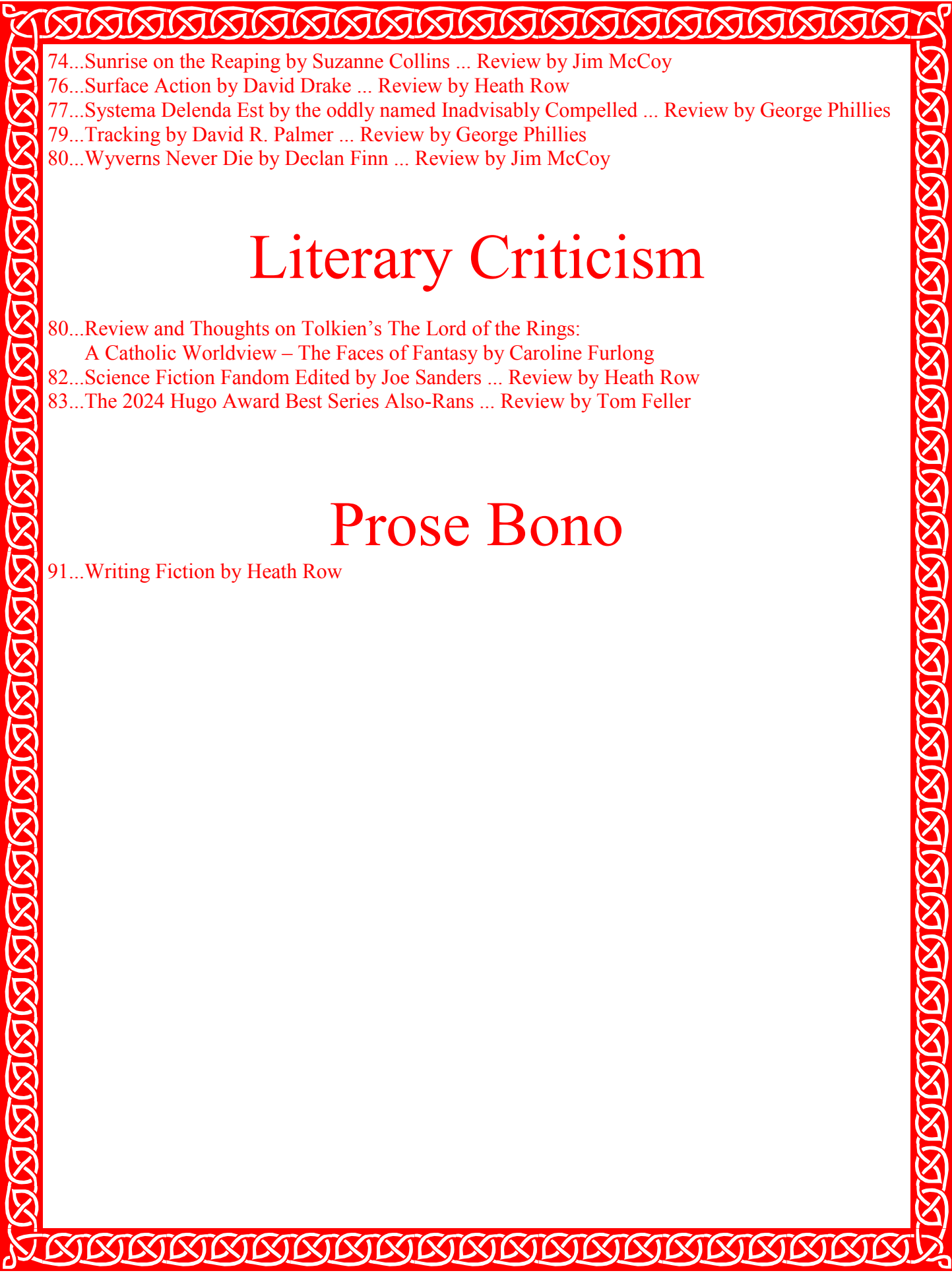


The M3J
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor
June 2025

Fiction

- 2...Allies of Convenience by Terry Mixon and J.N. Chaney ... Review by J.R. Handley
4...Beyond the Crimson Haze by Nicolas Woode-Smith ... Review by Declan Finn
6...Beyond the Shallow Grave by Nicolas Woode-Smith ... Review by Declan Finn
8...The Big Sheep by Rob Kroese ... Review by Declan Finn
10...Blood Country by Declan Finn ... Review by Jim McCoy
12...Blood, Sweat, and Steel - Tales of Future Combat and Mechanized Warfare
 Edited by Mark Green ... Review by JR Handley
17...Cartwright's Cavaliers by Mark Wandrey ... Review by Jim McCoy
20...Children of the Enaisi by L.S. King ... Review by Caroline Furlong
22...The Chooser: A Tale of Modern Valkyrie by David L. Burkhead ... Review by Jim McCoy
23...Conquistador by S. M. Stirling ... Review by George Phillies
24...Crossing Over by Paul Clayton ... Review by Michael Gallagher
26...The Dabare Snake Launcher by Joelle Presby ... Review by Jim McCoy
28...Every Version of You by Grace Chan ... Review by Mark Nelson
29...The Hedge Wizard by Alex Maher ... Review by Jim McCoy
31...King Kobold Revived by Christopher Stasheff ... Review by Caroline Furlong
33...Kothar Barbarian Swordsman by Gardner Francis Fox ... Review by Heath Row
34...The Last Iota by Rob Kroese ... Review by Declan Finn
35...Laws and Prophecies by L. S. King ... Review by Caroline Furlong
38...Liberty Station by Terry Mixon ... Review by JR Handley
42...Magelight by Kacey Ezell ... Review by Declan Finn
45...Majority by Abby Goldsmith ... Review by Declan Finn
47...Mystic Quest by Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman ... Review by Jim McCoy
49...The Neck Romancer by Declan Finn ... Review by George Phillies
49...Not that Kind of Good Guy by John Ringo ... Review by Declan Finn
51...President Patton by Rick Kester ... Review by George Phillies
52...Prospero Lost by L. Jagi Lamplighter ... Review by Caroline Furlong
54...Ready Player One by Ernest Cline ... Review by Jim McCoy
55...Redliners by David Drake ... Review by Jim McCoy
58...Rimworld: Into the Green by J.L. Curtiss ... Review by Jim McCoy
59...Scales of Injustice by J.F. Posthumus ... Review by Declan Finn
60...The Santara Commentaries: The Padri by Michael P. Marpaung ... Review by Brian Heming
62...Shadow Card Guardian, by Kacey Ezell ... Review by Declan Finn
64...Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows by James Lovegrove ... Review by George Phillies
64...Ship of Magic by Robin Hobb ... Review by Heath Row
65...Son of Cayn by Jason McDonald, Alan Isom and Stormy McDaniels ... Review by Jim McCoy
67...Space Platform by Murray Leinster ... Review by Heath Row
68...Standing the Final Watch by William Alan Webb ... Review by Jim McCoy
69...Starquest: Space Pirates of Andromeda, by John C. Wright ... Review by Declan Finn
72...Starquest #2: Secret Agents Of The Galaxy ... Review by Declan Finn

- 
- 74...Sunrise on the Reaping by Suzanne Collins ... Review by Jim McCoy
76...Surface Action by David Drake ... Review by Heath Row
77...Systema Delenda Est by the oddly named Inadvisably Compelled ... Review by George Phillies
79...Tracking by David R. Palmer ... Review by George Phillies
80...Wyverns Never Die by Declan Finn ... Review by Jim McCoy

Literary Criticism

- 80...Review and Thoughts on Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings:
A Catholic Worldview – The Faces of Fantasy by Caroline Furlong
82...Science Fiction Fandom Edited by Joe Sanders ... Review by Heath Row
83...The 2024 Hugo Award Best Series Also-Rans ... Review by Tom Feller

Prose Bono

- 91...Writing Fiction by Heath Row

Editorial

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

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.

Our reviewers and their web sites:

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>
Tom Feller <http://N3F.org>
Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>
Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>
Jean-Paul L. Garnier <https://spacecowboybooks.com>
Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>
Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>
Bob Jennings
Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>
Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperversiveSF.com>
Russ Lockwood <https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>
Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>
Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>
Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>
Pat Patterson goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson
Heath Row <http://N3F.org>
Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>
Cedar Sanderson: <http://www.CedarWrites.com>
Jessi Silver <http://s1e1.com>
Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>
J W Stepanek <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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

Allies of Convenience by Terry Mixon and J.N. Chaney

Review by J.R. Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews. This is a short story in The Last Hunter Series by Terry Mixon and JN Chaney and covers an incident in the main characters early career. It was co-written by Terry Mixon and JN Chaney in one heck of a dynamic collaboration. Their unique styles blended into something awesome and I'm here for this universe.

Before we go any further, let me show my bias. I loved Terry Mixon's Empire of Bones Series, so reading his Last Hunter Series with JN Chaney was a no-brainer. I was already a fan of his work when I started this universe. I went in expecting to like this series. Since I enjoyed the main series, I had to check out this prequel short story. This story was written like many of his books, in a 3rd person POV with multiple main characters. If you don't love that, this novel isn't the book for you. However, this is my jam, and I wasn't disappointed.

Okay, about this series. This completed series has 16 books written in this setting, and all but the last audiobook in the main series is published already. I'm already invested and hoping for more from this collaborative team! I've met Terry and Chaney in person and they're both as nice in the flesh as they are online. They truly engage with their large audience and value them in a sincere manner. In separate chats it was clear to me that both of them are thankful that readers let them get paid to share these romps through the voids of space.

Now, more about the first author, Terry Mixon. He's a former US Army crew chief, where he worked on keeping the whirly birds in the air. He was a non-commissioned officer in the 101st Airborne Division. I too was a sergeant in that division, so points to him! In case you didn't know, leg lives matter. After he left the Army, he spent some time working for NASA. He played solitaire working alongside the flight controllers in the Mission Control Center at the NASA Johnson Space Center.

The other author in this series is JN Chaney, a former US Air Force puke who kept the planes flying and the bombs dropping. His bubbas put warheads on foreheads as they let freedom ring! Or maybe that's my tinnitus from all the noise? Whatever, he's a veteran and a talented author whose Renegade Star books were my literary bubble gum pop this past summer. The books were fun, fast paced and high octane reads that you'll love.

Ok, since this is a prequel story, let's talk about the main series. The basic premise of centers around the main characters' taking charge of a museum ship that was once used 200 years ago in the fight against alien robot swarms. Now the enemy has returned, forcing his museum ship to be pressed back into active service. I loved the series and the idea of a museum spaceship getting a new lease on life. This world is Battlestar Galactica meets Battleship with shades of Horatio Hornblower and I'm here for it!

The Story

This story shines a light onto part of the main character's origin story, where we see the incident that changed his career trajectory. First, we see Jack struggling with the immediate repercussions of his near collision. After that, they send him on a cake run mission to protect a ship under attack by pirates. During that fight, he meets a certain pirate who becomes important later into The Last Hunter Series. It was a lot of fun to see the events that alter the trajectory of his career and set him on a path towards command of the Delta Orionis, the Confederation naval vessel.

During this story, Jack is sent to secure a freighter while his cruiser chases the main body of the pirates. Except the mission wasn't that straightforward. He's caught between pirate scum and their prey, and he's forced to choose a side. Lieutenant Jack Romanoff can't let the unexpected cargo fall into the wrong hands, so he holds his nose and picks a side. He and his marines make a plan and attempt to stop the pirates that vastly outnumber them.

Now that I've covered the basics of this story, let's talk about the writing itself. This book was a low stakes adventure that almost felt like a slice of life story. We see Jack talking to his executive officer about the near collision event and discussing how he could save his career from the fallout. Then Jack makes the trip across the system to render aid to the Edgar's Ghost, the ship that was recently under attack by pirates. During these events, the pacing felt unrushed, and the events felt low-key. The writing style was well executed, a testament to the author's skill. This was not a high-octane adventure, instead meandering along at a sedate pace. I was okay with it, because we got to explore the universe and the Confederation. Throughout the story, the prose was evocative, and the story was compelling. What more can you want?

The Characters

The main character in this story is Lieutenant Jack Romanoff, who serves in the Confederation Navy. He is a man trying to save his career from a near collision with a civilian space liner. He's the helmsman of the Dark Wind, a Confederation navy cruiser. When that near collision happens, his time in the navy might be at its end. That is, unless he can convince them that he is worth a second chance. What isn't said in this story, but I know from the main series is that Jack is the son of a former Grand Admiral of the Confederation Navy. His dad burnt a lot of bridges with his abrasive style and Jack suffered because of it. But the events of this short story are also part of what kills his career, creating the second chance adventure in The Last Hunter Series. This is an origin story of sorts, and I loved seeing the events that were only hinted at in the larger series. This character was extremely believable, if a little naïve, throughout this story. He was well-rounded, so you'll get no complaints from me. Again, I've read the main series so maybe that aids in my thoughts here.

The World

This is a prequel story in The Last Hunter Series, and I absolutely loved it. This story had a very fleshed out world that was consistent, made sense and sucked you in. Admittedly, I've read the main series, so I came into this knowing about this universe. Given my bias, everything was explained in a way that made sense. The universe was consistent, with just enough of the mundane facets of life thrown in to feel grounded in this reality. Everything made sense and sucked you into the story. Hat tip to these two skill wordsmiths, they earned it!

Politics

There is no modern Earth politics in this story. It's set so far into the future that nothing political could carry over. Sure, it's a naval adventure, and the military has internal politics, but that's it. Nothing to see here boys, move along!

Content Warning

This is a fun romp through Confederation space aboard a warship fighting the scourge of piracy. There's fighting and killing, but nothing gory happens on screen. I can't imagine anything here that would trigger anyone or need a content warning!

Narration

I enjoyed this book exclusively in the audiobook format. It was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did good! This isn't a dig at Jeffrey Kafer, the narrator, as this was a story told from a singular point of view, so there just wasn't a call for that many accents. What was there was well done. Seriously, I've listened to hundreds of hours of books by this narrator. Heck, I even hired him to work on one of my series. This short audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about! He didn't commit the Cardinal Sin, which is my only real requirement; he didn't sound like a robot, he didn't bore me, and he didn't use accents that annoy the bajesus out of me!

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who loves the classic space opera genre with shades of piracy. Throw in a kick arse universe for good measure and you'll be picking up what I'm laying down! If you are a fan of ship-to-ship action, then this book is for you! Throw in a massive 16 book arc from the main series and you have a recipe for awesomeness!

Why buy it?

If you're already a fan of The Last Hunter universe, then you're the target audience for this short story. However, if you love short content and the space opera genre with space navy themes, you can still enjoy Allies of Convenience.

Beyond the Crimson Haze by Nicolas Woode-Smith Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Blood Veil series has been a nice, tightly written series so far. Book One set up the world and some of the corrupt supernatural issues in it. Book two solved certain issues and unleashed others. And this one is going to wrap up certain threads in a nice neat little bow ... and then create multiple other problems.

The Story

Kali Black has been in a safe house for two months. Captain Theo Goldhaus of the Occult Related Crimes (ORC) division is sheltering her from the corrupt chief of police. Her time alone has kept her safe, but it's also left her alone with the voice in her head, telling her to be the monster she's meant to be.

But when Theo needs help with a ghost haunting an office building, the two of them stumble upon body parts of multiple corpses.

After years of working in the crime section of the newspaper, Kali has finally tripped over a serial killer.

But of course, nothing can be simple. Police Chief Gumede has shut down the investigation, leaving it to Kali and her friends to hunt down the real monster.

Unfortunately for all of them, this is one monster who's prepared.

Nicholas Woode-Smith is really stretching his muscles here. In his Kat Drummond series, if he ever

shot for horror, I never noticed. Here, he gets a horror atmosphere nailed down through several scenes, especially in the early chapters. It feels like Kali has fallen into a Resident Evil or a Silent Hill game. You could even say that Gumedé goes full Wesker in this one.

Beyond the Crimson Haze is an interesting culmination of the series thus far. Like Harry Dresden, Kali has gathered a collection of allies. Unlike Harry Dresden, Kali is sometimes just bringing in friends of friends to this battle.

Overall, at no time does this series spin its wheels. There isn't a lot of navel gazing or angst. There are still a lot of character driven chapters, and the character dynamics carry more of this series than you would expect.

The Characters

One of the interesting things with Kali Black is that she's evolving, even when she doesn't realize it.

On her religious beliefs, she states "[I'm an] Atheist? I guess.... my cat is from Hell, which makes me guess that Heaven exists. So, lapsed Atheist?" And some of her misnomers are entertaining. ("Does the Pope piss Holy Water?" Um, no. Why would you even think that?)

Of course, some of the character development is hilarious. Watching the (literal) demon-cat Fredward discovering Dolly Parton and losing his mind over his unfaithfulness to Taylor Swift is genuinely funny, providing for some levity at some unexpected moments.

It's still really odd to note how much of these books are character-driven, while at the same time consisting of a lot of constantly moving plot. Almost everyone here is deeper than you'd expect. They all have motivations and backstory.

Everyone is deftly handled ... except maybe for Gumedé. He's just a prick.

The World

It's so nice to have local color of a distinctive city, no matter where it is. Beyond the Crimson Haze has more local slang, local demons, local myths, distinctive local criminals and gangs, that really makes the world feel alive. Honestly, Kali Black's city feels more alive and has more of a sense of place than Anita Blake's ever did (serious question: What city was that again? St. Louis? Seattle? I'd think I'd remember if it were Portland).

And, like all good mysteries, Nicholas Woode-Smith uses this one to explore the world, and use the world-building elements to feed into the plot as clues and hints along the way.

Politics

If there is any. If there is not, say there isn't and move on.

Content Warning

It's a Vampire novel. There is blood. There are language concerns. There's even a warning in the opening.

Who is it for?

For fans of Butcher's Dresden Files, or Kim Harrison's Hollows, but without the angst.

Why buy it?

Beyond the Crimson Haze is strong contender for the next great Urban Fantasy series.

Beyond the Shallow Grave by Nicolas Woode-Smith

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Back to South Africa for some more bloody mayhem.

In Beyond the Blood Veil, we met Kali Black the night she died. She then got up and walked home as a vampire. She discovered her cat was a demon, her missing best friend is now a vampire abomination, and the conspiracy she's been tracking for a decade has some real bite to it.

In book two, Beyond the Shallow Grave, Kali's life is going to get worse.

The Story

With the help of her newfound vampire acquaintances, Kali Black is breaking up the child trafficking ring and the corrupt cops who run it.

Although not everything is moonbeams and shadows. The cops are prepared.

When it looks like they finally have a solid source of intelligence, another monster joins the party and nearly kills everyone—and the monster is Kali's old boss at the newspaper, possessed by something that's turned him very Hulk-like, by way of Lovecraft.

And as her demon cat the Swifty would say, she can't exactly shake it off. (Damn it, now Woode-Smith has me doing it.)

At the same time, she has her own problems. A local undercover cop is working with Kali's sire and wants to help in her crusade. Kali has money problems, since she can no longer work days, and her nights are spent hunting human traffickers.

Beyond the Shallow Grave juggles a lot of various and sundry elements, to the point where even the demon cat Fredward states "you can't get bogged down in too many plotlines." Despite that (possibly) self-referential statement, Beyond the Shallow Grave deals with its miscellaneous issues effortlessly. On top of that, there are ramifications from the conclusion of book one, on a plot and a character level, making the book nice and complex without becoming convoluted.

The conclusion is very ... energetic.

Like book one, the series is locked into Kali's first person POV, presenting all the relevant information to the reader and the character at the same time, since she hasn't even been a vampire for more than a few weeks.

The pace is nice and even. The pace isn't breakneck, but it moves along and never stops too long in any one place.

The Characters

Beyond the Shallow Grave has a nice variety of characters. There's Thalia, a shadowmancer, who stops just short of being emo. Kali's childhood friend Billy is friendly and personable despite looking worse

than Count Orlok from Nosferatu. Then there's Kali's best friend Amber, who is apparently a wealthy computer programmer and very much a nerd.

Then there's Fredward, a demon who has taken the shape of a cat and thinks that "Spreading the gospel [of Taylor Swift] is the height of wisdom." I'm not sure if that's a shot at Swifties or not... It's especially amusing that Fredward hates Fae as worse than demons. "At least demons are straightforward."

And then there is the corrupt police commissioner Gumede. He's not on screen that often, but he's a vividly drawn character who is in desperate need of having a stake rammed through his heart and his head cut off ... No, he's not a vampire, why do you ask?

The World

The world here is very much a character. I don't mean the city, I mean the world. Such as how most vampires have standards and that eating the underage is just not done. The various and sundry vampire types are interesting, especially when one gets to the hierarchies among them. The world-building informs character decisions and how things work, really impacting them at every level.

Beyond the Shallow Grave also has some nice local color, with some of South Africa's particular supernatural fauna, like Tokoloshes.

All of this is executed effortlessly. Like any good mystery, the reader is fed clues to the mystery, sometimes before giving you the mystery proper. Woode-Smith presents all the answers before asking the question. It's very well done, on par with some Nero Wolfe mysteries.

Politics

The only politics here is that the South African police are considered corrupt. From what I hear of the real-world South Africa, that's the least of its problems.

Content Warning

Beyond the Shallow Grave feels like Nicholas Woode-Smith wanted people to take his previous warning seriously and threw in enough crude language to earn it an R-rating on that alone. Otherwise, the content really doesn't offend. There's no sex or nudity or torture, but plenty of violence.

Who is it for?

If you liked Kim Harrison's *The Hollows*, you're going to love this series. (Except this series lacks 90% of the angst.)

Why buy it?

Beyond the Shallow Grave is a fun sequel in a series that clearly knows where it's going, and has definite ideas about how to get there. It has clear character arcs and a likeable protagonist. It makes for a refreshing change from the rest of the genre.

The Big Sheep by Rob Kroese
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

ence that one for yourself.

Part of the nice thing about this story is that Kroese knows what the reader will conclude as they work through the mystery. And of course, like any good mystery writer, he cuts ahead of them and pushes the reader down a flight of stairs. Not only does he offer what the reader is thinking of as the solution, he also debunks it within five pages after that.

So, yeah, this was fun. And how can you not enjoy someone named Erasmus Keane?

Keane and Fowler follow the Holmes and Watson school of detective work. Or perhaps Doctor Who. Every great detective in literature seems to need a handler, and Keane is no exception. Unlike needing Archie Goodwin to make Nero Wolfe work, or Watson to tell the stories that Holmes couldn't narrate to save his life, Keane almost needs Fowler to keep him tethered to the planet. They make for an interesting team. Though unlike Arthur Conan Doyle, Kroese doesn't cheat. Fowler sees everything Keane sees, just doesn't see the big picture, which Kroese puts together quite well.

Characters

Erasmus Keane is one part Sherlock Holmes and one part 200 IQ Thomist flake. He dresses in a way to make Columbo look like a fashion plate.

Blake Fowler is our Archie Goodwin—he is our narrator, Keane's sidekick, smartass and badass when required. His girlfriend Gwen has been missing for years, and he's hoping Keane will eventually find her. His function is to be "Keane's tether to mundane reality," from keeping track of the company funds, to making sure Keane didn't drift into the street, and generally feels "Like a babysitter for a manic-depressive eight-year-old."

The cast is vividly drawn, whether it be the bodyguard who will roll with nearly anything, the gang warlord who isn't a warlord, or the villain who, of course, quotes Nietzsche.

The World

Despite the presence of opening paragraph, I would not even consider slandering this book with the label of dystopia. In this future, there was a problem, everything fell apart for a while, it was never entirely fixed, and government, being government, just walled off the problem area and declared it fixed. There's a reason it's called The DZ.

But, in short, the bad parts of LA still suck. No one is surprised.

This was incredibly well put together. I was even surprised at how much the city itself was a character. Hell, the DZ is a character before you even get to the wretched place.

The Politics

There's nothing Left or Right about this. This is LA, so big companies are corrupt, the government isn't any better. But one thing is consistent about noir set in LA: down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean....

Content Warning

Mad science. So much mad science. It's less body horror, and more like genetic horror. There isn't much in the way of graphic detail, but at least one person gets their throat slit, and there's no clean way to describe that. Make this PG-13 at the outside. I wouldn't give it to anyone younger than that, because

I hate Rob Kroese. When he gave me a copy of *The Big Sheep* to review, I thought it would just be another book that I would cross off of my list and move on. Perhaps it would be okay. Few are seriously awesome. Some have been painfully, tear-invokingly bad.

And then some, like *Iron Chamber of Memory*, makes me want to go out and buy everything else the author has written.

The latter is the case here. Damn it, have you even seen how many novels this guy has out? They'd have my book collection bury me alive if they were collected in physical format.

Anyway, this book was quite a surprise. No, seriously, it was a shock. I was expecting something over the top and insane. This was more like if Jasper Fforde, Tom Holt, or Terry Pratchett went out and wrote a Raymond Chandler novel.

I read Rob Kroese's *The Big Sheep* over a decade ago. While I was tempted to review it a while ago, there were rights issues (Rob has explained it to me a few times. I still don't remember.) This makes it one of the few books I have ever read twice—including John Ringo's *Princess of Wands*, Timothy Zahn's *Heir to the Empire* trilogy, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The short version is that this is a brilliant mystery that is on par with Timothy Zahn's *Icarus* series. This is a mystery, where philosophy and epistemology come in handy in the plot.

The Story

Erasmus Keane is a Phenomenological Inquisitor (don't ask), working in the ruins of LA after "the Collapse of 2028"—a cataclysmic event that turned some areas of the country into a wasteland, but barely inconvenience others. He lives and works on the edge of the "The Disincorporated Zone"—a no man's land in the LA of 2039.

He's a flake who needs a minder, Blake Fowler, security specialist, who is also our narrator.

When Keane is hired to find a missing, 300-pound research sheep named Mary that is growing human organs, they take it in stride.

When the most beautiful, popular actress in Hollywood comes into their office, claiming that her life is in danger, that's one thing. When she receives a warning letter from her childhood teddy bear, it's insane. She's clearly paranoid ... but they take the case anyway. When she disappears in an explosion, and reappears with no memory of having hired them, it's clear that even paranoids have real enemies.

As Keane and Fowler dig deeper into both cases, they find that everyone wants that missing sheep—including the Hollywood producers connected to the actress.

It all ties together in one twisted knot. It ends with a conclusion that would have made Agatha Christie proud.

It's hard to tell where to start with *The Big Sheep*. Imagine Terry Pratchett writing a noir novel in science fiction, with Sherlock Holmes as a protagonist. Like Pratchett novels, *The Big Sheep* is fall down funny until it gets deeply serious.

The jokes are sly without being overly cute. The sheep they're trying to find is called "Mary." So of course, they suspect that there's something about Mary, and part of the problem is that she doesn't have a little lamb. We won't even get into the titanium shoulder and the crematorium. You have to experi-

it might be too smart for them.

Who is this for?

This section is usually reserve for “If you like X, Y, or Z, you’ll like this.” It’s a little harder to pin down here.

Take some Terry Pratchett or Jasper Fforde writing with Sherlock Holmes / Rex Stout dynamic and then stick it all in a Raymond Chandler novel.

If you like the twist, thoughtful, smart writing of Timothy Zahn’s Icarus novels, you will enjoy The Big Sheep.

Why buy it?

In a world where everyone is trying to be the next facsimile of yesteryear’s bestseller, Erasmus Keane is unique, operating in a well-constructed, vivid world.

Blood Country by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Dooooood. I mean seriously, buddy. Listen, friend, don’t get on the train with the psychotic killer and his vampire wife. If you do, something will find you and kill you till you die to death. It’s probably gonna hurt, too. Like, a lot. Although maybe not. You might be dead too quickly to feel the pain. But, uh, yeah. You’re busy that weekend. I dunno what you’re doing. Not dying sounds like it’s good enough though, right?

Declan Finn’s Blood Country (Honeymoon from Hell Book 2) is an orgy of violence and mayhem with enough story left over to make it fun. Seriously, it’s like a game of Super Smash Brothers with a plot. Now, some of the weapons used in said violence may not, technically speaking, be possible to create in the real world. That’ll happen. I mean, who needs a real gun that fires normal bullets when you can have zombie guns? What fun is Urban Fantasy if the Urban doesn’t Fantasy? Fortunately, Finn’s Urban Fantasy is hard and I got to reap the benefits of it doing so.

Before I get too far into the hard-hitting analysis that Jimbo’s in known for, I do have to say this much: Blood Country is not a standalone novel. It is part of a series which starts with The Neck Romancer. That’s where you need to start this series. I mean that seriously. This is definitely a case where you need to start the series where the series starts.

Of course, a polite and mature reviewer may be tempted to avoid pointing out that the title The Neck Romancer was inspired by a corny joke somewhere in Finn’s Saint Tommy NYPD series. If I ever meet one, I’ll remind him of that. As for me, I cackle evilly every time I see it.

Blood Country, for its part, starts early and doesn’t stop. The action continues throughout the book. It seemed like there was always something going on and I was never quite sure what was going to happen next. And it’s weird because I never really had time to wonder what was coming or look forward to it really, because there was already something going on.

Marco Catalano may or may not be going through some major changes based on certain aspects of his ancestry and his exposure to magic. We’re not sure yet. I know what day I’m betting and totally expect

to win, but I could still be wrong. Marco is pretty sure he's doing something too. It was awesome to see him try to figure out if I'm right or not.

If these changes are happening, they may have been noticed by Marco's wife Amanda. Amanda is a vampire. She really consumes blood and can be killed by sunlight. She's young by vampire standards (not much over a century has passed since she was turned) but is gaining in power and is already being talked about in vampire circles. I like this woman. Finn, being Finn, has written Amanda as a Catholic vampire and that is a bit of a twist, but it works. A praying vampire is a new thing, and I like it. Okay, so maybe Finn has written about Amanda before, but no one else has done it. I like it.

I've said a lot about the amount of action in Blood Country already, but I have to say that it's not just ubiquitous. It's also well done. Finn's mind for violence would be fascinating if it wasn't so terrifying. He seems to know more ways to kill than there are to die. The thing is the fights move quickly; they make sense and they're as entertaining as it gets. I don't just read a fight scene by Declan Finn, I go through each move in my mind, and I can see it happening. It's like watching a movie on my Kindle app.

Of course, no Finn book is complete without strange and whacky ways of killing people and breaking things. Whether it's guns that turn people into zombies, pistol with exploding ammunition roughly equivalent to that fired by a sixteen-inch naval cannon, or dragon drones there's a surprise around every corner. If the world ever takes a turn toward the weird, think Rifts Role Playing Game, I'm going to need Finn to report to my location immediately so that we can find an artificer immediately and start producing the weapons that fall out of Finn's brain. I'd love to know where he comes up with the inspiration for some of this stuff.

Check that. It's probably safer for all involved if I don't.

At any rate...

My only caveat to anyone who would think about reading Blood Country, or quite frankly any of Finn's work, would be to know what it is going in. If you're the type of person who is offended by Christians being Christians and doing things like praying, or wearing crosses, or attending church this is not the book for you. I mean that sincerely. Now I'm not saying that you have to be a churchgoing Christian to enjoy Finn's work. I'm just saying that it's not for the anti-Christian bigot types who run around screaming "WESTBORO!!" Although, at the risk of stating the blatantly obvious, the religious theme is not as strong in Honeymoon from Hell as it was in the Saint Tommy, NYPD series.

Blood Country is an amazeballs book even by Finn's standards and I'm an unabashed fan. I mean that seriously. Finn gave me a free copy of this book to review, and I bought a copy anyway. I like this guy's work that much. And listen, if I can break down and use my hard-won cash to support a guy simply because of how well he can write, then you can trust me when I tell you that his work is worth your time and money.

I already have copies of the next two in the series; Wyverns Never Die and Cross Over. I'll be picking up a copy of the final book, Fae'd to Black before too long as well, but it's in pre-order right now and I don't pre-order anyone's anything. That's a Jimbo thing. You'll be seeing reviews of all of them eventually. The life of a book reviewer is a hard one, and I don't review authors two in a row like, ever.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 "Exotic" Arms Dealers

Blood, Sweat, and Steel - Tales of Future Combat
and Mechanized Warfare —Edited by Mark Green

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well! I have another review for you of a new book, instead of me cleaning up recommendations previously shared on my website. I found this book via the company that published this, Three Ravens Publishing. To be transparent, I have a short story included in this collection, called “Contested Landing” that I co-wrote with my friend Liska McCabe. I loved writing this story and I thought that the narrator, Brian Fairbank, did a phenomenal job on my story. He made our story sound ten times better than it was on its own!

With that said, I am reviewing the other stories in this collection and not my own. Obviously, I think my own farts don’t smell but I doubt the larger world would agree. I loved the concept of this collection, diving deeper into the tactical process of combining arms for a more cohesive battle space in our future martial conflicts. This is the kind of thing Joes from every ear have considered, what will warfare in the future look like? This collection tries to answer those questions.

Because this is an anthology, this collection had eight stories by nine different authors with an introductory letter by the legendary military science fiction author, David Drake. These stories will leave you wanting more and wishing they all had several books in the fictional world where these adventure tales were told. While we normally use a format for these reviews, I am changing it for the unique way anthologies or collections are organized.

Seriously, this book will have you hooked on page one! Keep reading my review to see why you should be reading it!

The Stories

Since this is a collection of short stories, I thought I would break each one down and analyze them accordingly. I hope you enjoy my attempt at coherent thought as I chug my next mug of coffee!

Starting Out by David Drake

This collection was introduced by the legendary David Drake of military science fiction fame. His short essay set up the concept of the military science fiction genre we know and love. He did that while weaving in bits and pieces of his own personal history as a Vietnam veteran. That aside, how freaking cool is it that I got to be in a book with him? This is the kind of thing that dreams are made of! Seriously, I count myself lucky to be included. Next time, though, I think I’d like for our pages to touch. Wait, that isn’t family-friendly, never mind. Scratch that, we’ll just leave it with me squealing over how awesome it was!

And Thos Like Us by Kevin Ikenberry

This story was about the combat adventures of Master Sergeant Ivan Petrovich, a Chevalier Magtank commander. He’s fighting against the alien hordes in his iron behemoth, defying the odds and his own mortality to complete the mission. Further, we get to see the chaos that a multilingual battle space creates for those operating within its confines. The story telling in this short adventure was sometimes confusing, but it came off as intended and illustrated the chaotic nature of combined arms combat. It’s all good and fancy, just like in training. Then the firing starts and when the rubber meets the road it gets

messy. Kevin Ikenberry expertly captured that with this short story!

Contested Landing by JR Handley and Liska McCabe

My contribution to this anthology tells the story of a cherry US Space Force lieutenant in the famed Orbital Planetary Assault Regiments on his first drop. This story was partially about Second Lieutenant Jaxon Pierce's baptism of fire, but there was more to it. Liska and I covered what we thought a future drop pod insertion might look like. This was clearly inspired by the ODT from HALO and the iconic troopers in *Starship Trooper* by Heinlein. This wasn't an exact copy, instead we paid homage to the giants upon whom this industry was built. We sincerely hope that you love this one, because we poured our hearts into it.

Suzie Lightening by Morgan Chalfant

At its core, this is the story of Private Elliot Stokes, a former soldier caught flat footed by the zombie horde at the end of the world. When the attacks happened, he liberated a mech fighting suit that Battle-Tech would be proud of and used it to kill the grotesque parodies of humanity that the virus generated. The enemy appears to be the 'flood' from HALO or the zombie monsters from 'The Last of Us.' Elliot is a man in mourning, waiting to be reunited with his dead wife Suzie. She died in the opening salvo of this virus from hell and Elliot chose to honor her by painting her onto his massive mech. The story is extremely compelling and when I read it, I was assaulted by onion wielding ninja squirrels. Just a note of warning, this story brought on all the tears and ignited our fears of the undead. Suzie Lightening was a zombie apocalypse, meets Last Stand at the Alamo kind of story and was emotionally gripping because of it. This was my favorite story in this anthology and left me wanting to read more of Morgan's writing.

Rules of Survival by Casey Moores

At its core, this was a survival story. It told how Lieutenant Renee "Guts" Everett flew on a dangerous mission. She was enroute to insert combat troops behind enemy lines, but things went belly up. She crashed and had to retreat, utilizing everything she'd learned at SERE School, or training that teaches pilots what to do if they're trapped behind enemy lines. The name of the school, SERE, stands for Survival-Evasion-Resistance-and-Escape and is the stuff of legends amongst the pilots that I know.

The story itself was good, very great actually. However, it was unnecessarily weighed down by cumbersome jargon. Every character was introduced with their full name, rank and callsign. Every single piece of equipment had its full nomenclature listed as well. I felt like this wasn't necessary, not in a short story. To be fair, if this was simply world building for a larger novel universe, then I wouldn't complain about it. In a stand-alone short story, it felt overdone.

Since I mentioned how cumbersome the nomenclature felt, I wanted to praise the story itself. It was extremely well written, and the prose was clean and concise. Casey's understanding of airpower, and the culture that resides around it, felt authentic. The entire piloting scene also felt believable, and I could envision the cockpit and the controls that the author described. I shouldn't be surprised, given that Casey Moores is a retired Air Force pilot himself. His expertise on the subject shows, and this story shone brighter because of it.

Thunder Run by J.F. Holmes

This was one of my favorite stories in this collection. From a story telling perspective, it had the most compacted meat and potatoes of the entire collection. There was depth and emotion and a plot that I

thoroughly enjoyed. It was the story of a combined arms tank battle against alien invaders. It told the story of Sergeant First Class Lisa Dash, who was a platoon sergeant in a tank company. She felt real, a competent combat leader in a branch where brains matter more than brawns... at least until you have to replace a track! Overall, I liked this character and think you will too.

This story was a pleasure to read, especially the way J.F. Holmes had each of the military units interact. His manner of storytelling felt real, even the little details like the chaos created when units work together in combat conditions. The author's military credentials showed through once movement to contact activities began. In this story, some of the tankers died needlessly. They lost themselves in the battle lust, lost in the thrill of the hunt. During that engagement, they forgot that war is a democracy, and the enemy gets a vote as well. Because of all of this, some of the heroic last stands in this combat adventure felt more compelling, even in such a short format.

During this combat evolution, the main character, SFC Dash decided to prioritize her mission of taking out enemy tanks. She chose to protect allied infantry ground forces at grave personal risk. As a former grunt, I can appreciate when the tread heads are useful, and this was expertly shown by the author of this adventure. After dismantling the ones that were visible, she had to make a quick thunder run past the entrenched alien tanks situated near the naval air tower on the base where the attack was taking place.

During the fight she's wounded and forced to retreat with the help of her tank crewmen. They abandon their vehicle and hunker down in a ditch between the enemy and their own lines. In the end, she has to abandon her vehicle and pray for support. The story fades as medivac arrives, opening room for a larger and more compelling series built around these characters.

The action in this story was compelling, and it was extremely well written. This was one of the stories in this collection that left me wanting more. I wanted a series of novels about this alien invasion. I wanted more, always more. I hope J.F. Holmes comes back to this world someday. If he does, I'll be reviewing all of them!

Breach of Contract by William Joseph Roberts

At its most basic, this story is about a mercenary unit fighting for its survival in a world where it appears that the governments of the galaxy have fallen. Per my reading of this short story, it seems that all that is left are the mega corporations and other corporate oligarchies. This is a simple man versus the system plot structure. The corporate cronies are the bad guys, which is standard in post-apocalyptic universes.

This story is so much more, though. This was the story of a mercenary unit struggling against indomitable odds. They had nothing and nobody to rely on but themselves. Well, themselves and their ragtag equipment that they lovingly maintain. This short story had some jargon that was a little jarring at first, but it wasn't overdone, and I caught on pretty quickly. Given the genre, I felt like he balanced the need for military nomenclature with reader accessibility.

Now, let's talk about the writing by William Joseph Roberts. He showed his skill in how he delivered his prose and kept me captivated from start to finish. I was able to envision everything that the author described in this story. I could picture the combat he described like a movie playing in my mind. That's important, given that I have no experience in aviation. This adventure was a perfect example of an author using their military experience to great effect. The author used his intimate knowledge of aircraft maintenance, which was one of the major plot points in this adventure. This short story was one of the

standouts, I think you'll dig it!

The Flaming Bomb by Sergio Palumbo

This was a braided short story, with an aging main character and the memories of his adventures as a younger man. The soldier this story was written about was Robert Cordingly as a young rifleman and an older Captain who spends his dotage teaching young cadets in the ways of war and life. From a technical side, the author delivered. However, the swapping of POVs was handled with icons in the written text that didn't translate well into audio. Not the author's fault, but I had to switch to the print copy so that I could review this short story.

The story from 50 years in the past was a thrilling first contact scenario and was a lot of fun to read. The aliens have some sort of preternatural ability to jack with the minds of everyone in a specific radius of their craft. They convince them that they're burnt to cinder, though nothing happened to them physically. This leaves the survivors with horrific memories and a case of spicy de ja vu, otherwise known as PTSD.

The other story is that of the aged and retired soldier, turned teacher. A man trying to make his way in the world despite his past suffering. He isn't the young man thrilled at the prospect of combat anymore. When he learns that the aliens have returned, his world is turned upside down and the adventure ensues. He never wanted to encounter the enigmatic Hulowrs again, but fate had other ideas.

The main plot of this story is part recollections of adventures past and partly a mystery about the unknown "Flaming Bomb." In this story, we get to see the intersection of political alliances and war, and how the shifting sands of time alter everything in the end. Instead of a hero we cheered for, the ending makes us pity Robert and hate the government he served. There is almost no action, and you're left feeling like the author sucked you into the big game, only to have him strike out. The prose was good, the author clearly has talent, but I did not like this story.

Rituals by Rick Partlow

In the final short story in this anthology, we follow the main character Second Lieutenant Jason McKay. He's a seasoned drop trooper in the Marine Corps of some future national polity that isn't covered in this short content format. He's a former enlisted man, promoted through the ranks. I found him to be likeable enough, though this story focused more on the action than the characters. In short form content, I don't care but in a longer story I want both.

First, let's talk about the prose of this short story. I was more invested in the story than some of the others. To be transparent, it's likely because I consider Rick Partlow to be a friend. He's regularly on my podcast and we met in person. Further, we both served in the infantry and are both members of The Brotherhood of the Blue Cord. We didn't serve together; his service was like 100 years before my own. Hey, I know he's going to read this so I'm not talking behind his back. I think he's an extremely talented wordsmith and this story reaffirms that belief.

During this adventure through space, we see that the author has a visceral understanding of what future combat could look like. He understands small unit tactics, likely from his time as an infantry platoon leader. All of the characters felt real, though I came into this anthology with a plethora of my own uniformed experience to draw upon. I'm not sure if that translates to civilian readers, but I found the storytelling to be evocative. He covered all of the sensory details and put the reader onto the battlefield right next to the drop trooper LT.

The action in the story was well written, and I found myself drawn in. It was short, sweet and to the

Who is it for?

This collection is for readers who love the Mil SciFi genre. It's for readers who are thrilled to consume mecha adventures, war stories, and near-future fiction. This anthology, by Three Ravens Publishing, has an interesting mix of authors whose stories I know and love and one I'd never heard of before.

Why buy it?

Not gonna lie, I'd read it for 'Suzie Lightening' by Morgan Chalfan. It was the sleeper story in this collection and was written by the only author whose stories I'd never encountered before. Wow, just wow, this was an emotional rollercoaster of awesomeness. Then, I'd suggest reading it for 'Thunder Run' by J.F. Holmes. I've read his works before, and he didn't let me down with this story. I loved it and wanted more of this alien invasion story. Then, you should check out this anthology to find other stories and pick your own favorite. Hint, hint, 'Contested Landing' meets the bill!

Cartwright's Cavaliers by Mark Wandrey

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Me: Oh look, Cartwright's Cavaliers is going to be free all weekend (already done and gone). That's pretty cool.

Devil on My Shoulder: Oh, those evil, mean, hateful people. Didn't you just pay five dollars for that book like two weeks ago?

Me: Well, yeah, but...

Devil: But NOTHING!!!! We must have our revenge! Let it burn!!!

Angel on my Shoulder: You did pay for it, but let's face it. It was worth the five bucks. Actually, it was probably worth more than that. It was a really good book.

Me: That's true. I really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, being a dude who has had some financial problems, watching Jim rise from the ashes and resurrect his father's business was kind of inspirational.

Devil: F that! We paid when we didn't have to.

Angel: Never mind you, devil. Aren't you a fan of violence for its own sake?

Devil: What has that got to do with anything?

Angel: You can't tell me you didn't enjoy the fight scenes. You can't tell me you didn't chuckle when all that stuff blew up.

Devil: Ok, yeah, that didn't suck. I still don't see why it's okay that we spent all that money.

Angel: And you can't tell me that the Adayn chick doesn't smell a little fishy to you.

Devil: Ok, she stinks. I'd think more brimstone and less fish though. She does have a sneaky feeling to her.

Angel: And listen, that space battle was hot, right. I mean, mass chaos death, screaming, no one knew

point, but it felt plausible. Most of the words in this story were spent leading up to the mission, allowing us to climb inside the main character's head. During the lead up, McKay goes over the pre-mission situation reports, unit tactics and his brief history of his Marines.

During this story we also get to peek inside the political intrigue between the various groups in this universe. We see the tension between the Colonial Guard, or CG, troops and the Marines. Throw in the dynamic with local law enforcement and you have a powder keg of suck that made for an interesting backdrop for this short story.

Overall, this was an extremely well-written story and left me wanting more. I wanted more from the author, Rick Partlow, and from this larger universe. I hope that this is in one of his many expansive worlds, because I wanted to sink my teeth deeper into this dynamic environment. I'll have to check in with him to find out which world it's situated inside.

The Audiobook

This anthology was narrated by Brian Fairbank, a vocal storyteller whom I've never had the joy of listening to. It was a glorious experience, and Brian did such an amazing job that I could see hiring him for future projects. He's not a shining star in the industry, yet, but this voice actor is going places. I can't wait to watch this career and listen to more tales that he weaves with his richly alluring voice.

The Characters

Because this is an anthology, it would be impossible for me to address each of the characters from the individual short stories. Well, without breaking down each individual story like I did above. Therefore, I'll simply say that none of these stories felt like the characters were unrealized. They all felt flushed out and real, despite how little time we spent with each person.

The World

This is an area where the collective nature of an anthology means that there is not a succinct answer. There were eight worlds contained in this collection, and they were each unique. For my money, the most compelling world building came from the story Suzie Lightening by Morgan Chalfan, Thunder Run by J.F. Holmes and Rituals by Rick Partlow. These three stories created an environment where I could picture it happening like a movie running in my head. The imagery was in vivid 4K HD, and I loved it.

Politics

This collection is about the future of combat. War is the extension of, or breakdown of, the peaceful political processes. As such, there is an undercurrent of political intrigue, but not in a manner that that relates to the real world. No modern politics are addressed in any way. This collection is one that anyone on the political spectrum could enjoy.

Content Warning

Many of these stories contain foul language, as one would expect from an adventure told in a war zone. There was minimal discussions of sex and sex workers because, even in the future, soldiers tell crude jokes. There was violence and death within the scope of this anthology, but it didn't reach the level of gore or war porn. I doubt any readers of military science fiction would be concerned, but this might not be the choice for young readers.

what was going on.

Devil: Oh, okay, so I enjoy jacked up situations and that WAS a jacked-up situation.

Angel: Oh, and Jim's mom was definitely one of yours, the way she screwed him and his whole company over and almost killed it. You know you loved that.

Devil: Yeah, it did make my day. I mean, how do you not love pure, self-centered evil like that? It was the greatest thing EV-AR! But there were soldiers in the book.

Angel: It's military science fiction, you knob. Of course there were soldiers in the book.

Devil: And they like worked together and stuff.

Angel: Mm-hmm. That's what soldiers do.

Devil: And some of the guys who helped Jim did it because they were still loyal to his dad and HIS DAD WAS DEAD!

Angel: Yeah, mortals are funny like that. They don't stop caring about each other just because one of them dies. Especially if it's someone they've fought and bled with.

Devil: I'm a devil, jackass. I don't like it when people care about each other.

Angel: Oh, that's too bad. I mean, these guys work their tails off for each other. I was almost in tears when that cap...

Devil: I knew it. You're a wuss!

Angel: I know you liked that little Splunk thing.

Devil: You know, I have to have some respect for anything that looks that demonic. I mean, have you seen the stuffed animal version? She's a dead ringer for an imp! If only she had a bad attitude instead of acting like an animal companion in a Disney movie.

Angel: You know that Disney movies make hundreds of millions of dollars and are still watched decades later, right? And that they're so successful that people travel for thousands of miles and pay gobs of money to meet those same animal companions in "person?" And that they do it simply because they love them?

Devil: Huh?

Angel: And you can't tell me you that you don't want your very own pet Tortantula.

Devil: Heh. You know those things are cool. And they totally kick major ass. But what has that go to do with anything?

Angel: Never mind. Listen: You read this along with the rest of us right?

Devil: (snarky) Obviously, you dolt.

Angel: And now this is the second Four Horseman Universe book we've read, right? And we've reviewed both of them now too, right?

Devil: Yeah.

Angel: And we got the first one free even though that one was never offered for free to the public right?

Devil: Ok, yes. Come to the point, will you?

Angel: Do you doubt for a single moment that the rest of the books are going to feature huge amounts of chaos and carnage?

Devil: Nope. Not at all. We're going to see lots of explosions. I can't wait. It's like it says in my favorite song. Let the bodies hit the floor, let the bodies hit...

Angel: I get it, guy. And we got this one sooner right?

Devil: Yeah. Unlike those slack-tards who didn't buy this thing up front.

Angel: So you're admitting that it was worth the five bucks to get it early?

Devil: No. It's FIVE STINKING DOLLARS!!

Angel: Ok, so what did you not like about the book?

Devil: I find it unrealistic that the mercs in the book would follow an obvious slug like Jim. I mean, he's a slug. These are guys who work their tails off to stay in shape to be better soldiers and all that guy does is eat pizza and drink Coke!

Angel: Uh, the book does show why they respect him. He earns it. And also, c'mon guy. Have you looked in the mirror lately? What else?

Devil: Uhhh... uhhh... Well, there's some mushy stuff.

Angel: C'mon guy. We already covered that. Is that really the best you've got? CAN YOU NOT COME STRONGER THAN THAT?

Devil: What's your point?

Angel: My point is that this book was five bones well spent.

Devil: Yeah, I guess it was.

Angel: Even if everyone else can get it for free for the next few days.

Devil: Now wait a minute...

Angel: Nope. I'm right. You're wrong.

Devil: Okay, so maybe you got one right on accident. Just this once. Don't think it'll ever happen again!

Angel: Oh, I'm sure it will. I'm an angel. You're just an a...

Me: That's enough for you two.

Devil and Angel together: HMPH!

he first clapped eyes on Tam, who is eight years his junior, he knew he had found her. But Alcandhor has made it plain no one is to go near Tam with romantic intentions until she's old enough to become Thane, which will be in five years' time.

Further trouble arises as Marcalan realizes the sending bond he and his cousin established is a lot stronger than either of them anticipated. He can't bear to be apart from her and Tam cannot stand it either, leading her to realize they have what her uncle termed "in love." Trying their best to remain "friends and cousins" doesn't work too well when their bond keeps bringing them together like magnets, and things get worse when Marcalan learns a secret about his parentage. Whose son is he, really? Can he even be a Ranger? How could he ever be worthy of that title – or of Tam?

Meanwhile, Nandhal joins a group of Rogue Rangers and sets out to claim vengeance. At the same time, Tam receives a dream from an Enaisi, one claiming the name of her clan's ancestor. Whether Alcandhor wants it or not, his plans are not going to withstand the coming changes. Can he make sure those he loves will weather them? Or does he love his plans more than he cares about them?

The Characters

Marcalan, a minor character hinted to have feelings for Tam in book one, receives more of the spotlight in this sequel. Twenty-three or twenty-four to Tam's fifteen, he knows darn well he cannot afford for his love for his cousin to be recognized even as he is torn by the fact that he must keep his love for her secret from his Thane, who has decreed she should be left alone. The heart wants what it wants, though, and Tam's heart belongs to him as much as his belongs to her. Yet it is the question of his parentage that threatens to break the lighthearted Ranger more than any forbidden love could.

For her part, Tam is not as much of an ingenue as she was in *Sword's Edge*. The trials she has faced and conquered mean she has grown more than her uncle realizes. She also proves she knows her own mind and heart better than he thinks she does when she freely chooses Marcalan. If anything, her problem is not that she isn't mature enough to marry, but that she has enough post-traumatic stress from losses she does not even recall to accept that her new love is going to walk into danger just like the rest of their family must.

Poor Alcandhor really takes a beating in this book. Besides needing to plan an execution for Tanadhon and tracking down the Rogues, he also has to put out his wife, Aleta. Accepting that she didn't love him was difficult enough; realizing that her constant disrespect for him undermines his authority and that he must put her out or lose what he is trying to build is much, much harder. It makes him even more likely to err where romance is concerned because he isn't quite thinking straight.

The World

L.S. King expands on the world she introduced in *Sword's Edge* brilliantly. The Enaisi are described in greater detail and the manner of humanity's coming to this planet is also further explained. Ranger and Enaisi powers are explicated and shown further while future events are hinted at, setting up for the next book in the series. This is not just a well-crafted sci-fi/fantasy setting – it is a world in which to happily get lost!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

The romance is handled well and sweetly, but there is talk of “nestling” after marriage. Depression also features when Marcalan’s parentage is thrown into question, as the young man struggles with his identity and nearly loses that battle. There is also torture, discussions of rape, and a fade-to-black before a Rogue rapes and murders a mother and her teen daughter. All these events are handled delicately and well but it is worth knowing about them before going into the book.

Who is it for?

Fans of L.S. King and anyone who loved *Sword’s Edge* will devour this second book in the series. It is impossible not to fall into the novel and want more, as the world and characters linger long after the final chapter. Those seeking some sci-fi/fantasy that would make Andre Norton proud would do well to purchase both the prior book and this sequel, as King has proven an honorable heiress to the Grande Dame of Science Fiction. Readers who want some psi-powers in a Medieval setting but with plenty of science to go with the “magic” will love this book. Young adults hungry for a good read will enjoy it as well and they will be clamoring for the next installment after they are done, especially if they like action and romance. The book is not focused simply on the concept of “in love” – there are mysteries to solve, villains to fight, and trouble is brewing on the horizon. With all that going on, the romance is an acceptable place to sit down and breathe for a few pages!

Why buy it?

It is darn good sci-fi/fantasy. We do not have enough of that available. Could there be any better reason than that to purchase it?

The Chooser: A Tale of Modern Valkyrie by David L. Burkhead

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It’s not every day that I get to read a story that takes place primarily in Valhalla and is, in large part at least, a mystery story, if not the classic whodunit. So when I say that David L. Burkhead’s *The Chooser* is unlike anything I’ve ever read before, I mean it. And that’s saying something because the first fantasy story I remember reading was *Where the Wild Things Are* and that was age appropriate for me at the time. It was also over forty years ago. Don’t get me wrong. I love stories that include all the classic fantasy tropes. Still and all, it’s a rare and wondrous gift to get something I can read and enjoy that doesn’t read like everything else I’ve read over the last forty-five years.

Okay, so maybe the use of Norse Heathenry as a setting is not totally new. I still enjoyed it. And it’s clear that Burkhead knows his stuff. He knows how things work in the lore. The book also features the return of one of my favorite villains in *World of Warcraft* lore, although with a totally different take on the character, so that was cool. It was good to see an old foe treated more as part of the process than someone who was trying to kill me. I enjoyed that.

The villain in *The Chooser* is not a world ending, all powerful, Thanos-like being capable of slaughtering entire populations. The villain is someone who is much more real and immediate. The type of villain that exists in the real world and who wouldn’t be welcomed by the residents of any prison in the United States. He is honestly the kind of person that I would take great personal joy in turning in while secretly hoping that he would resist arrest. I’ll let you guess why.

Our hero is a young boy named Kamil who is much too young to end up in the afterlife but does any-

way. He's a bit scared at first, but he's been through a lot and is continuing to go through more. I'll give the kid this much though: He doesn't give up. He doesn't give in. And when his time comes, he's ready to do what he needs to do. Kamil is fierce.

Kamil is also dauntless, not to be confused with Dauntless. Seriously there were no needles and mind control involved in this kid's story. He works his tail off in confusing circumstances to learn what he needs to learn with no clear understanding of why he ended up where he did. This is not your typical teenage punk. Kamil is, in a lot of ways, what I should have been at his age. I like this guy.

Except maybe he's not really the main character. There is also a Valkyrie named Goll. There's actually supposed to be an accent over that o, but Substack appears to not accept alt codes. Their bad. Anyway, I almost feel bad for Goll. She gets caught in one situation that saddens her and then another that confuses her. I'll give her this much though: regardless of her personal thoughts on the matter, she gets her job done. Plus she has a really cool sounding horse and horses are cool. I like horses. So she gets props from me there as well.

My only complaint about The Chooser is how short it is, but that maybe doing both the book and Burkhead a disservice. I think it's the right length for the story that needed to be told. As my Rhetoric 160 teacher used to say; "It should be the length of a woman's skirt: Long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to keep things interesting." Burkhead has accomplished that here.

All in all, I'm glad I read The Chooser and I'd recommend it to anyone who likes fantasy stories or stories with a good moral. Burkhead definitely had a point to make with this story and he does it without lecturing. That may, in fact, be the best part of the book. I look forward to reading some more of Burkhead's work in the future.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Naginatas

Conquistador by S. M. Stirling

Review by George Phillies

<http://books-by-george.com>

Suppose you accidentally invented a machine that allows travel into a parallel world very similar to ours, except that North America is much as it was six hundred years ago. If you were of the appropriate inclination, you might choose to recruit friends, travel through the gate, and set up a civilization arranged on the ideas that you think are best for humans to live. And that is exactly what happened. Unfortunately, while you might prefer to keep the gate a secret, there are also people who would seek to profit from the gate in ways that reveal the gate's existence, for example, by smuggling a live dodo bird from the other world into ours. The hero of the piece uncovers what is happening, is smuggled to the parallel world, and eventually discovers that unfortunate deeds are afoot.

While Conquistador sounds like an adventure book, it's actually in the extremely old tradition of the geographical novel. As almost all readers are unfamiliar with geographical novels, I should begin by explaining that they reached their peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, when there was no photography, so that if you wished to learn about the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon you could read a detailed description of everything that was there, every sort of tree and animal that you would encounter, all in prose form, with a sketch of a novel being inserted in between. The author of Conquistador has done extremely extensive research so that we encounter lavish paragraph after lavish paragraph of description, interlaced with which are mystery, romance, and adventure. It's a wonderful piece of writing, in a style that we do not often see anymore.

Crossing Over by Paul Clayton
Review by Michael Gallagher
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

While the ubiquitous political strife in recent years have had many authors re-envisioning the idea of America's Second Civil War, Paul Clayton's *Crossing Over* presents a refreshingly civilian take on the idea that's part *Old Man's War*, part *The Road*.

The story

At a mere 174 pages, Clayton's novella drops us into a United States that's already on the verge of collapsing. Mike and Marie (last names are never given) are getting by in a country that's quickly disintegrating. A hotly contested presidential election has simmering political tensions welling up to a rolling boil, to the point of blocks of states seceding from the Union and establishing their own governments and militaries (and before anyone accuses Clayton of trend chasing in the wake of the most recent presidential election, bear in mind this book was published in 2018).

While most of the fighting and violence have been far away from their quiet Minnesotan suburbs where they live with their sixteen-year-old daughter Ellie, they're living with food staple shortages, no internet and limited electricity. After Mike is forced to shoot a transient discovered sleeping in his garage who attacks Marie, the family finally decides to pack their camper and make a break for the Canadian border. But winter is on the horizon, Mike and Marie are in their sixties, and Ellie is unable to function alone, being moderately developmentally disabled. Reluctantly, they leave their cul-de-sac behind, which was slowly being deserted as more of their neighbors flee. Little do they realize their problems have just begun.

The characters

For such a short novella (around only 30,000 words), a surprising number of people pass through the story as the family struggles through their life as refugees. Society falling apart as it is, Mike crosses paths with plenty of thieves, muggers, rioters, and other assorted riff-raff taking advantage of the upheaval. The other couples and families they come across who show themselves trustworthy become welcome spots of relief. Things are tense even when the plot is at rest. Absolutely everyone is looking over their shoulder for danger; from other families at the border encampments growing increasingly desperate, from human traffickers promising the moon, even overworked bureaucrats happy to leave them literally out in the cold if they don't pony up a suitable bribe.

Mike is driven by his need to protect his family, and it truly shows in some of his more anguished moments when he's faced with dwindling options. He wistfully pines for his wife, whom he shared a long and happy marriage with, as she slowly drifts into a thick depression, leaving him feeling completely alone in the ruins. He worries about his naive but beautiful daughter, a lamb among wolves he's become all too well acquainted with. He has no military training and doesn't even like guns. In him, Clayton writes an everyman protagonist whose heroism lies in his heart. To keep getting up after life and society have pummeled him into the ground, literally and figuratively. Mike's heroism shines through all the more as he does so against the added challenge of advanced age, something most authors don't have the skill or bravery to explore as well as Clayton does here. He's not an action hero; just a man who's good to the marrow of his bones, in whom many a reader, and certainly any father will see themselves, regardless of age.

Marie is similarly well-written, a dedicated wife and mother who does her best to keep Ellie sheltered from the grimmer realities of the world. Early on she is a source of comfort to them both and does her

best to care for them as their cupboards grow emptier and emptier. She loves Mike and worries that the strain of life is making him distant. Their relationship is realistic and goes through various ups and down as they face different challenges, but neither gives up on the other. When she insists on taking some French-Canadian smugglers up on their offer to walk them across the border and it gets revealed it was all just a trap for a robbery, Mike never blames her after they manage to escape with their lives and little else. She goes through sickness as winter sets in, and experiences bitterness, but never once does she entertain leaving him. It's a couple dynamic that's a breath of fresh air.

Ellie is the featured the least of the bunch, often understandably being made to frequently tag along with her mother on errands. She has no fear of strangers, and several times has to be reined in from simply walking off with some random person who's nice enough to her. While the book mentions that she's mentally about eleven years old, she comes across as even more childlike than that. Her fate at the hands of the brutal world that's been set up is something that's a source of constant stress for her parents, and I was relieved when a potential romantic interest in the form of Wisconsin militia member Gabe (who's aware of her condition, but a good guy) is introduced as a potential source of relief for the family.

The world

While I made an earlier comparison to Cormac McCarthy's grimdark masterpiece *The Road*, Clayton's setting is not quite so horrible. It's bleak, for certain, as the reader watches the residents of Mike's hometown violently become stripped of their humanity, with politics being the poisoned root of it all. And while the story wisely avoids setting politics front and center, it does rather acknowledge its part in the shaping (and twisting) of the everyday human experience. How people passing by on the street, indifferent to one another, can become violent enemies at practically the flip of a calendar day given the right circumstances, speaks more to the foolishness of anchoring politics as one's sole identity trait than anything else. And while circumstances do get dark, as the weeks stretch to months just waiting at the Canadian border, Mike manages to never quite lose hope, literally crying out to God in the wilderness at times to help him go on, for his wife and daughter if nothing else.

The politics

The story by its nature has more political underpinnings than most featured on this site, but many rhetorical bear traps the plot could have easily fallen into are navigated well enough to keep things enjoyably neutral. There are factions, for certain: the opening chapter where Mike witnesses a protest and counter-protest turn violent have clear stand-ins for Patriot Prayer and Antifa. And it's obvious Clayton is no fan of Antifa throughout the book; they beat up the elderly, steal, block roads, mug and even kidnap, all while chanting mindlessly about fighting racism and clad in all black. The overt demonizing of the faux-anarchist frappe-swilling fops that are Antifa is one hill Clayton seems content to die on, and that's fine and dandy by this reviewer.

On the very first page we learn that the northeastern region of the country had joined national guards to form a group called the Liberty League, who in turn had thrown in with a guerilla faction known as the Revolutionary People's Party and declared themselves loyal to the incoming (allegedly legitimately elected) president. The bloc of states south of them, from West Virginia down to Georgia and as far out as Tennessee, were loyal to the (purportedly fraudulently deposed) outgoing president, calling themselves the Minute Men. That's as deep as the lore gets, all explained on the first page. Names of presidents are not given, parties are never mentioned. And while it would have been so, so easy for a character to become an organ for the author's personal beliefs, it never occurs. One brief argument Mike gets into with a fellow refugee on the subject treats both sides with respect and serves more to highlight the destructive power of politics and its ability to drive a wedge between people.

Content warning

The family are set upon at several points by thugs and looters, and foul language is employed by various criminals as well as Not Antifa. There are a couple of instances of intimacy between Mike and Marie handled classily. A slimy border processing employee propositions Mike for his daughter in exchange for expediting his paperwork, but it thankfully goes nowhere.

Who is it for?

If you're a fan of post-apocalyptic fiction, give this a shot. It's mid-apocalypse; a story told from the ground as the smoke wafts up just before the world begins to burn. One criticism I do have of the story is that its ending is quite abrupt, something that's earned Clayton his share of heavy handed one-star reviews. It is satisfying enough in its own right, but after all the action and tension the characters have just gone through, it's a wonder a few more pages weren't spent allowing for a bit more closure and room to let out your breath. It actually had me wondering if it was meant to be a first in a series; Clayton himself told me it isn't, but that he'd be open to it. I'd say the endpoint and indeed overall setting leaves the door wide open for a vast array of narrative opportunities. That small defect aside, you'll be hard pressed to find a more human, tightly written drama for just .99.

Why read it?

Though I'd never heard of Paul Clayton before, he has quite a few impressive writing chops on his CV, and it shows here. The human drama is superb and the dialogue is about perfect. Clayton plumbs the depths of the soul and spares the reader nothing of what he finds. What he delivers is authentic without becoming misery porn. Paul Clayton has a new fan in me, and I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

Now write that sequel, Paul!

The Dabare Snake Launcher by Joelle Presby Review by Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Science Fiction can be huge space battles, androids and aliens all mashed together to create a grand epic, but it doesn't have to be. Sometimes Science Fiction can be earthbound. Sometimes, SF can be more character driven. Isaac Asimov, the grandmaster of science fiction, almost passed on writing SF entirely because he didn't want to write about rockets and rayguns, but about people. I bring that up not to show off my massive knowledge of all things Science Fictional or to show off the point on the top of my head, but because Joelle Presby's *The Dabare Snake Launcher* is a very character driven, near future novel set right here on Planet Earth.

A lot of *The Dabare Snake Launcher* centers around family and government intrigue. The picture painted by Presby is that the two are basically synonymous in Africa, where the story takes place. And when there's a space elevator to be built, it gets intense.

A huge part of what I loved about *The Dabare Snake Launcher* is that the main plot revolves around the building of a space elevator. If you're not familiar (meaning that you haven't read the Mars Trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson) a space elevator is exactly what it claims to be. A rock gets put into a geosynchronous orbit, you drop a rope to Earth and stuff travels up and down the rope. I can't begin to name

all of the technical challenges something like that would entail, but something like that could get cargo to orbit for dirt cheap and the future of the exploration and exploitation of the Solar System could easily end up tied to the success of such a thing. Imagine the possibilities of building a rebuilding spacecraft in orbit without the need to consume all of that fuel getting things into space in the first place. Something like this could be huge, and if we can get more than one up and working...

Yeah, it could be huge.

To Presby's credit though, she doesn't get bogged down in endless technical details. She keeps things moving by centering her story on the people who run the company that wants to build the space elevator. She's got enough in there to make things believable, but not too much to slow things down. Basically, *Dabare Snake Launcher* has the characterization of a David Weber type novel but without the eight-hundred-million-page infodumps.

That's not to say that Presby skimps on the details. At some point, we do come face to face with the issues involved in building a space elevator. That goes from the obvious (what do we make a rope this long out of? Where do we put the Earthbound end of this thing?) to the it should have been obvious (where do we get enough power to run this thing?) to the less obvious but still necessary (how do we get people and stuff to the elevator? How do we move it once it comes down?) to the obviously obvious (how do we keep the government from taking all of this from us, either flat out or in the form of taxation and regulation.) Oh, and you get to find out what the definition of the word "Dabare" is, since I'm assuming that most of you don't know. I definitely didn't when I picked up my copy.

With the exception of one pulse-quickenning sequence there isn't a whole lot of violence in *Dabare Snake Launcher*. This is a work of intrigue, not explosions. I loved every minute of it though. Some of my favorite works of Science Fiction contain all kinds of intrigue. The *Honorverse*, the *Safehold* series, *Battletech*, the *Carerraverse*, even *The Ashes* series all have a ton of political intrigue to them. The difference here is that Presby puts the intrigue front and center instead of in the background.

Presby has a disturbingly good grasp on government corruption and its effect on industry and science. If I didn't know better, I might be tempted to believe she had a cousin who was a Senator or something. There is a lot of horse trading and interweaving of families, some alliances forged with a marriage, other things almost prevented because of feuding...

Yeah, I can get with this kind of plot. The *Dabare Snake Launcher* is a work of SF set in just past modern-day Africa that reads like a primer on medieval European politics. I love that about it. Machiavelli would feel at home here and so do I. The thing is there's more than just a hint of mafia dealings here. Michael Corleone and Tony Soprano would feel home here as well. Presby did a great job keeping things moving.

And let's face it, moving is what it's all about. Tony Soprano moved trash. Michael Corleone moved his family to Vegas. Tony Montana moved into a mansion with his rival's widowed wife. FDR moved Joseph Kennedy to Washington DC and said, "It takes a crook to catch a crook." And, of course, Napoleon moved his ass to Elba. If the Sadou family just happens to want to move things back and forth to orbit, who am I to tell them no?

There's a little bit of African spiritualism in *Dabare Snake Launcher* and I found that I liked that. It not only helps establish setting, but it just fits. There's a bit in there about the traditional versus the modern vis a vis African religion as well and I like how well that fits with the current world and pretty much any religion to include Christianity, which I'm a part of.

And I guess that's what makes Dabare Snake Launcher work: It's got all conflict you could ever want even if people aren't shooting at each other. Whether it's business versus government, generational or interfamilial there's always something going on. There's a hidden secret or a concealed goal or even an open enemy that needs some resolution somewhere. That's what kept me glued to the page. And that's why I'll be picking up the sequel that I have a feeling might just be coming. Maybe. There's still work to be done and I need more books to review. Anyway, if you're friends with Presby, tell her I said to get writin'.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Bottles of Antivenom

Every Version of You by Grace Chan

Review by Mark Nelson

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

This novel is set in Australia in the not-quite near future of 2080, a year I don't expect to see. In 2080 most individuals spend the majority of their time inside a "hyper-immersive, hyper-consumerist virtual reality called Gaia". You can work, socialise, and even eat in Gaia, whilst your bodies are suspended in pods. During the course of the novel, it becomes possible to upload your brain permanently to Gaia. Governments move to Gaia, the rich move there, the not so rich move there, and people run fund me campaigns to move there. Within two years of the ultimate upload becoming available the Earth's non-digital population has shrunk to 1,700,000; Australia's to 5000.

The bulk of the 5000 would be the homeless, the isolated, the intoxicated, the chronically psychotic. They missed out on Gaia access in the early years. Stonewalled from new jobs and new tech, they were knocked off the social ladder and abandoned in the physical world to dwindle away. Even the most well-meaning activists are giving up on campaigning for those left behind. (Chapter 21)

I'm surprised that the number left behind is as low as 5,000 I would have thought it would be higher. Have all inequalities in Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities been eliminated by 2080? Some parents leave their children behind on Earth, where they are cared for by androids: "the children spend most of their time plugged into Gaia anyway, attending learncurve, hanging out with their parents".

The main character and her mother are Chinese Malaysians living in Australia. The mother does not even have a presence in Gaia, she has no on-line presence. After Tao-Yi's partner uploads his brain to Gaia, Tao-Yi remains because she can't leave her mother. The disappearance of most humans to Gaia does not impact the quality of care that Ms. Ling receives in Pebble Garden Residential Estate. How can it? All the care is provided by droids.

A few thoughts provoked by this novel.

"Tao-Yi follows the nurse-droid into a glass lift. The automaton stands with its luminous eyes trained on her, svelte arms resting against curvy hips. Tao-Yi closes her eyes. Even their mechanical creations reincarnate the hallmarks of feminine subservience: wholly attentive, gushing and pleasant, nurturing to the pinnacle of self-deprivation, with a garnish of sexual subordination."

How will the form of 'female' robots be determined in our world when we have the technology to produce life-like reproductions of humans? Who makes the choices?

In the absence of humans, many things carry on as before because they were carried out by droids; not humans. "A smattering of droids still patrol the city, fixing and patching and cleaning. But they are few

and slow. Funding extra-Gaia infrastructure isn't a priority of an intra-Gaia government".

Over four hundred humans are living in a settlement in Queensland. A decision has been made not to build the settlement too near to a town, to existing infrastructure. Why? Because in 2080 there are cameras everywhere, cameras that can be controlled by the digital humans in Gaia. The residents of the settlement don't want to be watched by the humans in Gaia, they don't want to become the ultimate reality TV show. But do they have the skills to survive long term, once the easy scavenger pickings from towns and cities across Australia have been depleted?

Tao-Yi decides to travel from Melbourne to Malaysia. Melbourne airport has been closed for months, but there are still flights leaving Sydney airport. She decides to take the maglev from Melbourne to Sydney airport.

This is the only part of the novel that I had a problem with. Human looking androids? No problem! Uploading your consciousness to a computer environment? No problem! Society reproducing itself on Gaia? No problem! The Australian Federal and State governments building a working maglev by 2080? That's just not believable.

Arriving at Sydney Airport Tao-Yi discovers that there are no longer any flights leaving Sydney, despite what the 'portal' says. Eventually. . . Tao-Yi discovers that although planes are not leaving Australia, ships are still leaving Australia. A ship arrives in Townsville Port twice a month. Tao-Yi is leaving Australia, taking her mother's ashes to a temple in Ipoh.

I'm looking forward to Grace Chan's next novel.

The Hedge Wizard by Alex Maher

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

OH... So That's the Difference Between Progression and Straight Up LitRPG

So in the dim, dark, distant past of ohh... Say... January or February of this year it came to my attention that I kept hearing about a new genre (or maybe sub-genre?) of books called "Progression." I was interested. A lot of these books sounded really good. But where to start? Someone suggested Alex Maher's The Hedge Wizard. It was someone I trust, so I ran off to Amazon and managed to find it on Kindle Unlimited. I then promptly added it to my queue and waited months to read it.

Waiting was, admittedly, not my smartest move, but I'm past it now. So let's just move on.

Something I really, really love is a book that doesn't take itself too seriously. The main character, the hedge wizard in a book named The Hedge Wizard is named Hump. Yup, you read that right. Hump. Just like the thing in Igor's back in Young Frankenstein. His best friend's name is Bud. I love it. I can kick my feet up by the fire (or just stick them out the window. It is July after all.) and read this thing with a can of coke in my other hand. It doesn't get much better than that.

About halfway through page one, we learn that Hump was an apprentice, only his Master just died. Sucks to be him. It's always best to be where the arrow isn't. Shoulda zigged. Zagged instead. Sayonara, guy.

Anyway...

Hump has no family. I find this to make sense as I would probably disappear in shame if I were to ever

name my child Hump. But with no family, and no money, and no way to make a buck other than risking his life as a hedge wizard, young Hump makes his way toward a newly formed Dungeon in search of fame and fortune. Or at least fortune. His motto is “Go where the money is.” I knew I liked this kid for a reason.

And Hump is very much a “kid” in the same vein where I would call a high school or college student a “kid”. He’s not really a child and he’s been through some things, but he’s not exactly super savvy and world wise. Nor is he overly confident. He is sometimes flat out scared. I’d be scared doing a lot of what he needs to do as well. When there are hordes of bad guys after you and not many people on your side, it can be a wee bit nervous making. He’s got guts though, in the sense that courage is the ability to fight through fear.

Hump is, to his own surprise and chagrin, pretty good at building relationships with those around him. Not just Bud, but a cast of characters that he gathers around himself and forms a party with. Bud has, apparently, seen some betrayal at some time in his life and doesn’t necessarily trust anyone right away. This is known in some circles as “displaying intelligence.” He does manage to find a good group of people to hang out with though, at least once he gets his head together.

Things don’t always go right for our intrepid hero either. Whether it’s being denied entry into the Adventurer’s Guild or not being able to find an inn when he needs one, he has what he refers to as “wizard’s luck.” Apparently, wizards are not beloved by the pantheon of the Hedge Wizard universe because they originally learned to do magic by copying the gifts the gods gave to their Chosen without actually being Chosen. I can see where that might be a problem.

And it’s possible that there might be at least one person he misjudges. I’m not going to say who and I’m not going to say how, but it’s a pretty amazing misstep. His reaction when he finds out he made a mistake is pretty pointed though. Hump is a guy who can make mistakes and learn from them.

The action sequences in the book are masterfully done. I don’t know what, if anything, Maher wrote before he wrote *The Hedge Wizard*, but he writes fantasy battles with all the evidence of having a practiced hand. The fights were intense, believable and easy to follow. I had my blood pumping. I could really picture the battle scenes the way they would like on the big screen. It was impressive.

I’m also guessing that Maher has at least read a little horror. I’m further guessing that he enjoyed it. There are some aspects of *The Hedge Wizard* that read like they come out of Stephen King’s nightmares. I loved it. They were disturbing, disgusting and an amazing amount of fun once you got over how shocking they were. The horrifying parts were totally plausible though, even if I was taken aback at first. And they work as a way to not only put the enemy over as being a bad guy but as being a valid motivation for the heroes to fight even harder than they had been.

I counted at least three different magic systems in *The Hedge Wizard*. That’s a lot of stuff going on, but it works. Maher had a plan here and he carried it out flawlessly. There is a zero percent chance that he didn’t do it on purpose. There is the way the hedge wizards do things. In the *Dungeons & Dragons* parlance that would be referred to as arcane magic. There is the magic of the Chosen given to them by the gods. In D&D that would be referred to as divine magic, although a lot of the effects produced by Chosen magic don’t necessarily square with something you’d expect to see out of a cleric in a D&D game. And the way necromancy works makes it feel a little different than hedge wizard magic, both in effects and methods. Maher handles it all smoothly though.

As for the difference between *Progression* and a more formal LitRPG like Dan Sugralinov’s *Disgardium* or Tao Wong’s *The System Apocalypse*, it’s basically a matter of formality. There is leveling of a sort but it’s a lot less formal. There are definitely new abilities learned and that’s really where the Pro-

gression comes in. It's a little looser and freer flowing and feels more like it could take place off of a computer screen. I'll be keeping an eye on this author, this series and this genre in the future. I really enjoyed this one.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Adventurer's Medallions

King Kobold Revived by Christopher Stasheff

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Witches, Warlocks, mad science, and time travel – oh my!

It is not often these days that one sees an author in traditional publishing take everything and the kitchen sink, put it in a blender, and release a good story. The indie sphere does this well, but now traditional publishers often spurn such works. Andre Norton's tales were science-fantasy fiction, but she was no more averse to the "kitchen sink" approach than others. She simply preferred to lean on the fantasy aspects rather than the scientific ones.

Christopher Stasheff did the reverse in *King Kobold Revived*. Looking for Witches and Warlocks with psi powers like Ms. Norton's? He has you covered. Want a space agent sent to monitor the planet where these "magicians" live to ensure that they stay alive and democracy can flourish? Again, he has exactly what you (did not know you) want. How about throwing in some time travel for extra fun?

Wait – what?!

The Story

The book begins with a recap of the first entry in the series written by the excited monk, Brother Childe, with a follow-up letter from the hero to his intergalactic bosses. The prologue familiarizes one with the ins and outs of Gramarye: how it is a Medieval society confined to a large island, the planet was settled by the equivalent of Ren Faire practitioners who wanted a "simpler" life, and it explains that the previous monarch died before he reached forty-five. His daughter Catherine took the throne, whereupon she proceeded to get practically everyone but the young nobleman Tuan (who is madly in love with her) up in arms. Considering she tried to banish Tuan but he didn't spurn her, this suggests he is made of some stern stuff.

Into this volatile mix dropped Rodney d'Armand, an agent for the intergalactic democracy's secretive Society for Conversion of Extraterrestrial Nascent Totalitarians. Yes, it gets shortened to SCENT. Mr. Stasheff is not subtle.

Anyway, going by the name Rod Gallowglass, our hero managed to avert the disaster that Catherine's reign would have become by a narrow margin. He got her to wed Tuan, who has since become a competent king, and he stopped the future totalitarians who were trying to make a bad situation worse. Rod also met and married the Witch Gwendolyn, with whom he now has a young son named Magnus. This all occurred in the course of two years.

Meaning now is the perfect time to spring a horrific surprise on the island of Gramarye: raiders known as "beastmen" by the Medieval locals strike at a village in a longship, one complete with dragon's head and oars. They wear horned helmets, wield axes and maces, and speak a language none can comprehend. Not only do they kill many of the men in the village, six babies or infant children are also mur-

dered, infuriating and terrifying the whole countryside. Gramarye is once again at war, so Tuan summons Rod – named the Lord High Warlock (it’s really science but hey, no need to make the locals nervous) – to help him in this fight. Apparently, these “beastmen” have psi powers of their own and can freeze men stiff via eye contact, making them able to kill fully armed knights easily.

Rod arrives to the next fight and gets a shock: these are not “beastmen” of the sort the locals think. Oh, they don’t look particularly human, but neither are they Vikings. Someone convinced them to LARP in that role, but it’s no wonder the inhabitants of Gramarye don’t recognize them.

After all, why would a Medieval society recognize Neanderthals?

The Characters

Rod is not much to look at, but it’s not difficult to see why Gwen fell in love with and married him. The man is stubborn and will not quit once he encounters a puzzle. Stationed on Gramarye to make certain it takes the steps needed to evolve from a monarchy into a democracy, Rod’s got plenty of official reasons intertwined with his personal reasons for staying invested in the affairs of Gramarye. His cover is mostly complete, as any science he brings up just sounds like another kind of magic to the locals – including his telepathic wife.

For her part, Gwen is both a capable Witch and a doting, happy mother. She balances out Rod’s thinking with the skills needed to bring his vision to fruition, and her piercing insights are invaluable for their plans to work. Even when she meets something she cannot directly compete with, Gwen remains adamant about supporting her husband and Gramarye.

Despite their initially unfavorable introduction in the prologue, Tuan and Catherine show themselves to be capable monarchs. Most of Catherine’s issue is her insecurity and quick temper, while Tuan’s still enough of a hotblooded youth that he might start something he won’t be able to stop without a lot of people being killed. But both are willing to listen when wiser heads counsel caution, and thus it is that they rely on Rod and Gwen – the “adults” in the room – to make sure their missteps don’t start something they cannot end save by bloodshed.

The World

Anyone who has read Andre Norton’s Witch World series will find King Kobold Revived’s Medieval setting familiar, straight down to the psychic Witches and Warlocks. Stasheff differentiates his world by focusing on the science behind these and other phenomena, though, leaning into the sci-fi rather than the fantasy tropes. The time-traveling Neanderthals are simply icing on the entire wacky, brilliant cake that lets a reader smile and laugh while enjoying the world Stasheff has created.

Politics

None, though the constant reference to democracy is annoying. What’s wrong with a representative Republic?

Content Warning

There is mention of repeated sexual assault and the implication that one elderly Witch is going to get it on with an elderly Warlock whether he is particularly happy about it or not. None of the blood and death is dwelt on overmuch so it does not distract from this highly entertaining novel.

Who is it for?

Fans of Andre Norton will like *King Kobold Revived*, albeit not for the reasons they like Andre's work. Stasheff makes sure to respect the fantasy medium; he is not poking fun at it, but having fun with it, and it shows. His scientific explanations are meant to play with what a person from a space-faring group would think as he made his living in a Medieval society, which will make a reader applaud his ingenuity while enjoying the tale. Those who want something light, fluffy, but serious enough to be entertaining will also want to pick up this book. Comedy fans will find ample humor in it, and those who want an out-of-the-box view of the sci-fi/fantasy genre will be thrilled as Stasheff keeps them guessing even as he pays off every item he sets up in his story.

Why buy it?

It is zany, brilliant fun. They do not make them like this anymore. What better reason could there be than to buy and read it?

Kothar Barbarian Swordsman by Gardner Francis Fox

Review by Heath Row

Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

I forget what caused me to prioritize reading this three-story sword and sorcery “novel,” but I might have been inspired by a co-worker who's drawn to such fantasy fare (which I also enjoy), as well as recent experimentation better managing the texts available on my Kindle and Kobo e-readers. (How's that for boring?)

I've been encountering social media advertisements lately for appealing, cost-effective collections of epub titles by authors of interest, and I've been taking advantage of those opportunities to stock up on such e-books. This selection didn't necessarily come from such an advertised lot, but the Gardner Francis Fox Library (<https://www.gardnerfrancisfoxlibrary.com>) is undertaking an intriguing effort: The digitization of the author's 150-plus paperbacks.

Inspired to explore Fox's Kothar and Kyrik series, I found the library's options quite attractive. At US\$2 an e-book—or US\$12 for a bundle of 11 e-books—they're not expensive at all. Not only was I aware of the two series because of their inclusion in the 1979 *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide's* “Appendix N: Inspirational and Educational Reading”—included indicating “Gardner Fox: ‘Kothar’ series; ‘Kyrik’ series; et al.”—I was aware of Fox's comic book work. As an early contributor to DC Comics, Timely Comics, EC, and other publishers, Fox had a hand in creating and writing heroes such as the original Sandman, the Flash, Hawkman, and the first superhero team, the Justice Society of America.

Kothar, however, while a new creation, is merely a Conan the Barbarian knockoff—and a late one, at that. First published as a paperback by Belmont Books in 1969, the erstwhile novel includes a pseudo-academic introduction by Donald MacIvers, PhD; a fragment of *The Lord Histories of Satoram Mandamor* titled “The Universe Is Old. Old!”—shades of Robert E. Howard's *Nemedian Chronicles*—and three short stories or novellas: “The Sword of the Sorcerer,” “The Treasure in the Labyrinth,” and “The Woman in the Witch-Wood.” While interconnected—there are several recurring characters—the book is hardly a unified novel.

Sword and sorcery, or heroic fantasy literature, might have originated with Howard's Conan in the pulps of the 1930s, but the phrase “sword and sorcery” was repopularized by Fritz Leiber in 1961 issues of the fanzines *Ancalagon* and *Amra*. By the late 1960s, Ace and Lancer were reprinting Conan stories in paperback, the Swordsmen and Sorcerers' Guild of America had been formed, and Leiber's

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series was about to be published by Ace in 1970. The Flashing Swords! anthology series would soon follow in 1973, and L. Sprague de Camp's Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy was first published by Arkham House in 1976.

In any event, I'm sure the Kothar books were published by Belmont to take advantage of the headwinds behind the paperback reintroduction of Conan. Even though there are linguistic—Conan: Kothar, Cimmeria:Cumberia, minotaur:minokar, etc.—and narrative similarities, I found Kothar to be a somewhat sad and sloppy second. (Sloppy because the resulting e-book contains quite a few misspellings and punctuation errors.) That's not to say that I didn't enjoy the book or that I won't read others of its ilk. Oh, I will.

But only because of Fox's literary lineage (he wrote for pulps such as Weird Tales and Planet Stories in the 1940s and 1950s), Kothar's adjacency to Conan—and perhaps as punctuation while reading Howard's writing and other weird fiction. In addition to the Conan similarities, Kothar also offers elements of H.P. Lovecraft's prose. James Maliszewski would suggest that there are also aspects of Jack Vance's Dying Earth series and Clark Ashton Smith's tales of Zothique.

In any event, it's all good, if derivative, fun. Sometimes, that's a good enough reason to read!

The Last Iota by Rob Kroese
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

A Raymond Chandler conspiracy with world-shaping consequences

Rob Kroese's *The Big Sheep* was a twisty tale of murder, gangsters, clones, and free will.

In the sequel, *The Last Iota*, is a tale of murder, warfare, conspiracies, world-wrecking affairs, and economics.

The Story

It has been a matter of weeks since Erasmus Keane and his partner Blake Fowler tangled with movie mogul Selah Fiore, a powerful force in Los Angeles society, and key figure controlling LA's city-within-a-city, the Disincorporated Zone. But now, Selah Fiore has reappeared again, but as a client. The treatments to extend her life have ironically given her leukemia. To cement Selah's legacy, she wants to hire the duo to find a rare lost Iota coin—a coin with seemingly no value.

When the client turns up murdered, and Keane and Fowler framed for the crime, it's clear that this worthless coin is worth their lives.

As they work the case, the threats grow beyond their own personal freedom and safety. The "useless" Iota threatens the gangs and civilians of the Disincorporated Zone, LA, and the entire planet. Soon, Keane and Fowler realize they're up against the city, state, federal authorities, a corrupt billionaire, and a capricious genius behind it all who would like to see the world burn—If Keane and Fowler don't succeed, it just might.

The Last Iota is hard to pin down because it does so much. Raymond Chandler would have loved it because of the complexity of the plot, but how it plays perfectly fair. Mickey Spillane would have loved it because it's filled with action. And the solution is dark and cynical and brilliant.

Have you ever read a person who can make economics a key plot point in a murder mystery? The clos-

est I've ever seen was perhaps Neil Stephenson's Reamde, or Terry Pratchett's Making Money, and Pratchett didn't address the depths of economics that The Last Iota uses in its plot.

The Last Iota takes economics and philosophy and makes it a tense science-fiction thriller.

Characters

Keane is brilliant, enigmatic, and makes Sherlock Holmes look like an open book. He uses logic puzzles as spycraft. He almost always knows more than he's telling.

Fowler is more of a basic noir lead character; he trusts few people, and trusts Keane maybe half the time. He's less of a Watson and more of an Archie Goodwin ... if Archie had military training.

The World

Like any good noir story, the world, the city itself, is a character. This is also especially true in a well-written sci-fi story. Here, it's both.

There are even well-sketched details that don't even add to the story, they're just fun. There are hologram projections, android stand-ins for actors. There are shadowy government agencies that predict disasters and have a layout for what happens next (specifically, in Los Angeles. Funny that.) It's a rich and detailed world, with a history twenty years from now, and almost nothing is wasted.

And everything ties together. In some cases, more neatly than Chandler's work did.

Politics

Unless you think basic economics is political, none.

Content Warning

None, really. There's murder. There are some shootouts. Nothing graphic really stood out, however.

Who is it for?

If you like noir mysteries, action and complex plots, you should try it. For those people who want to read noir science fiction, as if Neil Stephenson was trying to write Chandler or Spillane.

Why Buy it?

This is a fast-paced, tightly written mystery-thriller in a science fiction setting that is unique enough that you should give it a whirl.

Laws and Prophecies by L. S. King
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When change comes too fast, sometimes your only hope is to grab the tiger by the tail and ride it!

When Alcandhor was about fourteen years old and thus a "stripling" Ranger, his father took him up the mountain to view the Ranger stronghold city Zaidhron in Thane Valley. By this point Alcandhor's older brother, Valdhor, had already left Zaidhron and his birthright to Thane behind. As the oldest he

should have succeeded their father, but he voluntarily left his right to Thaneship behind and moved out to his own bounds to take up the life of a Ranger chief.

This leaves Alcandhor, the youngest child in his family, to be his father's heir and take over leading Ch'shalna Clan – the Rangers. Predisposed to the study of history and science, the boy is naturally uninclined to seek leadership. Now, however, he must face that he will be Thane in the future.

But that is not the main reason why Alcandhor's father, Ranger Thane Saldhor, has brought him up the mountainside. Viewing what will one day be his lands is part of Saldhor's reasoning but not the whole of it. For there is a well-kept secret up in these mountains: someone lives here, someone very important. Someone who should be long dead....

The Story

Fast-forward from the opening prologue to the present, where Alcandhor is leading the triumphant Rangers into Zaidhron. He orders that the two Rogues they have captured be imprisoned and commands that Nandhel be "cut off" for his crimes in Children of the Enaisi, adding more punishment to the younger man's final days of life prior to his and his compatriot's execution. With the Rogues' threat finally put to rest, plus Marcalan and Tam's marriage, the entire city is going to celebrate. Banquet time!

A Thane's work is never done, however, and Alcandhor is loath to join in the celebrations. At least until his sister Sarinna reminds him how much his people need him even in their merry-making, as if their Thane cannot have fun, how can they? Sadly, Alcandhor's ex-wife did her work too well by convincing him that everyone sees him as weak, feeding into his own sense of unworthiness until he believes that his family and entire clan would be better off without him. That is damage that cannot be undone in a day, let alone a few short weeks, especially weeks that have been so fraught with danger and change.

Further complications arise as Alcandhor seeks to unravel a series of prophecies. Are the original writings that they can check and confirm in the Portal Complex's computers, or are they elsewhere? There is also the Conclave to confirm the Aethling, Randhal, as the new Laird coming up in a few weeks' time. All the nobles will assemble to go over the young man's record and decide if Randhal is fit to be Laird. The poor boy is being nagged to marry, too, as his clan is weakened and has shrunk from a healthy size. He not only needs an heir, he needs a bigger clan!

More trouble is on the horizon as well. Prophetic dreams assault Alcandhor, members of his clan call Question on his actions, and a sense of foreboding hangs over him regarding one prophecy in particular. It is unthinkable. He does not want it to be true. But times are changing, and change brings danger. To protect his people – his world – Alcandhor may have to pay a price he desperately hoped to avoid. Can Alcandhor overcome his doubts to save his world and family, or will the seeds his ex-wife planted bloom into horrific fruit and cripple him when he is needed most?

The Characters

A secondary character during the prior two novels, Alcandhor takes center stage in Laws and Prophecies as he tries to navigate a world increasingly rocked by change. The rebels of the first book are neither quiescent nor have they forgotten their desires, making an already fraught situation worse. Soon this proves to be a bigger issue than all of Alcandhor's other problems put together, as who can stop scheming nobles who have abused their power for so long that they think they can get away with anything – including upsetting the treaty with the Enaisi?

Marcalan and Tam, while they fade into a secondary position in this adventure, still get their chance to shine. With her marriage now solidified, a great deal of Tam's repressed memories and personality starts to surface alongside the temper she inherited from her father. That scares her more than it does those who know her, meaning Marcalan has his work cut out for him reassuring and calming her, a task he seems surprisingly suited to the longer the story progresses.

Sarinna, Mattan, and Haladhon – all side characters from the previous books – receive greater screen time here. Haladhon's family is finally revealed while Mattan demonstrates just what he is willing to risk for his family, proving in the process where Alcandhor gets some of his stubbornness. Sarinna shows herself to be quite savvy but also a bit too blasé where she shouldn't be. Sometimes, letting the wrong people flatter her leads to trouble that could have been avoided!

The World

The world develops further here, bringing a reader back to familiar territory while explaining some of the nuances of what was previously established. The Enaisi "Worshippers" are shown a bit more and the law is explicated in a direct form: if the nobles try to their plan, then they will upend the treaty with the Enaisi. So accustomed are they to thinking of the Enaisi as rescuers that they have forgotten what the Rangers have always remembered: not all the Enaisi like humanity. The treaty specifically states that Ch'shalna clan is to be the sole security on their world or else. If the nobles try to change that, forget the havoc such an adjustment could cause in their own society. It could lead the Enaisi to come down on their world like a megaton nuke!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

It is not stated plainly, but to "cut off" a Ranger (or anyone else) means to castrate him, so Alcandhor's punishment for Nandhal before his death is pretty severe. So are the risks Alcandhor takes early in the book to protect his clan. There is again a view of prisoner abuse, as Alcandhor is captured and mistreated, and there is a suicide that occurs off-screen. The hanging of Nandhal and his fellow Rogue is also shown, though it isn't dwelt on. Neither is Marcalan and Tam's "nestling," though there is a peek at that early in the novel. Childhood abuse is also brought up and shown in some of Tam's memories, as Valdhor was not a kind father nor a kind man.

Who is it for?

Fans of L. S. King will love this novel, as will those who enjoy sci-fi/fantasy fiction. As noted before, fans of Andre Norton and The Lord of the Rings will be thoroughly entertained by Laws and Prophecies; it builds a world as deep as Tolkien's, yet it brings in tropes those familiar with Norton like and wish to see in modern fiction more. Those who want a good political thriller with a deep world in which they can become lost will definitely want this book. Young readers who hope to sink their teeth into a series with meat on the bone that will get them thinking about life in general, politics in some specificity, and the law as well as prophecy should acquire the book posthaste. If a reader wants to spend a whole day buried in a novel, then this one and its predecessors will do the trick!

Why buy it?

Laws and Prophecies is an adventure novel like no other, and it is part of a series of same. That is rare

It all started with a dream. With the desire to unshackle humanity from the bonds of Mother Earth. That's what motivated Clayton Rogers to build Liberty Station under the guise that it was a space hotel. But they had other plans for the former International Space Station. They threw an engine on it and turned it into a vessel capable of traveling the solar system.

Then Jessica Cook took a jaunt deep into the Guatemalan jungle to visit a friend. When she got there, they found something buried beneath a forgotten Mayan pyramid. Under that structure, an earth-shattering secret sits waiting to be found. But that revolutionary finding will shatter the misconception that humans occupy the solar system alone. Nope, there are aliens!

Now it's a race to the finish line. Who will ultimately gain control of this treasure trove of research potential? Will it be BenCorp? Humanity Unlimited? Or some nation state actor. With that as the backdrop, Harry Rogers and Jessica Cook are engaged in a life-and-death struggle for the future of mankind. They're forced to protect this secret from the most despicable foes imaginable... the governments of the world. Together, they must race across the globe to complete Liberty Station, the first true interplanetary ship. There is no room for error, failure means death for them and subjugation for everyone else.

Now that we've talked about the book's basic concept, let us dive into the writing! Gotta give it to this author; his novel was chock-full of quality visualization. You can definitely imagine yourself in this future dystopian world that he created! He described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how bleak the world felt. While I could vaguely visualize all of the characters, I'd love it if Terry described the characters' physical traits in more detail. He kept it light on the details, with just enough specifics to allow you to visualize it for yourself.

Now onto the prose! So, in this novel we see proof that Terry has an expansive vocabulary. Not in a snooty way, but there were words I had to look up and some I hadn't heard since college. And when he did, it never felt gratuitous or like he was navel gazing. When paired with Veronica Giguere's lovely voice, the story became poetry in motion. I mean it, I had fun listening to the words and sometimes had to rewind to listen to plot points that I missed.

Terry also did a good job with the pacing of this book. He balanced the explanation of this future world with the need to move a story along. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, though I filled in a lot of the details myself. Together, his words and my imagination added to the world. It felt tangible and I enjoyed it. The author's description of his universe was evocative, and enough to please your average readers. I always prefer more descriptions over less, but Terry did enough to get the job done.

In summary, I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of Terry. I wish he were more descriptive, but he gave you enough to form your own visual image. If you want a pulp era space opera that mated with the post-apocalyptic genre, then this is the book for you!

The Characters

This wasn't a story where there was only one main character, instead there was an ensemble cast of disparate personalities. I was pleasantly surprised at how well each character was portrayed, given the large cast of main characters. Then throw in the numerous secondary peeps who flutter on and off screen, well hat tip to the author's skill. Everyone had individual personalities, none of them felt like they were cardboard cut outs. Oh, and none of them were talking heads with no personalities. Given the familial relations of many of the main cast, any similarities can be explained away. To be clear, there were only a few of those likenesses. The ones there were minor and felt intentional. I guess I'm saying that I really loved these characters. The military characters reminded me of my past life as a grunt and

anyway, but these days? Why not buy some good, solid fun and spend time enjoying it?

Liberty Station by Terry Mixon

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

This is a book that I initially bought just to support an author whose other books I loved. It was written by Terry Mixon as a post-apocalyptic space opera world set in the not-too-distant future. To be honest, I forgot that it was in my library until Amazon recommended it to me. In digging into it, I realized that I already owned it! So, I downloaded it and gave it a listen. I wasn't sorry, that's for sure!

Before we go any further, let me show my bias. I loved Terry Mixon's Empire of Bones Series and his Last Hunter Series that he co-wrote with JN Chaney. I was already a fan of his work when I started this novel. I went in expecting to like this series. It's written like many of his books, in a 3rd person POV with multiple main characters. If you don't love that, this novel isn't the book for you. However, this is my jam, and I wasn't disappointed.

Okay, about this series. There are currently four books written in this setting. I'm already invested and hoping for more! I've heard rumors that Terry might continue telling epic adventures in this universe when his writing schedule clears up. I have high hopes, since I want more from this awesome author. I've met Terry in person and he's as nice there as he is online. He truly engages with his audience and values them. He's thankful that they let him get paid to share these romps through the voids of space.

Now, more about the author, Terry Mixon. He's a former US Army crew chief, where he worked on keeping the whirly birds in the air. He was a non-commissioned officer in the 101st Airborne Division. I too was a sergeant in that division, so points to him! In case you didn't know, leg lives matter. After he left the Army, he spent some time working for NASA. He played Solitaire working alongside the flight controllers in the Mission Control Center at the NASA Johnson Space Center.

His job was to support the Space Shuttle, the International Space Station, and other human spaceflight projects for almost two decades. I have it on good authority that he worked for the department that helped to fake the moon landing. He was the 'flat earth' ambassador to the Chief Administrator of the space program. Over the years he's shared proof that we faked the entirety of NASA's supposed space race, but apparently, we're no longer able to show evidence against the insane global earth cabal. Come on people, censorship is bad, am I right?

Now that I've triggered half of the world, I'll leave it to you to decide what lies you'll accept and which you'll ignore. What I will say is that Terry's knowledge of space travel that he learned from working with NASA showed how believable the future space program in this future world was. I totally bought into the idea that he'd consulted subject matter experts on the topic. He faked it better than I've seen in quite a while.

The basic premise of this series centers around the main characters' quest to take humanity to the stars. In the pursuit of that, they find proof that aliens existed in Earth's history. Now it's a race to exploit this find by two mega corporations. Their desire is to get the show on the road before governments can get in and ruin it. This book is technically in the post-apocalyptic genre, set in the near future. I found that it was too close to reality and these authors need to stop feeding fate such ideas! This premise could easily happen next year, and the political dynamics would be true. Well... except for some of the tech in these books not being there yet. Now let's talk about this book!

The Story

the nerdy academic, well she was every female I met in grad school studying history for fun.

Harry Rogers: He is the son of Clayton Rogers and Kathleen Bennett and the brother of Nathan Bennett. He's a former super-secret squirrel, an ex-Green Beret who works for his security company, Liberty SOG. During this novel, he serves as an American Army veteran version of James Bond. He's there to protect Jessica and the Liberty Station project. He's the voice of the worldly man, the foil to Jessica's more innocent personality. More than that, he's a fully fleshed out character outside of his counterbalancing the academic character. He's shown to be an idealist, who dislikes his dad because of his cut-throat business practices. Except, his idealism is tempered by his willingness to spill blood to protect those he deems worthy. Despite his dislike of his dad, he took the job of protecting Jessica because she was worthy of his time and attention. He sticks around because he grows fond of her. Maybe, he also thinks that she'd be at risk with just his dad to rely on. During the course of this novel, he doesn't really have a character arc, but he was already a fully realized character. In the next three novels I expect that we'll see him grow into his role on the mission of Liberty Station and the new Humanity Unlimited Corporation.

Jessica Cook: She's an employee of Rainforest LLC, working for their space company. She's a space engineer and designed the Liberty Station conversion and revitalization. She served as the Chief Engineer and was written as an extremely competent woman in her chosen field. She isn't a Mary Sue, she has things that she isn't good at. But where she's good, she's very good. During the course of this novel, we watch her grow and improve. What does she get better at? She forces herself to handle high stress situations where life and death are on the line. She does so without panicking or whining, she just grits her teeth and drives on. We see this when we first meet her at the Guatemalan dig site, and again as she's forced to learn how to use her weapons. She's clearly afraid of guns, but when push comes to shove, she does what needs to be done. She strives to improve those skills, having Harry's people train her to be better. I like that we see her becoming even more well-rounded, a true Renaissance man. Well, Renaissance Woman? She's written in the way you want a female heroine to be portrayed; she's competent, not a man with tits.

Clayton Rogers: He is the ex-husband of Kathleen Bennett and the father of Harry and Nathan. He owns and runs Rainforest LLC, an international company who seems to have their fingers in every pie. Part of his business used to be his ex-wife's family business that he seized in a hostile takeover. During this novel, he mostly exists as the means to the end. Aside from his familial roles, he is there to allow Harry and Jessica do the things and fund the fun. He's an idealist who invested heavily in his dream of a post-Terran humanity. We hear from him and Harry that he's done bad things, but I'm unconvinced. I think he's more of the grandfatherly Mister Rogers type by what we've seen so far. He still reads as a likeable fella, but only time will tell. Well, the next three novels, not time. But you're picking up what I'm laying down, I'm sure.

Nathan Bennett: He is the son of Clayton Rogers and Kathleen Bennett and the brother of Harry Rogers. He's a consummate asshole who is the mustache twirling bad guy in this book. He isn't evil for the sake of it, instead he comes off as just a psychotic sociopath who gets off of his dark deeds. He engages in the struggle snuggle with females, kills wantonly and generally does dirty deeds for the fun of it. He kills when it causes more harm than good, which is why I read him as crazy. Sometimes a character has to kill, it's understandable, even if done by the bad guy. It seems like his driving motivation is his hatred for his older brother and his father. It's unclear why he hates them, but given who his mom is, I wonder if parental alienation was at play? Regardless, he is an evil megalomaniacal idiot, and I can't wait until he dies in a brutally glorious fashion.

Kathleen Bennett: She is the ex-wife of Clayton Rogers and the mother of Harry and Nathan. She owns and runs BenCorp, an international company who seems to have their fingers in every pie. She's got a

lot in common with her ex, but she's a psychotic and evil version of him. She's the bad guy in this series, the puppet master who doesn't bother hiding it. Except, she works through proxy toadies who do the dirty work so she can keep her hands clean. We don't see as much of her in this book, since she works through her youngest son. I hope she plays a larger and more evil role in the next novel!

The World

Liberty Station is the first book in the Humanity Unlimited Series, and I absolutely loved it. The world was flushed out, and everything was explained in a way that made sense. The universe was consistent, with just enough of the mundane facets of life thrown in that it all felt grounded in this reality. It helps that this is basically Earth as we know it. Terry just pushed the timeline a few years into the future, where Europe has fallen to the Islamic terror menace. Scarily plausible, given the state of the world as we write this.

Anyway, everything in this world made sense and sucked you into the story. Some of the details seemed inconsequential, but those hooks just make me think that the larger mystery would continue to grow and expand. I hope the payoff is worth it, but Terry has skills so I am positive that it will. I really loved reading the scenes where they explored the newly discovered pyramid in the Guatemalan jungle. Made me dream anew, wanting to be the next Indiana Jones. Ok, it wasn't the Temple of Doom, but the vibes were there. In those scenes, Terry spoon fed us those details in a way that didn't feel like an info dump. There was never anything he described that I couldn't envision, or that felt like it wasn't "real."

When describing the world, Terry was light on the details... but not so much that I was lost or experienced the floating head syndrome. I could always picture the scene in my head, watching it in the movie theater of my mind. Despite being a bubblegum summer mystery read, Terry has upped the bar of excellence, adding more sensory input to the mix, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings.

Overall, the world building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Terry Mixon created. Like most of the stories I read, this one didn't take itself too seriously, which allowed you to focus on the fun which is why I read in the first place. And nobody, and I mean nobody, does fun better than Terry 'Moon Landing Faker' Mixon.

Politics

This space thriller novel was all about politics, and it seemed to lampoon modernity. Or did it predict it? I haven't decided yet, but the story is set in a world where America is a dying empire, the caliphates rule Europe and the world is in chaos with only India and China left as viable polities. I believe the world created by Terry Mixon was plausible, scarily so. It was well thought out and expertly executed. In this story we see the fallout of two larger-than-life personalities who hate each other after a bitter divorce. In their grudge match, their mega corps blunder around the globe in an unofficial war against each other. They leave dead bodies and destruction in their wake. This future could absolutely happen, which made the novel scarier while being more believable. I have mixed feelings on how Future America was portrayed., but I know that the author was a patriot who served in the US Army. I don't think the slightly evil America was because he hated his country, he just made a compelling prognostication about what the future might look like.

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 16. This is most certainly not a children's book; the amount of violence and implied rape marks this one for mature audiences only. None of that happened on screen, but it was certainly implied that it was going to happen after the scene faded to black. There was also a fair amount of gunplay, as the bad guys did bad things, and the good guys made

them pay with their lives. It definitely felt like something that felt worth mentioning. I know that this can be a sensitive issue for some families. It wasn't overly gory by my standards, but your mileage may vary.

Narration

I enjoyed this book exclusively in the audiobook format. I'm become a huge fan of audiobooks! No lie, I've listened to hundreds of hours of stories read to me by top notch narrators. I've listened to dozens of awesome men and women read to me, but my favorite female narrator is Veronica Giguere. She could make reading the phonebook interesting. Now, let's get into the nitty gritty with this novel! The only drawback, some of the character transitions yanked me out as I scrambled to figure out who we're following. This was written before everything went onto Audible, so it was written without the audiobook in mind. I checked and the ebook had visual cues that a transition was happening, so I don't hold this against the audiobook.

Overall, the audiobook was well done, and the accents were consistent. The narrator did a fantastic job narrating this book. I don't say that lightly, I already own every book by Terry Mixon that she's produced. Veronica won't bore you, or make you zone out because of her monotone or vocal fry. Did that make me sound smart? Because I have no clue about vocal fry, but I do know that Veronica puts together a fine narration. Her performance didn't feel robotic like a machine was reading the novel to me. Listening to this book felt like a friend was sitting with me, reading an amazing story that she couldn't put down. Only she made kind of cool voices, with believable accents that didn't yank you out of the story.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who loves Stargate and Indiana Jones, with shades of Cain and Able thrown in for good measure. If you are a fan of political thrillers set in the near future, peppered with military action, this is for you. Throw in a budding alien menace, and you have a recipe for awesomeness!

Why buy it

This is the story of the every-man academic type who stumbles into something bigger than herself. But it's okay, she teams up with an ex-special forces guy who keeps her safe as she battles her way around the globe and into space. The concept alone was worth the price of entry. If you love a thrill ride through a worst-case post-apocalyptic future, this is the novel for you!

Magelight by Kacey Ezell

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Kacey Ezell is (comparatively) one of Baen's more recent authors. She's a veteran helicopter pilot. She's written some short stories for Ringo's Black Tide Rising universe, co-authored the Romanov Rising novels with Kratman, and Gunpowder and Embers with Ringo, and a few other books I haven't gotten to yet.

Epic fantasy wouldn't have been my first guess for her next novel.

The Story

Three men who grew up together having finally united after years apart. Romik is a former gladiator and mercenary, about to muster out. Daen is a forester, driven out of the brotherhood because he never fit in. Vils is a thief who has become a freelancer. They have decided to join forces and become a private entity. Little do they know that their first client is about to fall into their laps.

After finally graduating as a mage, Aelys has run away from her academy. Events have conspired against her dream of being a battlemage and cost her a best friend and her boyfriend.

When Aelys is attacked by bandits, the three men come to her rescue. It's clear Aelys is going to need help getting home and hires them for protection. A warrior, a Ranger, a thief and a mage. So far, so formula.

But when the bandits come in force, it is clear that they are all dead...

Until Aelys levels the tavern they're in, the bandits, and the surrounding area. And at the same time, has locked all three men into a geas, tying them to her. What follows is a breakneck gauntlet, just trying to get her home and surviving all the threats along the way.

Let's get a few things out of the way. Yes, our team consists of a warrior, a Ranger, a thief and a mage, and I figured that this is either going to turn into a D&D session or Conan the Destroyer. That didn't happen. Pretty much accept that this book will confound most of your expectations. At points, I thought this was going to turn into some sort of harem novel ... and no, it doesn't do that, either.

It's an epic fantasy novel that is surprisingly character-driven but is paced almost like a thriller. At no point did the plot dawdle, or slow significantly. It opens strong and just keeps going. It's told from a rotating third-person POV from all four of our main characters, each of whom have their own distinctive narrative styles and perspectives. It's impressive on multiple levels.

The combat is tight and well-written, and more gripping than the opening of *Son of the Forgotten Sword*. It's seriously impressive how much character there is in this book, considering how little time it stops for breath. If this were in a modern setting, I would describe it as lots of running and gunning—only with edged weapons, arrows and fireballs.

The Characters

Aelys is a mage who has spent her entire life being beaten down and belittled by ... life, really. Starting with an emotionally abusive mother, living in the shadow of a famous battlemage aunt, Aelys has the self-confidence of a doormat. Events conspire to run her over even further, and the reader can see the train coming. Much to my surprise, Aelys' neurosis never becomes too annoying... in part because her companions have a negative BS tolerance threshold and cut it off.

Romik the warrior has worked his way up from an enslaved gladiator to a professional mercenary. He hates being tied down to anything that resembles a new slave master. Even being tied down to Aelys is triggering every instinct to fight back, no matter what he thinks of her. He feels like he should be played by Sean Bean, maybe wearing a dark green coat...

Daen the forester is cynical and bitter, driven out of a corrupt group of public servants who only serve themselves. His reaction to Aelys is ... interesting. He hates cities, crowds, and prefers the company of animals to people.

Vils is a professional thief; cool, clinical, and skeptical. While he is the most analytic of the three, he

appears to be the least affected by the geas. He suspects Aelys from start to finish. The only question is what he wants to do with it. He is direct and to the point and helps keep the plot moving.

One of the most interesting parts of *Magelight* is that all four have a solid character arc. They all have their own distinct reactions to the geas, to Aelys, and the world in general. Even when all four are in perfect agreement, it's never for the same reason, and all have their own approaches to a situation.

All of the character descriptions are nice and efficient, without any data dumps. All of the backgrounds are solid and well established in a short amount of time. Even our primary villains get a lot of character, once we meet them.

The World

Magelight's magic system is well-developed with a consistent internal logic.

The overall world feels like bits of Roman culture, especially around the language, the slaves and the gladiators, and what little of military life we see in early chapters. (There are no centurions, so Ezell stopped well short of copy and paste. This I see as a major positive.) We have no "stranger in a strange land" explanations for a point of view character; everything is integrated effortlessly into the novel. (The one exception is one bit of stilted dialogue on page 15 that feels forced, but it's from a character we never see ever again. It passes quickly because we have a plot to get to.)

There are elements of the local religion, which is enough to move the plot forward, but not bog down the novel.

Politics

It's a fantasy setting. No politics.

Content Warning

This book barely reaches an R-rating. There's just enough language and "sexual situations" (no actual sex) to move it just beyond PG-13.

Who is it for?

Twenty years ago, there was a novel called *Vertical Run* by Joseph Garber. It was a breakneck thriller that I read in a single night, with as much character as it was action. *Magelight* has pulled off something similar.

If you ready Terry Goodkind's *Sword of Truth*, think of this as just as much character and magical intricacies, with much less sex, and no speeches. Or look at it as Larry Correia's *Son of the Black Sword*, only it moves faster, with more character and better action.

It really is a solid fantasy novel. If you like the genre, you'll probably enjoy it.

Why buy it?

This is one of the best fantasy novels I've read in years. I'm seriously considering it as neck and neck with Daniel Humphreys' *Toil and Trouble* for best fantasy in the Dragon Awards.

Majority by Abby Goldsmith

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

"A Wrinkle in Time" meets "Flash Gordon"

I don't read many heartbreaking works of staggering genius, but this is one. I will admit, I am conflicted about this novel. Majority, by Abby Goldsmith, is quite amazing. There's a bit of a bumpy road along the way. But it's worth it.

Humor me for a bit and let me explain.

The Story

Thirteen-year-old foster child Thomas Hill has always been disabled. Born with a crippling disease, he's frail, requires a wheelchair, and needs an assistant, his foster sister Violet, just to move around. Luckily for him, he's a supergenius, has created his own medication, and uses himself as a guinea pig. He's also a mind reader, so that's given him some advantages.

When clues to his lineage take him to an old estate with nine-foot-tall Ariock, Thomas, Violet, Ariock, Ariock's mother Delia, and Thomas' best friend Cherise are abducted by an alien race called the Torth—an entire alien empire filled with telepaths.

Thomas and Ariock are both half-Torth, and the alien race want them both. For Thomas, they want him to join their hivemind, where the Majority rules all. Ariock, they want dead ... but maybe after some good old fashioned gladiatorial fun and games.

It's up to Thomas to get everyone out alive. It's one supergenius versus a hivemind of tens of trillions of telepaths, who control every known corner of the galaxy (Except for "nature preserves" like Earth)...

Assuming that Thomas doesn't decide that the Torth hivemind is more appealing, the Torth Majority caters to every whim. It's practically paradise. As long as Thomas doesn't mind losing his soul.

There is some good, the bad and the ugly with this.

This book is 800 pages long. Yes, I personally think that Madam Goldsmith could have cut about five to ten percent of the book, because there is only so much misery I can tolerate. I found myself skimming through whole chapters that could have boiled down to a few pages — or, combined, could have been whittled down a bit. In her afterword, Goldsmith does note that she slammed two books together to have more of a conclusion, and less of a cliff hanger.

When I say "less" of a cliff hanger, I mean this is book one of six. The others are all half as long, so if the length of this one is off-putting, the others are shorter.

Good news: if you can get halfway through the novel, it is a faster, easier, smoother ride, and a much better read. You can ALMOST see where the book one and two divide would have been. And yes, if Goldsmith hadn't made this one book, I would not be recommending it. But she did, and much to the good, because the second half is so much better written, and tightly written.

The second half of the book, where this really takes off, delves deep into other worlds and races, and how they work around and resist the Torth. It's much more uplifting and entertaining. And there are elements that remind me of Frederick Brown's Arena (credited as inspiring the original Star Trek epi-

sode of the same name). The finale is a full-on escape on par with *Empire Strikes Back*, ending in a finale that's one heck of a shootout.

Abby Goldsmith has created a book that my family would described as “novel novel.” The only book I can compare it to is Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, with a scope that would match the original *Flash Gordon* serials (without the budget constraints). And yes, there's a lot of *Flash Gordon* here—a tyrannical empire ruling over multiple worlds with distinct cultures and personalities—but it does lack the never-say-die optimism that came with that experience.

Thankfully, the finale, *Empire Ender*, comes out tomorrow, May 13th. If you hate long waits for a series to finish up, you might want to try it.

The Characters

Everyone here has a character arc—except for Thomas, whose arc is more of a sine curve.

With Thomas Hill, it's interesting to watch how he fits in with the sociopathic Torth, mostly by traumatizing himself to fit in with the rest. I've never watched mental self-mutilation before. It was interesting once, but I don't want to do it again. And there was a lot of skimming on my part.

And there are a lot of characters here, and as I said, they all get character arcs, they all grow and develop.

Thomas Hill's best friend Cherise is my only quibble. Were I editing the book, I would have cut this character. She doesn't do much during the book, and at times just disappears from the narrative. So, stick a pin in that, in the shape of a question mark.

The World

I will give Madam Goldsmith this: I want to see the Torth burn like no alien villains I can think of. These f***ers are all the worst aspects of the Borg (though it may be more “rule by lynch mob”), while they, individually, have all the charm of *Stargate's* Goa'uld—they have slaves they treat as disposable, belief they're gods, and act like they don't have emotions (and yet, retain six out of seven deadly sins). They have a eugenics program, communist ideas about personal property. I look forward to seeing how she kills all the little bastards.

There are a lot of worlds here, and Goldsmith develops at least four alien species, with distinct customs and habits and personality traits. It's quite brilliant.

Politics

If you can find 21st century politics in this, seek help.

Content Warning

First of all, there's some sex in here, but it is so clinically presented, I'm not sure there's much to warn about.

There is mention of torture, described as “tearing one's own skin off,” but that's as graphic as it gets. Would I have read this as a teenager? Maybe. I read *The Once and Future King* when I was twelve, so you can't go by me.

If you have read *A Wrinkle in Time* (and if you haven't, why haven't you? Go, read it. SPOILER

WARNING if you haven't), the character of Charles Wallace, a prepubescent super genius with mental powers is tempted by ... well, Satan. He is briefly lost to the dark side and is pulled out again with few ill effects. The entire book takes place over a few days.

Thomas Hill, on the other hand, has to do things to himself and to other people to convince the Torth Majority that he's one of them. If he doesn't, he dies, along with everyone abducted alongside him. Instead of days, it takes months. And unlike Charles Wallace, we get to see everything from Thomas' point of view. There is torture. There is mental and emotional manipulation. There is ... a lot of misery porn I wasn't a fan of. She does thank two people for advice: Jeanne Cavelos (brilliant author) and George RR Martin, which explains some of the misery porn.

If you can get 50% of the way through the book, the rest is smooth sailing.

Who is it for?

If you like Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time and Flash Gordon, I think you'll like this. Yes, I know a spread that wide boils down to "science fiction," but it's the best I give you.

Why buy it?

Abby Goldsmith has a brilliant work here that is an interesting ride with a solid conclusion. Despite any misgivings along the way, I do want to see what comes next

Mystic Quest by Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Sometimes, you can be surprised. Sometimes, the anticipation of re-reading something you read over fifteen years ago isn't better than what's coming. Sometimes, a reunion with a book can be the celebration you always wanted it to be. Not always, but sometimes.

Many millions of years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the Earth and my oldest daughter, who wins medals at national competitions and just graduated from high school, was still in diapers, I purchased and read a book known as Mystic Quest: Book Two of the Bronze Canticles. It was the only real outlet I had for as long as it took me to read it, as I was going to college full-time, working full time and taking care of said stinker while her mother was at work. I needed it and it worked.

It was also the third book in a trilogy whose conclusion wasn't published yet and when you factor in going from community college to a university (which I did the semester this thing came out) my recreational reading time crashed, and I lost track before the new one came out. I'll never forget the end of this thing and how exciting it was or how frustrated I got with the cliffhanger. Then I never finished the series because life.

I'm happy to say that I eventually got to pick up the full series and that I've previously reviewed book one, Mystic Warrior, here. I've enjoyed the journey thus far, and I can't wait to get to the final book. Look for that review later this month or early next month.

But as far as Mystic Quest goes on its own merits, I loved it. There is just so much in here. It's a book like this that really makes an aspiring author like me really excited about the possibilities of what I could potentially do. I've been a fan of Tracy Hickman since fall of 1991 (better known as the beginning of my freshman year of high school) and I knew that dude could write. I don't remember reading

anything by Laura before this, but I figured it he trusted her to help him tell a story so would I. I'm glad I did.

The Bronze Canticles are a series of books based not on one story, but on three. The Hickmans tell the story of three nearly completely separate groups of people on three completely different planes of existence (I think) and continuously draw them nearer. It is eventually made clear to the reader that events on one plane influence (or is it reflect?) the events on the other two planes. Everything is interrelated.

The only connection between people on separate planes is in a dreamscape. They can see each other and communicate after a fashion, but they don't seem to fully grasp the importance of the fact that they're all there. For the most part, they seem to be confused by the appearance of the other characters in the story. No one is quite sure who these other people are, why they look the way they do (one plane is inhabited by humans, one by fairies and the other by goblins) or why they're seeing them. It's frustrating to a certain extent but it also makes more sense than just about anything I've read in any other fantasy novel and I've been reading them since the early 90s.

Mystic Quest reads like three tightly plotted and high energy fantasy novels woven together. Somehow though, it makes sense that way. I'm guessing the Hickmans spent either

A.) A lot of time planning this novel

B.) A ton of time editing this novel

or

C.) Both

because binding it all together and making it all make sense could not possibly have been an easy task, but they did it. I need to figure out HOW they did it, but that's a separate issue at the moment.

The really cool part is that each individual story would make sense without the other two. When one group crashes their boat and falls from the aqueduct it works. Events in the other stories work alongside it, and are needed for the larger meta narrative, but even alone, a bunch of people on a boat that smash into something and get flung is exciting, suspense building, easy to follow and carries the storyline for those characters on and makes it everything look effortless, even if I know better.

The individual characters are believable in their own milieus as well. Whether it's the greedy goblin conqueror, his scheming wife, the dwarven paragon, the feuding brothers, the nerd who is enthralled with his discovery of an ancient and undisturbed library...

Every person in Mystic Quest seems to come from history. The plot contains surprises galore but the characters are in many ways archetypical, and I mean that as a compliment. There is a reason that the Faithful Servant exists as a trope. Whether it's Samwise Gamgee, Alfred Pennyworth or Aislynn the fairy hardly matters. When the Scheming Wife shows up no one cares if it's Agrippina the Elder (mother of Caligula) or Gynik the Goblin Queen, we know what's about to happen. It's comforting. It's like reading that fantasy story with the Grand Vizier that has a goatee and waiting for him to sell everybody out. You look forward to it. It's gratifying.

The action sequences are gratifying, especially in the case of the goblins and their attack on a city full of ogres. I expected that from the Hickmans and I wasn't disappointed. They don't necessarily describe things in the precise military terms you might get from a Tom Kratman, but it's still descriptive and riveting. When things really got going I got carried away with Mystic Quest and all the little other things like sleeping and eating kind of went out of the window. Fortunately, I didn't have to work today because I was up late last night finishing this thing. I'd do it again. It was worth it. I can't wait to get to

the conclusion of The Bronze Canticle even if I don't want to see it end.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Strange Devices

The Neck Romancer by Declan Finn

Review by George Phillies

<http://books-by-george.com>

The hero and heroine started off as a werewolf and a vampire. The author being Declan Finn, the vampire is a devout Roman Catholic who attends mass as frequently as possible and, thanks to the Miracle of the Transubstantiation, drinks blood in the form of communion wine, the Blood of Christ. By-and-by they are happily married, well, married, but matters go downhill from there. The author is extremely fond of all manners of modern implements of destruction, such as guns, thermite, chlorine trifluoride, athames, high explosives, etc. etc. etc., employed in highly imaginative ways. The Neck Romancer is the first of a five-volume series, with the quality of the opposition going up from volume to volume until late in the series that we learn that the Tunguska so-called meteorite was actually one of the side characters expressing her disapproval of the lead villain. Expressing, unfortunately, unsuccessfully.

Not that Kind of Good Guy by John Ringo

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Ringo tackles superheroes

John Ringo originally started this series on his personal Substack. But it can now be owned via Baen Books. It's his foray into the superhero genre and ...

Sometimes, there are books that make me worry about the author. There are moments here that make me want to ask John Ringo if he's okay.

The Story

While a great many authors lately open with "pure action" sequences, most of them suck because it's a situation the reader knows nothing about, with characters we haven't been introduced to yet. For those people, they should read the opening of Not That Kind of Good Guy and take notes.

During a Baltimore shootout with MS-13, thirteen-year-old orphan Michael Edwards is shot to pieces ... but he's saved when his superpowers kick in. Not only does his healing factor save him, but his new powers lead him to a government program for "junior supers" like him. He's dragged out of the ghetto of Baltimore and into the nicer parts of New York. He's put with new foster parents, who are genuinely good people (even if they are vegan), and a super team.

Now Michael's only problem is dealing with The Society, the secret masters of the world who pull strings behind the scenes. They're a deep state / World Economic Forum hybrid that manipulates governments and hierarchies.

But Michael also has a secret society of his own called Gondola. And Gondola doesn't play nice either.

Also, MS-13 still wants to kill him.

Not That Kind of Good Guy is very ... John Ringo. His data dumps are intensive and entertaining and could teach David Weber a thing or two. Michael's powers involve the manipulation of earth minerals, so Ringo goes into weaponizing types of rock. And while we're at it, Ringo throws in elements of Hindu mysticism. Instead of logistics, like the Vorpall Blade novels, Michael spends time on the covert development of his abilities. Since this is in the genre, let's poke fun at the superhero genre. And looking at federal waste and bugout bags.

Since it is the superhero genre, it's very much a frappe of elements. There's a fully self-aware AI, demons, witch doctors, two competent FBI agents (bringing the book fully into fantasy). And since Michael comes from Baltimore, we have to take a few shots at *The Wire* while we're at it.

Since this is Ringo, we seem to be building to a world-threatening antagonist that may destroy the world. Or at least kill 95% of the human race, as usual. To some degree, it feels a little bit like Larry Correia's *Grimnoir Chronicles*—all the superpowers, none of the alternate history.

It's also very clear that Ringo has done research on child psychology and the foster care system and vomits it out onto the page more than once. It's presented in enough of a clinical way that it doesn't feel like another episode of *SVU*. But Michael's file is referred to several times as "The War and Peace of Child Abuse."

Even taking all of this into account, *Not That Kind of Good Guy* was an entertaining read. This is an intelligent look on the superhero genre I haven't seen since *Silver Empire's* *Heroes Unleashed* series. Ringo took some very basic powers we've seen in multiple shows, and weaponized them in creative and smart ways. The plot has a nice balance of superheroism, conspiracy thriller, and the looming threat of MS-13 in the background

The Characters

Ringo insists that Michael is Chad from his *Monster Hunter Memoir* series. Which is funny, I don't remember Chad being quite this broken, with layers of PTSD, abuse, and the focus of a meth-addled squirrel. For Chad, killing monsters is just business. For Michael, it's pure survival. Michael's upbringing in the ghetto has basically made him decide that Dave Chapelle is too politically correct.

Any other character would probably be a Mary Sue, but Michael is far too broken for that. On the one hand, he's a self-taught 5'10" thirteen-year-old with multiple graduate papers in multiple areas. Before any superpowers kicked in, he had learned

"....since I was six and figured out how to set it up, I've been listening to two college lectures at a time on earbuds, one in either ear, sped up to usually three times speed."

Like I said, a little Mary Sue.

He's also been abused multiple times by multiple foster homes and been resuscitated repeatedly due to Baltimore being a hellhole. His catchphrase is "If what don't kill you make you stronger, I be diamond."

ADHD and PTSD are a hell of a combination.

The World

It's our world plus superheroes and renaming the deep state and the WEF as "the Society." It's much less development than Morgon Newquist did for her superhero world, but there are a lot of overlaps—

mostly that a lot of heroes seem to be more interested in selfies and celebrity than actual heroing (in this case, part of that is encouraged by ye olde secret society). But it has some of its own history going back a few years, even a few boogiemens.

Politics

It looks very much like John Ringo watched the last five years of public stupidity, noted all the sacred cows, and skipped turning them into hamburger. He just decided to break out the flamethrower and hit “flambe.” Want to talk trans? Want to talk about low-trust societies, defund the police, and “bail reform”? How about a discussion on the foster care system as a massive abuse factory? Perhaps shooting at academia? If you’re on the left side of the issues, this will not be your cup of tea.

Ringo basically took 2020 as well as I did, and my thoughts on 2020 involve arson, because nukes are too quick.

Content Warning

Violence. Lots of violence, and that’s just in chapter one.

Discussions of rape and pederasty, sexualizing children, and someone who expresses Marion Zimmer Bradley’s opinion that “everyone is innately homosexual.”

Torture. Torture-like symptoms.

I don’t care if the protagonist is thirteen, do not treat it like a YA novel.

Who is it for?

For those who liked The Grimnoir Chronicles or Jim Butcher’s Spider-Man novel The Darkest Hours. (Yes, I’m reaching back through the sands of time. Do you know how hard it is to get a good superhero novel in prose?)

Why buy it?

It’s a solid, character-driven novel by John Ringo. And this time, the only squicky is with the villains.

President Patton by Rick Kester

Review by George Phillies

<http://books-by-george.com>

We have a thick (nearly 600 pages) volume based on the traditional alternative history trope that there is a single branch point. In this case, the branch point is that in Fall 1945 General Eisenhower dies in a plane crash. Churchill decides to recruit General Patton to run for president in 1948. Churchill succeeds. Patton makes a series of small changes, all in the right direction, that greatly improve the American position when Stalin decides to start World War III. The remainder of the tale is told from the point of view of a considerable number of people, almost all of the bottom ranks. There are pilots, soldiers, sergeants, but we see extremely little of the strategy or logistics behind the war. Allied equipment is good enough, thanks to Patton’s minor alterations of history, that the Russian’s situation becomes unfavorable

Prospero Lost by L. Jagi Lamplighter
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Meet Shakespeare's characters in a world far deeper than it appears!

In the Oregonian mansion of her father, the magician Prospero, Miranda reads one of his journals by phoenix feather lamplight. Consecrated to Eureynome, the Unicorn, as a child, Miranda has several magic powers and immortality thanks to her connection with this Lady. It also allows her to receive impressions from her Mistress, promptings which she follows as best she can. So, when she feels she should hold an apparently blank page in her father's journal up to the light, she does.

Sparks fly and a message appears. In it, Prospero informs Miranda that he may have accidentally unleashed forces even he cannot control. Telling her to warn her siblings of their danger and to keep his "gifts" close, he ends the note with: "Beware the Three Shadowed Ones!"

After sending Peaseblossom to check on her father, in case this is a prank, Miranda is concerned about learning that Prospero has not been on his island in months. Nor can Peaseblossom or the other Aerie Ones, the spirits of the air, discover his whereabouts. Miranda must summon Prospero, Inc.'s trusted detective, who was once a north wind and is now incarnated in a specially made human body, to seek out clues to not only Prospero's whereabouts but the locations of her long-lost half-siblings, so she can warn them as her father intended.

The Story

Mab, formerly a north wind, arrives at the mansion promptly. Learning what Miranda knows about Prospero's disappearance, he makes his apologies for the wizard's demise even though they don't know for certain that he is dead. He also suggests Miranda destroy all the magical items in her house – including the Staff of Winds, which allows her to control the Aerie Ones. Despite the fact that he has a body, this Staff can still control Mab, so it is not difficult to see why he would want it unmade.

Of course, Miranda ignores this advice and gets him back on track: Father wants her to warn her siblings. Although they have not been on speaking terms for decades, she intends to follow Prospero's order and warn them. But that means finding them, and that is not going to be easy: Ulysses possesses the Staff of Transportation and can go anywhere he pleases as he wishes. Mephistopheles (Mephisto) is mad and only shows up at a Prospero, Inc. office or one of his siblings' residences when he needs money. Logistilla has disappeared, Cornelius can only be contacted via card, Titus has fallen off the map, Gregor died in the 1960s, and Theophrastus gave up magic entirely. By now he is an old man waiting to die.

After a little more talk, the two go into a specially sealed chamber so that Miranda can collect her Staff – really, a flute that allows her to control the Winds. They are not there long when an incubus arrives looking for the Staff of Winds. Mab and Miranda hide from him and avoid being seen, but he leaves behind a piece of star that acts as a bomb. Just barely sparing Mab's life to get rid of the bomb, Miranda has to clean up the mess to prevent what was stored in the now-damaged library from being destroyed. If it burns, spirits her father entrapped for mankind's benefit in these tomes will be released to unleash havoc on the world.

Following a trail of clues to try and find her oldest half-brother leads Miranda and Mab to an apparently dead end. But with Eureynome's help, the two manage to find Mephisto "by accident" in Chicago. Her crazy brother has already lost his Staff, however, and Miranda fears that is what these Three Shadowed

Ones desire: to collect all the Staves for some nefarious purpose. She sets out on her mission to warn her siblings with new urgency but little hope of achieving much. After all, they have been split up for decades and have not been on the best of terms for quite some time....

But the longer they search, the more secrets are brought to light, leading Miranda to question just how many of her own choices are actually hers. Maybe the Aerie Ones are not the only people her father bespelled to obey his will. What if he did that to her, too?

The Characters

Miranda is competent, calm, and collected, but occasionally she is as dense as a tree stump. While generally quick on the uptake there are times when a reader wonders how she could miss certain things, like Mab preferring to live rather than to die in his human body. This being said, Miranda makes up for her shortcomings with sheer determination to protect what is hers, including Mab when he is threatened. Despite living for five hundred plus years, Miranda still has a lot of growing up to do, and it shows.

For his part, Mab is adorable. Grumpy, easily angered, and stubborn as all get out, the 1940s-style detective is highly competent. He knows his Fae threats as well as his supernatural ones and is quite capable of handling them in many cases. While Mab might be slow to realize just how bad it would be if the Three Shadowed Ones or a demon were to get the Prospero family's Staves, due to seeing the Staff of Winds as a thing of bondage, he is often faster to recognize other, more immediate threats before Miranda does. It makes him a very sympathetic and appealing character.

Strangely enough, Mephisto is endearing despite his disconcerting madness. His loss of sanity means he mostly acts like a little kid and is thus as vulnerable as one. It also means he does not always remember to behave or keep quiet, which helps get his compatriots in trouble. At the same time, he is desperate enough for company and sanity to do some really unpleasant things. This leads the reader and Miranda to wonder just how far he is willing to go to get what he wants most, leaving him an endearing but possible threat throughout the novel.

The World

The world is a lot like Narnia, but it is less orthodox, as God is seen by the main character and several of the side characters as a distant Deity. Whether or not that is true to the world, that is how Miranda's first person POV presents Him, and it helps explain just why the spirits of earth, air, fire, and water are so darn dangerous. As Miranda posits time after time, without the contracts negotiated by Prospero, Inc., there would be a lot more natural disasters due to the spirits fighting one another. This in turn would lead to more human deaths, which can increase Hell's power, so it makes sense that this is something Miranda and her family wish to prevent. The spirits, however, tend to miss that point – including the Aerie Ones!

Politics

None, though if you're a conscientious Catholic, watch out for some incoming sniping shots about Church history.

Content Warning

There are descriptions of torture, descriptions of the results of demonic influence, mentions of rape and near-rape, and a bloody attack by spirit dogs. Miranda's powers are ensured by her virginity, so an easy

way to lose them is by rape. It is the best way to threaten her, if only in dreams. Oh, and Mephisto is a skirt-chaser, mentioning early on that he was trying impress his date, who turns out to be a male shapeshifter. He was not happy when he figured that out and neither was his sister.

Who is it for?

If you liked Narnia, you will enjoy Prospero Lost even with its unorthodox approach to worldbuilding, as it is very deep and involved. Fans of Mrs. Lamplighter's Rachel Griffin series will find a great many familiar items in this novel, too, albeit from a different perspective. Codex Alera readers will also want this story, as the idea of spirits being bound because otherwise, they will wreak untold destruction is very similar. Anyone who loves Shakespeare will want to pick up this novel as well, since Mrs. Lamplighter ably uses his plays and characters in her story. If you have read any of the great Medieval and early Renaissance romances or plays, or perused Paradise Lost and Dante's Divine Comedy, there will be plenty of references for you to catch and enjoy as well!

Why buy it?

Prospero Lost is an homage to all the great classics, from Shakespeare's plays to Medieval romances, especially the Italian ones. It also pays court to C.S. Lewis's Narnia while being a fun romp all on its own. With all that going for it, why not buy it?

Ready Player One by Ernest Cline

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

(Author's note: I am honor bound to pre-acknowledge the fact that none of what I'm about to reference in the following paragraph has any historical value whatsoever. Ok, with the possible exceptions of two WWII Flicks, those being Tora, Tora, Tora and Midway.)

I never thought we'd reach this point. I grew up watching movies and TV shows set in the past. You may think you know a fan of westerns but until you've met my grandpa and my dad, you really haven't met one. You may think you know someone who likes World War II flicks but until you've sat down on a weekend with myself, my father and some popcorn popped in a pan on the stove, you really don't. I'm still wondering why guys like my Uncle Bob who served in Korea never got their movies, but different blog/different day. Later came the Vietnam flicks. For some reason though, I never thought my generation would get their chance. I thought that 80s nostalgia would never happen. Well, I guess I need to apologize. Ernest Cline's Ready Player One had me soaking in my childhood. It felt great.

Something I've noticed a lot of lately is the inclusion of the internet in stories. I'm a big fan of this. I don't mean just for googling or checking Facebook. I mean epic battles online, like in Nick Coles CTRL, ALT, Revolt! reviewed here, (and I really need to review Soda Pop Soldier too.) or in Cline's Ready Player One. Not only is it entertaining as all get out, but it makes business sense too. There are legions of gamers out there and this is something that's perfect for them. Seriously. I'm neither a fan nor a supporter of identity politics but I can't deny that it's cool to read a story about someone like me. I'm a gamer. When I read about other gamers, it makes me happy. It entertains me. That's the whole point of escapism, right?

The kids in the book are after a prize; the world's most immense fortune. The greatest game designer in history (James Halliday) has designed an alternative environment online, the Oasis. He charges only a quarter to buy into the environment and does not charge a subscription fee. He does, however, charge

for certain things online (online goods and space for people who want to create separate environments within his environment for example). When he passes due to old age, he leaves his fortune including control of his shares in the company that controls the Oasis to the person who can solve his puzzle and complete the accompanying requirements. It's not easy but many people become enthralled with the search.

The Oasis eventually takes more and more of the time of the world to the point that many people only participate in society through the Oasis. Some (but not all) schools are conducted there. There are stores and a currency, which is listed as being the most stable currency in use. It goes so far that our hero, Wade Watts votes in the elections in the Oasis, but skips voting on real world politicians because the real-world politics don't affect his life as much as the representatives that are in charge of the Oasis. In the context of the story that actually makes sense.

The part about this book that really makes it fun is the nostalgia though. Ready Player One is a celebration of all of the stuff I remember from when I was a kid. The early video games are here. (Ok, maybe just maybe it would have been more fun with more Intellivision because that's what I owned but I didn't write it, so it makes sense that it wasn't going to be perfect for me personally) Eighties music is here. Eighties movies are here. I don't want to reveal too much because a lot of the nostalgia is essential to the plot but dude.. it's everywhere. The kids in the book (and this is a Young Adult novel) are experts in Eighties culture because they have to be. The clues left to solving the mystery are based on Halliday's 80s pop culture obsession. A lot of the time in the book kids are discussing the same stuff I grew up loving. They're honestly better than me at most of the games I grew up playing, but then again nobody ever gave me a fortune for my performance either.

Ultra-sensitive right-wing readers may not enjoy this book. The Big Bad is a corporation bent on taking over the Oasis and increasing their profits. There is a surprise gender/race bend at one point in the book. It makes sense in a way, but if you're a right winger that is as easy to offend as the average social justice bully, you're going to get all butthurt over this one. I personally won't feel any sympathy for you, especially since the socjus entry in the book makes sense in context, adds to the story and isn't overly preachy. Your mileage may vary but don't come whining to me if it does. This is a good story with a lot of action and entertaining characters. What little bit of leftism is included in the book does nothing to diminish it to anyone other than the whiner type.

Ready Player One is a celebration. It is a celebration of the Eighties. It is a celebration of gaming. It is a celebration of the courage of a small group of people set against a huge opponent. It is a celebration of the indomitable human spirit. It is a celebration of people who are willing to come together to fight the establishment. It is a celebration of asskickery. That is fitting because Ready Player One kicks ass.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Stars

Redliners by David Drake
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Today we're honoring David Drake. I usually send a short text interview/questionnaire to the author and do a write up based on their responses. Drake passed last December and so obviously that wasn't possible in this case. I have therefore stolen the bio from his webpage. Here it is:

While David Drake was studying at Duke Law School, the Army changed his immediate career path to a choice between interrogator or grunt. Dave chose interrogator. He was assigned to the 11th Cav, the Blackhorse, and spent much of 1970 riding armored vehicles through jungles instead of slogging on

foot.

During his service, Dave learned new skills, saw interesting sights, and met exotic people who hadn't run fast enough to get away. He returned to Duke, completed his law degree, and became Chapel Hill's Assistant Town Attorney while trying to put his life back together through fiction that made sense of his Army experiences. Dave describes war from where he saw it: the loader's hatch of a tank in Cambodia. His military experience, combined with his formal education in history and Latin, made him one of the foremost writers of realistic action SF and fantasy. His bestselling Hammer's Slammers series is credited with creating the genre of modern Military SF.

Some of the best Military Science Fiction is written by veterans. The reasons for that are obvious, right? They've been there. They've done that. They may or may not have the T-shirt. The fact remains that all vets, and combat vets in particular, know things that we don't and they see things in a way that the rest of us can't. Enter David Drake's Redliners. Drake served in Vietnam and had some trigger time. That experience enabled him to write something as amazing as Redliners.

Once upon a time I did a review about another book before I migrated the blog over to Substack and talked all about how that author had given a good picture of an officer who had to order her troops into combat knowing that it was going to kill some of them. It wasn't easy for her, and she spent a lot of time trying to find the bottom of a liquor bottle. I thought that was pretty amazing, not because I like books that are maudlin but because it was realistic and working through it was a major character arc for the character.

Drake's characters are totally the same, only completely different. The members of Striker Unit C41 are suffering from being in combat. They have been on the sharp end for precisely eight four point six kajillion times more than they should have been. They should be pulled out of the fighting and put into psychiatric care because there is only so much that any human being can take and it's time to readapt them to life outside of combat. (For the record, that's where the title comes from. Pulling a member of the military off the line for these reasons is called redlining them.)

But that's not to say that Drake's Redliners are psychotic murdering goons. The troopers of C41 are just wired a little too tight. Their minds have been trained to always be on the alert for danger because they've been subjected to it for so long. They see things as threatening when most of us wouldn't because they've been through things that most of us haven't. They're just a little too keyed up.

And we find all of that out in the first chapter, just like we find out that C41 is being tasked with protecting a bunch of would-be colonists from Chicago as they try to gain a foothold on a planet teeming with dangerous wildlife. Then, once the ship they're on crash lands in the wrong spot they find themselves in a spot that's more dangerous than any place they've been in the galaxy. The only thing that could make things any worse is if their enemies, the alien Kalendru, showed up, but what are the odds of that happening this deep into human space?

Of course, things go wrong from about three sentences or so past when the colony ship leaves Earth orbit. They land in the wrong spot. The ship smashes into a rock and unloading becomes a problem. The strikers are called on to herd civilians and they don't exactly get along with them. And oh, by the way, the wildlife isn't as bad as they expected it to be, but the plants are freaking deadly. They're like a mix of Devil's Snare from Harry Potter, the plant that shot Spock in the face with its seeds in ST:TOS and the mines from ST:DS9 episode "The Siege of AR 558." except worse. The crater they're stuck in is so freaking horrible that even most Australians wouldn't live there.

And that leads to some epic level action sequences. Strikers protecting themselves are scary enough but when you add in the civilians they're protecting, the amount of firepower they've able to bring to bear is either amazingly awesome or horrifyingly catastrophic depending on your view of such things. Personally, I can't help but think that a couple of those disposable rockets might be useful come rush hour, but what do I know? I just work here.

The uncertainty is a thing too. There is nothing to match Planet BZ 459 on Earth, but I can't help but wonder if Drake's experiences in Southeast Asia didn't play into his depiction of the jungle. There is a lot here and when the unexpected occurs it can be downright frightening. The civilians add another level of suspense in these situations because you never know how one will react. They don't have the training that the strikers do. If they did they wouldn't be civilians.

There is definitely a mass character arc that takes place between the strikers as a group as regards (hey look, I'm a real professional blogger! I said, "as regards"!) their attitude toward the civilians they're protecting. What starts out as thinly veiled contempt turns into something more than that. It's a gradual transition and that totally makes sense. That may be the most realistic part of the book. Things don't change overnight for those of us who have psychic damage regardless of source and watching C41 improve over time feels right.

Redliners is the type of novel that will keep you up reading at night when you know you have to work in the morning. It's also the type of book that will have you up late reading again the next night when you're already tired. Drake was that kind of author. If you're a hardcore, or even just a casual, Military Science Fiction fan, and you haven't read Drake, then Redliners is the perfect place to start your next unhealthy obsession.

Looks over left shoulder

Looks over right shoulder

Don't tell my boss I said that though, okay? He thinks I was tired because my allergies were acting up and I was up all night coughing.

Listen folks, I've been reading Drake for years. There are very few people in the business who can write as well as he can. Usually when I do my Memorial Day reviews I try to get hold of the author and find out what they want me to review. Not this time. Drake having passed late last year left me free to pick whatever I wanted to review. I chose Redliners over the Belisarius series and a bunch of other old favorites. This is a good book. Now hie thee off to Amazon and buy it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Brain Worms

Rimworld: Into the Green by J.L. Curtiss

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It pretty much sucks to be Ethan Fargo. He's a good dude and people like him, he even has some marketable skills, but he wants to be left alone. He can lead people into combat but his record at bringing them home again is less than stellar. He has some kind of weird genetic thing that keeps him from sleeping when he's in the regeneration tank. He's got mental abilities he doesn't want. And he can't just give it all up and go home because his government still needs him, even if it can't officially admit it. Yeah, the main character of J.L. Curtis's Rimworld: Into the Green is between a rock and a hard place.

But you'd never know it, because Fargo isn't the type to lay around and whine. He's the take-charge type even if he doesn't want to be. He's got a bad ass streak a mile wide and he has the ability to accomplish whatever, wherever however he has to. I like this guy. I mean, he could learn how to cook and it wouldn't hurt my feelings, but he's a good dude with a kind heart and a small menagerie.

Fargo is also the kind of guy who always ends up where the trouble is. Don't get me wrong. He's not a troublemaker, per se. Actually, he's more like a trouble ender. And, for all of you out there who absolutely love this kind of thing, he gets to play with all the cool toys. I'm not going to tell you what they all are because that would be spoiling but trust me when I say he's lucky in that regard. He never seems to be unequipped for anything whether it's fighting off aliens or skinning wildlife.

And all of that adds up to a lot of action. There seems to always be a fight of one type or another going on. Something is always going boom to a greater or lesser degree. Whether it's open combat or deadly encounters with wildlife or high-tech hazards I never knew when the next threat was going to emerge or, frequently, how Fargo was going to have to deal with it. But that's not to say that *Into the Green* is non-stop action. You do get the occasional chance to catch your breath.

Into the Green is the first book in a series and it reads like one. There's action but there is a lot of world building going on. I like that though. This is at least a five-book series and *Into the Green* is a great way to start a series. We get a good look at who the good guys are, who the bad guys are and why we care. There's even a hint at there being a whole lot more out there than what is contained in the first volume. The impression I got is that the Rimworld universe is stocked with Star Trek and Star Wars levels of alien species, but we only get a chance to see a few right off. That's not to say that there won't be more appearing in future volumes, just that we haven't seen them yet. Probably. I mean, I haven't read them yet so what do I know? It'd be cool if we did though.

In this case, "Rimworld" refers to a region of space; the outer rim of human colonization. It's a cool place to be because it's where all the conflict is. I just reviewed an anthology of Westerns a couple of days ago and, while I wouldn't label *Into the Green* as a Western because it's missing too many of the tropes, there are definitely some similar vibes. There's a frontier feeling here and I like it. I got the sense of expansion happening and no people coming in constantly like the American West. I liked that.

Some of the tech in the book is really cool too. There is a take here on beaming power wirelessly that I've never seen before. The Rimworld universe apparently uses aerial transportation that feels more like the cars in *The Jetsons* than modern day planes and helicopters, although I picture the Rimworld version as much cooler looking and a lot less cartoony.

And the WILDLife lives up to its name. Some of this stuff is just insane in its size and danger factor. The crazy part is that Curtis makes it all believable. There are certain things in nature that are aggressive and hard to stop in the real world, on Planet Earth circa 2024. Of course, it might be possible that not everything is dangerous, but would you take that chance?

Fargo is, obviously, not the only character in the book, even if I sometimes got the feeling that he wanted to be. He's got a sister and her family, and he makes some new friends on the way. Not everyone is what they seem though, and that's all part of the fun. Believe me, if I had to pick one word to describe *Into the Green* it wouldn't be predictable.

Into the Green has more twists than the average French braid. After awhile I wanted to go all Spy vs Spy and start looking under garbage can lids. It's like being lost in the Hall of Mirrors. I thought I knew

what was going on. Then I got to the point where I was obviously wrong because I had been wrong so many times before. But maybe that's what Curtis wants me to think. Yeah, this book came pretty close to give Ol' Jimbo the vapors. Especially the part at the end where Cliff Hanger didn't show up. I was pretty sure he would, too.

All in all though, I really loved *Into the Green* and I can't wait to read the rest of the series. Curtis has done an amazing job not just setting up his *Rimworld* series, but keeping the introduction exciting. Seriously, I read this entire, nearly four-hundred-page, book in one sitting. I haven't done that in years.

Bottom Line 5.0 out of 5 Slashgator Pelts

Scales of Injustice by J.F. Posthumus

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Nick and Nora in space
The Story

Violetta Cq'linns is a half-human homicide detective on the alien world of K'lais. When she brings evidence to the chief of police about department corruption one dark and stormy night, she finds him dead, and she becomes the target of a department-wide manhunt.

And that's just page two.

To survive, Violetta ends up teamed with her ex, who has risen in the ranks of the local mafia.

Unfortunately for the corrupt cops, Violetta is the daughter of a military officer whose CV is largely redacted, and his idea of raising her looks more like training.

Surprisingly, the resulting novel reads less like a thriller and more like a *Thin Man* film—part procedural and part romantic comedy. Despite a tense, tightly written opening, the rest of the novel is very relaxed

Some of the writing is almost noir, but more modern, lacking much of the poetry, but it's so close it doesn't matter. Then the book relaxes, and we go from a thriller into more of a pleasant stroll, especially once she runs into her ex. It feels like a Catherine Coulter FBI novel, only science fiction. Yes, I enjoyed those back in the day.

The overall tone is relatively relaxed, with tense spikes in the action

The Characters

Violetta Cq'linns and her ex, Malik, as noted above, are very Nick and Nora. It's a lot less goofy than the movies, but still funny. There is almost more banter and character than there is investigation. It's still a fun ride.

The World

There are a lot of complexities in this world, from the way civilian and military forces interact, a libertarian mafia who doesn't seem to do anything criminal (that we've seen). The aliens are clearly designed on elves, which wouldn't be the first time I've seen that. They have some innovative use of SF tech for the mystery elements.

Politics

Not applicable.

Content Warning

It's PG-13. At most.

Why buy it?

It was fun

The Santara Commentaries, Book 1: The Padri by Michael P. Marpaung Review by Brian Heming

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Military Sci-fi meets Wyvern Riders. Epic and Awesome

Imagine the tactical military sci-fi of Jerry Pournelle, e.g. in *Janissaries*. Take that tactical mindset, put it in the mind of an amnesiac protagonist, and have him direct a motley crew of 17th-century soldiers including swordsmen, musketeers, cannon, wyvern cavalry, elemental magic blasters riding pegasi, and more, against an evil empire. Set this all in an alternate history version of the many islands of Indonesia.

Epic? Yes. Awesome? Yes. Wargame-nerd well-thought-out strategies, tactics, and battles? Definitely in this book.

The Story

Our amnesiac protagonist, Yu, is rescued from brigands by two heroes: King Aron of the Sons of Yakob, and Drusus, his wyvern-riding vassal. After freeing him, Aron gives him his gun back, and Yu coordinates the three of them as they take on the remaining brigands.

Yu, having no memory of who he is, begs to join Aron, who, noticing his solid tactical mind, quickly makes him head tactician of his rebel army.

The year is 1621 on the Yakobian calendar. The Sons of Yakob under King Aron go through a series of battles, joining with many of the other factions of Santara, including the Paloean Sultanate, the Puncakians with their pegasus and wyvern mounted spellcasters, and the Sea Peoples. This alliance is called the Padri, and they fight to free Santara from its external rule by the Tionghoa, i.e. the Chinese Empire, which primarily uses musketeers and cannon.

The writing of the story is from Yu's perspective, who is obsessed with military tactics and strategy. We go scene by scene, battle by battle, throughout the Padri's war of independence, as he describes in great detail the strategies and tactics used, the precise disposition of different types of troops, and the results of each battle, interspersed with Yu's personal experiences and dialogue. There's plenty of characters, story, and personality, but there's also plenty of military strategy.

The Characters

‘Yu’—Yuanxi: Our amnesiac tactician, he is surprisingly humble and meek for one who coordinates multiple armies. Constantly analytical, he thinks not only about winning each battle, but also about the greater political situation of their alliance and the effects of the geography of Santara, a series of large islands, on their plans. I found it incredibly refreshing to get a story about an amnesiac who, contrary to the trope, makes no effort whatsoever to recover his old memories, does not obsess about his past in the least, and simply does the best he can.

‘Aron’—Aron bin Atreus Borremeo, King of Dun-a-din: Our central leader, he is noble, trusting, loyal, and religious. He is also a skilled swordsman who leads from the front.

‘Drusus’—Drusus bin Gaius Marius: Our wyvern-riding hero knight, he is skilled with the lance as well as the sword. His wyvern is used to charge into battle, not snipe from a distance. He is also the Despot of Leste, which exists as a vassal state to Dun-a-din.

‘Kochba’—Kochba bin Simon Hamshur, Sultan of Paloe: besides leading the Paloeans, who don't subscribe to Christian principles of mercy for obvious reasons, he is a ground-based magic blaster who shoots fire and ice.

‘Inferna’—Inferna boru Davit Corrolus, princess of Puncak: The older daughter of Puncak's Lord Protector; her father is not seen on-screen much. She is air-based fire blaster who rides a pegasus in combat and has a traditional evil-sexy-space-princess attitude to her.

‘Paradisa’—Paradisa boru Davit Carrolus, princess of Puncak: The younger daughter, she is an air-based healer in combat and has a traditional noble-loving-good-space-princess attitude to her.

‘Livia’—Livia Delapore: From the Black City. Our dark goth girl with dark magic who the narrator has a thing for.

Other than the narrator, our main characters are all, in their way, combat hero types. Combat-wise, we end up with a mix of hero-style combat in the vein of the Iliad with large-formation troop movements, a style of battle that would be familiar to players of RTS video games like Warcraft.

The World

We gradually are accommodated to the world through the series of battles and political alliances. Fundamentally, we see how epic a chain of large islands can be, fostering many different cultures and combat styles. Combat-wise, the various combat units are well-balanced in a way that doesn't make the side with magic auto-win. The Tionghoa's numerous musketeers and cannon can hit wyvern riders just fine, meaning airborne blasters are not a shoe-in win and wyvern cavalry have to pretty much be used like regular cavalry: for quick attacks and flanking maneuvers.

The alternate history world is just close enough to the real world to give background on the sides and setting, without our own history getting in the way. While the Sons of Yakob are clearly a stand-in for the Christians, this is never said explicitly, and only the Tionghoa closely match their counterparts in our own history.

Politics

The various factions in the book relate to various Indonesian factions in our history, but put their own political beefs aside to resist the Tionghoa. Political maneuvering is a significant theme in the book, but the factions are fantasy-level enough not to take much real-world political axe-grinding from it. The

major scene relating to the politics of our day involves King Aron and the Dunadinians interrupting a ritual infanticide, which I suppose infanticide-supporters might take issue with, as the Puncakians do in the book. However, the Puncakians suspend their human sacrifices for the duration of the war so as not to offend their allies.

Content Warning

As commented above, an interrupted child sacrifice. Fortunately, interrupted, so no gore.

Who is it for?

Anyone who loves tactical military science fiction in the style of Jerry Pournelle. Anyone who loved the epic fantasy battles in Lord of the Rings, whether the books or the movies. Anyone who thinks Indonesia is an epic and awesome place. Players of strategy games like Warcraft, Age of Empires, or Starcraft, who enjoy well-balanced combat between fictional unit-types. Wargamers and armchair tacticians of all stripes.

Why buy it?

Epic adventure. Epic battles. Wyvern cavalry, musketeers, swordsmen, and magic blasters.

Shadow Card Guardian, by Kacey Ezell

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

A Deck-building LitRPG

I am not big into the “LitRPG” field. I’m told it’s heavily male-dominated, with few women writing in the field, or appearing in the books.

This is news to me, because I’ve only ever read HP (Heather) Holo’s Monster Hunter novels, and now Shadow Card Guardian, by Kacey Ezell—women authors writing books centered on women protagonists. Clearly, I’m out of the loop.

This series is based off of a card-building world of John Stovall, so if that helps, great. I didn’t know Shami Stovall’s husband wrote books until five minutes after I finished this novel, so clearly, you don’t need to read those books to enjoy this book.

The Story

Drop night is when “gods” drop magical cards on a world ready for them. When Dania “Dani Ellis” orphaned nephew, Jake has a deck fall into his lap, it isn’t long before their apartment door is busted in by an assassin who wants the cards. But Dani is a combat veteran and an ER nurse, and the deck-bearing assassin didn’t expect someone without magic cards to slice his throat open with a pocketknife—because do not f*** with the babysitter. It’s clear that Jake is being hunted for his cards, and they have to go on the run ... and now that Dani has killed a deck-bearer, she has cards of her own.

And that’s just the first 14 pages. Kacey Ezell clearly doesn’t believe in slow openings.

Shadow Card Guardian is, for the most part, an urban fantasy thriller, told from Dani’s first person POV.

I like the writing style and all the little touches. Describing their town as “a city with more murders than the entire true crime section at the local Barnes and Noble” is a nice touch. The set up for the characters, the world and the plot are all efficiently done in a few pages.

Then we get to “the magical cards are handed out by the gods” and anyone who knows anything about polytheistic mythologies should start to worry.

But this is mostly a fast-paced thriller, with some odd touches of character development along the way that the average reader may not see coming. I know I didn’t.

I will admit, there are some elements here that can be a stumbling block to reading. The narrative will literally stop so Dani and Jake can read the card stats and abilities, and they all look like excerpted Magic the Gathering cards. There are literally several chapters of grinding for levels, which were far less tedious to read than any actual grinding in any video game I ever played. There’s even a card-playing arena match that is necessary for the plot to happen. While reading them, I enjoyed them well enough, but by the end of the book, you wonder if the books could have been a few pages shorter. I am told these are staples of the genre, so you can’t go by me.

Overall, this was a well-written, entertaining thriller.

The Characters

As I said, the writing is solid. Establishing Dani’s character by listing her CV as “a deployment to Afghanistan left Dania with a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, and recurring nightmares” was very efficient.

Frankly, everyone has a well-established character, no matter how late they’re brought into the story. This even includes our villain, brought into the last fifty pages or so ... but it helps that’s he’s insane.

Things get a little weird around the supernatural allies. Jake has a card that turns into a companion character. Then Dani befriends the monster under the bed, who just needed a hug...

It’s fun. But weird.

The World

The world-building is okay. Most of it centers around the world of card-building and card-fighting.

But if I try to wrap my brain around an open world urban fantasy, set in what looks like our world, but polytheistic, and yet the United States has still been fighting in the sandbox... How? Why? Are the Jihadis worshipping Hecate? Ba’al? Moloch? Why does my head hurt?

In short, Shadow Card Guardian isn’t Tolkien. It covers aspects of the world it needs to cover in order for the plot to keep going. If you can turn your brain off and enjoy the ride, you should be fine. If you can’t ... your mileage may vary.

Politics

I’m not even certain how politics would work in this world.

Content Warning

Eh. I'm not even sure the violence here is worth giving a warning for. And there may be more of a language warning for reading my notes than the book.

I'm not sure if it's really a content warning, but I'm sticking it here because I don't know where else to stick it. At several points along the way, Dani uses the expression "gods above and below!" I'm not sure why, but it feels so unnatural a phrase that I get a sensation of someone running an ice scraper along my brain. Who even talks like that?

(According to my wife, who was pagan before becoming Catholic, "who talks like that" includes Wiccans, for ceremonial occasions. Still not sure that makes it feel any more natural.)

Who is it for?

You would think that this would be for Yu-Gi-Oh! fans and nothing more. But no, this is a fairly straightforward urban fantasy, so if you're into the genre, it should scratch that itch.

Is it as good as The Dresden Files or Daniel Humphreys' Paxton Locke? No. But this is better than Iron Druid ever got.

Why buy it?

This is a solid entry in the Urban Fantasy genre, action-packed, and barely slows down to take a breath. If you're looking for a solid, entertaining read, I can recommend this.

Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows by James Lovegrove

Review by George Phillies

<http://books-by-george.com>

We have here a thick (440 pages) effort to combine the writings of Arthur Conan Doyle and Howard Phillips Lovecraft in a single volume. Holmes was the mythical great detective; Lovecraft wrote of the Great Old Ones and the Elder Gods, beings so mystical that their mere presence or sight is enough to drive some men mad. To do this, the author proposes that the works of Doyle are a fabrication by Doctor John Watson to hide the truth, namely that Sherlock Holmes actually spent his detective career attempting to destroy various eldritch horrors. In this volume, one of four books in the series, Holmes finds himself combating tentacular monstrosities that somehow lurk beneath the City of London, and the evil genius who is summoning them. His companion was indeed seriously injured in Afghanistan, namely by encountering other beings of the same sort. The reviewer is no expert on Victorian London, but to my ear the scene is set by the author certainly rings true. Holmes' skill as a detective, a master of finding conclusions from feeble but adequate clues, is said to be amazing, but at a few points the author stretches things a trifle beyond what seems plausible. Indeed, there are many churches in London and thereabouts that were named after St. Paul. However, Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows is a fine read if your tastes run in this direction.

Ship of Magic by Robin Hobb

Review by Heath Row

Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

This is one of the best fantasy novels I've ever read, and I'm surprised, though pleased, to come across Robin Hobb's writing so late in life. Featuring a front cover blurb from no less than George R.R. Mar-

tin— “Fantasy as it ought to be written.”—Ship of Magic is the first book in the Liveship Traders trilogy.

Hobb is the pen name of a Berkeley-based writer, Margaret Astrid Lindholm Ogden, who began using it in the mid-1990s. Previously, she’d written as Megan Lindholm dating back to the 1970s. As Hobb, she’s written several other epic fantasy trilogies, including the Soldier Son trilogy and a handful of trilogies in the Realm of the Elderlings series. This trilogy is part of that series.

Originally published in 1998, Ship of Magic focuses on a number of ships made of Wizardwood. Usually owned by a specific trading family, after a number of ship captains have died on the deck of their ship, the Wizardwood becomes alive, hence the term “liveship.” Such ships have their own distinct personalities and memories, drawing on those of their captains; are able to bond with a family member on deck; and control their own sailing, often working with the crew.

This novel focuses on one liveship trader family’s ship—and family members. A young woman is passed over for a captaincy in lieu of her sister’s husband, who has plans for the ship of his own. That man’s son effectively leaves the priesthood to serve as the family member on deck who bonds with the newly awakened liveship. And the liveship itself does her best to navigate those changing family dynamics, as well as her new captain’s decision to begin trading slaves.

Meanwhile, a debt owed the Rain Wilders, occasionally misshapen or malformed people who live up the Rain Wild River, is coming due, and that couldn’t happen at a worse time. The youngest daughter of the captain’s wife endangers her family’s standing by trying to mature and enter society too soon. And a skilled carver of wood tries to befriend a marooned liveship, blinded and partly insane after endangering his trader family and crew.

The resulting narrative is a rich story featuring characters with depth, motivations, and emotion; several interweaving storylines—including another that involves a pirate captain with designs on a liveship of his own—and hints of what might lie up the Rain Wild River. The Rain Wilders are largely portrayed as similar to the Romani people and traffic in mysterious higher technology mistaken for craft and magic. The source of such items has not yet been made clear.

Ship of Magic was a good enough read that I’m sure to seek out subsequent books in the trilogy, if not the series. Hobb offers fully formed, strong women characters, and the characters’ relationships are as important to the story’s progress as events occur. The Rain Wilders are fascinating and deserve more exploration, and the idea of the liveships—and the mysterious, intelligent, plumed sea serpents that seem to follow the ships—is absolutely wonderful.

There’s a lot going on in the book, and it all works well together. Nothing feels out of place or counter to the storyline’s purpose. Why Hobb isn’t a bigger deal in fantastic literature, I’m not sure. She’s a tremendous talent.

Son of Cayn by Jason McDonald, Alan Isom and Stormy McDaniels

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Umm...wow. I just finished reading Son of Cayn and I honestly don't know where to start with this review. Don't get me wrong, it was a really good book. I enjoyed it. I'm just not sure where to begin because there was a lot in here. I mean, I guess I expected that. It's the first book in a fantasy series and those are frequently pretty busy. When an author (or in this case team of authors) has to not only introduce their characters but also their world, there tends to be a lot of information necessary. Every fanta-

sy setting is different and when you couple in the setting and how magic works and what fantasy races exist. Yeah, it's a lot.

The good news is that *Son of Cayn* not only very effectively manages to introduce the characters and show off the world, it also manages to do so without bogging down into infodumps and leaves room for later expansion. I'm an as yet unpublished fantasy author myself. I should probably go back and take notes on how they did it because they did a damn good job. I feel like I could go on a wagon trip (Most of the story is spent on the trail, facing danger while traveling.) along the same path the crew in the book did and not get lost. I'm not sure I'd wanted because I tend to be big on not risking my hide unnecessarily, but that's a separate issue.

If you're going to read *Son of Cayn*, and I recommend doing so, you had best be prepared for some pretty major twists and turns. Nothing is quite as it seems. Most people are not quite who they say they are. This is a very tightly plotted story, and it turns on a dime. I enjoyed that. I'm reminded of a movie I watched with my dad back in either the 80s or 90s called *Legal Eagles*. It wasn't Science Fiction or Fantasy, but it had a great story and an ending that worked but that you never saw coming. My dad marked out because he couldn't figure it out and he was usually good at that stuff. It's that kind of a book.

Part of the surprises are people being precisely who we thought they were, even though they're nowhere near what we thought they were. Certain things happen that only make sense in retrospect. Sometimes a new talent emerges out of nowhere. Allegiances are sometimes a little murkier than you would first suspect. Seriously, don't trust any of these characters.

The fight scenes in *Son of Cayn* are awesome. I have been known to play the occasional game of *Dungeons and Dragons* and I really want a couple of these weapons. I mean, they're pretty awesome. I have a sneaking suspicion that one or more of these authors might be role-players themselves and that part of the reason these characters get such cool weapons is wish fulfillment. I'm okay with that though. It's entertaining regardless.

As if I haven't already made it obvious, *Son of Cayn* moves. There always seems to be something going on. It may not be what the reader thinks it is, but it's happening. You may not get a chance to catch your breath, but do you really want to? What's the point of catching your breath anyway? No, *Son of Cayn* is a book you go through at Mach Two with your hair on fire. It's more fun that way. Slowing down is for sissies. I mean, if you want to know the truth, if I wanted boring, I'd read romance. The authors of this one keep things interesting, most often in the sense of the ancient Chinese curse.

I'm also reminded of another movie when I read *Son of Cayn*. I know not everyone is a fan, but there is a strong leaning toward *The Godfather 3* contained within these pages. It's not really all that clear who the enemy is. It's not exactly clear if our heroes really have a singular enemy. Events happen but even after reading the book I'm not altogether certain which ones were related and which ones weren't. I totally feel like Michael Corleone reading this one. "Our true enemy has not yet revealed himself."

I really did get a feeling that there are several major players still missing from the board. Somewhere out there, our true villains are hatching their plots. Somewhere out there, there may very well be someone, or maybe a group of someones, that are on our side as well. We're being led into a much larger world than we or our heroes anticipate. It's obvious that it's there, but not how far it goes. I'm excited to find out because there is a *Lord of the Rings* feel here. Right now, it's just the Fellowship, but there may be entire kingdoms out there that we still get to journey to. None of the heroes of the book are kings or even nobles (well, probably. I mean, given the surprises so far...) but I can't help but think that

at some point in the future of this series we'll be meeting oodles and bunches of them. Or maybe I'm wrong but hey, I'm a fan I get to have my theory.

That leads me to my one complaint about *Sons of Cayn*. It doesn't really have a Big Bad. Our heroes are totally worth rooting for. They're honorable and they're a caravan of people off to simply sell some soap. Their goals are the everyday kind of noble: money to be earned, families to feed, etc. They're normal people for the most part, at least until things start to change. But there is no one person or thing to hate as such. I'm no fan of thieves and brigands, but they just don't engender the type of ill will that a Khan Noonien Singh or an Emperor Palpatine can. That much having been said, there is a strong case for keeping the reader wondering. It's always good when an author's audience wants more. That's why it's a series, right?

Speaking of which, I published this review on the release date of the book. It's about twelve thirty PM my time. I wonder: Should I start bothering the publisher for the sequel NOW, or should I wait until after dinner?

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Bars of Soap

Space Platform by Murray Leinster
Review by Heath Row
Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

The edition I read of this young adult novel by Leinster (T&T #16), a pseudonym used by William Fitzgerald Jenkins, is included in *The Murray Leinster Megapack* (Wildside, 2012). I'll comment on it as a standalone novel.

Originally published by Shasta Publishers, a specialty press run by sf fans T.E. Dikty, Melvin Korshak, and Mark Reinsberg, the book was subsequently published by Pocket Books. It's the first book in Leinster's *To the Stars* series, which also includes *Space Tug* and *City on the Moon*. *To the Stars* is also considered the *Joe Kenmore* series, which focuses on the protagonist of the three books, a master machinist who dreams of going into space.

The storyline of this novel concentrates on the construction of the titular space platform, a space station intended to facilitate deep space exploration, conduct dangerous nuclear experiments, and provide missile defense of Earth. The project is beset by ongoing sabotage attempts as political saboteurs smuggle radioactive cobalt onto the job site, damage gyroscopes, replace fuel with flammable liquids to destroy the pushpots that will help lift the space platform into orbit, and otherwise interfere with the project.

Kenmore is brought in to help build and install the pilot gyroscopes, and when they're damaged, he stays on to repair them and work against the saboteurs. He befriends a little person who advocates for people of his stature serving as astronauts—spacecraft could be smaller and lighter, and crews would use less food and oxygen—and a Native American who enlists his colleagues to join the anti-sabotage efforts, as well.

The protagonist is also selected as an alternate crew member, which helps set up his presence in the subsequent books, which—I'm guessing from the titles—take him to the space platform and the moon.

While reading the novel, *Space Platform* didn't strike me as a young adult novel—all of the characters are adults, which isn't a requirement for adult fiction or a hindrance for YA or juvenile fiction—but I can picture this being read by fans of Robert A. Heinlein juveniles. They were published around the

same time.

Overall, it was an enjoyable read: not excellent, but not disappointing. The technical discussion about construction and rocket fuel seems plausible for the time, but the characters are pretty thinly portrayed.

Standing the Final Watch by William Alan Webb

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Friends, Romans, Countrymen...

Nope, wrong speech

On March 29, 2025, a date which will live in infamy...

Nope, that's not right either.

Hmmm...

Forgive me, Reader, for I have sinned.

Yeah, that's it.

Forgive me, Reader, for I have sinned. I was beginning to read William Alan Webb's *Standing the Final Watch* (The Last Brigade, Book 1). I was thoroughly enjoying the book in a way that I don't usually enjoy the first book in a series. I almost gave up on it, anyway. I hear you working out there:

"Jimbo, that doesn't make any sense."

It wouldn't, except for the fact that the beginning of *Standing the Final Watch* reads more like a thriller than a Science Fiction novel for the first err... *mumble* pages. That doesn't make it a bad book. I was just looking to read something for my Science Fiction and Fantasy review blog and, well, this didn't have that SF/F feel to start out with. It's not that I didn't like it. I already said I loved it. It's just that it started out feeling more Tom Clancy than David Weber.

But then the twisty windy thing happens (not to be confused with timey-wimey, that's a different thing) and then all of a sudden we're deep into Science Fiction territory and are headed for the land of Post-Apocalyptic America at breakneck speed. I was glad. Because I totally wanted to finish reading *Standing the Final Watch* and I was trying to get something read that I could get to while on my computer (I'm working on something else that I can only read on the app on my phone.) and this could now be it. And I would like to state that (fingers crossed) I totally kept reading out of faith in Webb and didn't hie off to Amazon to find out if the book was written in the right genre. Totes. Maybe.

The thing is, I'm glad I kept reading. *Standing the Final Watch* is the type of book that I've always loved: It's got great characters, an awesome story and enough action to keep us all on our toes. Webb moves things along at a pace that's quick enough to hold interest and just slow enough that I could follow it. I found myself turning pages quickly, heading back from break late, and once it caused me to lose feeling in my legs when I didn't get up from the toi...

NM. You get the idea. It's a pageturner. Or sumfin'.

It's weird. Most post-apocalyptic stories are based on a particular occurrence. It can be the zombie plague, or a nuclear war or..

Well, lots of things.

But it's almost always a definable event. A moment, or a disease or war, whatever. The feeling that I get reading *Standing the Final Watch* is that the fall of the United States was nothing like that. It was more like the slow decay and fall of Rome, and a gradual slide into the morass. I could be wrong. General Nick Angriff, US Army, seems to have slept through the end of the world as we know it. That's all right, I get the reason why, both in universe and as writer myself. Seriously, there's a reason that most post-apocalyptic stories don't show the actual apocalypse: It's a pain to detail and it's usually largely irrelevant to the story that the author is writing.

I'm tempted to say that there is less worldbuilding here than I expected there to be, but there might actually be more. It's this weird situation where there are almost two worlds that exist simultaneously: The one inside the compound and the one outside the compound. We don't get a whole lot about the outside world just yet. The world inside the compound is pretty well shown though. This makes sense to me when I think about it. There is a LOT of world out there and it's going to take awhile to get to all of it. There's actually a lot of world on post as well, and Webb is taking his time trying to set things up before things really take off.

I get the feeling that Webb has taken pains to make his universe work and that he planned *Standing the Final Watch* to only reveal so much. There are a lot of books that come after this one, after all, and it makes sense to set things up to begin with. The weird part is that most of the time when authors do this it leads to a very slow first book. That is not at all the case here. Webb Heinleins his world in well. You're getting the details mixed in with the action and it's almost like he's not worldbuilding at all but he really is. Like, I got the feeling that Webb has never even heard the term "infodump" but I feel like I have a pretty solid grasp on the world that he's building based on what's there. I don't know if this is making any sense. Let me try it this way: STFW feels like it's going to make a terrific staging ground for the rest of the series. Does that work?

The characters here are well written, believable and engaging. I want to root for Angriff. Others, I don't want to root for as much but that's because I'm not supposed to. Even when the characters do something they shouldn't they do it for believable reasons. We've all knowingly done something stupid because we thought our motivations were good. So do the people in *Standing the Final Watch*. I love that about it.

There is a whole lot more of this story left to be told and I'm intrigued. This is the part where I would ordinarily say something along the lines of "I can't wait till the sequel comes out" except for the fact that I'm late to the part and there are already elebenty bajillion sequels to *Standing the Final Watch* available. I guess I'll just say that I'm off to download the next one on Amazon. You should join me in doing so, but probably not until you've read this one. It's definitely worth your time.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Hidden Wires

Starquest: Space Pirates of Andromeda, by John C. Wright

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Making Star Wars great again.

When John C. Wright saw *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, he had a different view than what we saw.

His review of the movie is what we were promised, as opposed to what we got.

The end result of this shot-from-the-hip mock review came as an outline of a twelve-book series. You can read it without much in the way of spoilers. The story grew exponentially as time went on, with the addition of many, many more space pirates.

The Story

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

To begin with, Alderaan was destroyed...

No, sorry, wrong opening.

The despotic Galactic Empire has fallen. The Dark Overlords, masters of mysterious mental powers, are dead. The remnants of the Imperial forces have retreated to the Black Sun Nebula at the core of the galaxy, brooding on revenge.

The Republic is reborn, and with it, truth, liberty, and hope. But from the ashes of the quenched tyranny, new evils arise!

One by one, an unknown force is extinguishing the life-giving suns throughout the arms of the galaxy, leaving billions to die in darkness.

Princess Lirazel Centauri (or simply “Lyra”) watched her world, and her die. They went down battling the forces of darkness. And despite everything she personally witnessed, no one will believe that the Galactic Empire was behind it—the Empire and its overlords were all dead.

And that’s just the thirty-page prologue.

Thirteen years later, Star Patrol Captain Athos Lone (not Solo, Lone) is boarding a pirate vessel, reading to exterminate the vile scum. He has a high-tech mask from the ancient times that helps him be on par with a whole ship filled with pirates. When he finds himself on the hull, he discovered a translucent maiden with a bow and arrow just striding along the vacuum of space.

Lyra has learned a few tricks since her planet was destroyed.

From here is a breakneck run for survival against a horde of pirates, all out for Athos’ blood.

Think about the pacing of the original *Star Wars: A New Hope*. We open with a space shootout, follow two droids down to Tatooine, then the film slows down as the droids wander over the sands.

Space Pirates of Andromeda has no such slow down. It doesn’t stop to breathe. Like the original serials that *Star Wars* was based on, the plot is always moving, and the threats are omnipresent. The pacing is on par with *Flash Gordon* or a *Barsoom* novel.

And the prose is ... well, it’s John C. Wright. His narration is poetry, no matter who’s being chased, stalked and / or shot at. It’s also very clear that Wright wanted to take a stiletto to the woke nonsense of “modern audiences.” Everyone is lovingly described. The heroes are heroic. The villains are villainous.

you know, like most fiction.

The reason this review is so late, despite having an early review copy, is ... well, the ending was very much like a Flash Gordon serial. Complete with a cliffhanger. The sort of cliffhanger that was fine if the next chapter came out next week, not months later. What do I mean? Imagine if The Empire Strikes Back stopped with TIE fighters chasing the Millennium Falcon into the clouds, and Luke Skywalker just dangling over Bespin, and everything just cut to credits... Yeah, that sensation right there? That was me when I first read it.

However, book two is out, I read it, it's fun, so you can go straight from book one to book two.

The Characters

If you imagined the next generation of the rebels from Star Wars as more akin to superheroes, living up to the shadows of their parents ... you pretty much have an idea of the characters.

And it's John C. Wright. Even the bit characters have personality, backstory, and motivations, and they're all relevant to the story.

The World

Despite how I've written it thus far, lest you think this is a bit of rewritten fanfiction retread, Wright has rewritten so much of Star Wars I want him to go back and give us the Starquest version of every episode before this. Everyone now has different background. Chewbacca looks more like Doctor McCoy from X-Men. There are conversations about the rise of this Empire, which rose in response to pirates, barbarians, "unholy things from Beyond the Edge, doppelgangers and underdwellers." The ancient order of the Templars (not the Jedi) are freeing mutinous robots.

There is clearly a large world stuck in Wright's head, and it has multitudes of planets swarming in there, each with their own distinct cultures.

How does Wright pull this off while keeping a breakneck pace akin to a thriller? Mostly by bringing up what's relevant as it becomes relevant. And try not to breathe too deeply along the way.

Politics

Pirates bad. Evil should be crushed... um. That's it.

If you think religion is just hokey superstition, you might have some issues. But this is a science fantasy in space. If you have problems with all that, you may be reading the wrong review.

Content Warning

Oh, the content is about as harsh as a Flash Gordon serial. Which is tame by the standards of some modern cartoons.

Who is it for?

Imagine Gene Wolfe writing Star Wars. If that sounds like fun, you're the target readership for this book.

Why buy it?

When I first encountered the David Weber's Honor Harrington series, it was described as "Horatio Hornblower meets Star Wars."

If David Weber is the CS Forester of science fiction, then that makes John C. Wright sci-fi's Patrick O'Brian.

Starquest #2: Secret Agents Of The Galaxy

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Master and Commander as Space Opera continues

Starquest book one, Space Pirates of Andromeda was an insane, mad dash through a pirate ship, into a planet's atmosphere, and through a primordial planet laden with boobytraps and a finicky robot with an ethics issue.

Or, as the opening puts it:

EPISODE TWO: SECRET AGENTS OF THE GALAXY.

PREVIOUSLY.

The Tale is not Ended!

For all True Tales are Part of a Greater

Captain Athos Lone, ace agent of the Star Patrol, enters the Living Mountain of Death to investigate the secret space pirate base hidden there, when the mountain is obliterated by a hail of nuclear holocaust from orbit!

Temple Maiden Lyra Centauri, the sole witness to the disaster, reports to her mysterious spymaster, the spectral figure known only as the Nightshadow.

Nightshadow alone believes her tale that the Greatest Empire still lives, and blotted out the sun of her home world, Centaurus. What is this terrifying power that can quench the stars?

Cue the John Williams Music.

I don't want to hear ONE WORD about how she's holding the arrow.

Shrine Maiden (not Jedi) Lyra Centauri is still working for the Shadow—er, Nightshadow, they only have similar names and dress similarly—digging through the realms of the galaxy in the hope of unearthing the hidden empire, dragging them back into the light. Unfortunately, staring into this abyss is more hazardous than one would think; this abyss is occupied. And these not-Sith look very much like they're second cousins to Cthulhu.

Meanwhile, Captain Athos Lone, having survived his little excursion to the planet of pirates, has been given a promotion... to a desk job. But his superior is a wily old walrus (literally) and has gotten him a different promotion, to Judge Dredd. (The title is Vindicator, with a license to "investigate without warrant and execute without trial" ... he's Judge Dredd.) It seems that the pirates he encountered were a

small corner of a larger threat, and he's handed cases that are clearly going to become plot points for at least one book more. But all roads first lead to pirate Captain Nemo.

On top of all that, there is Senator Napoleon Lone (not Solo, honest), who is threading through a maze of stellar politics, conflicting cultures, attitudes, trying to rouse this new republic to war before war comes to them.

Secret Agents of The Galaxy is a somewhat gentler novel compared to the last one. Remember how the now infamous Star Wars prequel trilogy tried to handle politics, leading to some odd conversations about trade embargos in what should have been formatted like a Flash Gordon serial? Now imagine of those conversations made sense, and they were basically political chess, with moves and countermoves ... and an irate Shine Maiden knocking over the chess board somewhere in the middle.

It's all very well done. The narrative is almost poetry. Like with the Patrick O'Brian Master and Commander novels, you could get lost enough on the sea of words that you might miss a detail. But it's so well written, you don't mind rereading. Surprisingly, there are as many rules and regs around the secret agents of the galaxy as the standard Honor Harrington novel.

And the last hundred pages turn into a Flash Gordon serial, complete with Megalodon sharks underneath the trap doors in the floor.

Thankfully, this cliff hanger is less annoying than book one's was.

The Characters

Here, we get more back story on ... pretty much everyone. Even Eobard the Duck (no, I did not make that up. Wright did.) We find out more about how Lyra ended up in the employ of Nightshadow after her planet was destroyed.

There's more background on the Lone family, such as how Athos' grandfather became a Templar hunter for the Empire, or how his father once "drew his weapon under the table and shot first." (There was of course, a conflicting narrative from a nanny, suggesting that the other man had shot first, but she was immediately fired.)

We meet up again with Athos Lone after the planet sort of blew up, and the natives basically decided that he is the Ghost Who Walks.

This is the first time we meet Athos' brother, Senator Napoleon Lone; we don't quite know how much he's playing Percy Blakeney, and how much isn't acting. He has the reflexes of someone who was brought up by a Pirate Queen and a commando, but hides it so well, even the reader can't quite figure him out.

And then there is Ko-Manu, long-term friend to the Lone family, who is less Chewbacca, and more Henry McCoy from X-Men (see the cover above).

And the funny thing is that there isn't a single character that is stupid. Literally. Even the random show-girls... long story.

The World

Book one was a frantic action thriller.

Book two, we do world building.

Because John C Wright is not George Lucas. No. While Lucas is content to have a few cultures about the relevant aliens, if Wright has an alien appear on screen, said alien has a specific culture, way of speaking, general attitudes, and does not merely have background aliens for better authors to flesh out at a later date. (Looking at you, Tales of Mos Eisley Cantina.)

Where Star Wars had a thousand aliens, with maybe two dozen named in the films, Wright is trying to name them all and give them personalities in a few lines at a time, without slowing down the plot.

Politics

There is plenty of in-world politics. If you want to translate them to real-world politics ... well, good luck with that.

Content Warning

I think Secret Agents of The Galaxy has even fewer content warnings than Star Wars. The book doesn't feature anyone making out with their sibling.

Who is it for?

If Honor Harrington is "Horatio Hornblower meets Star Wars," then this is Star Wars by way of Master and Commander. If you've ever read Gene Wolfe or Tim Powers, you're going to love this.

Why buy it?

John C Wright brings us back space opera as we have longed for, with action, smarts, and a sense of wonder ... and laser swords.

Sunrise on the Reaping by Suzanne Collins
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Five seconds after I met Haymitch Abernathy I hated the guy. I mean that seriously. The second I saw him I knew him for what he was; a raging alcoholic who really didn't care about anybody. His attitude toward Katniss and Peeta in The Hunger Games was abhorrent. He was going to let two kids get slaughtered while doing nothing to change their fates and all that mattered to him was getting liquored up to forget about it. I've been around alcoholics. I know the symptoms. I was right. I knew it.

Okay, so I was wrong. By the end of the movie (and I saw the first movie before I read any of the books) he had cleaned himself up enough to help Katniss and Peeta get through their Games. He got what was needed when it was needed and helped get the job done, to say nothing about his role in the next two books. Haymitch, it turns out, was a kinda okay-ish guy. Probably.

Of course, at no point did I stop to wonder what had happened to him that made him want to drink that much. That's not a Jimbo thing. Anyone who knows me knows that empathy isn't my strong suit. It never has been. I always just figured he was that guy and let it go at that. I mean, I knew he had been through the Games himself and in a particularly hard year. I just never thought about what that meant.

So, when I picked up Suzanne Collins's *Sunrise on the Reaping*, I wasn't sure what to expect. I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I wasn't going to tolerate any whining from Haymitch. I didn't have time for that. I had less than zero interest in hearing that guy make excuses. If any of that happened the book was going up against the wall.

SPOILER ALERT: I didn't throw the book against the wall. This is doubly good because I got the Kindle edition and I'm pretty sure that hitting the wall at a high velocity would have been a bad thing for my phone. Granted, I'd like to get a new phone but well...

Yeah. Bad.

Anyway...

Sunrise on the Reaping is Suzanne Collins at her best. I will grant you that the book is written in first person present tense and that some of you don't like that. It bothered me for about the first hundred pages of the first book but, having seen the movie I got over that. The fact remains that Collins is one of the bestselling authors of probably the last seventeen or eighteen years and there is a reason for that: Collins can write.

She managed to make me a fan of Haymitch. Honestly, I thought I'd be more likely to see rain rising from the ground and flying off into the sky to rejoin the cloud they had originally fallen from. I mean, I had gotten over my initial outright disgust with the dude but that was always provisional. I was ready to go off on the guy and leave him sitting on the side of the road waist deep in a snowbank wearing only his underwear at a moment's notice. Just take one toe off the line, buddy. But a funny thing happened on my way to the Arena: My character arced. I get Haymitch now.

In a lot of ways, Haymitch's victory was more believable than Katniss's. Haymitch comes across as a scared kid a lot more often than Katniss did. Don't get me wrong. A lot of what Haymitch did was incredibly brave, but Haymitch almost seems resigned to not making it home in parts where Katniss never did, or at least not after she got on the train. Haymitch feels real.

And the action feels right, too. Not only can Collins write an awesome fight scene, she simulates the fog of war better than pretty much any writer I've read. Seriously. Lots of authors can write an exciting fight. I've never read anyone who can make my body shake and my eyes pop open like Collins when a cannon goes off (signifying the death of a Tribute) and not knowing why, or even who.

What just happened? Is this a good thing for our main character or a bad thing? What is going to come out of the bush? Is it horrifying? What if it's nothing? Are the games makers going to force everyone together for the finale or will they give it another day or two? Where is everybody and how big is this arena anyway? Not only are these similar to questions that real life military officers would have to ask themselves, but it's the not knowing itself that makes things work so well. Of course, the present tense style prose helps here, but I'm not allowed to mention that. Someone's head might explode.

Of course, Haymitch isn't the only Tribute in the arena. It's the Second Quarter Quell and instead of twenty-three competitors, Haymitch has to contend with forty-seven others. Some of them are enemies. Some are friends or allies. All of them seem to be doing their best to act in their own best interests. The Hunger Games are war except worse. In war, you fight to get yourself and your buddies home. In the Games you fight to get yourself home knowing that you may have to kill your buddies along the way. Somehow, some way, he manages to sort out the good from the bad from the ugly and handle his business.

And that's not a spoiler. I've known since 2012 that Haymitch won his games and that's why he was Katniss and Peeta's mentor. I was late to the party. Others have known since 2008 and, while I'm not sure exactly where the line is, seventeen years is long enough ago that it no longer counts as a spoiler. The end of the Games was kind of horrifying though, and not at all how I pictured it even though I knew how it was going to happen in theory. The government of Panem has apparently taken lessons from the British government as portrayed in 1984.

Oddly enough though, it was the epilogue that started a conversation between myself and my daughter. Granted, she texted me to talk about things and I had to call her back two days later after I finished it, but that's life in the big city. I'm not always a big fan of prologues or epilogues but you definitely want to read the epilogue of this *Sunrise on the Reaping*. It's the payoff that counts, and I got a good one here.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Necklaces

Surface Action by David Drake

Review by Heath Row

Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

I just finished reading my first book by David Drake, and I think I picked the right one. If they're all like this, he's a wonderful writer. However, I'm skeptical that they're all like this.

In "Afterword: The Stuff of Myth" at the end of the 236-page paperback, Drake suggests that his novel *Cross the Stars* is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, *Dagger* adapts an Egyptian folk tale, *The Sea Hag* draws on fairy stories, and *Northworld* was inspired by Norse myth.

I've done a similar thing here with *Surface Action*. In this case the mythic basis is 1940s science fiction: the stories I encountered first (in anthologies) when I started to read SF. ... [H]ow can I make the conventions of this worldview acceptable to a modern audience?

Drawing inspiration from the "Venus tales woven by Kuttner and Moore, Keith Bennett and Wilbur S. Peacock, Brackett and Bradbury," the result is an example of military sf that owes an obvious debt to its stylistic forefathers. I haven't read a lot of military sf, but if this is what it's like, consider me a recruit.

The novel is also an intriguing crash course in masculine adventure- and military-influenced poetry. Each chapter opens with a reference, and if an active reader takes note of them, a solid reading list emerges as the book progresses. Works referenced include Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach;" William Bliss Carman's "The Joys of the Road;" Richard Hovey's "Unmanifest Destiny;" William Blake's "The Tyger;" Rudyard Kipling's "Birds of Prey March;" A.E. Housman's "Revolution;" Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lotos-eaters;" Kipling's "The Rhyme of the Three Sealers;" Leigh Hunt's "The Glove and the Lions;" Robert Browning's "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society;" Tennyson's "The Kraken;" Housman's "Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough;" John Boyle O'Reilly's "Though it lash the shallows that line the beach;" and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Troy Town"—and that's less than half the novel!

Roughly 10 years after the publication of his first novel Drake reaches quite far back for inspiration and direction for the book. The result is a very fun read. Venus has been colonized and terraformed, resulting in dangerous, mutated creatures. The leaders of domed cities vie for political, social, and economic power, hiring mercenary groups to strengthen their causes.

The son of one such senator is undergoing training for future military service. His uncle, brother of his father's ex-wife, is one of a few men jockeying for position at the top of one of the mercenary groups. After botched negotiations to gain enough military support to stand up to rival forces, the uncle enlists his nephew to join a guerrilla action: the hijacking of a ship that could adjust the balance of power, turning the tides of battle.

The guerrillas have to navigate through the hostile environs of Venus, encountering multiple creatively mutated beasts—several with intriguing physiologies—which are also hostile. The story blends training sequences, persuasion and negotiation, familial politics, alien biology, and plenty of action and adventure.

Truth be told, my attention wandered a little when the military escapades truly began. I'm sure frequent readers of Drake quite enjoy details about guns, shells, shell casings, and the like, but I found it somewhat distracting and uninteresting. The rest I enjoyed enthusiastically, and I was pleasantly surprised by the characterizations and aspects inspired by sf of the 1940s. More of that, I would welcome, regardless of whether it's military sf.

This novel might be a strong middle way between the two.

Systema Delenda Est by the oddly named Inadvisably Compelled.

Review by George Phillies

<http://books-by-george.com>

"The System must be destroyed!" is a series of three volumes, namely *Invading the System*, *Undermining the System*, and *Crashing the System* in which our hero launches an attack on a strange Empire that covers hundreds of thousands of stars. The tale begins in media res, leaving the reader to figure out what is going on. To make matters more interesting, the hero almost immediately finds himself in what might as well be a completely different universe with a completely different set of laws of nature. That's not what is actually going on, but the hero has to work out the details.

The volume could be viewed as an example of the new genre literary role-playing game, in which the deep background is taken from some unspecified role-playing game, and the characters are seen moving through it, complete with things that are not called spells, things that are not exactly called levels, a background that is extremely flat where the background would not show up in combat sequences, and a series of background characters some of whom actually do lurk in dungeons with rewards for completing the dungeon. Unlike many of these tales, *Inadvisably Compelled* leads us to a rational if not quite complete explanation of what is going on. For the sake of argument, we have a live action role-playing game simulator that has gone out of control in the manner of a von Neuman replicator. The hero comes from a human society whose technology is almost inconceivably in advance of our own, subject to the complication that that technology was almost completely useless when the System invaded our world. We don't see that conflict; apparently it was finally dealt with by a collection of gamers and hackers. What we do see is a hero who has a remarkably clever plan for defeating the inhuman opposition, a plan that he attempts to put into place.

The volumes are very well-written page-turners, coming to some conclusion after the various sides deploy more and more powerful weapons and other clever schemes. Details are a bit heavy on combat, but they certainly make an enjoyable read.

Tracking by David R. Palmer
Review by George Phillies
<http://books-by-george.com>

Many years ago, David Palmer wrote a novel *Emergence* about eleven-year-old super-genius Candidia Smith-Foster, who was one of the few survivors of the plague that almost completely destroyed humanity. As it turned out in that tale, she was a member of the emerging species *Homo superior*, some of whose other members had designed the plague to ensure that they would indeed rule the world, or at least what little was left of it. There was great interest in sequels, but sequels did not arrive. Here the author confesses that he had writer's block, now happily overcome.

In brief, the hero one has discovered not only that her father is still alive but where he's being held captive. Her training since the last novel has apparently focused on different methods of rendering people and objects deceased. Echoes of the superheroine *Hit Girl* come to mind. She is deadly in combat, but at key points she makes mistakes. In writing the volume, the author chose to write in first person, the person being the heroine, meaning that he had to attempt to duplicate the thought processes of someone vastly more intelligent than almost all of us. He chose to do this by skipping the use of complete sentences and compressing grammar without sacrificing comprehensibility. There are certainly alternatives, but what he chose to do he did extremely well indeed. The volume comes with vigorous praise clearly well-deserved from several prominent authors and editors.

Wyverns Never Die by Declan Finn
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Once upon a time I knew a girl. Her name was Stephanie Souders, and she was an awesome human being. She has since been called home to be with Jesus and we all miss her. But while I knew Steph, she told me about a Science Fiction convention where she volunteered every year. It was (and is) called *DragonCon*. It is well known as being a crazy place, with massive quantities of people stuffed into multiple hotels in Atlanta, Georgia on the first weekend of college football season. I've always wanted to go, but circumstances have prevented me from doing so. Maybe someday though.

All of that to say that Declan Finn's *Wyverns Never Die* is set at a huge Science Fiction convention in Georgia in late August and that it is toooooootally not *DragonCon* as evidenced by the fact that it is name *WyvernCon* and wyverns are nothing at all like dragons. Or sumfin'. Listen, I'm trying here. I actually managed to type that with a semi-straightish face. Somewhat.

There is something appealing about the combination of a sex-crazed serial killer and his wife the vampire that I just can't seem to put my finger on, but it works. Add in a dash of Catholicism (as is required of every protagonist in a Finn-written novel) and you've got a mix that can't be matched elsewhere. Seriously, no one has even tried. It makes me wonder exactly what goes in at Finn's mind. It also makes me not want to know. I'm a complicated person.

The fact remains that reading a book set at a place I've always wanted to go was an absolute blast and Finn describes it just like Steph did, only with more detail. That makes sense. He put the event in a book and Steph was describing it verbally. Mikey Mason also does a song (*Waiting to Wait In Line*) about the lines there and Finn's description fits perfectly with the way Mason's song describes things. Seriously, it was like reading a book about Disney World while cuddled up while laying on your Mickey Mouse pillow with Fantasia playing in the background. I loved it.

I don't want to spoil too much here, but the mass chaos in *Wyverns Never Die* leads to a bunch of fen living out their fantasies. I love that about that. It is not possible to be a geek and not picture oneself as a post-apocalyptic terror. We all want to be the person who survives in the ashes and leads humanity back from the brink with our pluck, our wits, and a weapon of our own choosing. Personally, I always pictured myself with an AR15 and a tomahawk, but that's just me. The thing is, massacring things that massacred all the people and coming out on top is what we're wired to do. I wanted to be there when all the craziness was going down and I couldn't because Wyverncon doesn't actually exist.

Of course, *Wyverns Never Die* is about more than just the con itself. We get the usual cast of characters: Marco, the aforementioned do-gooder with the gun and knife collection, Amanda, his wife the vampire, Rory also a vampire, but with law enforcement connections, Galadren the elf who thinks he's in a Tolkien novel but isn't, etc. The list goes on. All have their places and all work to flesh out the world and the action within it.

The action sequences are full of off-the-charts intensity with highly detailed violence. I don't read a Declan Finn action sequence, I live it. It's like watching a movie in slow motion. It's not *The Matrix* with Neo. It's easier to track than that. Marco is also known for his blade work, and not just martial arts and guns. Not that there's anything wrong with guns and fists, but it adds a dimension to things. Of course, it's possible that I've just watched too much *Forged in Fire*, but I like a description of a fight that goes slash slash instead of boom boom.

Oh, and we get some bow and arrow action this time around. One (that's me, I'm One) wonders if Finn has ever fired a bow when he shows the kind of pinpoint accuracy under pressure in *Wyverns Never Die*. Because I have spent some time at the archery range and that's hard to do. Then again, it worked for Katniss Everdeen. *The Rule of Cool* would seem to apply as well, so maybe I'll shut up.

Stop laughing, it could happen.

The villain this time around is unknown at first. Marco and friends refer to it as "X" and they're trying to figure out what they're up against. I can't say it ends up being exactly what they expected, but it ends up being a world class villain. Like a EPh.D. (for Evil PhD.) in Evil Studies from the University of the Evilly Evil at Evilville. No one else would make the kind of black magic powered weapons this thing is pushing. Really. Who makes weapons out of cremation diamonds? It's evil. It's more fun when we find out who it is. I love a good villain (by which I mean a totally evil villain) to root against, and Finn gave me one.

Wyverns Never Die is the third book in a series, except that there was another Marco and Amanda series (*Love at First Bite*) before this one, so it's kind of the seventh book in the series, if you follow. It is an awesome experience, but it is not a good starting point. I don't mean to discourage you from reading this thing, but honestly, you're better off starting with *The Neck Romancer*, the first book of *Honeymoon from Hell* or, better yet, *Honor at Stake*, the first book in the *Love at First Bite* series.

There is a lot of backstory here and it helps to know it before venturing in. I found myself a bit confused at first because I missed *Good to the Last Drop*, the last book of *Love at First Bite*. I blame Finn for that. He couldn't possibly have told me about it more than ten trillion times and how am I supposed to remember that it exists at that point? I'm going to go back and read it, but not before I get to *Cross Over* (*Honeymoon from Hell* Book Four). I can't wait and I already own it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Elven Athames

Literary Criticism

Review and Thoughts on Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: A Catholic Worldview – The Faces of Fantasy

By Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Does fantasy judge reality, or is it the other way around?

Today is Good Friday, the day that Christians recall the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, when He died on the Cross to free all men from sin. On this hallowed day it seems fitting to reflect on the works of one of the greatest Christian fantasy authors of all time: J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Specifically, we will consider another episode from EWTN's Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings series: The Faces of Fantasy.

This episode begins with a meditation from G.K. Chesterton on whether fairy tales judge reality or reality judges fairy tales. This is supported by a quote from J.R.R. Tolkien's essay On Fairy-Stories, a very good essay I highly recommend. Which is more real – the ideal, or the physical reality?

There is something to be said for both the ideal and the real: depending on the ideal you are chasing, the reality can be far preferable even if it is imperfect (the "ideal" of communism, for instance – every time it is chased, innocent people die). If someone is chasing a "reality" that can never be, then the ideal of the fairy story is going to offend that person by reminding him that happiness is not found in attempting to bend reality to his will. Happiness is most common when the ideal and the real align, though in this world it will always remain both imperfect and impermanent.

Once again Joseph Pearce leads the meditations in this episode, reminding viewers that Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton note fairy tales are ideals, as they represent what should happen in the real world but which all too often does not happen due to human concupiscence. Pearce, Tolkien, and Chesterton go on to say that fairy tales judge what good things ought to be and encourage one to try to reach those good ideals, however imperfectly. Furthermore, ideals are spiritual things; since humans are creatures with supernatural characters, this means that some part of us is never satisfied with nature. No matter how much we admire it, nature will always leave us wanting.

During the video, Pearce shares a quote from Chesterton regarding the nature of critics (including academic critics). The Apostle of Common Sense, as he is called, observed that he could make the point of his story as clear as a spike, yet those who sought to review his work would go find something else to impale themselves upon. What the blind obstinately do not wish to see, none can point them toward, unfortunately.

Recalling this quote leads Pearce to discuss the "magic" in Tolkien's legendarium. As he points out, the "magic" really isn't in Middle Earth; most of the elves' art is inherent to their race. It is not a power outside themselves that they must call upon spirits to use, nor an occult thing that involves signs, dark rituals, or spells. Pearce uses the elven cloaks as his primary example, pointing out that the elves – by their natural gifts – weave everything they love into the cloth that makes the cloak. It is this gift which allows the cloak to "magically" hide the wearers, not some spell or arcane incantation calling upon a

demon for help.

This is important because even very good fantasy tends to take the idea that a hero must recite a spell or invoke a spirit of some kind to see something marvelous done. Going back to making one's story as plain as a spike, such fantasy tales are not spikes. They are more often meant by the authors (or the publishers) as spearheads intended to wound and kill the reader's mind or spirit, but it is worth noting that there are plenty of readers out there whom the spear misses. This is likely because the same One Who made sure that Bilbo would find the Ring and pass it on to Frodo also makes sure these readers would not be hurt by such tales.

One can make this case because Pearce points out that it is Bilbo's moral decision not to kill Gollum out of pity and mercy, which enables him to let go of the Ring later on. This decision of Bilbo's ultimately spares both him and Frodo the fate of Gollum, since Gollum began his possession of the One Ring by murder. If, like Smeagol, he had killed Gollum for the Ring or just to keep himself safe, Bilbo would have transgressed the moral order and left himself open to the corruption of the One Ring.

In *The Hobbit* Bilbo is not asked to judge Gollum and then to carry out a sentence on him. Gollum is also not in a position to directly threaten Bilbo when he has him at his mercy. Instead, Bilbo is faced with a killing of convenience or the harder choice of sparing his enemy. By refusing to kill Gollum for his own convenience, Bilbo ensures he has a stronger moral stance from which to resist the Ring's influence until he passes it on to Frodo, who has learned from his uncle how to be a moral person.

This ties into the fact that the magic which does exist in *The Lord of the Rings* is inherently about abusing the natural world as well as (and more importantly) other people. Saruman, Sauron, et cetera, use power to dominate others as well as nature. Now some might find that a strange accusation for Tolkien to make, since Christians are told in Genesis to "fill the earth and subdue it." Doesn't that mean to dominate it?

A quick search answers this question by going into the original Hebrew here. There are two words which could mean "subdue" in Hebrew: kavash and radah. Kavash is the word closest to the English "subdue," but radah is more expressive and means "benevolent ruling" that allows the ruler to "walk among" his subjects and "learn from" them. In Genesis, therefore, man is told to benevolently rule the world with a light touch and not to brutally dominate it.

Here is where we come back to magic, something Pearce connects to Scientism and Medieval alchemy, both of which seek to oppress or dominate the world and those in it. These practices do so in the same vein as Saruman when he makes his white cloak one of many colors; they break the world, and the people in it, to refashion them to fit the image or inverse ideal that they desire. In other words, they break the much better reality to fit the remaining pieces into their idea or personal ideal of what reality ought to be.

Through Saruman, Tolkien shows how once one starts down the path rendering reality in one's own image, that person only succeeds in making it a caricature of true life. All the characters who seek domination, who desire to make their wills supreme, need to destroy what (or who) already is to "make" that thing (or person) fit into their personal, twisted, and selfish ideal. This is something God does not do with any of the characters in the trilogy, nor does He do it in reality.

God does not make Bilbo spare Gollum. He ensures that Bilbo is the one to find the Ring, but it is still up to Bilbo to either choose to let Gollum live or to kill him. Likewise, as Jay Richards and Jonathan Witt discuss in their book *The Hobbit Party: The Vision of Freedom Tolkien Got, and the West Forgot*

in the finale for *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo ends up struggling between a mysterious Voice (hinted to be Gandalf) and Sauron's will. Since he is wearing the Ring, Frodo is exposed to Sauron, and the Voice seeks to prevent the Hobbit from being dominated by the Dark Lord.

The two fight over him when he has the Ring on his finger. Granted, the Voice is trying to protect Frodo, but the constant striving between him and Sauron means that Frodo cannot make any choice on his own. That is, he cannot make any choice of his own until – for a very brief moment – the Voice and the Eye stop fighting over him. Only then can Frodo make a decision, and he decides to take off the Ring.

Dominating the wills of others means forcing their will to bow to yours. We see this very much in fandom these days, with the most explosive moment that many remember occurring in *Star Wars*' fandom over Episode VIII. If you had any kind of disagreement with the film, any reason to criticize it, you must be forced to agree and like it...or else you were a Bad Person who must be Pushed Out and Kept Out.

This has been repeated ad nauseum in other fandoms, and it is ongoing in *The Lord of the Rings* fandom. Notably, though, Amazon's "fan-breaker" series *Rings of Power* really isn't making much of a dent in pushing people out – certainly not compared to *The Last Jedi*. The linked *Forbes* piece notes that most viewers of *RoP* are apathetic, which is worse for the company than having hate-watchers make videos decrying the series, since hate-watching at least generates views and puts money on the table. *Rings of Power* isn't even managing that in its second season, with *The Teen Magazine* taking it to task over its depiction of evil and Sauron no less.

On this Good Friday, let us remember what Christ freely gave us and freely asks of us. He does not demand, and He most certainly does not dominate. Can we, truly, say the same? Perhaps we should strive to dominate less and to have more *radah*. Perhaps – even if we are not believers – we ought to say thanks to Him Who gave us the freedom to choose as we wish, even when it is to our detriment.

After all, the alternative really is not worth contemplating, is it? Most of us do not like being forced against our will to do something. Viewing *The Faces of Fantasy* episode and remembering today's most solemn feast, maybe we can find a little time to whisper: "Thank you." It can't hurt, can it?

Science Fiction Fandom Edited by Joe Sanders

Review by Heath Row

Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

I've also started reading the Joe Sanders-edited collection of essays *Science Fiction Fandom* (Greenwood, 1994), which I ordered because Hank Luttrell contributed a chapter on cons. The table of contents offers an impressive array of contributors, including Juanita and Robert Coulson, Sam Moskowitz, Robert A. Madle, Art Widner, Harry Warner Jr., John and Bjo Trimble, Richard A. Lupoff, Jack Gaughan, Howard DeVore, Joe Siclari, and others. You couldn't ask for a better master class on the topic. The book was written by *fen* for *fen* and mundanes alike. No detached, distant academia here!

In the preface, Sanders suggests that the book is the "first to attempt a comprehensive survey of fandom" and indicates that the essays view fandom through several lenses: a fandom that "exists to encourage the possession, production, and appreciation of SF;" that's "based on the personalities of the fans" and "stresses individual satisfaction through social interaction;" and that offers "ways to make sense of my liking for SF" and "healthy directions for my personal drive toward self-expression."

Other than the preface, I read Bernadette Bosky's piece, "Amateur Press Associations: Intellectual So-

ciety and Social Intellectualism” late last week. In that chapter, which made for excellent reading after emailing my final distribution as OC of APA-L, she discusses the origins of apae and their similarities and differences with mundane “ajay” activity.

Describing apae as “organization[s] for sharing and critiquing writing, as a substitute encounter group or support group, and as a cocktail party by mail,” Bosky suggests that the development of mailing comments, which were introduced in the Fantasy Amateur Press Association in October 1937 prioritizes dialogue over monologue. Similarly, fanzines stopped modeling themselves after prozines relatively early in their history. “[I]n the 1940s they began to concern themselves less with science fiction than with the lives and interests of SF fans,” she writes. “[I]nstead of focusing on reactions to science fiction stories, the writers focused on each other.”

Bosky mentions that at least three apae published Langdon charts but doesn’t name them. I know LASFAPA is one; I wonder what the other two are! Other highlights include the proposition that contemporary fandom is “dominated by conventions rather than fanzines;” that fanzines are overtly literary and covertly social while apae are overtly social and covertly literary; a reference to “No comments in, no comments out” and “You’ve got to give comments to get comments;” and how apae trend toward inclusivity rather than exclusivity. “If you don’t like it, you don’t have to read it.”

She also suggests that, because apae are “very forgiving of failed attempts,” they can produce writing of “a kind seen nowhere else.” In fact, “[a]pae encourage the development of a gestalt impression of a member, gleaned from reading all that person’s work over time.” One Big Fanzine, indeed. After all, “all knowledge’ is contained in fanzines.”

The essay ends with some comments on the structure, process, and management of apae. Numerous and elaborate rules are “unfannish.” If mailing comments are consistently critical or writing is ignored, participants might leave. Apahacks often participate in more than one apa. And the general trend has been from general apae to specialized apae— either in terms of topic or location.

There’s a lot to recognize in the essay. Bosky knows what she wrote. A member of the Esoteric Order of Dagon and FAPA, and an educator, she’s married to Kevin Maroney and Arthur Hlavaty. (See Idea #14 as reviewed in *Faculae & Filigree* #41.)

There’s also a lot to consider in terms of how well APA-L is upholding the ideals of apae. How much writing do we share in addition to mailing comments? How much do we critique and support each other? Do we welcome experimentation? Do we do our best to include each other and newcomers? Are we occasionally too critical?

I quite like the idea of apae being cocktail parties by mail. There are a lot of seats in our living room. May they all be comfortable—and the refreshments plentiful.

The 2024 Hugo Award Best Series Also-Rans Review by Tom Feller

The winner in this category last year was Ann Leckie’s *Imperial Ratch* series, and I believe I have read all of those books. However, I had not read all the books in the other finalists in that category. Far from it! There was even one author I don’t recall ever hearing about until she showed up on the finalist list. This was my principal reading project until this year’s Hugo and Nebula Award nominees were announced was to catch up on them.

Second Place: The Final Architecture trilogy by Adrian Tchaikovsky

“Architects” is the name given to Moon-sized aliens who take inhabited planets and remake them according to their aesthetic principles, killing everyone on the planet in the process. Humans had achieved faster-than-light travel before the Architects came to our planet so there were a significant number of survivors, and there are other “normal” aliens who suffered the same fate. Most of the first novel, *The Shards of Earth*, is set 40 years after the Architects have disappeared and 120 years after the destruction of the Earth.

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

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

She finds him on the *Vulture God*, whose captain is Rollo Rostand, a human. Other crew members include Olli Timo, a human woman who needs prosthetics, Kittering, a member of the crablike Han-nilambra species, Medvig, a collective of artificial intelligences residing in one robotic body, and Kris Almier, a human lawyer good in knife fights and the Platonic companion of Idris. They constitute a found family for Idris, who does not want to leave them, and Solace becomes somewhat of a member of the family as well. They have a series of adventures in which they discover valuable artifacts from a long dead species they call the Originators. This causes them to become wanted by both the closest thing to a human interstellar government, personified by Haever, an intelligence agent, and by a criminal gang led by an alien called “The Unspeakable Aklū, the Razor and the Hook”. Aklū, whose species are called the Essiel, employs human/alien symbionts called Tothiats. Rollo is killed, and Olli takes command of the *Vulture God*. At the end of the first book, the Architects return and Idris learns that they are really slaves who are forced to murder sentient species who have achieved faster-than-light travel.

The second book, *Eyes of the Void*, begins shortly after the first. Idris has defected to the Partheni to help them develop their own intermediaries. The other crewmembers of the *Vulture God* follow him out of loyalty. During a visit to an Originator ruin on the planet Arc Pallator, Idris is kidnapped by a rogue Tothiat and transported to an abandoned Originator base on Criccieth’s Hell, a planet so named because of its hostile environment. He joins a team using an Originator machine, which they call *The Eye*, to explore Unspace. They are led by “Ahab”, a member of the Naeromathi species whose home planet was destroyed by the Architects millennia ago. Idris learns a secret about the Architects that may enable the humans and other species to take the battle to them rather than fight defensively. Idris, however, does not want to attack the Architects but rather their masters. This will be no small feat, because those unnamed masters resemble Lovecraft’s Elder Gods.

By the beginning of the third book, *Lord of Uncreation*, they have moved *The Eye* to an orbital facility called *The Host* in another star system. However, war breaks out among the various human and alien factions, kind of like fighting over the deck chairs on *The Titanic*, and this comprises the action in the first half of the book. In the second half, the Architects and their mysterious Lovecraftian masters have figured out what Idris and his colleagues are up to and actively pursue them. Without Idris to navigate, Olli obtains a shark-like creature which she calls “Junior”. Although they are not sentient, they are able to travel through Unspace. Her story line provides the book with some comedy relief. This trilogy is a good, solid epic space opera.

Third Place: *The Laundry Series* by Charles Stross--

This series is a British version of *The X-Files*, but with a larger budget and more bureaucracy. For instance, they have an SAS unit on call that is trained to not freak out when encountering Lovecraftian monsters, but the paperwork they are required to complete is far more than Mulder and Sculley ever had to deal with. The unit’s name goes back to World War II during which they were part of the Special Operations Executive and headquartered in a former laundry. The main character and narrator is Bob Howard in a salute to Robert E. Howard, a correspondent of Lovecraft. He was originally a computer science major who stumbled across some secret files. Instead of killing him, Laundry recruited him. At the start of *The Atrocity Archives*, the first novel in the series, he shares an apartment with two other Laundry workers called Pinky and Brains. The female lead in the first novel is Dominique “Mo” O’Brien, a beautiful mathematician-philosopher whose work on the multi-verse brings her to the attention of powerful people.

After working in IT support for a few years, Howard is recruited to become a field agent. His first assignment is a burglary, and he successfully completes it. For his second assignment, he is sent to Santa Cruz, California to interview O’Brien who is doing post-doctoral research there. While he is there, she just happens to get abducted by Arab terrorists. Thanks to him, she gets rescued and moved to London. While on a research trip with Howard to an archive in Amsterdam, she is abducted again by survivors of the Nazi regime who are allied with a Frost Giant.

The second novel, *The Jennifer Morgue*, begins with prologue set in 1975 revealing the true story of how the CIA, contracting with Howard Hughes, attempted to raise a sunken Russian submarine and why it really failed. Flashing ahead to 2004, when the novel was published, Howard is sent to the Caribbean, where Ellis Billington, a tech billionaire, is summoning Lovecraft’s Old Ones with the intention of becoming the ruler of the world. He is obsessed with the James Bond novels and movies, although his fantasy is to be Blofeld. He even has a white Persian cat for a companion. His wife Eileen owns her own cosmetics company whose products contain the blood from sacrificed human females. Howard is partnered with an American agent named Ramona Random, not her real name, who looks like a supermodel. However, they do not have sex, because she is a succubus and likes him too much to kill him. She does not reveal her true form until about halfway through the novel. Mo O’Brien returns as a major character. She and Howard have been living together whenever possible, although their assignments keep them apart much of the time. She has received the training to be an agent rather than a damsel-in-distress and makes use of it. Despite numerous infodumps, it is an entertaining novel.

The Apocalypse Codex is the fourth book. (I had already read the third book.) Howard and Mo are now married. This installment introduces four new characters: Gerald Lockhart, the person at Laundry responsible for managing independent contractors, Penelope Hazard, a witch with special forces training, her bodyguard Johnny McTavish, a former SAS operative, and Pete Wilson, a religious scholar and friend of Bob and Mo. Hazard and McTavish are independent contractors, aka external assets, who occasionally work for the Laundry, although officially Laundry does not employ independent contractors.

(This gives the Laundry “plausible deniability”.) Bob is assigned to be their liaison when they investigate Raymond Schiller, a charismatic American evangelist from Colorado Springs who is seeking to convert the Prime Minister. They discover that he is not just waiting for the Second Coming of Christ but is seeking to hurry it along. Unfortunately, he unknowingly is really trying to summon one of Lovecraft’s elder gods. Although it has a slow start, once they get to America, the novel becomes a fast moving, exciting thriller.

Fourth Place: *October Daye* by Seanan McGuire—

The premise of this urban fantasy series is that the faerie world as depicted in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* really exists in parallel to ours. October “Toby” Daye, the main character, is the daughter of a faerie mother and a human father. She lives in our world, specifically the San Francisco area, making a living as a private detective, but occasionally has to venture into the faerie one. In *An Artificial Night*, the third book in the series (I had already read the first two), she is on a quest that takes her into the faerie realm several times. The principal villain is Blind Michael, the son of Oberon himself and Maeve, one of his queens. (Daye believes that through her mother, she is descended from Oberon and his other queen, Titania. She learns otherwise in the fourth book.) Once every hundred years, Blind Michael’s minions, called Riders, venture out of his kingdom, called The Hunt, and steal children. The faerie ones become his Riders, and the human ones become their horses. Two of those children are the son and daughter of friends of Daye, so most of the novel consists of her efforts to rescue them. She gets help from the Luidaeg, aka The Sea Witch, who turns out to be Blind Michael’s older full-sister, but she has no love for him; Lily, an undine who lives in Golden Gate Park; Tybalt, the King of Cats, because children of his subjects are among the kidnapped children; Raj, Tybalt’s nephew and heir; Danny, a bridge troll who drives a taxicab for a living; Connor, a selkie who was a childhood friend of Daye’s, but is now married to faerie noblewoman; and May Daye, who has come to “fetch” October from the world of the living to that of the dead and looks just like her, at least at the beginning of the book.

In *Late Eclipses*, the fourth book in the series, Daye is arrested for killing Blind Michael in the previous book, framed for the murder of her friend Lily, the Undine, and also framed for the critical illness of Luna, another friend and the wife of Sylvester, her liege Lord. Her enemies include Oleander de Merelands, who has a history with Daye and likes to use her namesake flower in her poisons, the Queen of Mists, the overlord of her liege lord, and Rayseline, the wife of Connor and daughter of Sylvester and Luna. Daye’s mother Amandine makes a brief appearance, which enables Daye to learn her true heritage.

In the fifth book, *One Salt Sea*, Daye makes use of her detective skills. The two ducal sons of the neighboring undersea Duchy of Salt Mist have just been kidnapped, and her parents are threatening a war with the Kingdom of the Mists of which Daye is a vassal. She is tasked with finding the boys. Using a magic spell given to her by the Luidaeg, Daye temporarily becomes a mermaid to travel to Salt Mist and examine the scene of the crime.

Prior to the events of the first book in the series, Daye had a daughter Gillian with a human man. In a prologue to that book, Daye was turned into a fish by one of the bad guys, and she remained one for fourteen years. By the time she became human again, her daughter and her father had moved on and refused to take her back. One complication that makes the whole affair personal is that the same kidnappers also abducted Daye’s daughter.

The principal villain is Rayseline Torquill, the daughter of Daye’s liege lord, Duke Sylvester Torquill and his wife Luna. Rayseline has hated Daye for a long time, and this hatred is intensified because Con-

nor, Rayseline's ex-husband and a selkie is now Daye's boyfriend. Despite the death of a major character, it was a very enjoyable read.

Fifth Place: The Xuya Universe by Aliette de Bodard--

The premise of the series is that East Asian empires, not European ones, conquered the world and expanded into interstellar space, and Xuya itself was a part of North America colonized by China in the alternate 15th Century. The series features mindships, faster-than-light spaceships with organic cores who have genders. Not only are they capable of emotions, but they can fall in love and have sex with humans.

Seven of Infinities is set in a backwater system belonging to the Dai Viet empire where an asteroid belt called The Scattered Pearls has been colonized and space habitats built. On one of them, Van, a scholar, is the tutor of Uyen, a teenage girl, and a member of a poetry club. One day, one of the other members pays her a visit to warn Van that she is about to be kicked out because of her humble origins. This friend is The Wild Orchid in Sunless Woods, a mindship. Definitely feminine, she interacts with humans through holographic avatars. Both Van and Sunless Woods have a secret. Van's is that she has an illegal memory implant that allows her to pass as an educated scholar. Sunless Woods is really a retired thief hiding out in this system. The action really kicks off when Uyen has an unknown visitor who drops dead while Uyen is making tea. Uyen automatically becomes a suspect, so Van and Sunless Woods endeavor to solve the murder and clear Uyen's name. Other characters include Thien Hoa, a fellow thief passing as a merchant, and Bearer of Healing Wine, another mindship. This well-plotted mystery, which includes the discovery of another murder, turns out to involve characters from Van's past. Although the story is only a novella, it actually drags in places, especially in the parts involving a romance between Van and Sunless Woods.

In The Red Scholar's Wake, the mindship, called Rice Fish, is a feminine pirate and leader of the pirate fleet called The Red Banner. The title character is Huan, her late wife who had been killed by the forces of the An O empire under mysterious circumstances two days prior to the beginning of the book. Rice Fish recruits Xich Si, a robot maker, data analyst, mother, and scavenger. Scavengers operate small spaceships who seek out wrecked spaceships to salvage their parts. Since Xich Si is a captive of the pirate fleet, Rice Fish knows that she was not involved in her wife's betrayal and may be able to help find the betrayer. To protect her, Rice Fish marries Xich Si. It starts out as a business arrangement, but they fall in love, of course. Actually, my favorite character is Crow's Words, another mindship who is part of the Red Banner fleet and definitely masculine.

The title of the novella The Citadel of Weeping Pearls refers to a space station that disappeared thirty years prior to the events of this story. It was led by Ngoc Minh, the crown princess of the Dai Viet empire, but the station was about to be invaded by the forces of the empress Mi Hiep, her mother. The daughter had become a threat because of the station's advanced technology, including teleportation. The mindship in this story is The Turtle's Golden Claw, whose human component is a granddaughter of the empress. The mindship's mother, Ngoc Ha, another imperial princess, never forgave the empress for forcing her to give up her only child in the service of the empire. Now the empire needs the Citadel's advanced technologies, because of an impending invasion from another empire.

Diem Huong is a commoner whose mother was in the Citadel when it disappeared. She was six years old and away with her father at the time. She and a group of friends build a time machine that "sort of" allows her to travel back in time to a few weeks before the Citadel's disappearance so that she can see her mother once again. Her visit is unsatisfactory because she can only travel as an avatar and interaction with people is limited. Their efforts are investigated by General Suu Nuoc, a commoner and former

lover of the empress. This is an effective story that explores mother-daughter relationships.

Sixth Place: *The Last Binding* trilogy by Freya Marske

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

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

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

The maguffin is something called “The Last Contract”, whose full nature is not revealed until almost the end of the first book. It consists of three items: a silver coin, a silver cup, and a silver knife. In search of them, they travel to Edwin’s family home in Cambridgeshire where Robin meets Edwin’s family and to a magical house called Sutton Cottage owned by the great aunt of Gatling, Robin’s deceased predecessor.

Robin and Edwin only appear at the end of the second book, *A Restless Truth*. Instead, the action switches to Robin’s sister Maud. Because she is not known on sight by the other forces pursuing the Last Contract, she is dispatched to America to visit Mrs. Navenby, whom they believe possesses the silver cup portion. Originally from England, Mrs. Navenby agrees to return there and bring the cup with them. Since Maud does not have a “need to know”, Mrs. Navenby does not inform Maud, who is pretending to be Mrs. Navenby’s paid companion, where the cup is located among her things. Mrs. Navenby is murdered shortly after the ship disembarks, but she had so cleverly hidden the cup in plain sight that neither the good guys nor the bad guys can find it. Maud recruits allies to help her catch the killer and find the cup. They include Violet Debenham. Lord Hawthorne, aka John “Jack” Allston, and

Alan Ross. Debenham is a powerful magician who is the black sheep of her family. After being “deflowered” before marriage, she ran away to America and becomes a stage performer, using real magic to pretend to be a stage magician. She and Maud become lovers by the end of the voyage. Hawthorne is a member of a noble magician family, but he has lost his powers. The circumstances causing the loss are not revealed until a prologue in the third book. Alan, aka Alonzo Rossi, is a journalist writing about the crossing, a jewel thief, and both a writer and distributor of pornography, but his back story is not developed until the third book as well. This novel is more of a treasure hunt than a whodunit, especially since the identity of the murderer is revealed about halfway through. In addition, in a first-class whodunit, the reader has to pay close attention because the author will plant clues with such subtlety that the reader is likely to miss them. That is not the case with this trilogy.

In the third book, *A Power Unbound*, Violet takes possession of an estate left to her by a distant relative. However, that relative is supposed to have possessed the third part of *The Last Contract*, a knife, so she is in danger. To protect her, Lord Hawthorne moves into her house. However, the romance in this novel is between him and Alan Ross, which is interesting because they hated each other at first sight in the second book. However, what they do have in common is that their tastes in sex lie in the direction of S&M role-playing. Robin, Edwin, and Maud return as major characters.

The trilogy is rather slow moving, especially the sex scenes, but a patient reader may find it rewarding. The final confrontation between the good guys and the bad guys, including Edwin’s brother Walter and Hawthorne’s cousin George, is exceptionally well written. I was glad I read the trilogy, since I feel it is good for me to get out of my comfort zone, but was also glad I did not have to spend any extra money for them. The author and publisher, to their credit, made them available in the Hugo packet.

Summary—

The finalists in the Best Series category show how broad our genre is. They included two space operas, one alternate history/space opera, two urban fantasies, and one historical urban fantasy. Two feature gay romances, and two show the influence of H.P. Lovecraft. The main thing they have in common is that they all have enough fans among Hugo voters to get on the final ballot.

Prose Bono

Writing Fiction by Heath Row

“When was the last time you wrote fiction? What was it about?”

Why, that would be “The Robot and the Open Road,” which appeared in T&T #151. I haven’t been able to keep up with writing a Cover Story every week but plan to return to the idea when I’m so inspired—and time allows. I think it’s a neat idea.

“The Robot and the Open Road” was the first story I’ve ever written using generative artificial intelligence, and it was an interesting experience. I used it primarily so the story was in the form of a BASIC program, but I also appreciated using it for broad strokes and generalities. The result gave me enough form and direction to refine and revise it more along the lines of a story I’d write, without starting from scratch. I’d feel more proud—and ownership—of it if it were entirely original work, but it was a fun experiment.

I actually wrote fiction more recently, midweek, in the form of character backgrounds for a play-by-mail fantasy roleplaying game called Xott. I originally played Xott in 2008-2010 and wrote about the experience starting in The Game Closet #1 for Alarums & Excursions. While not entirely short fiction, the character backgrounds are definitely fictional. Interestingly, I also used a couple of online tools to develop the character backgrounds: Capitalize My Title's DnD Backstory Generator (<https://capitalizemytitle.com/character-generator/dnd-backstory>) and Gemini. As with "The Robot and the Open Road," the tools gave me a useful starting place that I could then make my own.