.

But Porter has no clue of the horrors that this old book brings with it.

Porter, his partner Bloody Creek Mary, and his dog, Dawg, set out to track down a gang of murderous outlaws, but what they find is much stranger, including supernatural creatures, ancient ruins, and a gateway to another world.

The story

Porter Rockwell's friends have been murdered over a strange artifact: an ancient book. Porter sets out to discover why. As he digs deeper into the mystery, the stakes get higher, and he goes from tracking out-

laws to shootouts to facing down monsters to entering the lair of ancient elder gods waiting to be released and bring ruin upon the Earth.

The supernatural elements of the story start at a slow burn. The initial hook brings the mystery, but the beginning of the story plays out like your standard western: white hats tracking black hats through the mountains and deserts to bring them to justice. That standard western takes a sharp left turn into the Lovecraftian in the third act, and it only gets weirder from there.

The characters

Porter Rockwell is, funnily enough, himself an outlaw, wanted for a murder he did not commit, as well as some that he did. But Porter is an outlaw with a hardcoded sense of justice, and his loyalty to his few friends is unquestionable. It is this loyalty and his own curiosity that drives Porter throughout the story.

His partner, Bloody Creek Mary, is a no-nonsense indigenous woman who accompanies him on his adventures. Though she acts as a check on Porter's more impulsive instincts, it is clear that there is a great deal of mutual respect between the two, and they are repeatedly bailing each other out of tough situations.

The world

The story takes place in California in the Old West, and largely conforms with the tropes and history associated with it, plus some added mythological lore. Saloons, Prospectors, and Chinese immigrants are thrown in indigenous mysticism and western cryptids such as Sasquatch. The end of the story draws the reader into the realm of the Elder Gods, complete with the strange geometries and cyclopean structures drawn straight from the works of H. P. Lovecraft.

The politics

There is not much old west politics to speak of in *Let Sleeping Gods Lie*, much less modern politics. This is a romp through the realms of eldritch horror, with no partisan ideology to be found.

Content warning

While there is plenty of violence and descriptions of Lovecraftian horrors, none of it is especially graphic.

Who is it for?

Anyone who loves Westerns and Lovecraft should read *Let Sleeping Gods Lie*.

Why read it?

Read it for good old fashioned western heroes going up against the most powerful beings in the cosmos.

Message for the Devil: A King Roger V Adventure

by Jason McDonald and Stormy McDonald

Review by Jim McDonald

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

King Roger is back and he's up to his armpits in trouble. There's a lot going on in the city of Charleston, South Carolina is in danger. People are dying hideously. Who did it? I didn't know. You still don't. In *Message for the Devil* by Jason and Stormy McDonald the police think it might be Roger himself. We'd never believe that though would we?

Part of the problem is with Roger. He grew up in a mystical land on the planet Gaia, sister to Earth, where magic is plentiful and customs are closer to Medieval European than they are to modern American. This creates some problems for our hero as he does not always know the right way to handle things. At one point it becomes obvious that he doesn't even know how to count change. In some cases, I enjoyed that face immensely, because he acts more like a Player Character in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game than a modern American, but it makes sense in context.

The story itself is a mystery. Roger has been hired to find a ghost, but it's not just any ghost. Nope. That would be too easy. It has to be the ghost of a convicted murderess who was executed. Rumor has it that she said some nasty things at her own execution...

Yeah, it gets ugly quickly. This may have escaped your notice up to this point, but vengeful spirits tend not to be very nice people. Sometimes they can get downright...

Vengeful

Okay, that was terrible, but you get the point.

Hence the whole "dying hideously" that I mentioned earlier. Of course, it gets worse because Roger isn't exactly the most popular guy with the local police and they don't really understand some of his methods. I mean, do you know what a rust potion is? Do you think the police would? Think about it. I wouldn't and I'm a fantasy fan.

In a lot of ways, *Message for the Devil* feels like an early Dresden novel. The hero uses magic, even if Roger doesn't have the raw power that Harry does. There's a mystery. There's a supporting cast of characters that includes the police. There's even a human skull, although Roger doesn't name his skull "Bob." I've always had the feeling that Harry Dresden felt a bit out of place and Roger is certainly out of place. Both heroes have problems with using technology, even if they manifest themselves differently. The McDonalds' world is probably about as well developed as Butcher's was after two or three books as well. (And yes, that means that the McDonalds haven't managed as much worldbuilding in two books as Butcher has managed in eight million. They'll get there. Just 7,999,998 books to go.)

There's a lot of action in *Message for the Devil*, too. This is not the Hardy Boys by any stretch of the imagination. Roger is a big fan of bladed weapons and the police, of course, have guns. There is plenty of fighting and running and hiding to keep things lively. This is one of those areas where Roger clearly doesn't not understand the customs and laws of the United States and has a chance to get himself into some very real - and very serious - trouble. He somehow manages to get out of it, at least for the most part. Sort of. Read the book.

That's not to say that all there is to Message for the Devil is all action. This isn't a Michael Bay flick and there is no lens flare.

Huh?

Oh, yeah. Listen, I'm not sure how you would do lens flare in a book either, but I'm fairly certain that Bay would find a way to do it. Just don't pay attention to the fact that it doesn't make sense and you'll get it.

There is some fairly serious research taking place in order to solve the mystery. Speaking as a guy who has spent his time at libraries pouring over microfilm, the research in Message for the Devil makes sense. It reads like it was written by someone who has done some real research, for the simple reason that the characters in the book are smart enough to find the right place to go to and talk to someone who knows the story and where to find the information they need. This isn't a case of some rando jumping on the internet and solving a two hundred year old mystery in five seconds using Google. There's some real work involved here. I like that. The McDonalds some how manage to keep these parts from dragging out too long as well, so props to them.

There's some personal drama here as well. King Roger abandons his chance to return to his kingdom at the end of Thief on King Street. He did so for the love of a woman that he had just met. Yes, that is a cliché but it's used so often because it works. So while all of the insanity is going on, with murders and police problems and hauntings and...

You get the idea.

...Roger has to get to know the woman that he stayed for and figure out how things work with her. And, quite frankly, IF they work with her. It's not that she's disloyal, or that he is, but we've all been there. Making things work with a new person is never easy. He's a good dude and makes his way through it, but it's not as easy as perhaps he'd like it to be. I'm okay with it though. Easy stuff doesn't make a good story.

Message for the Devil is, as mentioned previously, a sequel. While I certainly do recommend reading the first book, you should be able to enjoy this work either way. There is enough here to move the story along independently and what callbacks there are to the previous story are brief and well enough explained so that you won't feel lost. All in all, this is a story worth reading.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Golden Coins

Murtagh by Christopher Paolini

Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Welcome Back To Alagaesia And The Tale Of MURTAGH

I've finally read Christopher Paolini's fifth book in the Inheritance Cycle, Murtagh. If you'll recall, I attended his book signing last November here in Kansas City. We listen to him speak and then I got to have him sign the copy of my book. When it was my turn, I told him I felt his previous book, Fractal Noise, was his best book yet. I gushed over it in my review, the very adult themes and the style of the writing. I felt it was a very good show of how he has grown as an author. A lot of people know him for his high fantasy writing of The Inheritance Cycle, yet in my opinion his dive into science fiction is better. I know it can be argued that he's had time to grow since writing Eragon at the age of 19. When I told him this, he looked surprised and asked me if I had read Murtagh yet. I'm guessing he figured I'd change my mind after. So, Mindy, have you changed your mind over which is his better book, Murtagh or Fractal Noise? Well, let's take a look.

For a small recap: Murtagh was in the first four The Inheritance Cycle books. He started as a friend and ally to Eragon. But then we learn who he really is, the son of one of the evil king's foresworn riders, Morzan. That's enough for others to hate him. He's learned to accept it while trying to also prove he's not his father. He's kidnapped and sent back to the evil king, Galbatorix, where he's forced to swear loyalty to him in the ancient language, which if broken would bring about his death. During this time a dragon egg hatches for him and he is bound to Thorn. They're forced to fight Eragon and do unimaginable things.

Fast forward to the final book, Inheritance. Murtagh and Thorn redeemed themselves once the oath to Galbatorix is broken with his death, but only a few know this. He's given the option to help Eragon in protecting and training future riders and dragons or staying within the newly established kingdom under Nasuada, though that would require swearing an oath of fealty because he can use magic. Murtagh and Thorn refuse to swear to anyone ever again and leave, to be just a rider and dragon, free of ties to anybody.

I'm not sure how many people thought about Murtagh after the fourth book. I figured if we got another book, it'd be about Eragon, Saphira, Arya, and her dragon, Firnen. Paolini released The Fork, The Witch, and The Worm seven years after Inheritance. That's a side book with stories from Alagaesia. To our surprise, Murtagh appeared under an assumed name in one of the stories. And to our great joy, Paolini released Murtagh five years later (with more added to Murtagh's story in The Fork).

In the afterword and acknowledgment, Paolini says that although Murtagh acts as a standalone entry into the Inheritance universe it's obvious some storylines are not finished. He reassures us that it's on purpose, but he can't reveal his plans yet and has more to write in Alagaesia.

With that said now I'll get into the book.

It's been nearly a year since the end of Inheritance, the war, and Galbatorix's death. Murtagh and Thorn have been traveling Alagaesia hiding their true identities since they've been labeled as outcasts by society. When Eragon and the Eldunari left Alagaesia, Murtagh was warned of certain places to avoid, places that had dark secrets even dragons were afraid of. However, during his travels he realized something evil was lurking in the land and began to search for a mysterious witch.

He receives the help of a werecat that leads him to Bachel, a witch who leads a cult. She uses dreams to make her followers believe they're living in an ideal society. But when Murtagh tries getting information on "how" she manipulates their dreams, he never receives a straight answer. Things eventually take a turn for the worse for him and Thorn, but I'm not going to give any spoilers on that. Just know that it leads to an unlikely brotherhood for Murtagh and he proves he's a man of his word despite what the people of Alagaesia may think of him. The story leaves Murtagh with hope for his future. However, it leaves the reader hanging.

Overall, the story is good enough. In the end we have a better understanding of who Murtagh and Thorn are by learning about their history. The first four books were focused on Eragon and Saphira. We got some glimpses of Murtagh's past but since this book is told from his point of view, it allows us to truly understand the horror that they suffered under Galbatorix. You get to see how much good is in him regardless of what Galbatorix made him and Thorn do. We get a better understanding of his relationship with Tornac, the swordsman trainer who became a father figure. His love and compassion toward Murtagh and the respect Murtagh had in return shaped him. It helped him keep a strong will against the king.

Paolini does well stirring up sympathetic feelings for Murtagh. However, I think that's where some of my praise for the book stops. I feel like the book was written very similarly to a World of Warcraft quest: this is your quest, look for the NPC with the exclamation point for instructions, do the quest, and return to NPC. I think that's a good way to describe how the book is broken out. For instance, while Murtagh is in his old home city of Gil'ead, he is sought out by the werecat named Carabel. She was just as puzzling as Solebum was in the four Eragon books. Her trade for information on the witch is to send Murtagh on several mini-quests. Yes, the payoff was okay and he learned other information along the way that was somewhat useful later, but after spending the first section of the book traveling from location to location for too long, this was almost as equally painful.

Murtagh finally finds the witch Bachel. She claims she's the speaker for an entity we never visually see, just the smoke around it. She never answers any questions from Murtagh, about herself, who she serves, just riddles that create more questions. It's frustrating to him and the reader both. I understand it's meant to keep us curious for the future stories from Alagaesia. One of the Eldunari, Umaroth, did warn Murtagh and Thorn to stay away from the area where Bachel and her cult live. The creature for whom the witch claims to be the speaker appears to be what the dragons fear but it's never made clear what it is. We only find out that through Bachel, this creature manipulates the dreams of the people to control them and believe in the life they're made to live is right.

Paolini's description of Bachel's actions towards Murtagh were enough to move the story along and build a hatred toward her. I also feel it's a generic scratch of the surface and more could have been done to better drive it home how demonic she was. Especially in her actions against Murtagh's mind and his dreams. His mental battle with her was interesting, creating more hatred towards her but again, just scratching the surface. The extent of her powers are never fully explained. She may be able to enter Murtagh's mind to do battle, but she also needs to use potions to control people, not magic. Murtagh realizes she can use it but doesn't have the skill or discipline of the ancient language to control it. We only know that she can overpower to a point, but not enough to overtake Murtagh in the very end.

There is one character introduced that I wish we had had more time with. While Murtagh was a prisoner, he met Uvek, an Urgal shaman who has been Bachel's prisoner for years. He had been found living alone, having left his tribe to live only with nature. In the Eragon books, we learned that the relationship between humans and Urgals weren't good, but they joined together to defeat Galbatorix. Uvek isn't like the other Urgals, who are a warrior race. He's more at peace and happiest alone with nature. His

simpler contentment with life leads to a bond with Murtagh. They both need each other's help, respect, and trust if they want any hope of escaping the witch. I enjoyed Uvek's storytelling. He used it as a way to help keep Murtagh awake from the witch's dreams and keep his mind sane against her torture. I would've liked to have more. I know that we always joke about everyone one getting a spinoff these days, but I can honestly say this one would be welcome.

Overall, I feel the book was choppy and I'll refer back to my previous World of Warcraft reference. There were too many long and unnecessary periods of time flying or running between locations, making it hard to get into the book because I felt all we were doing was traveling. Obviously it eventually picked up but it was not an easy start. When I originally read the first books, I couldn't put them down and in the back of my mind was "I have to go read." I did not feel that draw with this book. That time spent traveling could have maybe been used to massage other areas of the story that needed more expansion.

For those who are a fan of The Inheritance Cycle I do recommend the book because we are back in the Eragon sandbox. Plus we get a chance to see how the years have treated Paolini as a writer. He has grown since but I think his landing was rougher than expected. And it's fine, it has been a while since he was in Alagaesia.

Do I think that it's better than Fractal Noise?

No.

When I told Christopher Paolini that I thought Fractal Noise was his best book, he asked me if I had read Murtagh yet. I said I would get to it and now I can answer him: I have read Murtagh and I still stand by my statement that Fractal Noise is his best book to date. Maybe it's the more adult themes in that book that are not in Murtagh. While Murtagh is a fine fantasy story that gives better insight to who Murtagh and Thorn are, the high fantasy story is not at the same intellectual level. It's good for passing the time and I'm glad I got to go back to Alagaesia, but it doesn't leave me trying to critically break down the underlying themes like Fractal Noise.

Now don't get me wrong, I'll continue on my journey with The Inheritance Cycle as long as Paolini keeps writing the books for it. But now that I've seen what a great writer he can be outside that sandbox, my expectations for future Inheritance universe books will be only for his storytelling and imagination, not for critical thinking and analyzing. He could bring that to Alagaesia, but I think it would possibly ruin the beauty of it.

I still have a lot of respect for him, what he has done, and where he's going. But I believe that he has two paths in front of him. It will be interesting to see if he goes with a more leisure imagery that he gets with his high fantasy or a more critical thought imagery that I've found in his science fiction.

So to you Mr. Paolini, thank you for bringing us back into the world of Eragon and I do look forward to having more from you. However, "thump thump" Fractal Noise is still your best book.

The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and
High Adventure by William Goldman

Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Listen, it's not my fault. My history with The Princess Bride is composed of a couple decades worth of WUUUUUUUV, TWUUUU WUUUUUV! and I never realized that there was an actual novel that went with the movie. I mean, obviously Fred Savage's grandpa read him the book in the movie, but I thought that was just a prop. I mean, I've spent more hours in bookstores than any sane person and I'd have noticed the thing at some point, right?

I mean, it's inconceivable that I could possibly not know about a The Princess Bride book if it existed. There was no chance that could get stuck in the Fire Swamp of ignorance of the existence that it would take to not know that there was a novel. Seriously, you couldn't have stopped me from getting one if I had known about it. I'd have all kinds of fun storming that castle. At least until a rodent of unusual size got to my bookshelf and ate my copy. Even then, I bet I could get my boy Miracle Max to bring my copy back to life so I could read it again.

And all of that makes sense until you realize that there actually was such a book and I didn't know about it. At that point I was all just like...

"My name is Jimbo McCoy. You killed my delusion. Prepare to buy!" Fortunately for me, e-books aren't all that expensive and I won't need a wheelbarrow to carry it in.

Oh wait, you wanted an actual review and not just me acting like a bigger geek than normal?

As you wish.

Or not.

Suck it up, Buttercup.

Dude, put down the six-fingered sword and the iocaine powder. I'm getting there. I promise.

Although, all trash talk aside, it does occur to me that it has been far too long since I've watched the movie with my daughters, but I digress.

Dude, reading this review must be like climbing the Cliffs of Insanity.

Please don't go all Dread Pirate Roberts on me. I wouldn't like it if you mostly likely killed me in the morning.

Alright, alright. I'll say something meaningful about the book.

Dude...

The Princess Bride is the most meta book in the history of ever. There is so much here that got left out of the movie because it wouldn't fit, but like "Morgenstern" must have been the worst author in the his-

tory of ever. He mentioned a bunch of crap about the history of Guilder and Florin that would totally not work in an actual novel and Goldman is really snarky about it.

I mean, I know I'm putting on airs here and I haven't really earned the right to say this, but parts of *The Princess Bride* read like a review from Jimbo's Awesome SF/F Reviews. Seriously. Goldman has a similar whacky and zany sense of humor. Reading endless pages about the history of women's hats would suck, but reading Goldman's complaints about those pages is pure comedy gold.

There is a lot more about Inigo Montoya's childhood and his relationship with his father in the book than there was in the movie. This is a good thing. The whole revenge angle takes on so much more importance when we know how close he was to his father, why his father was killed, and how humiliated Montoya was by his father's murderer. This was good stuff that would have made the movie even better if they could have found a way to work it in.

The Narrator of the novel, supposedly Goldman himself, is a source of great entertainment as well. The story goes that his father read the book to him as a kid and left lots of it out. That's where a lot of the meta stuff comes in. Now the Narrator wants his son to read the book and can't figure out why he won't. Then the Narrator picks the book up and finds out how bad it was..

Yeah, it doesn't sound like the kind of thing you'd want to re-write honestly, but he does and it's amazing. This strikes a chord with me personally because it reminds me a lot of the struggles I've had to get my kids to read the stuff I loved as a kid. I can't even get my oldest to read the stuff I love NOW and it can be a bit of a challenge to deal with mentally. It would be so awesome if they would, but..

Yeah.

Long story (overly) long this is the type of situation that I can identify with and I'm guessing a lot of you can as well.

Of course, all of our favorite characters are there; Westley, Buttercup, Fezzik, Inigo Montoya, Vizzini, etc. Not all of the lines were translated straight from the book though, and it's one of those things where you can end up disappointed not because something isn't entertaining, but because it's not quite the way you remembered it. That much is, I guess, inevitable as the movie writer, actor/actress, director and some other person that I forgot about probably all had a hand in rewriting the dialogue for the movie. It doesn't ruin it, but it is a little different and that took some getting used to.

One suggestion I'm going to make is to skip the introductions to both the Thirtieth and Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Editions. They don't add a whole lot to the experience and they took a lot of time to get through. I was really surprised by this because I thought I was going to get something really awesome with these, but not so much. I've been more disappointed in my life, obviously, but I kind of wish I could have that time back.

Still and all I'm glad I read *The Princess Bride*. It was a lot of fun exploring something I had loved for a long time in a totally different setting. This was an experience I won't forget. That sounds weird, but it's true. If you haven't read the book, and especially if you're just finding out that it actually exists, I'd recommend reading it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Boring Intros

The Romanov Rescue by Tom Kratman, Justin Watson, and Kacey Ezell

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“I can [speak to your father that way, Anastasia],” Chekov said, quietly maintaining eye contact with Nicholas. “I can because he isn’t the emperor anymore, and he isn’t the emperor anymore because he refused to hear the things he didn’t want to hear.”

(Fair Warning: Spoilers.)

The First World War, and the collapse of the Russian Empire and the civil war that ended in a communist victory, is not a very common stamping ground for published alternate history, although there are quite a few essays and timelines wondering what might have happened if the war had been avoided or if the Tsar and/or the Russian Whites had come out on top. I suspect that owes much to a sense of historical inevitability surrounding both events – 1914s Europe was a tinderbox, waiting for someone to light a match, while 1917s Russia had reached and passed the breaking point quite some time ago. The Provisional Government that took over, in the first heady days after the Tsar abdicated, was unable to either satisfy its British and French allies nor tend to the legitimate demands of the Russian population, leaving a gap for Lenin and the Bolsheviks to take power themselves. The Bolsheviks took the calculated risk of conceding defeat in the war, making huge concessions to the Germans so Russia could step out of the fighting and concentrate on internal affairs. This might have seemed insane in London and Paris, and would have been if the Germans hadn’t lost the war, but it paid off. The Bolsheviks secured their power, executed the Tsar and his close family, won the civil war and unleashed a regime every bit as awful as their enemies claimed.

A second reason for the shortage of novels set in this period is a certain awareness that just about everyone involved was bad, from the imperialists of Imperial Germany to the weak and foolish Tsar, the opportunists who surrounded him, the various social classes who finally wanted to get theirs and, of course, the Bolsheviks themselves. It is hard not to look at the era and think there are few good guys, certainly in any position of power. Nazi apologists who argue Versailles was an unwarrantedly harsh treaty should take a good look at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which was even more harsh to the losing side. The only true innocents in the affair were the Tsar’s children, who were murdered with the adults of their family, and even they had their flaws. But they did not deserve their fate.

But what if they’d been rescued before they could be murdered?

The Romanov Rescue starts with the premise of the Germans, under pressure from the near-powerless Kaiser (who was actually a relative of the Tsar, as was true of most European royalty of the time), mounting a bid to rescue the Tsar and his family from the Bolsheviks before their time runs out. Realizing that an openly German rescue force would be unlikely to work (and it would be easy to brand the Tsar a German puppet), the Germans hunt through POW camps and recruit a force of Russian loyalists who can be relied upon, with a little help from the Germans, to liberate the Tsar and take him to safety.

The book effectively splits into three separate storylines before closing up again near the end of the story. The first section focused on the recruitment and training of the infantry, something that plays very well to Kratman’s strengths as an author. The second follows a team of infiltrators sneaking into Russia to locate where the Tsar is being held, allowing them to call the infantry force down on them. The third follows the Tsar and his family themselves, seen through the eyes of Grand Duchess Anastasia (who is popularly thought to have survived the slaughter in OTL). Kratman does a very good job of

keeping the three separate and interesting; the first focused on solving technical challenges, the second explores 1917/8 Russia as the country slips into chaos, the third studies how the captives adapt themselves to their situation, and how some of their guards become sympathetic to them while others remain implacable foes.

The storylines then converge again, with the Tsar located ... just in time. The Bolsheviks have finally decided to kill the Tsar and his family and have dispatched a force to carry it out. The rescue party lands – I don't know how plausible it is for the Germans to send a troop-carrying airship so far into Russia, but it is pretty cool as well as AH-themed – attacks the Bolsheviks and tries to rescue the Tsar, with mixed results. The Tsar and his son, the haemophilic, are both killed in the attack, with the crown descending on the senior survivor – Grand Duchess Tatiana. At that point, the story ends ... leaving plenty of room for a sequel.

The book works as well as it does, partly, because it doesn't gloss over issues that need to be mentioned. The Germans are not rescuing the Tsar out of the goodness of their hearts and that's fairly clear, even from the start. The Bolsheviks may be monsters who will get more monstrous as history rolls on, but the Russian aristocracy brought most of their troubles on themselves. This is pointed out fairly bluntly by one of the 'friendlier' guards, who argues that Russian mistreatment of the Jews explains why so many Jews joined the Bolsheviks:

"Come now," Nicholas said, taking Chekov's queen with his own. "You mustn't think I hate all Jews, there are many who contribute to Russia, but clearly there are a larger proportion of malcontents amongst them than in the Christian, or Mohammedan populations. Surely, you've noticed the raw number of Jews among the Bolsheviks!"

"I think perhaps you're confusing cause and effect, Citizen Romanov," Chekov said as he removed Nicholas's queen from the board with his own rook. "For generations Jews have been brutalized and murdered and you and your ancestors have done little but scapegoat them, eat away at their rights and reduce the sentences of the bastards who prey upon them, then you have the audacity to wonder why revolution might appeal to some of them."

This problem is also noted by a communist subversive, a former Russian POW who finds himself attached to the rescue force and enduring sermons on religion (which Marx called the opiate of the masses):

"And as long as we're on the subject, could there be any better proof that this Christ was a charlatan than that he forgave a tax collector? I don't bloody think so ..."

These are issues that will hopefully be explored in future books, as they plagued the Russia of OTL and will need to be solved by the new Tsarina (assuming she survives the inevitable civil war.) Indeed, it is difficult to see why anyone would support Nicolas making a bid to retake the throne and his death at the end of the novel makes sense, from a practical point of view. (King John was a monster, during the Magna Carta War, but his son Henry III was blameless and that worked in his favour.)

The book has too large a cast of characters for any of them to get much screen time, certainly as much as they deserve, but they play their roles fairly well. (Mostly – I was expecting the communist subversive mentioned above to do more, particularly when the Tsar is finally close to being rescued.) In some places, the characters are tissue-thin; in others, there is a surprising depth to them. Stockholm syndrome runs both ways. Prisoners can get very close to their captors and convince them, in some ways, that they deserve to live. The book also touches on the greater matters, from the reason Russia came to

terms in 1917 to the decision to finally execute the Royal Family and crack down on the peasants. It makes sense from their point of view, although much seems monstrous or irrational from ours.

Quite how things will develop from the endpoint is hard to say. Tatiana might well be a better rally point than anything the whites had in OTL, but – as a daughter of the Tsar – she would certainly find it hard to appeal to Russians who were heartily sick of the aristocracy (with reason); indeed, she'd be expected to uphold the aristocracy, which would be an absolute gift to her enemies. It might be possible, of course, to push reform with so much of the aristocracy dead or in exile, but it would be tricky. And we know, even if she doesn't, that Imperial Germany is not going to see 1919. Will she get help from the British and French, more enthusiastic than OTL? Or will she be sidelined as part of a family that brought much of its troubles on itself?

Kratman is known for having firm political opinions which colour his writing, for better or worse, but they are largely absent here. What little there is fits in well – the book points out, for example, that the Jews are often a boon to their host countries, but hated and resented despite it. (The Protocols of the Elders of Zion came out of Imperial Russia.) It also points out that the monarchy is bad, but so are the Bolsheviks and many of the more reasonable people would be minded to be reasonable if a reasonable alternative existed.

The book's greatest weakness, however, is that it spends too much time on recruiting, training and preparing the rescue force. While this is interesting in and of itself, it comes across as padding in places and really should have been reduced (giving room for more action and adventure – for example, the Tsar is rescued, but the Bolsheviks give chase and have to be fought).

Overall, though, *The Romanov Rescue* works very well. It may never be seen as a classic of the AH scene, but it is both a good action-adventure and a poke into less-explored regions of alternate history. I give it eight out of ten.

Space Pirates of Andromeda by John C. Wright

Review by Daniel M. Bensen

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Silliness with a grander scale and deeper meaning

It's not often you get to read a real homage, one in which the writer loves the source material and extends it. Here, John C. Wright asks "what if the Star Wars sequels were good?" *Space Pirates of Andromeda* gives us a very satisfying answer.

The Story

Athos Lone is the son of a pair of resistance fighters (one royal, the other a scalawag) who joined a wandering mystic to help overthrow an evil, interstellar empire. Okay, you got it. Except this couple had more kids than just the one.

To avenge his brother's murder, Athos joined the government force tasked with hunting space pirates. We join him on the job as he breaks into a ship, *The Devil's Delight*, with the aid of his ultra-tech space-cloak, his myth-tech lion's mask, and his courageous, heroic nature.

Wright plays his usual trick of packing an epic trilogy's worth of detail into the backstory, of which very little appears on the page. There was a robot in a top hat and a winged pirate queen, but we don't

get to hang out with them because we're mostly on that ship with Athos.

To be fair, Wright dumps so much punishment on his protagonist that we spend most of our mental energy wondering how the boy's going to make it out of this one. Athos escapes one deadly challenge by diving into another, solving past mysteries and uncovering larger conspiracies as he goes, sometimes with supernatural aid.

The Characters

A little princess escaped her home planet just after the Empire killed its sun. She spent a while in suspended animation before growing up into an astral-projecting temple maiden (not a Star Maiden because technically she hasn't graduated yet). She's searching for the lost founder of her order, the hero of the late war, Jaywind Starquest. Yes, you're still with me.

We also get flashbacks from the rebellion from the point of view of a Centurion of the Deathguards, who wonders if he might be one of the baddies. I assume he'll have a bigger role to play in later books.

Other characters include Liska, of the fox-like Vulpinae, a Batrachian named Groac Wroc Yehomelek, and Tisquantum the Neanderthal. This is Wright's boys-own-adventure style: silliness is on such a tremendous scale that it becomes grand.

The World

Alright, I'll start a fight with the internet: Wright's galaxy is better than Lucas's. Wright is, after all, standing on the shoulders of Star Wars, so it's understandable that he reaches farther. For example, his evil Empire has a definite ideology, and so does the resistance (I'd say it's "programming" versus "free will," and I'm willing to debate it). The magic and technology have limits that give the characters interesting problems to solve while the cultures and societies they hail from have depth. Even the ruins of a vanished civilization display an artistic style that shows us what they thought of themselves.

I have to admit, I loved the little asides about why robots are all built with hands and supertech guns shoot balls of plasma rather than bullets. Those are some sweet justifications. I won't spoil them here.

Politics

If this book were published by the traditional presses, it wouldn't be. The races that populate the Andromeda galaxy include anthropomorphic animal-people such as the Vulpinae ("Foxes") and Batrachians (Frogs), as well as Nemean lion-men, Neanderthals, long-nosed Noachians, and the Sinanthropes, who are Asians. Myself, I think they're all descendants of settlers from Earth, with varying amounts of genetic engineering, but can you imagine what Mary Robinette Kowal would say? If Wright knows, he writes as if he doesn't care. There's an innocent boyishness to his galaxy of colorful creatures and things that go boom, all of it shining with the light of their author's convictions.

John C. Wright is Catholic. Good comes from God, and evil is what opposes Him. There is no Church of Rome in Andromeda, but various societies there seem to have gotten close. The Empire was a technocracy that punished by death anyone who held "extravagant, unscientific, immoderate, or nonconformist beliefs, opinions, speculations, or fancies." It's not hard to draw real-world parallels.

Aside from that one speech quoted above, the bad guys' philosophy doesn't get much airtime. Most of the pirates just want loot, and the Deathguard is just following orders. Even when we're in the heads of the good guys, we don't ponder why they're doing the right thing because the right thing is obvious. The

closest I can come to finding a political screed in this book is: "I am not protecting you because I am programmed to do it. I am doing it because it is right and good." I agree.

Content Warning

There's nothing really vile or disturbing in this book. The violence is on the level of Star Wars, meaning bad guys sometimes get blown up. Sex is confined to Athos thinking that this one girl is very pretty.

Who is it for?

If you loved Star Wars as a kid, thought the prequels were dumb, and didn't even bother with the sequels, then you're me. This book was for me. If you were angry about the sequels, this book is probably for you too. Otherwise, if you like Saturday morning cartoons about good guys defeating bad guys, with enough classical and technological in-jokes to make you feel clever, then you're probably me again. This book is great.

Why buy it?

You should buy several! Give them to your friends. Throw them at passers-by. Flood John C. Wright with money so he can quit his day job and spend all his time writing more boys-own-adventures with brain and heart. We have so few books like this one.

The Stepford Wives by Ira Levin

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

While this book was hard to put down it was also one of the exceedingly rare cases where I enjoyed the movie more than the book. The two do not differ that greatly but the book felt like it was missing something, most likely a fulfilling conclusion. However, the mystery we are left with at the inconclusive ending does add in some ways to the creepiness of the story. The thing that was most compelling about this book was actually a turn off to me at first. The language that it is written in is completely saccharine and devoid of emotion, at first this was bothering me until I realized that the approach was being used as a device to make the reader uncomfortable with the characters' lack of personality. Overall this is a book of its time and good social criticism of the patriarchy.

Tales Yet Unsung by Denton Salle

Review by Becky Jones

<http://ornerydragon.com/>

Tales Yet Unsung is a collection of short stories and almost novella length stories that provide history or backstory and fill in some gaps in Denton Salle's Avatar Wizard series. Some of the stories take place before the first book in the series, Sworn to the Light. In Tales Yet Unsung, we are gifted with ten stories. Two take place before Book 1, one tells us what happened in Book 3 while Jeremy and his friends were in Krali Marko's black mountain, one takes place immediately after the events in Book 4, and the remaining six are set after Book 5... which has yet to be published.

All of the stories can be read without spoilers for any of the books in the series. We also are provided with more details on the rich world of Slavic myths and legends the provides the basis for the Avatar

Wizard series. Additionally, the two stories that precede Book 1 do not leave you wishing you'd known those stories before reading Book 1. And that's a rare accomplishment. All the stories in *Tales Yet Unsung* are complete in themselves and do not require any information from the series.

The first two stories, "The Weight of the Past" and "A Boon for a Vixen" provide us with more details on the background of Jeremy's father, Petrov, and Mistress Arianna. We learn about the precipitating event that drove Petrov to renounce the ways of the volkhvy and the battle he faced after that, trying to put his past behind him and become a good husband and innkeeper. In the second story we get the accurate account of how and why Mistress Arianna came to the keep and how she convinced Master Anthony to marry her. This story is far more accurate than that told by the bards, believe me.

"Lessons in the School of War" takes us into Krali Marko's mountain with Jeremy and his six companions. We are given a glimpse of what they endured and conquered, how much they grew, and the deep friendships forged in the seven days (fourteen months for them) they were gone.

"Changes" gives us a brief glimpse of the very happy occasions that come, every once in a while, for those who live in the keep. Taking place after the events in the city of Venetsiya detailed in Book 4, we head back to Volkheim keep with Jeremy, Galena, Ivana, Kirill, and Yaros. They bring with them Helena, the Doge's granddaughter so she may be trained as a volkva, the first heron-shifter to show the gift in many generations. The group arrives home to several other joyful changes and happy surprises.

Finally, the last six stories all take place after Book 5, *Hall of Eternal Music* (due out Fall 2022). In "Riding with the Storm" Jeremy repays a promise to the spirit of Winter and rides with the Hunt. The temptations to do so eternally are great. Will Jeremy find it in himself to overcome them? In "Winter Megrimms" Jeremy and Galena return to his family's inn so Jeremy can introduce Galena to his parents and younger siblings. Always a bit stressful for anybody. "A Wedding Present for Vasilia" follows up on the story of the bard that got tossed out of the keep for insulting Mistress Arianna and a new song makes its debut at Vasilia's wedding.

"At the Forge of the Sun" tells Harald's story and the forging of his new and named war hammer. "Heron and Puppies" was previously published in *Adventure Stories for Young Readers* and gives us a look at life in the keep from the view of a young girl who is finding out that the volkhvy and volkva are not the monsters she heard about in the stories of her childhood. Helena also learns that chasing a Grim can have some less-than-fun consequences. Finally in "Danil and the Nightingale" we follow Danil as he and Harald ride back to Danil's land to see if they can figure out what's going on. The land is crying in pain and sorrow and things at the family keep are not what they seem. Danil and Harald have to face the Nightingale, a monstrous creation of the Dark thought to have been destroyed in the great war.

All of these stories have the same rich descriptions of land and people that characterize Salle's other books in this series. Salle was raised on these stories, and it shows in how skillfully he weaves his characters and their lives into the folktales. I have read all four of the books published so far, and I can say with certainty that you do not need to read those in order to enjoy the ten stories in this book. I highly recommend you go get and download *Tales Yet Unsung* and start reading. After that, if this is your first introduction to the world of the Avatar Wizard, I recommend you head back to Amazon and start in on the series. You won't regret it.

If you've already read the four books in the series, you'll end up like me – happy to be back in the world of the volkhvy and eagerly awaiting more stories.

Tenure by Blaine Lee Pardoe and Mike Baron

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Punisher Targets the Woke

At BasedCon, I was on a panel with Blaine Lee Pardoe. Blaine said that he worked with Mike Baron on a plot that could be summed up as “The Punisher kills the woke.”

And away we go.

Story

Braxton is a classical history professor in Portland, Oregon. Sure, he served in the military, but he was desk bound once the army discovered that he could type 70 words a minute. Braxton has a lovely wife who’s a lawyer, and a daughter with whom he reads *The Lord of the Rings*.

When a student decides to kick up a fuss over her pronouns, Braxton’s life spirals out of control. He’s fired from his college. His wife is run off the road. He’s SWATted. The FBI raids his house at two in the morning. AntiFa vandalizes his home. The local authorities are on the side of AntiFa. The Feds want to make the “misgendering” into a civil rights issue.

Braxton has had enough. He will get justice any way he can.

Tenure is a perfect encapsulation of “the Current Year” insanity. Everything that happens to Braxton is a culmination of everything we’ve seen happen to public figures: slander, libel, SWATting by local police, midnight raids by the Feds, general harassment, lawfare and murder.

Watching Braxton’s life get slowly ground to pieces by political activists and officials is tough to read. But it really does make it much more satisfying when the comeuppance hits.

If you’re someone like Razorfist, who wants to critique that there is no art or irony to Frank Castle’s style of retribution, there are elements where Braxton does take notes from the Shadow. I especially enjoyed one kill that relied on detonating the target’s electric car battery.

The World

Depressingly, this is the real world. The elements of corruption throughout the system are a little too real.

Characters

Braxton is a standard human being who just wants to do his job and stay out of the culture wars. He teaches classical history, and stays awake from modern politics. But like all normal humans, just because he has no interest in politics doesn’t mean politics doesn’t have an interest in him. When it does, there will be Hell to pay.

Braxton’s father is a former FBI agent who retired back when there was a possibility that the FBI wasn’t evil incarnate. When he sees Braxton’s family victimized, he’s happy to help with the retribution.

Faye is a reporter just looking into AntiFa locally. When the bodies start dropping, she thinks she's on the trail of a vigilante. But no one on either side of this wants her asking questions.

Then there's Ronin. He's the obligatory tech support character that moves the plot along. He's not exactly Frank Castle's Micro, but he's helpful.

Politics

Honestly, the politics is not right-wing. It's more anti-Leftist than it is on the right. Braxton just wants to be left alone. He has some guns, but this isn't Larry Correia gun porn. This is more classical (1780s) liberalism.

Who is this for?

Normally, we like to compare books to other books. But *Tenure* is more *Death Wish* or *The Punisher* than anything else. What starts as a revenge plot evolves into a mission that's definitely going to make for a fun series.

Why Buy It?

This is a fun, solid novel with an interesting premise. I suspect it's going to be an interesting ongoing series.

The Wizard's Way by H.P. Holo and Jacob Holo Review by Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

“The only good wizard is a dead wizard” really doesn't help when you ARE the wizard

Welcome to Aurica – a Victorian-style Queenship with a capitol city built into the ancient trees of an equally ancient mountainside. Known as The Iron City, this capitol is a haven for inventors and scientists who hail from the nation of Aurica. These inventors are people who want to investigate everything from electricity to flight to fart bombs. Hey, the sublime cannot be the only thing inventors work on. They might get bigger heads if there weren't others with less grand ambitions to keep them on their toes!

But Aurica has a policy that makes it the outlier among other nations. It doesn't like wizards. Male or female, child or adult, a wizard in the city who doesn't manage to hide is soon dangling from a rope or burning in a public spectacle. Either way, said wizard ends up quite dead.

Seventeen-year-old James Chaucey Thatcher is an inventor trying to make a personal glider he can use to fly.

He is also a wizard with a monster inside of him.

The Story

James Chaucey Thatcher is an orphan from The Caldron, the lowest sector of the Iron City. Swirling with noxious mists, the Caldron is giant pit where orphans and criminals live. No one can tell the differ-

ence between them, either, because they are all killing each other as much for sport as over the trash which the Iron City residents cast down upon them. When he was seven, Chaucey attracted the attention of the Queen Aurice's Grace, a social program that lifts orphan "Calderlings" out of their poverty and tries to make them respectable citizens of Aurica.

The program hasn't gone that well, particularly in Chaucey's case. Every time he tries to invent something or do something beneficial for the city that will prove he isn't a criminal-in-waiting, things go wrong and damage ensues. Worse, he still has enough visible signs of malnutrition and a general deportment that passerby recognize him as a "Calderling" on sight. Given that if he fails his upcoming evaluation by the Queen Aurice's Grace he gets sent back to the Caldron, it is not hard to see why Chaucey is a little desperate to get his latest invention off the ground, somewhat literally.

Chaucey is so desperate, in fact, that he is willing to resort to rather stupid tactics to try to prove his latest invention – a winged personal glider – will work. Unfortunately something again goes wrong with his experiment, and he gets trapped in an electric hansom (tram car). He then must wreck the hansom to save lives, only to realize he used his magic to do it.

Anyone who looks really hard will figure out how Chaucey managed not to kill anyone in this latest disaster. What they cannot know is that, whenever Chaucey's emotions reach a certain point, his magic manifests as a physical "familiar" – a mechanical lion he named the Stealgore at seven...

...when, in a desperate attempt to protect himself from being burnt alive in an oven, he first unleashed the mechanical lion and it killed twenty boys, plus their adult crime boss.

So not only is Chaucey an inventor, he is a wizard – a very powerful wizard whose skills lie in machining. And he is living smack dab in the center of The Iron City, which is not only full of inventors, it is full of metal. If the Stealgore accidentally gets loose, it will rampage uncontrollably through the capitol. The only two people in on Chaucey's secret are his inventing mentor, Charles Farwude, and Farwude's gentleman's hound Pentalion, an anthropomorphic pugman butler with a strict sense of propriety.

That number gets reduced by one when Farwude is brutally murdered and the city descends into madness hunting the wizard who committed the crime. Now Chaucey has to figure out just what his power is and where he can go to escape this craziness. Because in Aurica, the only good wizard is a dead wizard.

Or so everyone says....

The Characters

Chaucey is a very sympathetic character even when he does something profoundly ill-advised. He is so traumatized by what happened to him in The Caldron that the very idea of going back there sends him into survival mode, which he channels into building something that will show his value to society. What he does not yet realize is that he, as a person, is worth more than anything he could invent. Add to this his desperate need to hide his true nature in Aurica, where if any human citizen sees what he can do, he will be dead – or have to kill again in self-defense – and his behavior makes a sad amount of reasonable sense.

Luckily he has friends who see his worth when he cannot. Elsa, the girl of Chaucey's dreams, may give him a hard time (particularly after he wrecks her all-electric hansom), but that doesn't mean she doesn't like and want to help him. Pentalion would make Alfred Pennyworth proud with his professionalism

and brotherly attendance on his young gentleman, though he could stand to relax a hair or two. Both these characters help anchor and steer Chaucey as he seeks answers to the mysteries surrounding him at the same time that he worries about the invisible clock apparently only he can hear ticking down to his doom.

The World

Picture Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist* thrown into a world with anthropomorphic animals (bears and dogs for the most part), add a good dose of magic and a lot of Jules Verne-like inventions, sprinkle in a few dragons, and the world of *The Wizard's Way* takes shape. The Iron City is center stage for this novel but remains so detailed that waiting for information on the rest of the universe is not frustrating. Rather, it is a good idea – with so much to learn about the city built into the trees, there is not a lot of time to absorb how the rest of the world works!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

People die. Their deaths are not described graphically but they are not pretty nonetheless. Chaucey also appreciates Elsa's curves and figure, while another female character makes certain to show her own figure off to the fullest extent she can manage in this Victorian setting. Said female character is a wizard with power over flesh, her own and others, which leads to some rather disturbing scenes and more than one nightmare scenario if someone thinks about her abilities too hard. The battle scenes where she gets hurt are not pretty even though they are not described graphically.

Who is it for?

Teens will love this YA novel for sure, and Steampunk fans would be remiss if they didn't give it a read. Anyone looking for a Victorian era romp in a fantasy world that has more to reveal will also want it, and those seeking a good adventure are in for a treat when they pick up *The Wizard's Way*. Lovers of anthropomorphic bears and dogs will enjoy the novel, as will those who want a world with a great deal of depth in it. Boys will enjoy the puzzles and swashbuckling adventure while girls marvel at the societal engineering and wonder just how the protagonist is going to get out of this one. Mecha aficionados will adore the Stealgore and want one of their own, as will cat owners. The ending will have readers clamoring for the sequel, too!

Why buy it?

It is a fun book in a new universe with a believable Steampunk aesthetic. Those are few and far between these days, so why not pick it up and enjoy it?

Literary Criticism

Fiction: What is it good for?

by Cedar Sanderson

There is a sense in our modern culture that fiction must equate lying, and ergo, it is bad and indulging in it is faintly if not overtly wrong. I've seen this cropping up in the whole books for boys debate, again, and it is by far from the first time I have seen that argued. I have had people tell me, in my role as a librarian years ago, that they gave up fiction when they 'grew up' and only read non-fiction as it was true. Boys, then, who leave off reading fiction because they don't care for the books offered to them, and prefer the far less agenda-driven non-fiction books on dinosaurs, trucks, and many other topics, meet with the tacit approval of these adults to ignore fiction. Only... they don't leave fiction entirely. Fiction drives video games, and boys consume those massively. It's books, specifically, which get the opprobrium (yes, yes, I am aware of the long-running and largely basis to smear video games as promoting senseless violence, subtly different and I'm not qualified to speak on it as I can't even play Stray without being wildly upset when my cat character dies.)

Personally, I read and write fiction for entertainment. Mine and others! This does not mean, though, that I am unaware of the hidden benefits of telling a story, and of taking a story in. If we separate all books into two sections, as Oatley describes in his exploration of literary criticism stretching back to Aristotle, of history and poetry, we have books which cover the facts, the dry bones of the world around us. Poetry, which encompasses what would become the stories we label fiction, is then the breath of soul into that world. Fiction is the emotion, the humanity, and through stories we can experience the potential of the facts which surround us actuated into actions and consequences... in short, we can explore the universe without any risk, until we have discovered the path forward for us. The characters model actions we might take, and through a tale, we can sound out what the results of those actions may be for us.

Through reading fiction, and using our minds to step into the shoes of characters in situations we may never have been in, and probably never will be, readers can expand their empathy, their ability to put themselves into the shoes of a real person when they interact with someone, shall we say, unpleasant. Empathy modeled in fiction thus comes into the real world and is a social lubricant in interactions with people around us. There is a study on this, as well, and it points out that while the stereotype of a bookworm is someone who wants to retreat from society preferring the company of books, the reality is that a reader is somewhat better equipped to deal with society than a child (or even adult) who has been brought up with no instruction in social niceties. One of the other observations made in the paper caught my eye: "an ability to see oneself in a story and simulate the experiences described is more important for predicting the reading behavior of men than women." Which they point out may be hard-wired behaviour, or culturally embedded. Either way – men and women approach reading differently, something to keep in mind as a writer when considering your audience.

Fiction may also increase the ability of the reader to deal with this lonely world of ours. There is a direct link between the non-fiction reader and feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Narrative fiction readers, on the other hand! "Reading narrative fiction was associated with more social support and reading expository nonfiction was related to less social support and more stress." Whether it is the empathy adapted from reading stories about others, or even considering the characters themselves a form

of parasocial support, the reality is that human beings do not do well with loneliness. Feeling alone can lead to depression, low self-esteem, and ultimately can become a factor in early death. I'll say that again – particularly in the elderly, being lonely is a factor in the mortality rate, as well as in increased mental and physical illnesses. Am I saying – or any of the study authors, for that matter – that if you don't read it's bad for your health? Well, maybe. Certainly it is indicated that reading narrative fiction is going to improve your mental and even physical health.

There's even one more factor that can come into play in the connection between health and fiction – this study is looking at the ability of a doctor to empathize with his patient, and to be able to extract a better picture of the health of that person than AI can do, in the time when there is a temptation to replace the human with the machine because of cost savings. “There is concern that stressing on the hard sciences may be weeding out more empathetic and caring candidates who can be better healers.” The paper goes on to say that using AI as a tool to replace some of the rote memorization might actually give doctors the time and mental space to indulge in empathy for their patients. Moreover, “the quality which will distinguish the best from the rest in the time of AI will be empathy. Human empathy is something that AI and machines cannot simulate.”

All of that, in a story! Fiction is a place where a reader can take up the human experience, can improve their emotional intelligence, can hone their empathy. Through those difficult and incalculable skills, the fiction reader improves their social support, which carries them through times of illness and gives them a reason to live – even so tenuous a grasp, perhaps, as waiting on the last book of the series to come out! – all of this, because they picked up a book and lost themselves in an author's imagination for a short while.

We who write, then, are not liars for a living. We are, instead, the storytellers who weave wisdom with wit, show that love can win through, that joy has a place in this bleak world. We can keep the black dog at bay for another day, and perhaps that is enough. We are purveyors of hope.

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