

# The R3F

## Review of Books

### Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor  
February 2024

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## FREE BOOKS

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

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch  
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future  
The Brittle Riders  
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

Become the Hunted

Not In Our Stars

The Captive’s Rank

The Universal Prey

The Praesidium of Archive

The Empire’s Legacy

Voyage of the Planetslayer

Revolt and Rebirth

The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy  
with Demons

Warsprite

Web of Futures

The Iron Gates of Life

Deserts of Vast Eternity

The Last Age

The Shadowy Road

When Angels Fall

The Computer Ferrets

The Sea Dragon

The Thug Acrostic

What You See

Painterror

Adrift on a Foreign Sea

The Silver Crusade

Each Shining Hour

Gravelight

The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy

The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series

Eye of the Staricane

Capitulation of the Carnivores

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls

The One World

Mistress of the Waves

Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World

Airy Castles All Ablaze

Stand Against the Light

Of Breaking Waves

Practical Exercise

Simultaneous Times

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

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

# Editorial

For better or worse, we are advancing to bimonthly publication, to alternate with *Eldritch Science*. This issue of the Review is a bit late. Perhaps we will do better next time.

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# Fiction

## Academic Magic by Becky Jones Short Review by George Phillies

Becky Jones is a Neffer. She served for a year as Chair of our Directorate. She notes that she had been a faculty member with a Ph.D. in political science, but finally fled academia. She has now given us three books of a series, namely *Academic Magic*, *Night Mage*, and *Magic Abroad*. The heroine, Zoe O'Brien, is an assistant professor of history at Summerfield College. She teaches history of magic and witchcraft. Her stay on campus deteriorates soon after arrival when the squirrels start talking to her. By and by she is advised by the other magicians on campus that she, too, is a magician, and an Earth Elemental. As her skills advance, the caliber of her opposition also escalates. By the end of book three, press coverage might be "Taylor Swift has new boyfriend. Red Sox Win Series. Godzilla Destroys Galway. National French Vanilla Ice Cream Shortage Threatens." of which headline three might well be found inside book four, reporting on book three. Intermixed with the magic is a great deal of personal life. Grading papers. Counselling students. Dinner with friends. Dealing with cats...they talk, too. Well written, so the pages keep turning, with a dim view of some aspects of academic politics.

## Death Cult by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy [Jim McCoy Jimbosffreviews.substack.com](http://JimMcCoyJimbosffreviews.substack.com)

Ladies and Gentleman (and you in the back) I present to you a plot synopsis of Declan Finn's Latest Book, Death Cult.

Hi  
OOF!  
OUCH!  
Dude, don't  
He did?  
Really?  
That sounds like it hurt.  
That had to have hurt  
Them again  
I'm not sure that's physically possible  
I KNOW that's NOT physically possible  
COOL!  
HOT!  
The End!

You may all now return to your regularly scheduled lives.

Kidding!

And honestly, I don't think I've quite done it justice. There is a slight chance that I'm oversimplifying a bit. The book is after all, quite a bit longer than that so called synopsis. It's worth reading every

word though, because Death Cult kicks ass.

In Hell Spawn Saint Tommy fought a demon. It was ugly. There was lots of fighting and many people died to death. It was quite horrifying. I loved the book, but I was a bit worried. Don't get me wrong. Finn is a good author. But when you're writing Christian fiction and you go up against a demon, what comes next? I mean, I didn't see Finn bringing Satan himself to Earth for a straight up rumble, although I'd buy that book. The threats need to get bigger if you're going to keep it entertaining. So what do you do and who do you do it with? You fight a death cult. (No, that's not a spoiler. It's the title of the stinking book.) It works. It's deadly dangerous and definitely something that most Christians in general, and Catholics in particular, would find themselves at odds with.

I will say this much: Some of the symbolism in this book is both funny and a little blatant. I'm thinking of one thing in particular which I'm not going to mention. It makes massive amounts of sense. It's pretty gross. It's kind of funny in a sick sort of way because of how well it fits. I enjoyed it and it works but it's pretty hard to miss.

Finn has built his world very well. We're treated to some old friends and some new acquaintances, and they all fit together nicely. I really like it when a book stays true to the universe it is written in. Death Cult does so nicely. The internal logic is consistent, the characters stay true to their own motivations. I don't mean that the book is predictable because it's not. There is, however, a difference between logical and predictable and Finn has found his groove here.

Having said that, it's worth mentioning that not every saint was Mother Theresa. I mean Saint George slew the dragon and the Catholic faith has seen its share of fights as well as saints that were involved in them. Tommy is no exception. Yes, he's a nice guy when he can be. That doesn't mean he's always a nice guy. My pastor (who admittedly is not Catholic) just did a sermon a few weeks ago about the sixth commandment and talked about how it's not wrong to kill in the defense of life. Trust me when I tell you that Tommy has plenty of reasons to fight God would approve of all of them.

In a way, part of the reason I think I liked this book so much is because Finn picked a villain that made sense in the context of that selfsame commandment. The villain is the kind of person you just want to slap and can't. They are evil personified (and I'm guessing that's intentional) and hide behind a facade of providing a useful service. They really boil my butt. It did me heart well to see Tommy after them.

Finn has always (or at least as long as I've been reading his work) been able to write an awesome action sequence and Death Cult gave him a chance to show off his skills. You start to feel bad for Tommy after awhile because of all the crap he is going through but that doesn't mean it's not fun to "watch". I will say that I have no intention of ever getting on Finn's bad side though. It would appear to be a bad idea. If he can conceive of violence at this level, he might just be able to get the drop on me. That would be a bad thing.

The politics in this book work for me. I have no trouble seeing a liberal mayor cover for an unmitigated evil within his city if it fits his ideology. Finn does a good job of displaying things in a way that would not please the mainstream media but fits with the beliefs of roughly half the country. It is presented in a manner consistent with religion (his main character is a saint in the making after all) but without being overly preachy. There are conversations I've had with family members that cover some of the same subjects. I'd like to get some of them to read Death Cult specifically, but since they don't really do horror...

UGH

Let's face it though. Family or not, if you can't enjoy a Declan Finn book you pretty much suck at life and your opinion doesn't really matter. Seriously, you all need to read this book right now. I'll wait to finish the review. Hie thee off to Amazon and purchase the thing. The link is down there 'somewhere. Okay, okay. If you haven't bought the first book, Hell Spawn, then I'll wait for you to get back after buying both of them. Go ahead.

Back now? Did you put your credit card number in right? Actually, I don't really care as long as you didn't use mine. I bought the Indiegogo with the ARC and the autographed copy so yeah... I dished out the loot already.

Ok, so maybe I talked a bit of trash there, but this is a really good book and I'm seriously looking forward to number three. I think he announced a title, but if so, I'm pretty sure I forgot what it was going to be. That's okay though. I'm gonna read it anyway.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Hail Marys

## He Who Hunts With Monsters by Shirtaloon

Review by Jim McCoy

[Jim McCoy Jimbosffreviews.substack.com](http://JimMcCoyJimbosffreviews.substack.com)

Umm

Wow.

Jimbo's Awesome Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

A friend of mine recommended Shirtaloon's He Who Fights With Monsters series and I figured I'd pick the first one up, give it a quick review if I like it and maybe revisit the series at some point in the future if I enjoyed it as much as he told me I would. I mean, I love a good LitRPG, and I've been told that He Who Fights with Monsters was also progression and cultivation fiction. I've been told that I should try both, but I was never quite sure what the difference was. I am, after all, an old fuddy duddy and this newfangled Gamelit thing didn't exist when I was a wee little Jimbo. It's like trying to learn the rules of football in your thirties or forties instead of as a kid watching TV with your dad. It can be enjoyable, but there's a learning curve.

And I learned a lot by reading He Who Fights With Monsters. I learned that there is no need for titles of individual books, just a number at the end of the series. Reading this thing was like having a conversation among Potterheads: Remember what Snape does at the end of Book 5, except there's no choice. There are no titles for the books. Speaking of Harry Potter, I learned that there is actually an author out there who can out-smart-aleck J.K. Rowling. I'm impressed. I mean, you still don't have to call me sir, Professor, but you might want to refer to Shirtaloon that way. I learned a lot about worldbuilding by sitting there with my Kindle app open, screaming, Go, Shirt, go! Seriously, this guy has his stuff together. And there is a lot here through eleven books.

I learned that it is better to have friends than allies. I learned that I need to step up my sandwich game. I learned a lot about how to make a totally amazing magic system and have it make sense. Shirtaloon knows how to get things done in a book.

The main character of He Who Fights With Monsters is a guy named Jason Asano. Jason begins the



series as a socialist but eventually figures out that the real world doesn't work the way he thinks he does. He is a fierce combatant and nobody's fool. Jason does what's right even when it costs him more than he can afford to pay. Asano is the guy we all wish we were. Oh, and not only can he outcook your grandma, he can do it on two planets that don't even share a lot of the same ingredients.

Jason is also a man with a great deal of mental flexibility. He can adapt to all kinds of crazy things that happen to him. He has a tendency to work with whoever he has to regardless of what their previous relationship was. He does what he needs to do and not what he wants to do. Jason Asano is a man of character, even if he's not always agreeable. And, could take life a little more seriously at times

Of course, there's a huge supporting cast across eleven books. Jason's buddy Gary is not just a leonid who can swing a hammer, he's also a hero. Jason's friend Farrah is amazingly intelligent, incredibly hardcore and teaches him a lot. Humphrey is a guy who can dish it out and take it and who has a heart of gold. Stash is cool, for a dragon with a biscuit fascination. And those are just Jason's friends on Palimustus.

He comes back to Earth, and we meet his whole family and another whole cornucopia of friends, allies and enemies. Note that the three groups overlap at points. His little cousin Emi is totally the girl I should've met when I was the right age to meet a girl that age. His great-grandmother turns out to be something I didn't expect her to be. There is magic on Earth, but not much and most people don't know about it. Even those who have it can't necessarily function as well as they can on Palimustus for a variety of reasons. But remember what I said about worldbuilding? Shirtaloon makes it make sense. It so seamless I didn't realize how well he had done it until just now, but the dude is a genius.

The battle sequences (and there are a WHOLE FREAKING BUNCH of them) are done well. Shirtaloon has a way of allowing the characters to use their powers in ways that make sense not just to them but to the reader. Action scenes are well thought out and move fast. I'd be careful here. One battle can lead to another can lead to another can lead to a long day at work after only a few hours' sleep the night before. Don't ask me how I know that. Suffice it to say that dude can keep it interesting.

There is enough political maneuvering in these books to keep a fan of both Battletech and Dune happy, I would know from experience. There is always someone trying to accomplish something using political methods. Things are a bit strange on Palimustus, given the fact that magical power affects status as much as anything else and it creates situations where politicking can get a little complicated. Add to that the fact that Jason doesn't exactly follow the rules even after he learns them and things can go from zero to insane awfully quickly.

I loved these books. You will too, especially if you're into any form of LitRPG whatsoever. And besides, I need someone to suffer with me. The He Who Fights With Monsters series doesn't appear to be anywhere near over. As a matter of fact, the table is set for the next stage, and I see no reason to believe that it's the last one. I stopped here because

**\*SOB\* \*WHINE\*\*CRY\***

The next book isn't out yet. Misery loves company. So go read all eleven books and love them. Then we can sit and cry together. It ll be great.

Or sumfin. Listen, we'll cry then we'll write about it and your high school literature teacher will be massively proud.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Awakening Stones

The Icarus Needle by Timothy Zahn

Review by Declan Finn

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

Time to go full Kobayashi Maru

With the Icarus novels, Timothy Zahn apparently decided that Leverage and Mission: Impossible were just playing on easy mode and Le Carre was only medium difficulty.

In The Icarus Needle, Zahn has gone to full Kobayashi Maru.

The story

Gregory Rourke and his partner, the Kadolian named Seline, have been working for the Icarus group for a few years, looking for the Icarus gates long lost technology developed by an ancient civilization. It's the only way to break the transportation monopoly of the competition, the Paath.

Unfortunately, all that has changed. The human part of the Icarus group has taken over and started a purge of everyone else. The new General in charge was responsible for pulling Rourke's backup in The Icarus Changeling, and wants Rourke to fall in line, take orders without question because Rourke has played so well with others. But Rourke's solutions in previous encounters have led to one too many Paath victories.

To smooth over the transition to the new status quo, they've hired a renowned fixer, Nicholas Rourke Gregory's father. (When I thought that Rourke's father would show up in the series, I always believed he would be a punchline to the series, not a main character. I still want him played by James Garner.)

The General has a new mission for Rourke and Seline: go down to a planet and seek out the codex of gate addresses Rourke surmised back in The Icarus Twin. The General has a plan that includes a one-way trip for Seline.

Now, Rourke and Seline have to circumvent their own allies, in a plan that amounts to a suicide mission. And that's just the first hundred pages.

If they survive that, there's just one other problem: the locals used to work for the ancient aliens Rourke calls the Icari and the former employers would like to become the masters. The key to their plan: using Seline.

And all that is before the Paath show up.

Once again, I find I cannot say enough good things about one of Zahn's Icarus novels. Every Icarus book is a smart, snappy thrill ride with no slow moments, or time to breathe. While I am a fast reader, I generally do not consume 400-page novels in under four hours, as I did here. Each Icarus novel has more twists than a bent corkscrew designed by MC Escher, and they all move at the speed of a Larry Correia Monster Hunter novel.

Normally, Rourke has to tangle with an 8-sided chessboard, be it with multiple branches of organized crime, the Paath, law enforcement, environmental factors and the guest star of the week (sometimes an assassin, sometimes a con man, etc). Now, he has a new side to worry about: his own.



I guess Zahn thought Rourke didn't have enough problems. It gets bad enough that Rourke actually has to take up arms and open fire, something he has largely avoided up to this point in the series.

On top of all that, *The Icarus Needle* brings multiple plot threads to a head. The mystery of the Icari has been built up throughout the series, and many of them come together here, tying together multiple threads. Once again, Zahn shows off that he has mastered the art of playing perfectly fair with the reader. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, the reader sees everything Rourke sees, making the conclusions self-evident and obvious but only after Rourke explains it.

The conclusion of the book is truly unexpected and seriously changes the board and the players in this game.

*The Icarus Coda* is the next and final book in the series, and I can only imagine what twists Zahn has in store for us next.

## The Characters

One of the nice things with Zahn is that he doesn't believe in dumb characters. No one here is stupid. Seline knows how Rourke's mind works (sideways, with WD40). Even among the Paath, there are people who are at least Rourke's equal, and they have more resources at their disposal.

The fun part of *The Icarus Needle* is watching Rourke and Seline play off of each other, their enemies, and the competition.

As usual, Gregory Rourke feels like a spy who has been raised by Bret Maverick. Gregory Rourke never gets lost in the wilderness of mirrors, since he grew up there. And putting him up against his own father truly makes these two chess players who know their moves from the beginning.

Seline is truly Rourke's partner, and if she's not his equal, she can certainly keep up with him.

We also see the return of the Paath Director Naask and his minion, the expeditor Huginn (Muginn appears later). They are truly enjoyable to watch as everyone spars with each other, and one never knows which way the characters are going to jump next. I haven't seen a relationship like this, with characters this smart maybe ever. The alliances seem to shift like sands in an earthquake. It is a joy to watch competitors team up against an external threat, all the while, everyone is playing their own game. And while Naask and the Paath are still the competition, *The Icarus Needle* makes it clear that they are not exactly the enemy. But what else can we expect from the man who created Grand Admiral Thrawn?

## The World

Usually, there is just enough world-building to make the plot work, building upon the layers of what we've seen in previous novels. This time, Zahn is continuing to build on multiple worlds at once: there's Rourke's day-to-day existence, the new world being landed on today, and the world of the Icari, thousands of years ago, in an effort to piece together why the Icarus Gate network fell apart in the first place.

I may have to reread this series again just to take notes.

## Politics

The only politics of this book are the interpersonal.

Content Warning

It may be PG. At worst.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who likes the brilliance of Sherlock Holmes, the spy craft of John Le Carre, the action of an Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the complexity of only the best caper novels.

Why buy it?

This series shows Timothy Zahn at his best. Unlike certain authors who get lazier and more long-winded with success, coasting on their prior reputation, Zahn just keeps getting better as an author. If there is justice in this world, Zahn will be made an official grandmaster of science fiction, just for the Icarus series alone.

**Just Stab Me Now by Jill Bearup**

**Review by Declan Finn**

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

Welcome to The Princess Bride, with extra strangeness.

This review will be a little different today. Because we're going to show you the whole book because the author started by making this a comedy routine on YouTube.

Jill Bearup is a YouTuber whose hobbies include the art of staged combat. Many of her videos center around fights in media, as well as armor and weaponry.

A few years ago, she made a series of shorts that lampooned fantasy romance tropes—all the romance tropes. The series focused on the discussion between the author, Caroline, and the heroine, Rosamund.

This is the series in one video, assuming YouTube doesn't do something stupid. Again.

The series was so popular, fans of the series demanded that Jill Bearup write a novel.

The result is Just Stab Me Now.

The story

I will assume you have not watched the above video. If you have, please bear with us.

Caroline Lindley is a mid-tier author who tries not to let her day job as a database administrator get in the way of her writing career. Mostly, Caroline writes about cozies centered around a coffee shop. But now she is going to write fantasy romance!

If only the characters would cooperate.

The nineteen-year-old heroine has turned into a thirty-six-year-old widow named Rosamund. Captain Leo Collins, the Hot Enemy in this enemies-to-lovers trope, looks suspiciously like Caroline's editor. And they are all giving Caroline lip.

While in the book, Rosamund and Collins are on a mission to get a peace treaty signed if only their author would stop appearing in their book and meddling.

When Jill Bearup tried to get this book traditionally published, the universal reply was, 'We like this book, we just can't market it'. While the Amazon description hearkens to Terry Pratchett, I would argue that *Just Stab Me Now* has more in common with *The Princess Bride* novel. Like William Goldman's original novel, there is our fantasy story, and there's the meta-universe.

Unlike *The Princess Bride*, Bearup created a fictional author with her own character arc to go through, differentiating it from Goldman's meta-fiction that he himself is a part of.

You would think Caroline popping in and out of the narrative would be a distraction, or that Bearup's multiple-font system to convey point of view would be a pain. They both work.

One of our modern-day concerns is that if the author is a woman, and the main character is a woman, the female lead in the story will out-fight, out-think, and be superior to her male counterpart in every way, making the reason for his existence to be a punching bag for her. That is not a problem here. They each have different strengths that balance out the narrative. Rosamund is no bitch girl boss here, perhaps more what John C. Wright referred to as an action girl. She gets into three fights in the entire story, and it's all surprisingly realistic melee combat, utilizing a sort of sword judo at one point (read it, it'll make sense). In fact, there is a scene where Rosamund spends half a page contemplating how, if she gets into a fight, she will get her butt kicked and I can't help but wonder if Jill Bearup deliberately put that scene in to deliberately counter the trend of catering to modern audiences.

Interesting thing about *Just Stab Me Now* is where it deviates from the original series of shorts on YouTube. very few sections are just cut and paste, much to my surprise. It treats the original series as an outline. All to the book's credit.

Another difference is how Caroline interacts with her characters. She's not limited to interacting with just one. Funny enough, Bearup does capture writer character problems when the characters develop free will and make choices on their own and having two problems solve each other even if it wasn't in the outline. It's good enough to explain writer schizophrenia, even if it doesn't capture it perfectly. (My personal experience with writing never sees me having a direct conversation with characters, their random events and independent choices just sort of happen.)

### The Characters

As I alluded to above, this has an interesting four-person rotating POV.

We have Caroline, the author, who is fighting with her characters, struggling under an overbearing boss who makes both of her jobs difficult, and has unresolved feelings for her own editor. She has work to do.

The editor, Henry, is a relatively minor character in this novel, but he has an amusing perspective that highlights parts of the story we wouldn't otherwise get. Bearup tells the story through a strict third-person personal perspective we see things through the character's eyes, and we are severely limited to

what they know, and no more. Henry's view on Caroline help shape her more.

Our two romance characters are also well-developed. Part of the joke is that they are too well-developed to be trapped in the tropes Caroline wants them to be in.

Rosamund is recently widowed with two children, her husband murdered less than a year ago. And if she thinks she's having a bad time of it now, just wait until she learns why he was killed. She is logical, she overthinks problems, she is bound by duty, which leaves little room for romance, driving Caroline crazy. While she carries more knives on her than a Ginsu outlet store, she isn't getting into fistfights, and she well knows her limitations.

Captain Leo Collins is taciturn, has no skill in diplomacy, and is quite bemused by the games the aristocracy play. He has other layers to his character, but those are spoilers.

## The World

The fantasy world is interesting. The geopolitics is as serious as Game of Thrones (lacking the sexual perversion and murder porn) with enough social etiquette to make for some comedy on par with Jane Austen. There are two warring kingdoms, our two leads are from opposite sides of the conflict, and they act as couriers.

I find it interesting that Bearup went through a lot of trouble to insert a religion in the book. It's clearly Christianity with serial numbers rubbed off and I'm not sure she scrubbed very hard.

There is a little bit of magic thrown in there, and fantasy medical remedies, but the entire thing is fleshed out just enough to get the plot going. This isn't Tolkien. But it has slight similarities to David Weber orders a pizza.

## Politics

There are no modern politics in here. At all. Zero. There is none of the message. There's no rewriting for modern audiences. It's just a simple fantasy romance with the author's personal problems thrown in for good measure.

## Content Warning

The harshest I think this gets is PG-13. It helps that Caroline is squeamish about certain scenes, and prefers they fade to black.

## Who is it for?

Frankly if you like The Princess Bride, I think you'll like this one. Unlike Goldman's work, the characters get paragraphs of backstory instead of pages, but it's the closest work I could accurately compare this to in my experience.

## Why buy it?

Is this a heartbreaking work of staggering genius? Nope. But it's fun.

One Extra Corpse by Barbara Hambly  
Short Review by George Phillis

Barbara Hambly has been one of my favorite authors since her first novel, *The Coming of the Dark*, a fantasy tale published more than four decades ago. Her most recent two novels, *Scandal in Babylon* and *One Extra Corpse*, are mystery novels set in a place which seems almost scientific, Hollywood of the early 1920s. Can we really believe that a director, to enhance cinematographic realism, had live ammunition fired over the heads of extras, or that some number of extras died during filming of another silent epic? *One Extra Corpse* is a mystery investigated by widow Emma Blackstone, the companion of her sister-in-law silent-movie actress Kitty Flint. With motion picture directors, one violently deceased, romance, Russian spies, a boat chase that would have dismayed James Bond, expensive and fake jewelry, socialists and Mexican politics, bootleggers, a heroine who occasionally thinks in Latin given her prior life as an archeological assistant, vast numbers of clues and red herrings, arson, and at the end the surprise denouement for which adequate clues were planted in advance if you had noticed them. As a historical novel, the tale is overlaid with fine details of motion picture production, period automobiles, social customs of the wealthy, and cameo appearances by historical figures. Hambly writes delightfully complicated mysteries set in places that might as well be mythical.

Rex Regis by TC Ross  
Review by Jim McCoy  
Jim McCoy [Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimbossffreviews.substack.com)

I was impressed with TC Ross's *Rex Regis: Book One of Blackwood* and I find myself a bit surprised at that. I grabbed a copy of the book on Kindle Unlimited because I had been urged to by my friends over at Raconteur Press. I knew nothing about the book or its author, but I know some of the people who work for Raconteur and I figured that if they recommended the book, it would probably be worth my time. So I picked up a copy and read through the thing in like two days. That's fast for me. Like, really fast. I couldn't get my head out of the book because I liked it so much.

BUT

*Rex Regis* is a story that starts off with somewhat of a romance feel and that's not normally my thing. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean that it's a romance novel in the sense that there is a bunch of sex, and I'm told that one of the defining traits of romance is a whole lot of woohah in the hoohah. I find though, that the lack of the horizontal lambada actually improves things. Seriously, there are things I'd rather read about than a game of hide the salai and Ross managed to include a bunch of them.

*Rex Regis* had me engrossed (SCORE!! I JUST USED THE WORD ENGROSSED IN A SENTENCE! Somebody call my English teacher. She'd be so proud!) from beginning to end. I can't quite figure it out. The first two thirds or three quarters of the book is more relationship- and worldbuilding than anything. That makes sense because it's the first book in a series, but it turns out that Ross is really good at it.

Within the first couple of chapters I had one guy who appeared to be solid and dependable, but who I could tell was deeper than just stereotypical best friend dude (Bodgan Laird), a woman who was in a situation over her head (Katherine Sideris) and her abusive boyfriend (Nolan Iforgethislast-namebutheDoesn'tdeserveonesowhatever.) and a very messy situation. It's not really a love triangle in the sense that *The Hunger Games* is, and it's nowhere near as tacky as that *Twilight* trash, but there is a bit of that here, but with a twist.

Oh, wait. Did I say twist? Everything in Rex Regis is a twist. Maybe it just seems like it. Ross did a really good job of giving us things that don't make sense at first, and then awhile later when you're thinking about something else, it's just like OH WOW. I get it now. I had to be patient while reading Rex Regis. Everything was explained eventually. It just took awhile to get there.

And for the record, just in case you missed it, I would like to kick Nolan right square in the teeth. While wearing cleats. Made of butcher knives. Or sumfin. Yeah, he's That Guy. It's probably a good thing that he doesn't actually exist. I might get myself in trouble.

Of course there are more than just those three characters in Rex Regis. Ross has placed a heavy emphasis on family throughout the book. I approve. There's a lot here that makes sense. Sometimes it's an older person offering advice. Sometimes it's a younger person doing something not quite ill-advised but not quite well-advised either. Other times it's that one buttface family member who won't mind his business. Toss in a confused father or two and she had me alternately laughing, nodding and frustrated depending on the exact circumstance involved. Seriously, I once praised DT Read for how well she writes family, and I meant it, but Ross might just give her a run for her money.

Ross does description very well. I know that's not something I usually comment on, but it's true this time. I usually focus on characters and action (and my own writing suffers from a lack of description for precisely that reason) but there were times when I felt like I was actually there for some of these scenes. I could picture these locations in my mind so well that I feel like I could build the sets for them, given the skills and a big enough budget.

Rex Regis centers around two towns and the people in them. Both towns are fully realized with multiple locations that just seem to fit there. The main characters know them well and I got a good chance to get a feel for them even if I only got to see the amount of actual real estate that actually fits into a single book. That's good though. Ross showed off her towns enough to make them feel lifelike and didn't get carried away to the point that it got overwhelming.

I don't want to give too much away here, but there is also a wilderness area that I would very much like to take a hike through. It's developed slowly throughout the story, but it sounds just gorgeous. It also sounds fascinating. I wish there was a Blackwood theme park because the forest would be an amazing attraction if they did it right. (They'd have to go heavy on the awesome and easy on the kitsch. That wouldn't be easy.) I'm going to shut up now, at least about the forest.

There is also a lot of the world that still needs exploring. There is an appendix at the end of Rex Regis that covers the existence of certain fictional groups that don't either don't appear in the main text or were easy to miss. That's okay though. This is Book One and, at the end of the day, that's just another reason to read Book Two.

When the action actually does start though, it goes from zero to ten in about three words or at least it felt like it. It jumped out at just the right time and it was well written. What little violence there was happened in an entertaining and believable manner. Ross also managed to use the fighting to make her good guys gooder and her evil guys eviller and I loved that.

In short, I'll be picking up the sequel as soon as I can. I'd urge you to get the first one now.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Green Eyes



## Starship Freedom by Daniel Arenson

Review by Jim McCoy

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

People are stupid. Even, sometimes especially, the smart ones. We've all done things that we regretted later because of a lapse in judgment, and ignoring basic facts that would have made all the difference if we had just been paying attention. Not to put out too many spoilers, but that is kind of the theme of the first few chapters of Daniel Arenson's *Starship Freedom*. There are aliens closing in on us and no-one quite believes it, even when confronted with good evidence that the bad guys are coming.

That does make a certain amount of sense though. No one has ever seen an alien. Any space battles have been fought between various human factions. Humanity hasn't had a war in a generation, and everyone is hoping that it will never have one again. There are still military forces present but humanity is ruled by three great powers and they're at peace. The great hero ship of World War III, which was actually an interplanetary war, is the starship *Freedom*, but it's been converted into a spaceborne museum.

The Alliance's mightiest ship is now overrun with tourists. Most of its berthing spaces have been converted to hotel rooms. There is a pool, and an arcade. There are bars and even a mini golf course. What's missing is weaponry.

There is one main gun, but the only round for it onboard is a fake for tourists to take pictures with. The other guns are still active, but they're used to launch fireworks. The space fighters are still operative as well, but they have no combat loads and are used to launch fireworks. The *Freedom* is a once proud ship with a proud history. It's still caught with its pants around its ankles when the bad guys show up.

And make no mistake, these are villainous aliens the likes of which I've rarely seen. They're here to conquer but that's not all they want. They've got a huge tech advantage, too: Earth hasn't made it out of our own solar system. I don't think Arenson ever mentioned precisely where his aliens are from, but it's not here and their space travel technology is scarily powerful and accurate. It's reminiscent of Robotech's space fold system on the surface and it's fast. Look out if one of those is after you.

Ya know, I hate it when people say Look out. Look out of what? My house? The car? Should I stick my head up like a meerkat and look out of the ground?

\*SIGH\*

Fine. I'll find my own way to look out.

Anyway

For being an unarmed museum ship with its Army contingent left dirtside, the starship *Freedom* manages to see an awful lot of action. Seriously, Commander James Bulldog King, Captain of the ship is a badass from the halls of badassery. He's a decorated veteran of World War III, having survived a throat slashing at the last battle of the war. I'm still a bit confused as to why he wasn't in his fighter at the time, but I may have just missed that. At any rate, King is a guy who just won't give up.

Once the fighting gets started it doesn't let up. A lot of the combat takes place in space. That makes sense in a book named *Starship Freedom*. And, of course, aliens have to get here somehow so it only makes sense that they have their own ships which Earth's forces are going to try to stop. There has to be

a naval battle in space.

There is one heck of a dust-up planetside as well. It gets a bit frustrating at times but for all the right reasons. The invaders are tough, and things didn't go the way I wanted them to. That makes sense. When a technologically superior foe invades and they're physically tougher than humans on top of it, things are going to get ugly. And, if there is a lack of weaponry that's really needed to fight the battle, well, the world has been at peace and no one really thought we were going to need all that heavy stuff anyway.

That's not to say that humanity just rolls over and dies. Nope. Our people fight for all they're worth. It's something to see. Arenson has a good sense of what lengths people will go to in order to protect themselves and their loved ones. There are a lot of characters in *Starship Freedom* that I wouldn't want to go up against in any kind of fight. These are people you can trust to have your back. I kept waiting for the Gaius Baltar character to show up, but he hasn't yet.

The aliens, for their part, don't see themselves as villains. To them, hunting is natural and so is the quest for glory and power. It's not evil, it's what keeps their species healthy and whole. It helps them keep away from the other people, the force that they see as a threat. We don't get to meet that third species in *Starship Freedom*, but this is the first book in the series and I'm going to stick my neck out and guess that we will at some point later.

I mentioned some of Arenson's world building earlier, but I want to take a second and acknowledge it for what it is; masterful. A lot of what we know about the world at large we learn from Commander King. He's lived a long time and seen a lot. He knows a lot. He was there for the battles that made the world what it is today, and he lives in the world that he, in a very real sense, helped create. He's not the Chosen One per se, but he is the guy who is where he needs to be when he needs to be there, and he knows how all the pieces are laid out. King isn't the subtle type. He is very human in his emotional reactions, but it's those reactions that reveal the relationships between people and nations that make the world of *Starship Freedom* what it is.

And *Starship Freedom* is the first book in the series. You could stop here and know everything you need to follow this story, but why? I've already gotten the second book and I can't wait to get to it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Pieces of Cutlery

Summer's End by John Van Stry

Review by Jim McCoy

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

So this one kind of shocked me a bit. I guess I've read too much Nathan Lowell. When I get a book about a guy just starting out his career in the Merchant Marine (IN SPAAAAAAAAAAAAACE!) as the new guy on a tramp freighter, my mind immediately goes to something nice and relaxing, cozy even. You know, a dude making some coffee for his crew and taking some classes, and the next thing you know, he's rich.

Yeah, not so much this time. John Van Stry's book is just as good as any of Nathan Lowell's. I mean that. *Summer's End* was a rocking good time. I mean, other than the fact that it's not the thing to read if you're trying to fall asleep at night. Van Stry seems to have no concern at all for those of us who have

to get up for work at five AM. Whatever. It was worth the extra cup of tea I had to drink to stay awake.

\*SIGH\*

Yes, I said tea. You coffee drinkers perplex me.

Anyway

Listen, this Dave Walker guy is something else. At first you kind of think that he's just a quiet, unassuming type dude who just finished his education (he got an engineering certificate) and is headed off into space because someone doesn't like him. That makes things spicy from the beginning, even if we're not sure why. But there are layers to Walker that you really don't know much about until suddenly you do. And once you think you know everything you find out you don't know anything.

Seriously, Summer's End takes more left turns than a NASCAR driver. I really like that about it though. That's what kept me from sleeping. I always felt like something new was right around the corner and I was always right. I never quite knew what it was going to be, but you don't relax when you're reading a book like Summer's End. Van Stry is playing three-dimensional chess here and I haven't even gotten my checkerboard unwrapped yet.

Fans of Jimbo's (both of you) will already be well aware that I love a book with lots of action and fighting in it. I review a lot of Military Science Fiction because I love the action sequences. I didn't think I'd get a lot of that in Summer's End. I was wrong.

There are no enormous space battles or mass infantry attacks but there are a lot of street brawls in Summer's End. Walker is a genuine tough guy in the classic sense. I was often reminded of a quote from an old Insane Clown Posse song; I'll be coming for you ass with an ice pick, prick. Seriously, Dave Walker is not a guy you pick a fight with if you know what's good for you.

Thank you for reading Jimbo's Awesome Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews. This post is public so feel free to share it.

But he's not just some random muscle either. Walker's sense of loyalty is well, perhaps overly, developed. If he has your back, he really has your back. You'd best be aware that he expects the same in return though. Still, there's no one you'd rather trust your sister with than Dave Walker, even if some sketchy things do happen to him. Although, truth be told, in a lot of ways he's a typical early twenties young man.

He's ambitious though. Walker is always working on his next certification. He's a lot more focused on the future than I was at that age. Although, he does develop a good reason or two for that along the way, but that would be telling. Suffice it to say that Walker gets things done and appears to be headed places.

That's not to say that Walker is the only character I enjoyed. He's got a laundry list of friends and associates, enemies and random encounters that leave an impression that it's impossible to list them all here. Still, look out for the person who wants to help Walker, the person who wants to hurt Walker, the person who

Well, that's a weird one. Watch out for that. For sure. I still don't know what to make of the twist there. It was fun though.

Summer's End is set in a not so distant future where humanity has settled large parts of its solar system. There is no interstellar travel as of yet, but Walker manages to make it quite a distance into deep space on the Iowa Hill and get paid for doing it. If it wasn't for all of the crazy stuff that happens to him it would be pretty epic job. Unfortunately for Walker, he goes through a lot of the type of thing that is a lot of fun to read about but would probably be less enjoyable to live through.

Van Stry's world building is a real treasure to behold. I want to know how long he spent planning out the set up of the solar system. The way he set up the Earth (and that's where Walker is from) is a bit uncomfortable for me, but that's because it tracks with what I see happening around me and I'm afraid he might be right. The rest of the solar system (minus Venus) seems like a good place to be though. Don't move to Venus. The corrosive atmosphere is probably the best part about the place. Trust me on this. He didn't put a whole lot of detail about Venus in the book, but I'm guessing we'll be seeing more of them in the future (Summer's End is a book that is just begging for a sequel. Or is that me begging? I get those confused sometimes.) and trust me, I'd rather breathe in the acid than put up with that government.

I will warn you, once again, that if you pick up Summer's End you may not be willing to put it down. Being the first book in a series it took me a second to get started, but new series are that way for me. I don't have the familiarity with the Summer's End universe that I do with the Honorverse for example. It takes a second to get to know a new universe and a new author as well. Once I got started, though, I couldn't stop. And I've got three more Van Stry novels in my possession. This could get ugly. Especially since I don't know when the sequel is coming. If I go Dutchman, just know that I got lost looking for it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Mongeese

### Tanager's Flight by Cedar Sanderson Short Review by George Phillies

Cedar Sanderson is one of the N3F's resident artists and professional SF writers. She also heads our Gourmet Bureau. *Tanager's Flight* is the second of a series about the trading spaceship *Tanager*, the very young man Jem Raznick who inherited it, and his crew, brother Ed and sisters Maria and Julia, and their dog, a basset hound. Traders face hazards. Illegal importing feathers of non-existent birds. Fake criminal charges. A mysterious spy who manipulates their flight plans. Pirates. Exploding planets. Jem trying to be a father figure to 12-year-old Julia and older sister Maria. The mysterious background of the *Tanager*. The characters are well and nicely drawn. When we walk into a toy shop, we can almost see it in front of us, its description loving and spare.

### Tearmoon Empire by Nozomu Mochitsuki and Nozomu Motituki Review by Chris Nuttall

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

Surrounded by the hate-filled gazes of her people, the selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, Mia, takes one last look at the bleeding sun before the guillotine blade falls. Only to wake back up as a twelve-year-old! With time rewound and a second chance at life dropped into her lap, she sets out to right the countless wrongs that plague the ailing Empire. Corrupt governance? Check. Border troubles? Check. Natural calamities and economic strife? Check. My, seems like a lot of work. Hard work and Mia don't mix, so she seeks out the aid of others, starting with her loyal maid, Anne, and the brilliant minister, Ludwig. Together, they strive day and night to restore the Empire. Little by little, their tireless

efforts begin to change the course of history, pushing the whole of the continent toward a new future. And why did the selfish princess have a change of heart, you ask? Simple she didn't. She's just terrified of the guillotine. Dying hurt like hell, and Mia hates pain more than work.

#### -Book One Blurb

My opinion of light novels and manga has always been a little mixed. Some of them are very good. *Death Note*, for example, while others, I suspect, don't translate very well. I enjoy *Ascendance of a Bookworm*, but there's something about the style that makes it hard to read and I can't put my finger on it. They also shift between formats. The *Ascendance of a Bookworm* light novels work very well, but the manga comics aren't so detailed; *Death Note* works much better as a manga than an animated or live-action show. I stumbled into the *Tearmoon Empire* books more or less by accident and found myself hooked. They may be based in a fictional world, but they are definitely of interest to alternate history fans.

The basic concept of the series is that Princess Mia, a rough expy for Marie Antoinette, is dethroned by a revolution (following a major famine) held in prison for several years and then meets her end under the guillotine. And then she wakes up as she was in her early teens with an opportunity to do it all again. She remembers the final moments so clearly that she is willing to do anything, anything at all, to avoid being executed again.

This is a difficult task, because the problems facing the empire are vast and, in the original timeline, Mia's personality flaws made them worse. She was and still is, to a degree, ignorant, lazy, greedy and selfish. She did come out of her shell a little, in her last few years, but it was far too late to do more than struggle before the end. The crop failures and famines led to disease, deprivation and eventual revolution (led by someone who Mia bullied harshly at school) Mia knows this to be true, but can she stop it?

She doesn't know, but she's determined to try. This time around, she makes allies, both at home including Ludwig, this world's counterpart of Jacques Necker and at the school, which is more of a meeting place for aristocrats and a handful of commoners. She's afraid of some of the students who will turn on her, in the first timeline, but somehow, she finds herself making new friends and allies. She does this so well, partly by accident, that she earns the title of Great Sage of the Empire. Her insights into people spurred by the first timeline give her a reputation for perceptiveness that is simply not true.

Indeed, most of the humour of the books comes from the discrepancy between Mia's true thoughts and how her friends and allies (and even some of her enemies) perceive her. Mia reaches a pedestal too high for any of her closest allies to lose faith in her, even when she is clearly driven by selfishness. They are, in a sense, gas-lighting themselves. (Although, to be fair, it is a very practical kind of selfishness; she's aware of just how easy it is to make enemies and goes out of her way to try to avoid it.) It also leads to some amusing moments when her romantic letters to her crush are intercepted and read, the spies assume the fluff is a secret code, rather than soppy exchanges between two youngsters in love. The narrator is the only person who is aware of this discrepancy and regularly highlights it.

These books are not too deep, to be honest, but they do make a lot of good points. The kingdom is in serious danger of a famine, at least in part because the aristocracy look down on farmers and refuse to assign more than the bare minimum of land to growing crops. The public health system is non-existent. Mia shames the aristocracy into funding an orphanage and hospice for the poor and education is terrible. She works hard to try to fix the problems, while ducking other problems; somehow, she blunders

through the world and does things, in a manner that reminds me of Darth Jar-Jar, that have astonishingly positive results. And in this case, it is luck.

The romance is fluffy and, at least at first, rather silly. OTL's Mia was in love with a prince who disliked her, because of her entitled personality. The second time around, she falls for a young prince who is a much better match, but the relationship is often cringe-worthy because most real-life teen romance is cringe-worthy. It gets a little annoying at times.

The side characters are also fleshed out, with hints of what they were like in the original timeline contrasted with the new. Some characters see dreams of themselves as they were and find them disturbing, even wrong. There are also suggestions that the future timeline is constantly changing, with each of her improvements leading to different timelines, some more worrying than the rest.

The series does have a weakness, and that is the introduction of an ancient conspiracy to tear down the empire and civilisation itself. I understand the temptation to blame everything on evildoers, but it is a mistake. A great many problems are caused by incompetence, short-sightedness and a simple failure to ensure good leadership. Blaming one's woes on shadowy figures merely deflects one from solving the real problem. The empire brought most of its problems on itself, as did the real-life France of Louis and Marie Antoinette. There was no one else to blame.

A somewhat lesser weakness is that there is no real tension. Mia has a knack, in this timeline, for winning people over and making her enemies into friends. There's no real sense she's ever in any major danger, even when she thrusts herself into situations that should threaten her.

Overall, though, the series is very good if you like light-hearted books which don't take themselves too seriously. (The manga comics are less good, because you don't see innermost thoughts and suchlike.) If you want to try, you can find them on Amazon or direct from J-Club.

## Tides of Redemption by Blaine Lee Pardoe

Review by Jim McCoy

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

Just when you thought it was once again safe to eat sushi, Blaine Lee Pardoe releases another book in the Land & Sea universe. Yes, my friends, Tides of Redemption is finally here (even if I'm a few months late. The life of a book reviewer is a hard one spent slaving over a hot cell phone.) and it is no longer safe to go near the water.

And yes, I remember Jaws. The fact of the matter is that you actually had to go into the water to be in danger from Jaws. In The Tides of Redemption (and the rest of the Land & Sea universe) the fish come out of the water to kill the people. It is quite frankly horrifying.

The books up to this point have all involved a humanity that is on its heels. No one knew what was coming (except the one guy who did and no one would listen to. Nope, totes doesn't remind me of Pearl Harbor and I don't know why you're asking me about that.) until people started dying in job lot quantities and aliens emerged from the ocean and conquering the land.

In The Tides of Redemption, the war is still not going all that well for humanity. Alien tech is less tech and more biology, and we can't figure out how to copy it, or even match it. They can inhabit ocean depths where we have no hope of being able to strike back. And they have interstellar travel, and we



can't figure out how they do it. We can't even get eyes on one of their ships because they land in the ocean and immediately sink to depths where we can't follow, only they don't get crushed at that depth. Until, that is, the US Space Force manages to shoot down one of the alien ships and it crashes in Greenland.

The world of Tides of Redemption is the Earth, but the political situation is not one that a reader would be familiar with unless they had read the books. So when I say that the US and the UK both send military expeditions to Greenland to recon the downed ship, most people would probably expect things to be far friendlier than they end up being. Neither the US or the UK commanders seem to like each other much. It doesn't help that the Americans never knew the Brits would be there, and they can't agree on who the wrecked ship belongs to

Yeah. It gets ugly. Of course, the Fish are still there, and they still don't like humans. Or are they? What's in that ship? Is it a ship or a really big alien? Can it be repaired? How does it work? Is there a bridge? Where are the engines? Who put the bop in the bop shu bop shu bop?

Or sumfin

And that's just the first three chapters or so, I think. I wasn't exactly taking notes. I never do. I'm lazy.

Pardoe has made a career out of writing about big, stompy robots and, while the ASHURs or Augmented Soft/Hard Unconventional Combat Rigs in the book (the Brits call them Sovereigns) are closer to power armor than the huge mecha that Pardoe has traditionally written about, but they seem more realistic because they're smaller. It could be because I grew up on Iron Man, but a not much more than man sized suit of armor and weapons that just kicks ass seems easier to build and maintain.

The ASHURs of the Land & Sea are roughly the size of the Armored Personnel Units from The Matrix: Revolutions but are probably closer to a medium Battletech Mech in terms of armor and weaponry. Lots of punch in not a lot of space. I like these things, and I want one. I don't particularly care which one. I do need it now though.

But no story is solely about things. Pardoe gets that, and Tide of Redemption shows his basic understanding of human nature. Pardoe's characters live and breathe. The commanders of the opposing human forces have a hate on for each other's countries and it makes sense in context. His scientists just want to do their job free of interference from the military. The military wants to keep the scientists safe regardless of what the scientists want. The reporter wants a story. The camera man wants her to get one and he put his ass on the line to make it happen. And then there's Marine Staff Sergeant Natalia Falto.

Fans who have read the earlier books will recognize Falto as the ballsiest Marine this side of Chesty Puller and they'll know that she's earned the Medal of Honor. Falto is a badass's badass. She's been captured and survived a horror that would make a Corregidor survivor cringe and she is, quite frankly, a mess. She's not sure if she can go on this mission with a bunch of Army Rangers and ASHUR pilots. She's not sure if she wants to. She's not forced to. But Falto is, in the end, a Marine and she goes because she has expertise in what the expedition needs.

A lot of Tides of Redemption is told from Falto's point of view, and I love that about it. Falto is a person who, despite the suffering she went through, is goal oriented and perhaps a little bit of a loose cannon. Don't get me wrong. Falto will, and does, stand in the line of battle and do her job but she's not as respecting of rank as perhaps a member of the military should be. She has a tendency to say things she shouldn't at times when, well

They work. She's not sent along to fight, per se, sees sent as an advisor outside of the normal chain of command. That's a good thing for her. Her comparative lack of rank compared to some of the commissioned officers doesn't stop her from advising when she needs to, even if her input isn't always appreciated the way it should be. I like this woman.

That's not to say she's the only hero in Tides of Redemption. There are plenty of heroics to go around. There is so much action in this book that it's hard to keep up with. It's always exciting and even when nothing seems to be wrong, something is probably wrong and our heroes don't know it until it's too late and they're in it up to their waists.

Seriously, Pardoe has already announced that there will be a sequel, and I can't wait. If it's as good as Tides of Redemption I'm going to lose my mind again. This thing deserves a Dragon Award. Fight me.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Underground Tentacles

**Toll of Honor by David Weber**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**  
Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

I've been reading David Weber's Honorverse books for twenty-ish years now. I say ish because I know I started reading them before my eighteen-year-old daughter was born, but not how much before. I know I was either dating, engaged or married to my ex-wife at the time, so that puts it somewhere between 2002 and 2006 when I decided to not strangle my coworker (He had been telling me all about this Weber fella ad nauseam but I had no idea who that was.) and pick up a copy of the first Honor Harrington, if I could find out what it was called. Fortunately, the lady at the Waldenbooks (remember them?) was familiar with the Honorverse because both her brother and father loved it. She literally took me by the hand (good thing Nicole was at the shoe store) and led me over to the shelf and put a copy of On Basilisk Station in my hand before apologizing because they didn't have a copy of book two (which I later found out was called The Honor of the Queen) available and she just knew I wouldn't want to stop after the first book. She was right.

What can I say? I was a regular.

So now, two decades or so later, I find myself with a copy of David Weber's Toll of Honor in my hands. Well, on my phone is probably closer to it. I bought the ebook. At any rate, this is a feeling I love and that I only learned to appreciate when I got into reading series that weren't finished yet. Seriously, reading a book like Toll of Honor is like having an old friend over for a cup of coffee. You can't wait to find out what's going on and what they've been up to. You can't get enough of each other. And then, the day is up and you each go your own way knowing how much you'll miss each other. Or well, how badly I'll miss all of these people that clearly don't actually exist, but you get the idea.

And now, maybe, just possibly, I'll talk about the book I'm actually reviewing. I think I did that once before, back during the pandemic. Possibly. Honestly though, my greatest strength and fondest hobby has always been digression. I remember this one time...

AHEM

So, yeah. That Toll of Honor book.

Dude, I loved it. There's a lot here. Some of it isn't exactly new. Toll of Honor is basically a flashback to the much earlier parts of the series. It covers a lot of the stuff that wasn't covered the first time around and in his afterword, Weber mentions how he wants to go back and fill in some of the holes. I support that.

Seriously, this is a concept similar to Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Lost Chronicles*. I loved those. It's a chance to go back and not just see the missing bits of story, but to get to spend some time with old friends and maybe some characters I'm not as familiar with doing things that didn't happen onscreen last time.

In the case of *Toll of Honor*, it's a good change to see some of what happens with some of the lower ranked characters and that was cool. Honor Harrington starts the series as a ship's Captain and ends up commanding fleets. A lot of the people she hangs out with are either high ranking members of the military, politicians, nobles/royalty or some combination thereof. There is a lot of that here, because Honor has a big part in the book. We get to see her deal with the death of Paul Tankersley, her duels with Denver Summervale and Pavel Young and see Honor actually taking charge of Harrington Steading, all different takes than have appeared before. That's not all of it though.

Brandy Bolgeo is not that. She's a young woman just starting out in her naval career who just so happens to be very good at her job. Her family has a long tradition of military service but they're not extremely rich or powerful. Weber has a tendency to mention the little guy, but this is one of a few times that he focuses on the little guy, or girl as the case may be. I like that.

In the first part of *Toll of Honor* we see a lot of Honor Harrington. That was pretty much inevitable. The second half of the book focuses primarily on other characters. People like Senior Chief Horace Harkness, Sergeant Major Iris Babcock and, as mentioned previously, Brandy Bolgeo.

And Weber's strength is, and always has been, his sense of character. Brandy is a woman who has goes through a lot. She's wounded in combat, has to recover from those wounds and then go on to continue serving in a wartime navy. She has a lot of emotion to deal with but she's not some shrinking violet. She reminds me a lot of a young Honor Harrington, but she has her own personality. I like this woman.

Being an Honorverse novel there is plenty of combat. Action abounds and death rides happen. Things explode. The enemy this time around is the People's Republic of Haven. It's a different take on the war. Honor missed a lot of this war while she was on half pay and spent it in Grayson as one of their flag officers. Bolgeo doesn't miss it. She's in the thick of the war and so are a lot of other point of view characters.

Weber keeps in mind the proverb that amateurs study tactics. Professionals study logistics. There is a lot here about the logistics of the war and the problems that come from fighting a war that the Star Kingdom of Manticore wasn't prepared for. This is a take on war that I've rarely seen, and I've studied history. Histories don't go in to this level of detail and *Toll of Honor* manages to do it while being vastly entertaining while doing it. Weber personalizes the effects of the shortages on the troops and the war.

This is the twentieth book in the mainline Honorverse and there are only God knows how many side novels and anthologies. Books like *Toll of Honor* are why I can't wait for the next one.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Rebuilt Impeller Nodes

## Wildfire: The Rise of a Hero by Jordan S. Keller

Review by Jason P. Hunt

Jason P. Hunt <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It's an old story. Girl meets Boy. Boy tries to kill Girl. Girl signs up to train with Boy so they both can generate white-hot blue flame to burn things to the ground .

OK. Maybe it's not the usual Girl-Meets-Boy story, but Wildfire does have all of the hallmarks of a typical Hallmark Saturday Superhero Movie. Abigail Turner, also known as Inferna, is a flame-powered sidekick to the flame-powered Volcanic. She's been attached to the hero by the Saves the Day Hero Company to improve his ratings in the city of San Arbor.

Everything's going well until an attack downtown puts Abigail face-to-face with The Flame Villain who almost killed her in an earlier encounter. Haring off to chase him on her own, Abigail ends up wreaking havoc in the same area where she's supposed to be helping Volcanic, and there are consequences to leaping out on your own most notably extra property damage and endangerment of civilians.

What follows is a kind of reverse redemption arc, with Abigail finding herself training with The Flame Villain to increase the output of her flame abilities, the goal being to get the bad guy to teach her so she can ultimately defeat him. It doesn't quite work out that way, of course.

The further she goes into training, the more her motivations get confused and out of sync. Add to that a new job with a new hero corporation, and we're in the middle of a Hallmark-type story where it goes pretty much where you would expect. I guess I could say it's typical YA fare, except that I haven't read enough YA to really know for certain. The tropes are here--bad boy villain has more to his story than he lets on, good girl's mentors have more to their story than they let on, good girl keeps her trysts secret because she worries that she'll compromise who she is because she's overwhelmed by her feelings for the bad boy.

Being a sidekick who wants to ultimately be the hero who saves the city, Abigail naturally is looking for any way to increase her powers and improve her skills. But in the process, she faces the dilemma of divided loyalty: is she going to remain true to the principles that got her a new gig with the Knights of the Round Table, complete with extra training from Excalibur, or does she fall into the temptation of losing control and succumbing to the very enemy she's sworn to defeat?

And while the prose can get a little clunky every now and again, the story plays out pretty evenly with a decent pace. I never got the sense that anything was filler, and I never got bored. A couple of 'well, of course' moments, of course.

Now, one minor gripe I have: the Flame Villain moniker. It got a bit overused, especially after Abigail learned his actual code name, what he calls himself. Once we were past that, I got a little annoyed every time I saw Flame Villain again. There should have been a scene early in the book, wherein the hero community was established to have a database and a process for determining names to use when the actual code name isn't immediately to hand. It could always be updated once the name is revealed.

I do like the dynamic between Abigail and her hero mentors. Each is different; Volcanic recognizes the ratings boost he gets but doesn't engage with her much personally, while Excalibur seems to genuinely care about Abigail and her success. Abigail responds to the support and encouragement, to the point where she feels guilty about training with the Flame Villain (see?) without telling anyone at work. It

creates some tension within Abigail herself. Tension that will likely build in the second book, which I need to pick up somewhere so I can see how this all works out.

Overall, it's an easy read. The consequences are appropriate to the setting, and Abigail is not an over-powered Mary Sue type of character who's amazing because of course she's the best ever.

Will check back when I get the other two under my belt. More to come

## Literary Criticism

### A Rejoinder by Thomas E. Simmons to Fiction: What is it good for?

Cedar Sanderson's essay in the December issue of The N3F: Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono confronts the contention that fiction is false or worse, a lie, and therefore faintly if not overtly wrong. Reading (or writing) fiction, many assert, lacks utility. It's all just stories. Nothing, Sanderson counters, could be further from the truth.

The efficacy of fiction, Sanderson argues, is multifold. It has several uses. It entertains us. It teaches us empathy (a social lubricant). It dispels loneliness. It imparts meaning. It sharpens our perception. It gives us coping skills. She concludes:

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.

Perhaps that is enough, but I think there is more.

Fictional anecdotes and stories are more than practice sessions for real-life dilemmas. Storytellers accomplish more than staving off melancholy by means of escapism. Stories achieve more than honing reading skills, teaching life lessons, and enriching human experience. Stories are the human experience. We live stories. No one on their deathbed recalls data.

Sanderson approached the dismissal-of-fiction problem through her past profession as a librarian. Sanderson took account of the boys who, as they matured, gave up the volumes of fiction for books of facts--nonfiction accounts of dinosaurs or trucks--thereby earning greater quantities of parental approval. Since nonfiction texts are less agenda-driven, they presumably profit readers more than yarns and fables. Few boys grow up to become successful engineers by virtue of lessons learned from *Dandelion Wine* or *Exordia*. Rather, they become successful engineers from the study of books about bridges, circuits, and aerodynamics. Or at least this is what the parents of the boys checking out books from Cedar Sanderson thought.

I approach the dismissal-of-fiction problem through the lens of a lawyer (my own chosen profession). At times, I've found myself sharing the skepticism of the parents Sanderson encountered at her check-out desk. Storytelling and psychodrama are the recommended tools of a courtroom lawyer. Storytelling supposedly humanizes an unsympathetic client. It convinces the jury. I've seen the storytelling technique in action and when wielded by inexperienced attorneys it seems fake and gimmicky. After all, cases should be decided on the basis of evidence and facts. Not a fanciful narrative advanced by a hon-

ey-tongued advocate.

Sanderson's parents (and an earlier me) saw a world composed of evidence and facts: atoms and quantum strings at the most basic level. We saw reality as a forum of things: qualities, quantities, and momentums, precisely articulated and strictly validated. Objective. But there is an alternative view of reality; reality as a forum not of things but as a forum for action.

If reality is a forum for action, it is as a mode of storytelling. Reality as a forum for action contains gluons and neutrinos, yes, but it construes them as having meaning and values. Imagine finding yourself on an alien planet landscape lit by twin suns. Before you is a field of sinewy flora and chair-shaped tree stumps. If you are exhausted, the nearest chair-shaped stump offers a chance to rest. If you are fleeing from a tentacled bug, the stumps are obstacles in your path of retreat. This is the world as we encounter it; as a forum for action. By virtue of seeing the world as comprised of meaning we are thereby able to navigate it.

Nothing about a world of mere facts allows us to imagine the world as it ought to be, either. To advance through an adventure, one needs a goal, but not just any goal. One needs a good and virtuous goal, constantly recalibrated to take account of missteps and additional meaningful data that is accumulated along the way.

The first question is not, how should Pardot Kynes and the Fremen terraform Arrakis?

The first question must be: should Pardot Kynes and the Fremen terraform Arrakis?

It is true that one could configure any landscape from a purely factual perspective; that is, as a forum of things. But we perceive the landscape primarily as a forum for action. A forum of things is not false, but it is incomplete. It needs the domain of meaning and values and significance. We need the domain of meaning and values and significance.

We need myth. We need storytellers. And librarians, too.

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# Prose Bono

Write on Demand

by Cedar Sanderson

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

Over at my personal blog, I've been slowly working my way through a spice Advent calendar. 24 days of flavor! Yay! How many ways can I make this interesting? Well, the easy and obvious way is for me to cook something, photograph it, and blog the recipe. My readers would largely be fine with a month of that. I say largely, as I've already noticed a drop in readership. I expected that. Many of my subscribers are not there for the food, and I am selfishly devoting a whole month to it. On my blog, this is my amusement, and after nearly twenty years of doing it, I can nay! must! amuse myself or I would have given up long ago.

Which doesn't mean that I can do that here, or for the Rac Press blog on the rare occasions I write for it, or if I am asked to contribute an article or introduction elsewhere. In those cases, I need to write interesting material on demand, to spec. Which means that I must find other facets of familiar things, in some cases, and present those. I plan to do that for today's spice on my blog, as chili powder is lovely stuff but I did a chili recipe yesterday and I already am locked into the dessert I'm making tonight and I don't think mentioning how good a sprinkle of it is in hot cocoa to be sufficient. Instead, I'll talk about how it is made, how good it is when you make it yourself (and how), and I'll try to take some really nice photos along the way. There are other angles I could take. I could talk about the history of it, how it is linked deeply into the cultures where it originated and was bred from the solanum species it started from to the hundreds of varieties gardeners grow today. This is true of most any topic. You need to find all of the facets of it, and then, prune ruthlessly.

You can, depending on the length of your work, write about one, maybe two perhaps three, although that is likely going to be glancing mentions on your part, or painfully long reading on the audience. After that initial work on learning about your topic, and getting excited about it, cutting it back to a piece that will be interesting, cohesive, and convey to the audience what you want? Well, this is always the hardest part for me. How to approach this pruning will vary but considering your audience and why you are talking to them is a good start. Are you trying to teach them? Amuse them? Rouse their emotions? Decide this, and it will give you clarity in what you are going to write for them.

I have recently been working my way through a book of essays by Thomas Sowell. His is a brilliant mind, and I much enjoy time spent in its company. You could do worse than to study essay-writing by reading his work. He ranges from the dry academic to the droll semi-sarcastic, depending on who he was writing for. Your tone in writing matters. A retelling of the fable of the ant and grasshopper might not be the best thing for a scientific journal, but the bees' knees for an op-ed in a newspaper (when those still existed, today the analogy would be a Substack article). Playful and scholarly have their places and times in the best of scenarios you can and should combine them. Humor when well done is memorable, and a fantastic teaching tool.

After all of this, you begin to write. I did mention research, no? I see I did not. Research isn't always necessary, however even with a whimsical piece you may find that you should look some things up. I wrote an introduction for Goblin Bazaar that involved several books, a few pages of notes, and the total in the book is something like 400 words of exposition and thumbnail sketch of the content. Could I

have made it longer, included more of the research, slid a bibliography in the back of the book? Yes, but no. That's not what it was for. It was for the rare reader who pays attention to such a thing in a fiction anthology, and to set up the blurb for the book's back cover and Amazon listing. And not all of it would be included in the latter two places, which I was very aware of. Know why you are writing, but also, why you are researching.

All of this may sound like it takes a great deal of time and contemplation before the writing starts on an essay. Perhaps, in the beginning, when you are still learning how to craft words. After a couple of decades, I assure you, it will take very little time as you are building on the foundation you've put in place through much practice. You can be given a topic, write on it, and if there is research, you may already know where to begin (which is a topic all on its own, may be next week's post!) and merely need to decide on the facet you plan to polish and present. Extemporaneous speeches are harder than writing on demand, but both are eminently possible with effort and a concerted study of the craft. Above all, it must be interesting. Your reader should find themselves at the end, not stuck in the middle bored and wondering what the point of it all is. And here you are.

### Quirks and Tics by Cedar Sanderson

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

I've been alternating my reading recently, between stuff like gardening with native plants in Texas, essays by Thomas Sowell, and mystery series. I'm prone to rummaging through Amazon looking for series to binge when I'm in the mood. Other times are, well, that's a topic for somewhen else.

I'd found a new-to-me series, by Gladys Mitchell, and was seriously annoyed that whoever republished it on Amazon hadn't bothered to link the books as a series. I think I've vented about that before, but the reason I can only take a couple of her books in a row is that the main character, Mrs. Bradley, has pronounced characterization tics which get annoying if you're reading the stories back-to-back-to-back. I realize that when they were being written and released perhaps a year apart (there are 47 of them!) it made more sense to quickly remind the reader of who the character was, and it set her apart from the other female detectives of the time like Miss Marple and Miss Silver and likely others I'm less familiar with. All of a part, they are. Extremely popular with the same set of women who still read mysteries (raises hand) and follow true crime sensations. (I prefer male detectives, being slightly sexist but will happily read a well-done female as well).

On the other hand, I stumbled over Charlotte McLeod's Madoc series, set in Canada, and have been delighted with her deft touch in developing the characters through a series, where we see Madoc and Janet meet, fall very gently in love, marry, and develop a strong relationship while they grow together. Unlike Mrs. Bradley, who seems not to change physically or mentally throughout the years as portrayed in the series, these two have a real character arc that is satisfying and pulls me from one book to another to watch. The mysteries are a big part of what I'm reading for, sure, but this is another layer. There are connections. And you need to read the series in order, to make sense of it. Other mysteries you needn't read in order because the Great Detective virtually never changes and there's not enough meat around the bone to matter if it was book five or book fifty. Which is fine for a quick read, but not fun at all when you are binge-reading!

I'm not actually saying you should write one, or the other, or perhaps something in the middle. I am saying to be aware of what you are writing, and if you're writing the neverending series with quirks of character as a shortcut to re-introduce readers, you might want to be aware that will be annoying on a rapid publication schedule. Maybe read the manuscript and tone it back a little. On the other hand, if you are writing a very long series, doing what Pam Uphoff has been doing and breaking the timelines

up to give new readers an easy intro without having to read seventy back-volumes to catch up is a wise idea.

It's all a matter of taste, and you should like what you are writing. If a tic in another author's writing annoys you, don't imitate it. Write what you enjoy and blend it all up into something new and interesting.

## Freezing or Frying by Cedar Sanderson

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

There are two plots. If you boil all fiction down to ultima conclusio then you either have man versus man, or man versus nature. If you want to be persnickety, you could also have man versus man versus nature, but there you are.

I'm not serious, here. I think there may actually be six plots, but I'm on my first cup of coffee and what I actually wanted to talk about is ecology. On X the other day, there was a post and counter-comment about single-ecosystem planets. The first post said something to the effect of a desert planet is lazy writing and the second was something along the lines of having two planets if you wanted to portray a desert and an icy wasteland, because it's science fiction and that makes it seem like your characters traveled over more distance than just being on a single planet. I usually don't think to screenshot these things, as I chew them over in my head if they catch my attention a bit, and can't find them again later. The answer to both is yes, but no.

It really depends how much the planet, with its rich ecosystem, plays a role in your story. When I wrote a desert planet, I still developed a number of places on the planet which aren't stark dry waste, because it was important to the planet. I didn't need or want to add oceans, rainforests, et al, as they played no part in the stories I was weaving, not the like the sentient windstorms did.

So it may be that what the first guy is saying, and the second, is that only one environment is relevant to the plot. The first guy would like the author to acknowledge that there may be other parts of a distant planet, just as there are on our own. The second is pointing out that for plotting and worldbuilding, you might not need or want to describe the whole planet if your characters are only going to be standing on a small portion of it during the story. Further, setting it on two planets makes it more science fictional, I suppose? You have to think about what moves the story, and the reader, along.

It can be easy to get bogged down in thinking about, then writing, the swamps if your character is only ever going to deal with the deserts, even if they are on the same planet. On the other hand, if you have him crashland into the swamps when he expected to land in desert and was equipped for such, that's a whole thrilling story on its own. And if you have a thriving spaceport way out in a terrible desert when there is temperate grassland and forest, some explanation of why people even bothered might be a good idea, a sentence or two will deepen your world for the reader without being an onslaught of description they have to hack through to reach the path of the plot again.

It can be a lot of fun to acknowledge the ground under your protagonist's feet. Dorothy Grant's research in *Blood, Oil, and Love* really shows, and gives a verisimilitude to the motivations of the characters and their antagonists which draws the readers into the conflict very well. It can be part of your world-building and slipped in subtly here and there without a real need to describe at length, unless the world itself is a character in the story, like the hollow world tale I have been serializing over on my blog. Even then, like character description, there's no need for a wall of text telling the reader every last

attribute, far better to gradually fill in the details and build up a mental image.

Now, I'm off to do a little more work in my garden before the temperatures fall all the way into the ice-box. Did you know the soil is teeming with life, and may be linked to alleviating depression when you garden?

## Evaluate Your Schedule by Cedar Sanderson

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This last week I finished revisions on my next novel, turned in the story selections for an anthology I was editing, illustrated a different anthology, put up a segment of serial fiction on my blog, and this morning I'm sitting here thinking I haven't gotten anything done.

The human mind has an immense capacity to fool itself. Yes, there are things on my to-do list that haven't happened yet. Yes, I did add a bunch of unexpected and unplanned, but not unwelcome! work to my week due to unforeseen circumstances. Notice all those un's there? You can make plans, but that doesn't mean you get to keep them.

When things come up and you know you must make changes, then take the time to triage your lists:

What absolutely must happen? Do that.

What can be moved to another day or week?

Is this worth losing sleep over (spoiler: it almost never is)

If yes to the last, can you make up the sleep in the next day or two?

If no, evaluate your priorities again.

Don't forget you need to eat--is this big enough to spend the money ordering takeout?

Your time is valuable. Don't give it unless the task is a worthwhile return on your time.

Do you need to do this, or can someone else take it from you and get it done?

I've started keeping a physical day planner, which helps me not only bring forward tasks not completed on an assigned day (and thereby not losing track of them) but also gives me a way to look back and see that yes, I did get stuff done. When my brain plays tricks on me, I have evidence to shut it up. This keeps me from spiraling into doubt which then keeps me from performing as I need to get everything done (eventually). It's a work in progress. I've been doing this for just over a month, and I have to say that it's working for me. Might not for you--there are very few one-size-fits-all solutions.

One of those everyone needs to do it things that will improve your mood and productivity? Put everything down. Shove your phone deep in a pocket if you can't bear to be separated from it by more than a few feet. Go for a walk. Get some sun on your face. And before you say in the comments--It's raining! It's cold! It's stop and think. Can you bundle up and stay warm? If not, wait a day and you're far enough south it will be warmer. If yes, then do that and go out. How hard is it raining? Will it be raining tomorrow? The day after? Order a full spectrum light or lightbulb for your desk lamp and do that as a pale substitute for the star our planet swings around. But get outside as soon as you can, for no less

than fifteen minutes in a day. Can't spare fifteen minutes? Re-evaluate your schedule.

Now. I need to get a tarp for the truck, because I'm going to go get a load of dirt. God bless Texas, I can garden year-round and the benefit to my health and happiness is incalculable. Yes, there are writing tasks to be done, hoo boy are there ever. I will think about them while I exercise and get grubby and shower, and then I'll be fresh and bursting with inspiration to get at them again.

You can do this. I know you can. I can do this, and I will. See you next week!