

The R3F

Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

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

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The East Witch

The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

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Far Future

The Brittle Riders

Splice: Hit Bit Technology

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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 actually on time. Perhaps we will do better next time.

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

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Fiction

Aliens in the Fog by David Guenther

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Aliens in the Fog is action packed. Things start moving and they don't stop. The West Coast is invaded by aliens. It's World War II. People are dying. The troops don't know if this is an actual fight, or someone who's just nervous in the service or, once it becomes obvious that there actually is a fight. They're expecting Japanese and they get alien crabs. This creates confusion. What follows is a sub-optimal situation.

And that may be the best part of the whole story. Guenther's soldiers are not superhuman know-it-alls. They're people. They do what they can with what they have, but that's not always enough. They take a beating in places but that's logical because their planet is being invaded by a technologically superior enemy. They get a little grossed out too, because these aliens eat people.

Yeah, Aliens in the Fog is a great book, but it's not for the squeamish. A lot of this book is realistic which, in a word, means graphic. Guenther doesn't shy away from the realities of war. If too much blood bothers you, you could maybe read something else. My oldest daughter liked Fraggles Rock comics when she was little. Maybe you could try those.

Aliens in the Fog is at once well named, because a large part of the fighting takes place in an area covered by an artificially created fog, and possibly poorly named because, if one alien in particular can be trusted, we know more about these aliens than we do in the first book of any series. If that alien can be trusted. If.

Look, I don't know what comes next. Guenther didn't tell me, and I wasn't born with the gift of prophecy. He just doesn't sit right with me, though. I've got this whole scenario built up in my head. It's probably wrong. I get these feelings all the time and they're ALWAYS wrong, even when I'm the guy writing the book. I just know that I don't trust that guy any further than I would trust my ex-wife's estimation of my income at a child support hearing.

I've read a ton of Military Science Fiction in my life, and for my money, the best Mil SF is written by veterans. They can get the details of military life right because they've lived them. Guenther is no exception. His years of service shine through on every page. I can believe in these guys.

And it's awesome. Most military stories, whether written by veterans or not, tend to concentrate on just the action. There is plenty of action here and I'm an action junkie. I would know. What Aliens in the Fog also has in spades is attention to the other stuff. We've got officers and NCOs that actually worry about weird stuff like feeding their troops and making sure everyone has coffee. I mean, you get the odd Honorverse novel where Honor has dinner with her officers, but who includes setting up a field kitchen in the book? Guenther does, and the book is better for it. Guenther doesn't spend endless chapters setting up field hospitals, but his officers at least take the time to make sure they put them where they'll do some good. The details make the whole narrative feel that much more real.

The characters themselves are pretty amazing as well. There is one particular lieutenant who I intensely enjoyed, although I will leave it to the attentive reader to spot precisely why. It shouldn't be hard. Staff Sergeant Boucher is a guy I'd follow. Two brothers serving together is a situation that we've seen from history.

And there are those that aren't up to the fight. I won't talk trash. I've never been in combat, and it could be me if it ever came to it. The fact remains that things like that happen in real life and that's why Guenther included them. Too many writers, of both books and movies, treat soldiers like they're superheroes. They're not. They're normal human beings accepting orders to do things that we should never ask of a human being but have to.

My only complaint about *Aliens in the Fog* is that it's too short. The ending hits pretty abruptly and I can't help but think that I'd like to see more. That's actually a good thing, in a way. I enjoyed the book so much that I wanted more. It's also a bit frustrating as a reader though. One second, I'm reading furiously, flipping pages at an insane rate. The next I'm like "Wait, did that say Epilogue?" and then I'm like "Oh, yeah, I guess it did."

There is no notation in the title to indicate that *Aliens in the Fog* is part of a series, but it damn well better be. There's a whole lot left to tell. I'll be waiting with baited..

Uhh.. Bated...

Err...beighted

Whatever. The next book just needs to get here. Stat.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Severed Arms

After the Sky by Milo James Fowler
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

In *After the Sky* (Spirits of the Earth #1), the world ended twenty years ago.

Now, the bunkers are opening, and the survivors are looking forward to rebuilding.

Unfortunately, dealing with a nuclear wasteland is the least of their problems.

The story

Twenty years ago, the United World Government nuked the planet in order to save it from a biological attack launched by rebels. The population was divided up based on their skills and sent into bunkers to wait for the All-Clear.

Now, the signal has been given. The survivors are coming out of their bunkers to restart civilization. However, not everything is going according to plan. Not all of the bunkers survived. Some of them went crazy. Another came under the control of a madman who systematically murdered everyone. Others ran into trouble on the surface. They were also changed.

That is the set up for this post-apocalyptic tale by Milo James Fowler.

While it is unclear how and why it happens, the dust and ash that cover the earth changes everyone who comes in contact with it. Milton, the first character we meet discovers he has super-speed when the ground itself seems to rise up and attack him. Others have other gifts, claws, night vision, super-strength, even telekinesis.

As if that mystery and figuring out how to rebuild civilization from scratch were not bad enough, there is a seemingly endless number of cannibalistic marauders roaming the wastes that have to be dealt with. Like the Reavers of *Firefly*, these daemons are deformed, heavily armed, and eager to eat everyone they come across. Yet, as often happens in such stories, the real threat is the humans left behind, in this case, the Eden Guard. A group of unaltered engineers, Eden is determined to wipe out or enslave every mutation they can find.

As these different factions, the altered survivors, the Eden Guard, and the daemons, come into conflict, their fate and possibly that of the world may come down to the battle raging within Milton.

The characters

Milton is very much an everyman type of character. He is from a bunker where everyone was intended to be a simple laborer. Until he discovers his super-speed, he has no special skills to speak of. Nor is he possessed of an unusual degree of courage. In fact, we quickly learn that it is easy to manipulate him if it's in the interest of his self-preservation. As I said, he's an everyman, which is exactly why he is so important. He, like others in the book, can sense and even hear spirits, the spirits that apparently are responsible for his powers, and also for strange phenomena like the earth attacking some people.

As the story progresses, we learn there are two spirits, one that is trying to help the survivors and another that is trying to finish off humanity. These two wage a battle for Milton's soul, trying to convince him to join one side or the other. Because of his unique ability, which side he lands on will have profound implications for the world.

There are others of course. Luther and Samson are both from a breeder bunker, specifically chosen to help repopulate the earth thanks to their superior genetics. In order to regulate the food supply, the male and female breeders were kept separate during the 20 years underground. Luther and Samson and the rest of the men in their bunker are eager to get started, of course.

Daiyna and the rest of the women breeders aren't looking forward to fulfilling their purpose quite as much. It turns out that men and women are different, and women just might resent existing for the sole purpose of breeding. The men are understandably fine with the arrangement. In defense of Daiyna and the women, the first men they encounter are the daemons who shot and ate some of them without bothering to say hello first.

For that reason, when the two groups come together, they decide to wait to establish themselves more securely before getting to their...purpose. Luther, being a deeply religious man and the leader of the men does a good job of keeping the men's spirits up, though Samson definitely has a one-track mind when it comes to his purpose.

Daiyna has been traumatized by all that she's seen since All-Clear. In addition to some of her friends being eaten in front of her she's seen a friend have her skin eaten away by apparently living sand, and the leader of her bunker and several women trapping themselves underground where they would soon

suffocate; so, it's understandable that she is more than a little untrusting. Still, she is happy to work with Luther and the others.

Then there is Willard, the leader of the Eden Guard. Willard is a hypocritical self-serving psychopath, though he may also be the reason there is currently anyone alive in the wasteland.

The world

The story is clearly set in the not terribly distant future. The USA is long gone, absorbed by the United World Government. Yet, there are still plenty of combustion engines in use, though the preference is clearly for solar powered vehicles. As one might expect after a nuclear apocalypse, there is nothing left alive on the surface, no one comes into contact with so much as a roach. Everyone is struggling to survive on leftover rations from the bunkers and provisions stored for after the All-Clear is given.

It's certainly a convincing world in that despite the work of the many experts who planned the retreat to the bunkers and the subsequent restart (Reset?) of civilization, not everything goes smoothly. After all, it wouldn't be a nuclear wasteland without mutated cannibals running around the place. Or with a few of the best and brightest, like Willard, losing their minds. The only thing that separates this world from how similar events might play out in ours is the spirits and the gifts they grant.

The politics

A key message of this book is definitely don't trust the centralized planners. It was centralized planners who decided to nuke the surface, Willard is a centralized planner who institutes his own dystopia, and Jackson, the leader of Milton's bunker took power to himself to murder everyone else over the years. The only group that is ever shown to be running well without murder and enslavement is the voluntary one that is made up of the survivors of the two breeding groups, the only people with a diversity of skills and interests and the only ones not sterilized.

Content warning

There is one mild sex scene, plenty of suggestive language from Samson, medical experimentation that would make Mengele proud and, did I mention the mutant cannibals?

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes a good post-apocalypse story should enjoy this. Those who enjoy games like The Last of Us or series like the Walking Dead will appreciate the plight of the main characters struggling to find hope in the wasteland, only to find their fellow humans might be worse than anything they've faced.

Why read it?

Fowler manages to bring multiple genres together. We get a mix of post-apocalypse, superhero, and dystopian fiction with a side of mystery all rolled into one without it feeling wedged in. The end result is a good time that has me interested in reading the next book in the series.

The Anvil of Dust and Stars by Damon Alan

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Wow. It's been awhile since I've watched Battlestar Galactica, but I'm thinking Damon Alan's book *The Anvil of Dust and Stars* might just be the start of a series to rival BSG. I mean that for real. There is plenty of action and intrigue here. There isn't any political angst just yet, but this is the first book. Oh, and Alan seems to have left his president a few light years out of the way. That tends to leave things a bit relaxed on the political front.

The threat humanity faces is an existential one. The Hive is the enemy. They infect humanity with nanites that do bad things like, ya know, killing them till they die to death and to which humanity has no cure. This is bad folks. They can kill off whole planets full of humans with these things and they're really good at pushing the human militaries back, too. It gets ugly. Enter Sarah Dayson.

Sarah is not just the main character she's also a spacer. Well, an officer spacer, but a spacer nonetheless. She's got both a competence and a confidence to her. Sarah knows when to fight and when to flee. She finds ways to solve weird problems. She listens to her subordinates. She does what's right, even if she doesn't always want to. I'd follow this chick in to battle.

Sarah starts the book as a newbie but her rise is meteoric. Part of that is her natural talent and ability. Part of it is that the people over her keep getting killed. Things don't look good. Sarah takes a bit of a beating herself at times, but she doesn't give up and she won't let anyone around her give up either. She's kind of a cross between Honor Harrington, Ben Raines and Admiral Adama.

The people Sarah serves with are a mix of good (mostly) and bad (ugly?) but she works with what she has and gets through the things she has to. They're also the only people we see a lot in *The Anvil of Dust and Stars* but that makes sense. Deployed military give up time with family and friends to focus on doing their jobs. It's rough on the and their families, but it's necessary. And when you're Sarah Dayson and you've lost two homeworlds...

Yeah, life is rough.

There is a lot of combat in *The Anvil of Dust and Stars*. It's one of the best parts of the book. Alan writes a space fight like few I've read before him and his Grapppler ships (they're small craft) have a propulsion system like nothing I've ever experienced in Science Fiction, and I've been a fan since...

Uhh...

I was like uhh..

Yeah, it's been a minute. I don't really remember not being a fan of SF. My four earliest friends were named Jim Kirk, Spock, Dr. Leonard McCoy and Mike Boldt. Mike lived around the block. The rest you should be familiar with. When I FINALLY got to the age where they'd let me get into the big kid books, I immediately read through the *Star Trek Log Books*. After that, I found this book named *Citizen of the Galaxy* by some Heinlein guy. And it was off to the races after that.

So anyway, when I find something that is believable but that I've never heard of before, I get excited. The Grapple Drive's a pretty impressive piece of machinery. Impressive, that is, as long as I don't have to use it. It sounds like something that would work well in combat, but not something that would create

the best physical sensations among the crew that uses it. Seriously. Ouch.

Both sides like to toss nukes around as well. Alan seems to have done his homework not just on how much damage a nuke can do as an explosive, but how much radiation can do. Some of what happens in *The Anvil of Dust and Stars* is leaning heavily on the gross side, but it all fits. Someone, somewhere, once referred to radiation victims as dying from the inside out. That pretty well sums things up and, even with their future science and medicine, they can't save everyone. That makes a lot more sense than I wish it did.

The Faster Than Light space travel system Alan uses, he calls it "travelling through high space" seems fairly familiar. The exact mechanics are a bit different, they always vary from universe to universe, but it works about the same as hyperspace in *The Honorverse* or space fold technology in *Robotech* albeit a bit faster. It works though, because it's nice to have something familiar in a totally new universe, at least to me. It's like wearing a brand-new outfit to a job interview but rocking the necklace you got in high school underneath for comfort.

The enemy in *The Anvil of Dust and Stars* is something we don't quite understand yet. It's not an alien species per se. Humanity has never found another species out there, at least to this point. The Hive seems to be a fully automated machine society, but it has me wondering: Who built these things? That seems to be a question that no one in the books is pondering and I kind of wonder why. Then again, they are pretty busy just trying to survive at this point. Still and all, it seems like an analysis of where these things came from and why they're attacking humanity might help defeat them. Maybe some kind of mass attack at a central node would be helpful? I dunno, but I think I'd have to try if I was the one in charge.

Other than that, though, and this is the first book in a series so it may be a little too early to reveal everything, this is some damn good world building. Humanity has a bunch of different star nations, and they seem to relate to each other in ways that I can understand. Each wants to remain independent and sometimes that causes problems. In other words, Alan seems to have read at least one history book in his life and possibly several others. Division in the face of a larger and more powerful foe has cost many groups of people dearly. The Dark Seas Series is no exception.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Determined Survivors

Apprentice to the Gods by D.T. Read

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Seriously, this is a REALLY good book, but how do you not spoil too much?

Okay so I've reviewed the first three books. For purposes of this review, I'm going to assume you've read the first three. If you haven't, hie thee off to the two links listed above and then go read the books. I'll wait.

Okay. ARE YOU DONE YET? Sheesh. I gave you at least five seconds there.

And I never, and I mean ever, put this this early in the review but don't read *Apprentice to the Gods* as a standalone. This book is part of a series, and it really only works that way. That's not to say it's not a good book, because it's amazeballs. It is to say that *ATTG* is awesome in large part because of how

well it connects with what has come before. It also works (at least it feels like it does) as a bridge to the rest of the series.

There are certain moments in certain series where the entire story turns on that one moment. The death of Sturm Brightblade in The Dragonlance Chronicles comes to mind. So does "No Luke, I am your father." for the original Star Wars trilogy. Apprentice to the Gods contains that moment for this series, I think. I mean, the last three (at least! WHO ELSE IS EXCITED?!?!?!?!?) books of the Seventh Shaman haven't come out yet and I could be dead wrong, but it was definitely _a_ turning point even if it wasn't _the_ turning point.

Something big happens though, and it changes the trajectory of Ku's life. Maybe for the better, maybe for the worse, but it'll never be the same. It's definitely not all bad though. Ku is a man with a destiny, and he knows it. Ku needs training outside of what he received from the military, and he gets it but I'm damn sure that not everything he needed to know and learned can be termed as "training."

Ku, like many other men throughout history, became a father for the first time while serving a combat deployment. He ends up at home for his first extended period since that happen in Apprentice to the Gods. He honestly hadn't been married for all that long before he deployed either. What this translates into is a man who needs to learn how to live in a family as a husband and father. And the military, or so I've been told, doesn't do much to prepare its troops to deal with these kinds of tasks. He does about as well with his first diaper as I did though. I'll give him that much.

For what it's worth though, Ku is a good dad and does as much of the stuff that I've been told multiple times that men don't do as I did when I was married and lived with my kids. Well, except that we had disposable diapers. Thankfully, I didn't have to deal with THAT.

Things are going well for Ku in the sense of his immediate family, but not on the macro scale. There is a lot going on that may very well end up requiring his military skills. I'm only seventy percent sure of that at this point, but I'd be shocked if I'm wrong. There is a fight brewing and I'm not sure how big it's going to be, but I'm guessing somewhere between huge and gigundus. And yes, gigundus is a word. I just made it up.

And it's serious because Ku has some serious religious obligations coming up too, and they're likely to require a whole bunch of his family and military skills. There are shades of prophecy involved here and it's not always clear what is literal and what isn't. Ku has a lot riding on his shoulders. I don't think I'd want some of his responsibilities. I'm not sure he does. What he does have though is guts and more. He's a man that is stuck in a situation he can't get out of and does what is required of him BECAUSE it is required of him. That's all anyone can ask I guess, and I find it utterly realistic and understandable.

I'm thinking his religious training benefits from his military training in ways that may not be apparent until you think about it, but it makes sense. As a matter of fact, I think it might be the only way to make some of it make sense. Military training is conducted at a high rate of speed and things are condensed into the smallest amount of time they can take up and still be useful. Ku, and his wife Derry, get a lot of that in Apprentice to the Gods. That makes sense because she's military too, but they have to learn a lot in a short amount of time. Anyone who has been through Basic Training knows how that feels.

And Ku also ends up being an imperfect human being. He makes one very serious mistake in the book that almost costs him one of the most important things in his life and it hurts him. It hurts him badly, and it makes him do what he should have done previously. He learns from it though, and I'm thinking

that it will stand him as well in books to come as it does in this one.

If you're annoyed by the fact that I keep bringing up future books in *The Seventh Shaman* just know that it doesn't annoy me at all. That's because I'm geeked up on this series and can't wait to find out what's next. Unfortunately, I may have to wait longer for the next one as I'm told that it may be up to a year before it's out.

Don't worry about me though. I won't cry about it.

Much.

Probably.

Or at least not in public.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Chants

Before the Coffee Gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

Review by Heath Row

anac.org/fanzines/Stf_Amateur/

I checked this book out from the library after seeing it on the Jan. 10 “Southern California Bestsellers” list provided by the California Independent Booksellers Alliance for the Los Angeles Times. No. 10 in the hardcover fiction list, the book’s description read, “A Tokyo cafe gives customers the chance to travel back in time.”

Science fiction on the bestseller list? I was curious. The story behind *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* is interesting. Initially a stage play, the novel was published in Japan in 2015, first translated into English in the United Kingdom in 2019. There are now multiple books in the series, including *Before Your Memory Fades*, *Tales from the Cafe*, *Before We Say Goodbye*, and *Before We Forget Kindness*. Translated by Geoffrey Trousselot, the book offers four vignettes, perhaps interconnected short stories, detailing the customers of a back-alley cafe in Tokyo, *Funiculi Funicula*. The gist of the book is that if you sit in a specific seat in the cafe—when it’s not occupied by its usual inhabitant—you can travel into the past to see someone else who’s visited the cafe.

There are additional rules to the experience that I won’t outline here, to save you some of the fun of discovery and enjoyment while reading. But the book does go into some detail discussing the potential effects of returning to the past—and guidelines necessary to avoid such impact.

A somewhat breezy read, the book is enjoyable. Its characters are compelling, and the repeated elements suggest that the series was worth pursuing. In this first volume, chapter headings include “The Lovers,” “Husband and Wife,” “The Sisters,” and “Mother and Child.” A couple of the chapters interconnect, which provides at least one meaningful callback, but a notable risk expressed earlier in the book doesn’t necessarily resolve by the book’s end. Perhaps it will in a subsequent book.

Before the Coffee Gets Cold is definitely more of a mainstream novel than genre fiction, but given its time travel aspects, it could perhaps lead to other science fiction reading. It’s certainly not marketed as sf, more along the lines of *Tuesdays with Morrie* or *The Bridges of Madison County*. The book is airy and sentimental, not as dark as Haruki Murakami and similar to Banana Yoshimoto.

Black Hat Blues by Gene Kendall

Review by JE Tabor

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

A comic book supervillain dropped into the insanity that is Twenty-First Century America

Black Hat Blues by Gene Kendall is a darkly humorous novel about an aging comic book artist whose supervillain creation comes knocking at his back door. The villain comes into direct conflict with the current cultural moment, and kidnapping, murder, and other hijinks ensue. Being a comic book supervillain, Mr. Scratch's inner (and outer) monologue is appropriately over-the-top in contrast to his peace-loving hippie creator Mark.

Along with the dark humor there are genuine moments of real human connection that will tug at the heart strings, and the bittersweet ending does not tie every thread into a neat bow – in fact, spending time dwelling on the characters' choices leaves some disturbing questions left unanswered.

The story

Although Mark Lipscomb has been a huge success with his popular comic book series, he is losing control of his work to the corporate owners that want to take the Bronze Age comic in a different direction for the new generation that doesn't share the same sensibilities.

Enter Mr. Scratch, Mark's supervillain creation who has travelled through the multiverse to come face-to-face with his creator. After finally coming to terms with that incredible turn of events, Mark reluctantly allows his supervillain creation to crash on his couch, unsure of what else to do.

Learning of Mark's struggles with his work, Mr. Scratch decides to become his champion. As you might suspect, having a supervillain fight your battles can quickly get out of hand. An escalating series of felonies follow, and Mark must figure out how to battle his evil creation without bringing his daughter, his granddaughter, and the rest of the world to more harm.

The characters

Mark is a massively successful but aging hippie cartoonist with arthritis and failing vision. Though he doesn't realize it, he is stuck in the past when it comes to the new generation of social justice activists, and he can't help but ruffle their feathers with his every attempt to connect with this new audience.

Mr. Scratch is the scheming megalomaniac sorcerer, CEO, and mad scientist that acts as Mark's id. Scratch does the things that Mark's darkest version of himself wishes he could, to horrific results. Most of the book consists of Mark struggling to control Mr. Scratch while slowly realizing how dangerous he is.

The world

There are two worlds in Black Hat Blues: our world, and the superhero world of the main character's creation. The real world is head-shakingly familiar, and the comic book world is a fairly standard sendup of DC's Metropolis. The real world-building and satire come from the portrayals of the interaction between the two worlds.

Mark is living in a world that is passing him by - despite being at the forefront of the counterculture - and still seeing himself as such - his progressive views from the seventies are considered "problematic" by college kids in the Twenty-First Century, and he increasingly finds that the people he would consider his allies don't see him the same way. In the same way, Mark finds his creations rebelling against him - and not just the villains. The comic book characters' reactions to the revelation of what they are, who Mark is, and what he has done to them, feels especially real.

The politics

If not completely politically right, it has libertarian themes and is certainly not "woke." Black Hat Blues lands Mr. Scratch directly in the current cultural moment, grappling with such issues as the contradictions of the modern social justice movement, the distortions of online culture and fandom, and the realities of police militarization, all with running commentary by a megalomaniacal psychopath.

Content warning

There are few "on-screen" instances of violence, but murder and subsequent pulverization of the corpse is implied. There is a scene where Mark remembers being beaten by his abusive father and one significant scene of violence against an animal.

Who is it for?

Black Hat Blues is for anyone who ever wondered what it would be like if Lex Luthor or the Riddler stepped out of the pages of the Bronze Age comics and into the real world. If you are a fan of comic books who get frustrated with the sensitivities of modern social justice activists, this book is for you.

Why read it?

Black Hat Blues is a fun satire of the modern world that also deals with serious subjects with a whole lot of heart.

Bronze Canticles, Book One by Tracy and Laura Hickman

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Look, sometimes life can be a little weird. So, like, if you're reading this TOTALLY AWESOME series called The Bronze Canticle and you just finished Book Two and you're so geeked for the next one you can't see straight maybe you go back to school before Book Three hits and maybe you even become the first person on either side of your family to get your degree but by then you're so caught up that you didn't get the book, and then you get a divorce...

Yup. Lost track of the series. But maybe what's even weirder is that I kept remembering the last scene of Book Two but not what book it was from. Then I remembered that it was by Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis, only I remembered WRONG because it's by Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman, and I figured I'd just used Margaret Weis's name to find the thing because her name is listed first usually, but then I gave in and finally searched under Tracy's name and found it, but I had to start over because it's been over fifteen years...

Yeah, weird. You feel me?

But totally worth it. I just finished reading *Mystic Warrior: Bronze Canticles, Book One* by Tracy and Laura Hickman and I'd go through all of that again just to get my hands on this one. But it gets better because I actually have the next two as well. I just haven't read them yet. I'm going to though.

Mystic Warrior is a book that's told in three parts. One centers on a human named Galen Arvad. He's got a bit of a mental illness, he thinks. That's unless it's something else and he just doesn't know it. Then there's a faery named Dwywyn. She's a seeker in search of truth, but she's nothing at all like Richard Cipher/Rahl. And then there's Mimic who is totally a goblin engineer, only he doesn't play *World of Warcraft*. Got all that?

Good. There will be a quiz later. Did you bring your number two pencil and a Scantron?

SHOOSH!!!

You're lucky I'm not making you use a blue book.

Anyway...

The three exist in worlds separate from each other but they can communicate in their dreams. Ideas pass back and forth between worlds and as the story goes further on and things get more complicated and more interconnected. The three find ways to influence each other's worlds without even being there. It's like the Marvel multiverse only it makes sense.

Mystic Warrior is epic fantasy at both its finest and its weirdest. The fates of three worlds hang in the balance and these three people (two of which are relative nobodies at the beginning of the story) have huge roles to play. They don't know that at the beginning of the story. I'm not sure one of them knows it at the end of the book. It doesn't matter. They're all in this together and this plot is going places.

The action in *Mystic Warrior* doesn't let up. Whether it's one person fleeing or another accidentally headed into danger unexpectedly or flat-out mass battle, there's always something going on. *Mystic Warrior* is not the book you read to put yourself to sleep, but it will keep you at work during a boring shift at work while you're wondering what comes next.

I want to know how much planning went into writing this book. The way everything draws together is amazing and it didn't happen by accident. I don't know much about Laura Hickman's writing career, but Tracy has been publishing since at least the Eighties and that experience shows here. I mean, I'm betting that editing *Mystic Warrior* was still a major undertaking, but this thing hangs together despite how spread out the plot is. I'm as big a supporter of first-time authors as you're likely to find but you'll never find something like this series out of a newbie. And granted, *Mystic Warrior* was published in 2004, but Tracy had roughly twenty-ish years of publishing experience even then. There's too much going on and it's handled so well.

It should go without saying that the world(s)building here is magnificent. Each separate setting has its own backstory that's really well done. At least one world is built a little better than the people in that part of the story realize, but I digress. Every SF/F story needs a world, but *The Bronze Canticle* needed three and they all deliver. I'm really amazed at how well the three worlds play off of each other while still maintaining their individual flavor.

What we don't get to see is how and why the three separate worlds are linked as tightly as they are. There is something beyond our sight going on here. I can't remember what it is if, indeed, we find out what that is in Book Two. Then again, the Hickmans must have simply been too smart to let out all their secrets in the first book when there are two more left.

This may not make sense to anyone who hasn't read the book (and you are, of course, welcome to read the book then re-read my review) but I was kind of concerned that we were going to get an Eighties style training montage. You know, the one where Our Hero doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground and, after roughly three minutes of intense music and waving their hands around, becomes a master warrior capable of taking on the whole world with the power of their massive fighting skills? Didn't happen. Sure, there's a similar sequence, but after that Our Hero is slightly less pathetic. That I can deal with.

I can't wait to read the next one again. I remember how it ended but I've forgotten much of what led up to it. I've done a lot of reading and writing since then. Unfortunately, though, it's going to have to wait. May is the Month of the Veteran here at Jimbo's and I've got six books written by veterans to review with four of them posted over Memorial Day Weekend. Look for a combined review of the last two come June though.

All in all, though, I'm really glad that I managed to figure out what these books were and buy copies. It's been a good time so far and it's bound to get better from here.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 New Truths

The Cosmic Courtship by Julian Hawthorne Review by Ginger Man upstreamreviews.substack.com

It's been called the American Out of the Silent Planet and it's easy to see why.

A lost work by Julian Hawthorne – son of the legendary Nathaniel Hawthorne – is brought back to life by Cirsova Publishing.

It's been called the American Out of the Silent Planet and it's easy to see why.

The story

In the distant future of 2001 (the story was written in 1917) Miriam Mayne and Jack Paladin both live in the upper crust of New York society. She is a promising young scientist and he an artist of immense talent and neither seems to have a particular interest in the opposite sex, until they meet that is.

That changes rather suddenly when their mutual love for and skill with horses brings them together. Jack is instantly taken with her when he sees the young woman at social event before a horse race. He's unsure if the attraction is mutual until he has the opportunity of saving her life on the horse track.

The pair fall in love immediately, but the affair is seemingly cut short when Miriam disappears suddenly after their first meetings. When Jack tracks her to the lab of Mary Faust, the mystery is only deepened. While Miriam's body is there, her consciousness is (along with a suitable body) on Saturn with no clear way of return.

Jack follows, promising to bring her back. When he arrives, he finds that the task will not be easy as Miriam has also caught the eye of Torpeon, a despot with designs of ruling not only the moon of Tor but the whole solar system and beyond. Fortunately, Jack has been followed by his trusty servant Jim, a deformed but streetwise and loyal youth he had rescued from the gutter.

The characters

If you are a modern reader with certain preconceived notions of how people wrote a hundred years ago and how they portrayed people, especially women, then prepare to have your mind blown. Not only are many of the main characters women, they are not mere love interests. Mary is clearly ahead of her time with her inventions. Miriam is not only a worthy pupil, she is a skilled horse rider, and has enough intelligence and will to defy Torpeon and even develop a backup plan that would require her to sacrifice her life.

Lamara, the benevolent ruler of the Saturnians, also seems to have a status slightly below that of a goddess. It's clear that she has immense power at her disposal but would rather avoid using it lest she call more harm than good.

The excellence of the women also does not come at the expense of the men. Jack Paladin might be the most obvious protagonist name in literary history, and the character does not disappoint. While he obviously struggles with understanding the pacifism of the Saturnians, he demonstrates his fidelity to Miriam as well as his bravery many times over.

The star of the show though is Jim. Much like Samwise Gamgee, he is fiercely loyal, thinking the world of his master, while also considering him to dangerously naïve in certain areas. In fact, it is Jim, acting with complete selflessness that really moves the story along at many points, saving Jack and taking the fight straight to Torpeon.

The world

Especially given the time period in which *The Cosmic Courtship* was written one should forgive certain liberties Hawthorne takes when it comes to filling in the massive holes in scientific knowledge. Instead, focus on the way he describes a society that is in many ways truly alien to our own. While they are pacifistic, their advances also make war completely unnecessary, even with Torpeon. Yet, they are still clearly tempted by fear, anger, desire, and vengeance.

Saturn is also contrasted well with Torpeon's world of Tor which is a violent place ruled with Torpeon's iron fist and turned into a giant lab for the despot's experiments.

The politics

There are few overt politics in the book. What little there is would at first seem to be center left with the strong focus on nonviolence and lack of punishment for criminals. Yet, pay a bit more attention and you realize these things are only possible because of the immense virtue of the citizens of Saturn which is such that a criminal brought to judgment is so shamed that he or she would willingly sacrifice themselves to make amends. It's also clear that these virtues are only so well developed because their immense devotion to God. That places a bit right of center as whole.

Content warning

There is little content that could be found objectionable here. There is some use of magic and attempts at seduction undertaken by the villains of the story, but it only ever skirts the edge of PG-13 once. There are also a couple violent deaths near the end but not described in a graphic way.

Who is it for?

I'd recommend this to anyone with a taste for an older style of storytelling. It is slower paced and relies on the character relationships and concepts to carry the story. If you are a Chris Nolan fan, or you greatly enjoyed C.S. Lewis' sci-fi trilogy, then this is for you. I'd also recommend this to a teenage boy or girl who has a more advanced reading ability and expose them to the way men and women should act when courting.

Why read it?

To return to a simpler time, to a different way of telling stories, unencumbered by the many silly rules we impose on ourselves.

Endless Summer by Misha Burnett Review by Ginger Man upstreamreviews.substack.com

Misha Burnett proves himself to be a true talent that deserves a lot more attention with this collection of short stories.

The story

I had never heard of Misha Burnett until Cirsova sent me *Endless Summer* to review. I wish I had been aware of him long before. In this book, he offers up several sci-fi stories that fuel the imagination and do so across a number of sub-genres. The book contains detective stories, alien visitors, surveillance everywhere, the end of the world, time travel, and more.

It's hard to pick a favorite. Most of them are not particularly hopeful, but there are some exceptions. Such as *Milk, Bread, & Eggs* in which aliens come not to invade but to pick up some groceries. And by groceries, I mean stopping at an actual supermarket, not harvesting people like *War of the Worlds*. And the opening story, *The Bullet from Tomorrow* in which the heroes avert a nuclear apocalypse by stopping a plane crash. There is also *These Were the Things that Bounded Me*, a story of a paraplegic and a blind girl working together to survive in a world decimated by a virus similar to *The Stand*.

Perhaps the saddest of them all involves a bunch of apparently sentient theme park characters keeping their park going when everyone else is dead, called *The Happiest Place on Earth*. There is something about the need to keep on going, to fulfill some kind of purpose in the face of utter desolation that really reaches in and tugs at the heart strings.

The most unsettling goes to *The Island of Forbidden Dances*, a story of a vacation at the Morningside Resort. Think of it as Big Brother but on an entire island and the cameras are literally everywhere. And one of the founders of it is always on the lookout for new recruits to keep the ratings high. It isn't so much what happens in the story that is so unsettling, it's the fact that we're about one or two years away

Why read it?

You should read this because Misha is a gifted writer who knows how to tell a tight story without sacrificing character or plot development.

Gun Runner by Larry Correia and John D. Brown

Review by Ginger Man

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Gun Runner is my first exposure to the work of Larry Correia and Larry Brown. After reading it, I have two thoughts.

One, this won't be the last of his work that I read.

Two, why the hell did I wait so long?

The story

Captain Halloway may be a gun smuggler, but he's the good kind. No, really. He spends most of his time running guns to the underdogs of the galaxy, the people that the mega governments and corporations have decided shouldn't have weapons to defend themselves. One collection of underdogs was the freedom fighters of the planet Gloss. Struggling to throw off the abusive government, they had been fighting a losing battle until the captain and the crew of the Tar Heel dropped off some mechs. Even then, it was a tough fight until Jackson Rook climbed into one.

Mechs are dangerous weapons when used properly but their full potential can only be unlocked by pilots who are capable of accepting certain cybernetic implants. Jackson Rook, though only a teen at the time, is one of the few who can accept them. Already a gifted pilot in manual mode, with the implants he became a virtual god of war.

Unfortunately, the enemy had an ace up their sleeve that would have consigned Jack to a prolonged and agonizing death had Halloway not rescued him.

Now, Jackson is part of the Tar Heel crew, helping to secure a Citadel, a top-of-the-line mech and the last item in an order that will let Halloway retire, and Jack get his own ship. That order is going to the planet Swindle, a world full of nightmare creatures that makes the worst of Australia look like a petting zoo on Valium. It also happens to be the source of the fuel that makes interstellar travel possible, meaning that regardless of the dangers, people make regular excursions to the surface to mine the stuff.

However, while finalizing the deal with Warlord – one of the two men with the most direct control over Swindle – Jack and other members of the crew come across some things that make them doubt they've been supplying the good guys after all. Unable to let it rest, Jack winds up dragging the crew of the Tar Heel into the fight of their lives.

The characters

The crew of the Tar Heel is made up of a merry band of misfits collected from all over the galaxy. The few things they have in common are troubled pasts, a high degree of skill in their field, and the trust of Captain Halloway.

from it actually happening.

There are a total of twelve stories in the collection and each one is engaging and will likely even spark a thought or two.

The characters

Like the stories, the characters are many, varied, and extremely well developed in a shockingly small amount of space. One that really sticks in my mind is Len, a man stuck in his auto-driving car In the Driving Lane. As the story progresses, you can feel his desperation, trying to figure out what is going on with his car and why he can't get off the road.

Then there is Mr. Emil Becker, an apparently soft and mild-mannered auditor sent to check out operations in a mutant wasteland. When the operation decides to strand him and doom him to the Serpent's Walk, Becker is revealed to be something else entirely.

Not all of the main characters in Burnett's worlds are good guys either. In Heartbeat City Homicide, we meet Alex, a dirty cop who manages to feel some remorse about working with the criminal elements of the vast underworld.

It would be easy to go on and on because in every story, the author manages to deliver characters that are never flat or one dimensional despite allowing himself just a few pages to develop them.

The world

Obviously, there is no one thorough line on the world building in a collection of short stories. However, each story feels like a snippet of a complete world even though most are only around twenty pages. Burnett manages this through a combination of brilliant setting descriptions, dialogue, and character reactions that show the tone of the world, sketches how society works and how the characters' place within it. The fact he does this so consistently demonstrates the author's immense talent more than anything else. If you go read through his comments on the stories in the back, Burnett suggests that several of them could easily exist in the same universe.

The politics

As is often the case with books reviewed here, there are no explicit politics. Yet, each tale tells the story of how individuals react to their circumstances, and it is often the individual and his own action and responsibility that drives the story, placing it somewhere in the libertarian camp.

Content warning

There are a couple of gay characters in the first story but nothing special is made of it. There is also one not-quite sex scene and a number of naughty words that are unlikely to ruffle the feathers of anyone reading the book.

Who is it for?

If you are fan of speculative shows like The Twilight Zone, The Outer Limits and the like, you are going to love this.

Halloway is definitely a rogue with a heart of gold, fiercely loyal to his ship and his crew, with a code that drives him to help the galaxy's Davids fight their Goliaths. He is apparently willing to not look too close though and may be too willing to trust their broker Shade when it comes to who they should work with.

Shade herself is a mysterious figure. She seems on an equal or even superior footing with Halloway in business matters and also has the ability to call on unknown allies to get the crew out of tight situations. She also is clearly hiding something as discovered by Jane.

Jane is the Tar Heel's spectre, a computer genius who builds adorable murder robots in her spare time. Possibly the best tech expert in the galaxy, she still has to work for it sometimes, such as when tracking down Shade's contacts or that time she saved Jack from being enslaved by the people he was trying to fight.

Jackson Rook, despite being a child soldier, getting turned on his own people and living his subsequent life as a smuggler and thief is an idealist. In order avoid his fate on Gloss, he's sworn to never do a full uplink to a mech again. He also can't stand the thought that he and the crew have been supplying a brutal dictator, someone who almost makes his former enemies seem tame.

That brutal dictator is of course Warlord. Yes, just Warlord. Given the name, it probably isn't too surprising. He is brilliant, charismatic, determined, and downright sadistic, willing to go to any lengths to maintain and expand his control over Swindle.

The world

The world of Gun Runner is well-grounded in the realm of the possible. Other than the gates that facilitate interstellar travel, there isn't any magical technology. Otherwise, artificial gravity is provided by rotating a taurus, mechs are not useful in most situations unless piloted by someone like Jackson, various corporations and governments vie for dominance. In short, the politics are not so different from this world.

The politics

Captain Halloway and crew are very explicitly the type who don't much like rules. In fact, if doing so will poke one of the major powers in the eye, he will be more than happy to bring weapons to nearly anyone. Gun Runner isn't an unthinking endorsement of that outlook either, as the whole story is about what can happen if you get sloppy and don't take proper care of your corner of the world.

Content warning

There are some scenes where children are brutally murdered. If you can handle that, you'll be just fine.

Who is it for?

Think of Gun Runner as Firefly with more purpose and without the space whore. If that sounds good to you, then this book will definitely appeal.

Why read it?

Correia and Brown deliver a gripping tale that will keep you on the edge of your seat, while also taking

the necessary time to develop his characters and introduce them in ways that make them seem very grounded and real.

Jack of Shadows Review by Brian Heming upstreamreviews.substack.com

One of Zelazny's best

Jack of Shadows, Lord of Shadowguard! Shadowjack, the thief who walks in silence and shadow! Jack of Liars, breaker of the Compact! An immortal, elemental power from the shadowed side of the world, who draws his power where light meets darkness.

One of Roger Zelazny's greatest stories, with all the epicness of *Amber* and the magic and mythos of *Lord of Light*, in a fast-paced, adventure-filled short novel.

The Story

Shadowjack, the world's greatest thief, is engaged to steal the Hellflame. Betrayed, he is killed, and on his revival, imprisoned by his enemy.

Jack must escape, obtain power, and seek vengeance. But his vengeance has world-shaking consequences, and the entire Earth, magical and mundane, is re-made as a result.

The Characters

Jack of Shadows — Though a thief and a liar, he's a charming character easy to sympathize with. Vengeful, driven, and ultimately justified by the mistreatments visited upon him.

The Lord of Bats — Jack's greatest enemy. Stubborn, implacable, evil, and villainous. He has his reasons, though.

Evene — Jack's former betrothed. Beautiful, feminine, emotional, and a sympathetic character.

Rosalie — An old flame of Jack's, a human lightsider from the sunset zone who now works as a witch in the dark side. Being a lightsider, she is the most human of all those we meet on the darkside, acting with all the foibles and nobilities of the people you know around you. Jack's love and fondness for her is palpable.

The Colonel Who Never Died — Evene's father, and a power of the darkside.

Morningstar — His position fixed in the mountains overlooking the Everdawn, he is perhaps Jack's only true friend. Their relationship is poignant.

The World

Jack lives in a world of light and dark, on an Earth tidally locked to the sun. The world of day is a world of the mundane, dominated by a physics-based technological civilization like that of the late 20th century. The world of night is a world of magic, dominated by alternately cooperating and fighting ele-

mental powers.

Politics

The politics of the story vaguely resemble those of Cold War era United States, with the dayside world representing the US. That being said, the only clear moral points made are that lacking a soul may result in terrible political policies, and that one should go outside and get some fresh air occasionally.

Content Warning

Jack of Shadows is a cad, and there's a fair bit of off-screen implied fornication, befitting his personality. The implication is strong that this is immoral behavior, but then, he's an anti-hero.

Who is it for?

This is a book for those who like a compelling hero and can cheer for the villain. This is a book for those who want to face impossible odds and come out on top. This is a book for those who like world-shaking mythos in the story behind their characters. And of course, this is a book for anyone who has enjoyed any of Zelazny's works, being one of the best of them.

Why buy it?

Jack of Shadows is one of the greatest anti-heroes in the history of science fiction. It's difficult not to sympathize with him in his struggles, and difficult not to cheer for him as he overcomes them. His relationships pull on the heart strings, and he is redeemed by the ending.

The Lost Metal by Brandon Sanderson

Review by Heath Row

https://fanac.org/fanzines/Stf_Amateur/

I bought this 760-page mass-market paperback at the airport before flying to Portugal last fall, read about half of it while traveling, and finally pushed through to the end early this week. (It's the first book I finished in 2025.) The novel was fun and interesting, but it wasn't really that compelling or thought-provoking, and having now read this and *The Bands of Mourning*, I might be done with Sanderson.

While I recognize his presence and importance in genre publishing—not many authors can support their own con (*Dragonsteel*)—and I know he's a Big Deal liked by many people, I don't think I fully see the appeal or understand the allure. The two *Mistborn* books I've read are fine. I just might not need to read more of them. And if his other writing is similar, maybe I don't need to read the *Stormlight Archive*, *Alcatraz vs. the Evil Librarians*, *Skyward*, or the *Reckoners* series. Plenty of other people have—and will. Sanderson strikes me as similar to the New York Yankees or Los Angeles Dodgers. He'll be fine without me.

That's not at all to say that I don't find Sanderson himself interesting. I find him fascinating. A 2014 New York Times profile offers a useful entry point to understanding the man's productivity and success. A 2023 *Wired* feature explores the role his Mormonism plays in his work. The man has built up a sizable industry around him, and when we think about Sanderson the author, we're likely thinking

about Sanderson the business (also called Dragonsteel). That's what he's become, as indicated by a 2022 New York Times article on the author's approach to Kickstarter. The Acknowledgments preceding this novel tip hat to some of the industrialization of his prose. So many people are involved in any Sanderson project. His—their—work pays more bills than his own.

Not only does Sanderson's Dragonsteel employ his own line editors (who "perform... the line edit work that often is shouldered by the US publisher"), he has his own lead editors, an art department led by an internal art director, an in-house editorial department staffed by people "running continuity," a fulfillment and events team, a "writing group" that likely writes more than Sanderson himself does, a network of beta readers, gamma readers, and a Magic System Continuity team. His wife serves as COO.

Sanderson might be the Ryan Seacrest of genre publishing, perhaps akin to James Patterson. He's definitely become Big Business. I'm sure Sanderson remains the primary font of style and sensibility, but Dragonsteel as an organization has likely grown to the extent that he's no longer the sole source of ideas. His books are likely written, edited, and packaged by committee—as a business activity. The "author," then serves as CEO, as figurehead.

I also found that where *The Lost Metal* falls in the Mistborn story arc is interesting. This novel marks the end of Era Two of Mistborn, which has now been publishing for more than 16 years. Sanderson also discusses that progression in the Acknowledgments. "Sixteen years ago ... I first pitched to my wife an audacious idea I'd been developing: taking an epic fantasy world and then expanding it through different eras into the future," he wrote. "I'd seen mashups of fantasy and science fiction before, and I'd seen epic fantasy inch toward industrial technology. But I'd never seen an author develop a world in quite this way—giving an expansive view of a planet moving into the future, using the lore of earlier book series as the foundation of religion and myth."

His "grand experiment with genre" is noteworthy and intriguing. Laudable, even. Not only has the magic of the planet evolved through various eras, characters once considered gods are now known (by some) to be aliens, and the planet is now known (again, by some) to be one of many planets, its people one of many peoples. Some people (not many) even know you can travel between the planets. That's fascinating and pretty darn cool.

But do you have to read all of it, or do certain novels stand out as pivotal moments similar to the key issues of comic book series? (For any non-comic readers or collectors, key issues are issues in which there's a first appearance, a notable birth or death, an origin story, the introduction of a new costume, or similar event.) I'm not sure.

The Lost Metal was a fun read. There's just a lot of it. When a book is merely fine, that can make a lot seem like even more. The book ends with multiple character-driven epilogues. (The book can't just end!) There's an "Ars Arcanum" Metals Quick Reference Chart and "Allomancy Alphabetical Reference." The Metallic Arts are explained. Each metal utilized in Allomancy is designated an icon. (Thank you, art department!) The icons are utilized at the start of every chapter; I'm sure that means something to more actively invested readers.

As it was, despite all of that, what worked best for me in *The Lost Metal* were the characters. Wax and Wayne make a compelling duo. Good cop, bad cop oversimplifies the dynamic. Their portrayal on the cover of the book makes them look much younger than I think they actually are. Wax, in particular, has been through a lot. Wayne largely offers comic relief but shows a surprising and increasing amount of heart and complexity throughout. The alien-god characters, one the former lover of one of the characters, are intriguing. And the supporting cast includes a couple of additional characters who resonated

with me. I particularly enjoyed Steris and her realization that her approach to disaster preparations might be something she could—should—be proud of. Her surprise that others found it valuable and impressive was delightful.

The book is primarily a steampunk-esque thriller. A metal long thought lost is rediscovered. (That's where the title comes from.) Enemies of the state develop a nascent form of nuclear weaponry. A ship is utilized as a bomb. And there's a lot of fight scenes and magic drawing on various metals. The logic and physics of the magic system plays a major role in this—and other—books. It's practically a character on its own, the real protagonist and star of the show.

Even though I asserted that I might be done with Sanderson, I might just be getting started. I might seek out the key novels in the series to experience the most important transitions. Then again, I might not. The book was fine, and it was written by committee. Maybe I'll seek out the books Sanderson himself wrote before his writing became industrialized. I don't begrudge Sanderson his success or his fans their well-deserved pleasure, but there might be other authors—writers without corporations behind them—more deserving of my attention. I've always been more of a Mets guy.

The New Galveston Duology by Dale Cozort)

Review by Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

New Galveston Book 1: Operation Croatoan

New Galveston Book 2: The Wild East

Dale Cozort is well known amongst alternate history fans for his detailed WW2 scenarios and, more rarely in the AH world, equally detailed scenarios following possible Native American/Spanish Conquest period. He brings an astonishing grasp of both periods to his work, with enough details to make them some of the most plausible timelines/outlines in the genre. Dale does his research and it shows.

In the New Galveston books, Dale combines both time periods to create a very different world. In 1939, when much of the US Navy was at sea holding a massive exercise – with President Franklin Roosevelt as the guest of honour – the United States simply vanished, to be replaced by an alternate new world still inhabited solely by the descendants of the Aztecs, Incas and North American tribal societies. (The US vanishing is not unique – John Birmingham did it well in *Without Warning* – but replacing the US with a 'new' New World is unique as far as I know.) The remnants of the US try to settle the new land, but find themselves competing with foreign powers, including the Nazis and the Japanese, both of whom have allied themselves with the Aztecs and other hostile Indian powers. And an uneasy peace is about to be broken as the Nazis make a bid to take over the New World ...

The story is very pulpy, with a handful of very diverse characters competing to stop the Nazis and save the New World before it is too late. There are relatively few moments of contemplation – instead, rather, all-out action as the characters race across the 'undiscovered' lands in constant running battles. The bigger actions – the USN fighting the German Navy – are largely off-screen, although it is clear the battles are quite significant. It also draws in political insights, from the US being reluctant to arm local allies (and, accidentally, forcing them to bend the knee to the Aztecs), to the impact of a vast new space for exploration and settlement. The politics are a tight squeeze for the US, caught between multiple different factions of varying levels of hostility. And the Nazi plot to cripple and isolate the remnants of America is horrifyingly plausible.

There are issues I might take with the global politics. Losing the US in 1939, even before the war broke out, would severely damage the global economy (although not to the extent of Without Warning). The Reich might actually be less able to sustain a war – and in this timeline it is clear Hitler never invaded Poland – but it would be balanced by Britain and France being thrown back on their own resources. Given time, the Reich would peak and start to decline – just when this would happen is hard to calculate, as Britain and France – and to some extent Russia – would be weakened by the loss of the US. I'm also unsure if the Germans could have deployed a major fleet – pretty much everything they had – to the New World. Even if they had bases in the region, they would not be capable of supporting the fleet. The logistics would be an absolute nightmare.

The book doesn't try to sugar-coat either the Native Americans or the Nazis themselves, nor does it skim away from the immense problems facing the Native Americans when the confronted Europeans for the first time. Disease is a serious problem, even with 'modern' vaccination techniques; tribal warfare and constant feuds makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a stable society to arise. (The Aztecs had actually neared the limits of their expansion when the Spanish arrived.) The willingness of certain powers to ally with the Nazis is quite plausible, particularly when the Germans appeared to be the only outsiders willing to trade modern weapons to the locals. They are, of course, planning to backstab the Aztecs when they've outlived their usefulness.

Overall, the two books are good quick reads. I might quibble about the ending – and I would love to see a third book – but I enjoyed reading them. You might too.

The Other Time by Mack Reynolds and Dean Ing Review by Chris Nuttall

Stories in which someone is sent back in time and starts making changes, for better or worse, have always been a favourite of mine, although the genre is never easy to get right. It is difficult to understand the technical limitations facing the locals, as well as the simple fact they have a very different mindset. Slavery, for example, is repulsive to us – and rightly so – but simply part of many primitive societies. Indeed, it can be difficult to convince people set in their ways (with very little room for manoeuvre) to change on your say-so. Doing a story in which this happens convincingly is very difficult.

The Other Time follows the adventures of Don Fielding, an American archaeologist who falls through a rift in space-time and finds himself in the Mexico of the past, when the Spanish Conquistador had just begun their conquest. (This neatly solves the language issue, as Don speaks both Spanish and a handful of local tongues.) Blundering into Cortés's camp, Don makes the mistake of telling him about the rich lands to the north – ironically, ones that don't yet exist in Cortés's time – and finds himself a prisoner, eventually sentenced to death.

Making his escape, Don flees to Tenochtitlan, becomes an adoptive brother of a leading Aztec nobleman and winds up advising them on how to resist Cortés, eventually becoming the war leader and effective dictator of the Aztec Empire. Although not a military man, Don's combination of hindsight – he knows what to expect, before events start to change – and cunning give him the edge, allowing him to leverage the empire's greater manpower to produce a victory, assimilate the surviving Spanish and set out to build a world where the Americans meet the Europeans as near-equals. The book does end with the outcome unresolved, but it is clear that history has been changed beyond repair.

Don is, right from the start, a likable character – it helps he has no emotional tie to Cortés and his men. The book does a good job of showing his earlier befuddlement and while he does make mistakes, they are understandable ones. He never talks down to the Aztecs or indeed anyone else, despite knowing far

more than they do about what is to come. There are limits to what he can do – and what he can convince them to do – and the book acknowledges this. The locals find him a little odd, but it generally works. He serves as the eyes through which we see the Aztecs, a society very different to our own, and allows us to recognise their possession of traits we recognise as virtues. This is also true of the Spanish themselves. They may be painted as greedy monsters, which was partly true in the original timeline, but they have virtues too. How well this works out will depend on your point of view. Don is, at one point, shunned for not leading his men into battle, unlike both his closest allies and Cortés himself.

The authors show an excellent understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the Aztecs, detailing why they lost so badly in the original timeline and altering matters to reshape the future. Don does not snap his fingers and bring forth modern weapons from the soil to arm his troops. Instead, he uses his manpower advantage to bait traps and try to force the Spanish into killing grounds, leveraging their weaknesses against them while trying to capture as many Spanish craftsman and horses as possible. He also starts introducing concepts like the wheel, allowing the Aztecs a chance to take his ideas and build on them. His insights into how the Spanish think also prove instructive – Don points out, to several Spanish commoners, that they're not going to wind up rich men, as Cortés and the aristocracy will take most of the loot. In the end, he uses the promise of genuine wealth to convince many of the Spanish to stay with him.

At the same time, however, the book does suffer from two major weaknesses. The first one is that the impact of smallpox on the Aztecs is significantly understated. The disease was so lethal because the Aztecs had no immunity whatsoever, a problem made worse by the demands of the war. It is possible that a sizable number of newcomers could have made a difference, simply by taking care of the ill before becoming infected themselves, but there just weren't enough people to handle the task.

The second is that the Aztecs themselves are, for what of a better term, whitewashed. They were not nice people. They were an aggressive empire with a nasty habit of bullying its neighbours, taking their people for sacrifice and generally being thoroughly unpleasant to everyone they happened to encounter. Cortés had no trouble finding allies in his war against the empire because there were a lot of tribes and cities that loathed the Aztecs and would be happy to side with anyone standing against them. While in the long term this was disastrous – in much the same sense as Russians who sided with the Nazis against the Soviets; they traded a bad master for an even worse one – it was understandable. Don does nod to the difficulty of convincing other cities to let bygones be bygones, but I think the book understates it.

(The suggestion the Aztecs saw Cortés, and later Don himself, as a god is mentioned, but it isn't clear how seriously anyone really took it.)

Overall, though, the book does maintain a fun pulpy atmosphere. The action moves quickly, the infodumps are worked neatly into the text. It does sometimes get a little strange – there is a suggestion that La Malinche (aka Doña Marina) originally let Don go because he kissed her, something Cortés never did – but those are minor issues. The book does paint the Spanish as heartless conquerors, which is largely true (although the historical Cortés wanted to present the entire empire to his king, rather than destroy it) and general monsters, although – unlike Turtledove's *The Guns of the South* – the primary audience was not composed of people who might take offense at a nakedly hostile depiction.

Secret Agents of the Galaxy by John C. Wright
Review by Brian Heming
upstreamreviews.substack.com

Pulp Space Opera at its best

Firstly, this is the second in the series. Go buy the first, it's amazing.

Starquest continues with Secret Agents of the Galaxy. Wright channels classic pulp space opera like E. Doc Smith's Lensman series in addition to spy novel tropes, and like Doc Smith's pulp space operas, we have ever-expanding scope and grandeur as the series progresses. From the ending of Space Pirates of Andromeda, in which the action largely focused on a single planetary system with greater implications, we zoom out to the greater implications as the fate of a slice of the Andromeda galaxy, and the new Republic they have founded after the end of the Empire, hangs in the balance.

With scope, and republics, comes politics. But Wright does not handle this with the eye-popping boringness of the senatorial meetings of the Star Wars prequels. We have secret agents, high drama, pulp cheesecake, split second decisions, and actual politics. Will a representative government do the right thing, for once in history?

Nor is this to say that this is a political thriller. We have a spy novel, cloak and dagger drama, and epic galactic worldbuilding. We have blaster combat, pirate hunting, planetary infiltration, and cliffhanger action. We not only have a blaster-slinging heroic pirate hunting hero dude, but a heroic charity-loving hero girl with hints of the dark side within her.

The Empire has long fallen, and we are in the early days of a new galactic Republic. However, with peace has come complacency, and the worlds and citizens of the new Republic disbelieve in the threats immediately bearing down upon their heads: pirate fleets under a pirate king approaching to destroy their worlds, dark, corrupting influences within, and planet and star destroying weapons under the control of the hidden remnants of the Empire, stemming from the lost Arcadia—a planet, not the ship of Space Pirate Captain Harlock. The secret agents of the galaxy, coordinated by a mysterious being of shadow who works for the light, must address the threats and wake up the worlds of the Republic to the encroaching dangers.

The Characters

Athos Lone—In the aftermath of his successful mission in Space Pirates of Andromeda, pirate hunter Athos Lone returns. He is immediately promoted to Vindicator, Wright's equivalent of a Gray Lensmen, given plenipotentiary policing powers, and heads off on an epic pirate-hunting quest. He is an excellent character—heroic and self-sacrificing, but with a deep backstory, family troubles, and troubles of the heart.

Lyra Centauri—Her planet and star was destroyed by a ship from the Empire while she was a child. Though branded a liar by those who think the Empire long gone, she has sworn a vow to the stars to track down the lost world of Arcadia, and end the threat of the Empire. After acquiring space wizard powers via her Shrine Maiden training, including telepresence and levitation, she is recruited as a secret agent. She runs spy missions in pursuit of the goal of her vow. But she is distracted by concerns of charity and emotion, not all of which lead to good places. An extremely well-written female pulp protagonist: a girl space wizard who isn't a Mary Sue or a sword-dude with bumps on her chest.

Napoleon Lone—Unserious senator, bon vivant, scandalous womanizer, he's actually a secret agent who struggles in his position within the Galactic Senate and government to work on the side of good. All the rest is a front, which he keeps up with great aplomb, though secret lack of enthusiasm.

Ko-Manu—a Wookiee-like retainer of the Lone family. A charming, nerdy super-engineer, he has excellent, humorous dialogue, and an appropriately paternal attitude to Athos and his siblings. Not a main character, but he steals the show.

The Politics

Surprisingly non-controversial. Political statements you might infer include the idea that charity is good, and that republics, for all their positives, can suffer from corruption and indecision.

Content Warning

Clean and family-friendly, other than some space pirate deaths.

Who is it for?

If you liked the original Star Wars movies and wished the others were half as good, this book is for you. If you like classic space opera or pulp-era sci-fi, this is for you. If you want larger-than-life heroes firing blasters with their capes blowing in the wind while the fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance, this book is for you.

Why buy it?

A better way to spend your money than any Star Wars of the past decade. Larger-than-life pulp space opera at its best, by one of the greatest masters of science fiction alive today.

Shards of Honor by Lois McMaster Bujold

Review by JE Tabor

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Military Science Fiction meets Planetary Romance

Cordelia Naismith is leading a survey mission on a newly discovered planet when her camp is attacked by the forces of a militaristic empire. She ends up stranded with an officer of the force that attacked her, and they must work together to survive.

In their time together, they learn to respect and admire each other, if not more. When they finally are able to get off-planet, they find their troubles are only beginning, as war and political intrigue threaten not just their lives but their very worlds. Their unlikely partnership may be the only thing that stands between those worlds and disaster.

The story

The story starts with Betan Astronomical Survey Commander Cordelia Naismith leading a mission to explore a newly found planet when her team is attacked by the Barrayaran military. Cordelia is

knocked unconscious in the attack and awakens to find herself stranded with and the prisoner of the Barryaran officer Aral Vorkosigan, who himself has been left to die by his own mutinous soldiers.

The two immediately come into conflict over how to treat Cordelia's wounded comrade, but they soon gain a mutual respect for each other as they fight to survive and find their way back to safety. Once they do find a way off the planet, the tension between the two only increases.

As their two worlds prepare for war, both are called to face one another in battle.

The characters

Cordelia Naismith is a loyal citizen of the liberal Beta Colony, dedicated to liberty, tolerance, the pursuit of knowledge and the integration of technology and society. This is in direct opposition to what she views as the backwards society of the feudal and militaristic Barryaran Empire. But above all, Cordelia is curious. Her liberal open-mindedness also allows her to see through her own society's propaganda when encountering the infamous Butcher of Komarr. Her tolerant values and ability to see both sides of an issue bring her into conflict with her own world as well as the enemies'.

Aral Vorkosigan is a product of his own world's feudal conservatism, and he unapologetically embraces their warrior culture. But his total belief in meritocracy leads him to admire Cordelia, despite their differences. Vorkosigan's honor is important to him above all, which makes the destruction of his career and the label of war criminal tarnishing his reputation all the more difficult for him to bear.

Yes, this space opera is also a romance, and you can see where this is going. Bujold is able to make the couple's push and pull relationship believable, and both are likeable, sympathetic characters that have enough depth to them so that the reader will care about what happens to them next.

The world

In the world of Shards of Honor, interstellar travel is accomplished through the use of naturally occurring worm holes throughout the galaxy that connect two distant points in space. These wormholes are significant in trade and warfare and are key to the plot in Shards of Honor.

Beta Colony is a stand-in for progressive but bureaucratic liberal democracies, and the Barryaran Empire has aspects of the Roman or Byzantine Empire with its political maneuvering and internal discord within an authoritarian and oligarchical warrior culture. These cultures are deceptively deep, and the cardboard cutouts that might be perceived at first are filled out with nuance throughout the story. The two societies are not as straightforward as it might seem.

The politics

Real world politics are entirely absent from Shards of Honor, but if you really want to drag them in, Bujold places the enlightened liberal democracy of Beta Colony as the default by which the reader learns about the foreign ways of the conservative and traditional Barryaran Empire. In this exploration, though, Barryar is not Mordor, and the more "enlightened" planets are not shining cities on a hill. Bujold explores the pros and cons of both these societies, although clearly favoring modern political mores.

There is an aspect of the story that can be seen as openly pro-life: in one scene, we encounter pre-born children growing in artificial synthetics wombs known as "uterine replicators." In the story, they are not

treated much differently than newborn infants from Cordelia's perspective.

Content warning

The story is not for children. There are clear though not graphic depictions of torture and maiming, and explicit references to rape.

Who is it for?

Shards of Honor is for anyone who likes some romance at the forefront of their star-spanning space opera.

Why read it?

Read Shards of Honor for the push and pull between two characters from very different worlds who still end up falling for each other. In our very polarized world, it is nice to imagine that people from completely alien backgrounds can grow to care for each other.

Supermind by A.E. van Vogt

Review by Heath Row

fanac.org/fanzines/Stf_Amateur/

I haven't read a ton of A.E. van Vogt, but I've read *Destination: Universe!* (Telegraphs & Tar Pits #33), *Mission: Interplanetary* (The N3F Review of Books, May 2022)—a retitling of *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*—*Slan*, and *The Silkie*. That's enough to suggest that I should generally understand where the writer is coming from by now. While I enjoyed those books by van Vogt—*The Silkie* in particular—*Supermind* is the first I've read that indicates just how stilted and awkward his writing can be.

Supermind is kind of a mess. It's a fix-up, combining "Asylum" (Astounding Science Fiction, May 1942), "The Proxy Intelligence" (Worlds of If, October 1968), and "Research Alpha" (co-written by James H. Schmitz, Worlds of If, July 1965). While there are consistent elements in the three stories—the space vampire Dreeghs, who can drain living beings of their inherent electricity, energy, or life force, as well as blood; Galactic Observers who monitor the readiness of spacefaring worlds to encounter life from other planets; and somewhat organized efforts to accelerate the development of human cognition—those concepts aren't strong enough to connect the three pieces consistently or convincingly.

The author fetishizes IQ and places various groups in an explicit hierarchy based on their IQ. The Kluggs, for example, are "galactic morons." Other IQ-based castes include the Lennel, Medder, Hulak, and Great Galactics—with IQs ranging from 200 to 1200. Each section of the fix-up is delineated with interstitial text such as "First stage I.Q. 10,000 rehabilitation completed. Begin second stage."

If read as short stories, each might work well on its own. But read as a novel—not as a brief collection of short stories—*Supermind* just doesn't hang together. Let's focus on the component parts as short stories.

The first section focuses on the arrival of the Dreeghs on Earth, their vampiric abilities, and their efforts to enlist the assistance of a prominent journalist in order to determine whether the planet is overseen by a Galactic Observer—which seems to be the only element that might hinder their efforts. This portion

of the fix-up works pretty well, and had the other stories continued to focus on the conflict with the Dreeghs, Supermind might have worked better as a novel. It would have focused on space vampires rather than the accelerated improvement of IQ.

That theory is borne out in the second section, which shares some characters with the first—Steve Hanardy, Professor Ungarn, and his daughter—and largely continues the narrative. The idea of a base hidden in an asteroid is interesting though it seems to get little attention as an environment or setting.

So, it might be the third section that makes the overarching whole uneven and inconsistent. No characters are shared with the earlier portions of the fix-up—until the epilogue, which might have been written for the purposes of the novel—and the section concentrates on a scientist who developed a serum that accelerates evolution.

By itself, the section works very well. The different responses of the test subjects to the Point Omega Stimulation is intriguing, and Barbara Ellington—who responds better than the other subject—ends up being a very compelling character. But the connections between this piece and the others—for example, between Research Alpha and the Galactics—are weak and unconvincing. The book no longer works well as a whole.

I generally appreciate fix-ups and consider them an effective way to combine short stories into compelling longer-form works. That requires that the component parts work well together. In this case, the results aren't as strong as other examples I've read, which suggest that fix-ups can pose risks as well as benefits. You can't necessarily fix up any old set of stories.

With Supermind, I think the perceived failure of the fix-up results from what van Vogt chose to focus on. Had the focus remained on the Dreeghs and the other warring groups, instead of on "Intelligence Quotient Ten Thousand!" in the language of the text on the cover, the book might have worked better. Space vampires might have been enough.

Tales of the Mongoose and Meerkat by Jim Breyfogle

Review by Ginger Man

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Collected from the pages of Cirsova Magazine, *Tales of the Mongoose and Meerkat* by Jim Breyfogle is a throwback to the carefree days when the good guys didn't spend a lot of time moralizing. They showed up, killed the bad guys, got their reward and went out drinking.

The story

The book is actually a collection of short stories so there is not an overarching plot, but rather a series of adventures. However, they are presented chronologically, marked by how long it has been since the fall of Alness. There is also some progression in the relationship between the main characters as well as the growth of their reputation as adventurers.

It begins with Mangos regretting a bet he had made the night before to retrieve the helm of a legendary warrior. Still, he has a reputation as a self-described great adventurer to maintain so he can't refuse. He's joined by Kat, an attractive young woman who seems to know an unusual amount about history and adventuring. Mangos is suspicious of her at first but their relationship begins to become more relaxed after they face off a wolf pack together.

The two continue their adventures, taking on wizards, giant snakes, and thugs as they search for a Mar-in blade, precious jewels, and even a burning fish. As they go through their adventures, the pair clearly develop a genuine respect for each other. Mangos also can't help but notice that Kat is very quiet about her past. Even more than that, pretty much every man they meet notices she's pretty, yet no one, including Mangos ever pursues her. And it's perfectly clear that Mangos likes the ladies.

The individual stories are not always mere treasure hunts or fetch quests. In their search for the burning fish, Kat and Mangos contend with a cult of dubious origins. When they are hired to forcefully resolve a dispute over some bushes, they discover that things are much more complicated than they might have thought.

The collection ends with Deathwater, an unconnected tale involving an assassin, a seer, a king and bunch of very corrupt nobles.

The characters

Mangos starts off as a bit of a braggart, running around telling everyone what a great adventurer he is. He of course was busy proving it in the local tavern by arm wrestling and throwing darts at everything in sight. Yet, even in the first story, he surprises the more sophisticated Kat with an insight into magic. Throughout all the stories, he proves again and again that he is brave, though a little brash and thick-headed from time to time.

Kat, as has already been said, is more mysterious. Given her fighting ability and her vast store of knowledge, she clearly has a past that is much more than meets the eye. Not that she ever intentionally calls attention to herself.

The real charm of the characters is their interaction with each other. The way they'll verbally jab at each other in all the tales, while also saving each other's lives over and over makes it feel like a buddy cop story.

The world

The world of Mongoose and Meerkat feels very like a medieval fantasy. There are wizards, necromancers, demons, giant snakes, fallen kingdoms and all the great tropes that you love from the stories you grew up with. There is a well-fleshed out geography full of lakes, mountains, and cities, all in places where it makes sense. There are also clearly different kinds of societies that they come across. There is already the aforementioned cult centered around the burning fish, two warring factions of berry harvesters, and of course a few taverns along the way.

There are hints of more going on in the world such as Alness. What it is and how it fell are not entirely clear. Also somewhat mysterious are little hints here and there that suggest more modern technologies such as a brief discussion about a bridge constructed with rebar. Which only makes me want to read future installments to find out all that is going on.

The politics

There aren't any clear politics in this world and Mangos and Kat seem pretty apolitical. However, the spirit of adventure without the politically correct moralizing that has infected most of the mainstream fare today could only come from a philosophy that respects merit and risk taking.

Content warning

There is of course violence throughout but never gets to be more than PG-13. There is a bit of magic, a couple of monsters and a momentary sex scene in Deathwater.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who likes a good buddy cop movie, and swashbuckling adventures featuring a morally ambiguous duo.

Why read it?

Because it's just a good time. Though I typically read ebooks these days out of convenience, I ripped through the paperback edition faster than I've read any print book in years. If you want to read something with likeable characters who talk fast and fight faster, getting themselves into all kinds of impossible situations, then this is definitely a book for you.

Tides of Redemption by Blaine Lee Pardoe

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.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 horriblifying.

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 conquered 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 nor 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.

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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 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, she's 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 its 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.

Literary Criticism

Review and Thoughts on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: A Catholic Worldview – Elves, Hobbits, and Men

Review by Caroline Furlong

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Some thoughts on a Christian story in preparation for Easter.

It is Lent for the Christian world, and the season came relatively late this year. Many people think that this is the time to give up chocolate or candy and move on, sort of like a forty-day diet, but others do their best to make the season one of true transformation. A reorientation toward what matters most to a Christian: a refocusing on God and a relationship with Him.

Given this fact, a review of an episode from Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN)'s Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* seems to fit perfectly for the season. EWTN is a Catholic television station that was started by Mother Angelica, a nun and the head of a religious order headquartered in Alabama. EWTN has grown into quite the juggernaut over the decades: it carries a variety of programs, offering a Catholic perspective on everything from news to children's stories to – you guessed it – *The Lord of the Rings*.

The network filmed several hour-long segments on Tolkien's masterwork. Starring Joseph Pearce, a noted Tolkien scholar, these episodes allowed him to speak about the Catholic aspects of the trilogy and the author's attendant writings. In the episode titled *Elves, Hobbits, and Men*, Pearce appears alongside Kevin O'Brien. O'Brien portrays Professor Tolkien, reading from his letters and his works to give insight into the author's thoughts as the show progresses. Meanwhile, Mr. Pearce opines about the trilogy, offering his perspective on how Christian theology is the foundation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Elves, Hobbits, and Men considers the themes of Tolkien's magnum opus via the three main races in the novels, then looks at those races through the characters who represent them. Pearce reflects on the creation of these races by God (Iluvitar in Elvish) in Middle-Earth, how they behave, and what the actions of certain individual members demonstrate about Christian theology. Among the items which Pearce meditates upon in the video are the elves' immortality. He specifically points out that Tolkien wrote *LotR* as a contemplation on two themes: immortality and death. Pearce, a convert to Catholicism, explains that immortality is not the same thing as eternal life.

Eternal life is beyond time, whereas immortality is life unending within time. So, while the elves have immortality and, thus, do not die, this means they are not free to be happy or do whatever they want. It means that they are trapped within time on Middle-Earth, always fighting against Morgoth (the Satan stand-in of the series) and his servant Sauron. They have great wisdom due to living so long, but they

are never able to find true peace in their immortality. In fact, as *Rings of Power* fails to grasp and fully convey, the elves are – largely – exiles from the Undying Lands.

Unlike Middle-Earth, the Undying Lands are at peace. They are also unchanging. The elves, some of whom are banned from returning to this representation of Paradise, wish to go there because these Lands are not held by Morgoth's power. The elves have a choice: to stay and remain in the "Long Defeat," or to go into eternity and rest. Some prefer to stay in Middle-Earth but many others are tired and just want to go home. Home, where their immortality is not a burden, and they do not need to keep fighting for centuries in a war that will only end when time does.

Men, however, have never laid eyes upon the Undying Lands as a group. In fact, when they tried, they were roundly punished for it. As Pearce explains, men lack immortality. They die – but this death the elves consider a gift from Iluvitar. Death takes men out of the immortal struggle against Morgoth and gives them rest – or eternal torment with their dark master, if they chose to serve Morgoth or Sauron.

Pearce also discusses which characters are "everyman" characters, which ones are Christ-like figures, and more in the video. This episode offers fans much to draw out of the trilogy that they can rely upon to further their enjoyment of the books. It also explains why any attempt to alter the books in any way to make them more "relevant" or to add some kind of activist "message" to the story more obviously breaks the resultant products than it would any other fantasy or franchise.

This is due in part, as Pearce notes, to the good professor writing *The Lord of the Rings* not as an allegory but as a fantastical reflection of the Gospel story. Tolkien wrote his novels to "reflect upon reality through the mirror of fantasy." He added deep theological knowledge and symbols to his tale in order to accomplish this, which is where half the Catholic scholarship ends up going even when the writers are focused on other things. This is also why some fans read the trilogy in sync with Catholic liturgical seasons, such as Advent or Lent; they are not doing it to replace reading the Bible but to enhance their view of that Book and the theological understandings distilled from it over thousands of years.

It is this very tie to reality, to objective truth and to faith, that makes *The Lord of the Rings*' "immune system" against activists trying to change it so strong. "Bad fanfic" like the Rohirrim film and RoP are unwatchable because they rip out what makes the books work in the first place. Watching *Elves*, *Hobbits*, and *Men* is a good reminder of what makes *Lord of the Rings* so very powerful as a story.

Does this mean that *Lord of the Rings* cannot be destroyed? Certainly not. But it does explain in part the continual failure of those trying to insert their own messages into Professor Tolkien's fantastical epic. He made it with one definitive point in mind – that immortality is not the preferred end state of man, but eternal life is, whether man wishes it or not. Man can either choose the happy eternal life or the miserable eternity of torment....

But he will have eternal life, whichever way he chooses. Even if you are not Christian, if you enjoy *The Lord of the Rings*, then you might want to give *Elves*, *Hobbits*, and *Men* a view. It is only an hour of your time and while it is thought-provoking, it need not be overwhelming. You can pause it, replay it, or simply stop it if you decide you dislike it. There will be plenty to keep you busy and thinking in this film!

Why not give it a shot, particularly if you are following Lent this season? It's better than giving up chocolate. That's the popular decision. Not everyone takes something up instead. You could certainly stand out this way!

Prose Bono

Cast Iron Rules
Cedar Sanderson
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I am in Dallas at FenCon this weekend, and yesterday was the first day of the con. It was a day of friends, old and new, conversations, and somewhat random food. I started the con off slowly with one panel, “Facts Behind Urban Legends and Folklore.”

It was a good panel discussion. One of the panelists was sitting at her very first experience on the side of the table facing the audience, and she did a wonderful job. Something she said caught my attention, about cooking with Dutch ovens being a skill she’d given her main character. Later, during the question time of the panel, an audience member asked the panel a question, about showing something in use, rather than telling about it. I made an offhand comment that show, don’t tell, being one of those cast-iron rules of writing, and then added, with a glance over at the other panel member who would understand, that like cast iron it is brittle and can be broken.

If you’ve ever dropped a cast iron skillet onto a hard surface, you know what I mean. If you haven’t, try not to. Most kitchen floors won’t lead to calamity, but from a height onto stones around a campfire, or onto a concrete floor... You know what I mean, and I didn’t have to describe the whole scene for you to flinch a little and if you love your cookware, feel the emotions I did thinking about it while I wrote that passage. While it can be very good to show in storytelling, there are times where you don’t want or need to do that.

If the story is short, telling in a few words or a sentence can allow the plot to drive on without being hung up in the weeds of writing out the ‘show’ of an object, an emotion, an interaction. If the ‘show’ is important to the plot, by all means, weave it in there. If it isn’t, and you think your readers will follow you, don’t bother with the ‘showing’ but simply introduce it and carry on. Unless you are writing a mystery and want them to be misled by the red herrings you keep tossing along the path, in which case, ‘show’ things that later turn out to have been unimportant, or downright misleading. Don’t do that too often, though. If you do, you’ll have a confused, frustrated reader.

On the other hand, if you withhold the ‘showing’ of something (or someone) from the reader, you can pull off some deft misdirection that allows you to pull a rabbit out of a hat later in the plot. Don’t do this without foreshadowing, but that can be some small ‘tells’ tucked in that gave the reader hints but didn’t dwell on writing out the whole ‘show’ and, er, giving the show away.

In short, ‘show don’t tell’ is a solid rule of writing, a workhorse, even, that stands you in good stead. However, there are times that it can be broken, and probably should. Knowing the rules in order to break them is important, as this way you’ll know why the rule was there, before you circumvent it. And listen to your reader’s feedback. They may be telling you the story is broken, but it might not be in the way they are saying it is. The audience member asking about showing and telling was more interested in the idea, exploring a concept, than in moving the story forward. You have to decide what’s right for your story, for the length you want it to be, the plot it should have, and the style of digressions your readers will enjoy, and stopping to smell the roses while exploring just what chemical compounds make up their fragrance may not be it.

Lashing the Muse
by Cedar Sanderson
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I will say that prolonged stress and disruption sends the muse into hiding, and then you have to coax her out and decondition her agoraphobia, but that's a different post.

So, I have a problem. On one hand, I want to write and am delighted when the muse awakens and sends tendrils of stories out into my head so I can write them down. On the other hand, when those tendrils become tentacles of the kraken and threaten to take over my brain... that's a problem. I need to find a balance. A way to bottle up the muse, so to speak, and only let it out when I can actually write, because there's a fair amount of time when I can't. Or at least, when it's highly inconvenient to have the muse tickling at my backbrain while I'm supposed to be concentrating on something else.

So, what I need to do is lash the muse to the bowsprit, and stick wax in my ears, and only once we're past the sirens, let her go again to infect me with the madn... er, stories. Unfortunately, so far, my attempts at this have yielded a sulky muse who tends to plop down on deck and fold her arms and stubbornly pout when I remove the lashings. This is less than ideal.

I can't let her loose all the time. When it's a particularly loud story, with a bright voice to the main character (and if it were that voice on the side character, I'm writing the story down wrong), it's hard to keep my mind on the day job. As much as I enjoy writing, I can't afford to make it my day job and give up science (for many good and complex reasons, not just because Science!) Look, you, being a Mad Scientist requires a higher degree than I've got. And more madness. I'm just.. I dunno. I'm an aspiring Mad Scientist. Maybe someday.

So, the muse needs to be locked up, at least some of the time. I mean, it would be easy to lock her up and throw away the key. Um. I think it would be easier. I will admit I've not tried to actually do that. I have enough trouble with my brain wanting to explore all the shiny interests, trying to force it to focus on only one thing at a time usually backfires. So, stopping writing altogether might be like that. It would leak.

The stories leak. I find myself wandering around work, with half my brain off in another universe. It's not safe. So, I write when I can, which is less than I'd like. When I finally get to the place and time where I can sit down to the story, I'm too tired to string together coherent words into anything other than, possibly, Vagon poetry. I'm pretty sure there's no market for that, except possibly as an interrogation method, and even then you've got Geneva Convention violations, inter-Galactic war crime trials, not to mention the interrogators whose brains have leaked out their ears. It's no use.

So I keep steering through the straits of Charybdis, with Scylla sucking on one side and the whirlpool of distraction on the other. And the damn muse keeps snatching the wheel when I'm not looking and pointing us at those story sirens. Spoiled brat.

Vainglorious
by Cedar Sanderson
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Vain-glo-ri-ous
Adjective; literary

excessively proud of oneself or one's achievements; overly vain.

"this vainglorious boast of personal infallibility"

Synonyms: assured, biggety (or biggity) [Southern & Midland], bigheaded, complacent, consequential, egoistic (also egoistical), egotistic (or egotistical), important, overweening, pompous, prideful, proud, self-conceited, self-important, self-opinionated, self-satisfied, smug, stuck-up, swellheaded, vain, conceited

The most difficult part of this business, for most of us, is promoting ourselves and our books. It's also the most important, if we want to be read and paid for our work. This applies to both the traditionally published, and the independent. The book is published, but how are readers going to know about it?

There are many paths to a reader. The best is the same in any business, because it is also the strongest. I did it myself yesterday. I tried to use my First Reader's 30+ year old Kirby vacuum, and to my great frustration, it left as much on the carpet as had been there to begin with. I hopped on Amazon, looking at the top-rated vacuums, reading reviews, and still hadn't made up my mind. It wasn't until I made a wisecrack on Facebook about vacuums being pushed as Father's Day gifts, and perceptive friends started recommending vacuums that they had used and loved, that I made up my mind about the purchase. Word of mouth is king, when it comes to marketing and promotion.

Word of mouth can come in many ways. It can come from the mouths of happy consumers. In this case, readers who review, or just rave about their latest read to anyone who will listen, whether in person or on social media are ideal. Those are the readers who sell books. They aren't trying. They just really enjoyed that book, it stuck out in their mind, so when someone asks for the latest space opera, they say, Oh! You just have to read...

There's also the word of those who are being helpful. Whether it's readers who know that if they share their favorite author's promo post, it helps that author out and therefore they write more books to be read later, or readers who are big fans and see themselves as unofficial street team-members assisting an author. Sometimes it can be fellow authors helping one another out – like the Indie Author sales we host here at MGC. This can be really beneficial when an author with a large fanbase shares the work of a new author. The downside of this can be two-fold: one, the "Name" author is likely to then be hit up with exuberant newbs (see the title of the post) asking him to do the same for them. And secondly, the reputation of the Name can actually be harmed by recommending sub-par works. I've gotten very cautious about the work I share and promote (in my Eat This While You Read That posts, for instance. I'll be rebooting that series in about a week, by the by) because I want to keep the trust of my readers. It might be someone who is young and just doesn't realize they NEED editing. Or it could be work that's just not like mine, and my fans would shy away from. I have to use some judicious thought in who I promote, and what I say when I promote them.

Finally, the last mouth that can be talking is... the author themselves. This can be effective, or harmful.

Writing ad Libitum
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Writing at one's pleasure. Anyway, that's a rough translation of the Latin there. I make no claims to Latin scholarship, but I'd looked up the phrase after seeing it in a paper (rats were given food and water ad libitum) and it struck me that it's a bit how I used to write. Used to.

Before I went pro with my writing, I'd write when a story struck me, and as a consequence, I have files (or had files, many have been lost or discarded) upon files of snips and scraps of tales that I wrote down simply to amuse myself. Writing ad libitum, as it were. Deciding that I was going to make a more professional tack with the writing took away from the 'at my pleasure' but it produced more polished, and egads! Actual finished work.

Because that's the difference between professional and amateur. Not that a good amateur cannot produce some amazing stuff, but they only go so far as their passion for the topic will take them. A professional approaches the task with a different framework entirely. It's not that writing becomes less fun - although there are days like that - it's that you begin to approach your own work with more objectivity. It's not strictly about writing what you enjoy, it's also about writing what will sell.

Furthermore, it's about pushing yourself when it's not fun any more. Because as anyone who has seriously pursued a sport, or simply an exercise regime, you don't start to see results until after you have pushed through the really hard, sometimes painful, and often dull bits. Then, on the other side, you get into the synergy of 'this is fun again! And I can do so much more than I could before I developed my muscles...' Which is what you're doing when you practice. Physical development, for sports and exercise, mental, in the case of writing. That practice is what sets the pro apart from the amateur.

I realized the other day that Jetpack keeps some interesting statistics on my blog, and I added it up. Since I started the dang thing, way back in 2006, I've written over a million words on the blog. Just the personal blog, not my regular posts here, or guest posts elsewhere. Not counting my fiction. The last few years, since I got serious with the blog as a marketing platform in 2013, I've racked up six figure word counts every year, so most of that million words is just in the last five years. I got serious about my writing, and started to treat it professionally, and it shows. At least I think so. I've gotten enough compliments on my non-fiction work to swell my head a little, but also to let me know that I've improved. I've even gotten nice words from people who bashed me in the next breath because of my affiliations. So there's that.

As for my fiction, it's been languishing recently, in no small part because I haven't been treating it professionally. I had shelved it so I could pay attention to other things, like the day job, and personal life, and you all have seen that ooze into my blog articles I fought to keep writing and finally decided that it would be better to come back to it when I could pay attention to it. Which will be, hopefully, soon now. Work is going through a lot, so I tend to come home and fall over. Family stuff takes any spare energy. Weekends have become impossible to write on, other than blogging (and possibly not even that, with my personal blog). So... I persist. I insist that I will come back to writing, because at my core I am a fiction writer. I tell stories. I write ad libitum. That I get to make money with it simply adds to the pleasure.

The last thing I wrote purely for the joy of it?

Look, we all need to talk about our work. Get excited about it. That's a great and wonderful thing, because the onlookers will pick up on your enthusiasm for your work, and they will react positively to it. If, on the other hand, you project 'just another book for another buck' and you're not talking about what's in the book, just how many copies you're hoping to sell... well, no one likes to be sold a bill of goods.

Excitement is one thing. But keep in mind that no-one wants to see constant self-promotion. If you nominate your own work in every thread where someone is asking for book recommendations, there might be a problem. If you are posting links to your work in every group, forum, and you aren't paying any attention to the rules about self-promotion... not only are you going to get a bad name as 'that guy' and get banned from groups as fast as you join them, you're going to give other indie authors a bad name, too.

Not that it matters to you. If you're the vainglorious one, nothing at all matters to you except making a quick buck. You're not interested in spending any money on your books: need a cover? Grab a quick image online. Doesn't matter who created it, it's yours now. Need an editor? Ignore the pros and readers who plead with you to find at least a copyeditor, and publish it anyhow, because rent is due and you don't care about return readers. Banned from groups for over-promotion? Tell everyone how unfair it is and then join ten more groups to use for free promotion. Buying ads? Ain't nobody got cash for that, man! Promoting yourself in another author's fan group? Well, heck, my book is sorta like that guy's book...

You all know someone like that. The one that makes you cringe and wonder if you are overdoing it with your own book. The one that when you admit you're an Indie Author, people wonder if you're driving around with a trunk full of copies, flogging them at flea markets or begging people to take a copy just so your garage might eventually empty out.

It is possible to self-promote without being That Guy. Making an ass of yourself only happens if you ignore the feedback from others. Ideally? You'll grow a group of readers who will turn into fans and they'll be the ones bringing up your book when a call is put out for a good read. Also, there are paid promotional opportunities to pitch your book, in email lists and ads that are targeted. Dorothy Grant put together a great list of these, and there are more out there if you look.

But first, stop and think. Where did you find the last books you read? Who told you about them? Why did you decide to pick them up?

It's a tough balance, between blowing our own horns and picking up a damn vuvuzela. Pay attention to rules, don't choose to be That Guy, and do share your own links from time to time on your own wall/page/tweet-whatever. I found out today that I have cousins – admittedly, not close ones, but still – that had no idea I was an author. Which amused me highly since I was being approached to write some free content. Um. Thanks?

Remember, guys. Exposure will kill you. And being the one running around flashing your junk will get you attention, all right. It just might not be the attention you think it is!

Morning

There was a snowflake on her eyeball. It sparkled a little as I bent over her, close, but not too close, lest I should thaw it with the warmth of my breath. I could imagine what it would look like, the liquid giving her flat gaze a mockery of life, focusing on me, accusing. How could I have let this happen to her? I straightened up, expanding my focus, away from her, to the rest of the scene. There were no visible marks on her tiny body, on the footie pajamas she wore, or the bright, almost fluorescent, pink jacket with the puffy quilting. Perfect, just like she was. I bent back down and touched her cheek, gently, with my left hand. The one that couldn't feel. Her skin was rigid, as unyielding as my own fingers.

I turned away then and headed toward the house she had come from. She would remain at her rest as she had been for hours, now. I walked slowly, reluctant to face what I knew lay inside, my breaths coming in visible puffs of white. Maybe if I blew out hard enough it would expand into a blinding fog and wipe it all out, a blank white surface to write a new story on. One with a happy ending for the little pink girl, with cocoa and marshmallows in it.

I stepped through the open door, exchanging silent nods with the uniformed policeman who was standing there. He'd worked with me often enough to know not to speak until he was spoken to. And I knew him well enough to know that this place would have silenced him, anyway.

It was as cold inside as it was out, perhaps even colder. I made my way to the stair, ignoring the open arch to a living room, at a guess, and the swinging doors which would lead to a kitchen, perhaps. I had been briefed, briefly. My lips twisted in what might have been amusement, under other circumstances. Looking up the stairs, I knew that the next scene would not be as peaceful as the one outside. The splashes and arcs of blood, bright droplets frozen onto the eggshell paint...

I turned my head and spoke, not looking all the way around at him, my body still facing the path I must take. "Get images done of this right away, while it is still frozen. I don't know how long it will last."

Now I could hear him speaking, into his radio, but I wasn't listening to his voice, letting it fade into the background buzz. The death curse that lay over this place wouldn't hurt me, or my people. It wasn't directed at us. No more than it had been directed at the little tyke outside, who had been caught on the backlash by virtue of her blood, and trapped, no matter how well someone with half-sense had bundled her and told her to run, just run.

I stepped onto the stair. The magic was a scream inside my head, but I focused carefully and took another step. This was my job to do, and I would do it. The curse was a strong one, which alone told me that it would fade quickly. Magic must come at a price, to the surprise of the perpetually physics-bound. Just like their human laws, it had bounds which held it. Kept it from taking over the world, really, like some comic-book villainess. Not that magic was limited to women. Just that this was a feminine voice in my head, howling for vengeance.