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Staff

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Cover by Morris Scott Dollens "Centuries of Wonder"

EDITORIAL

State of the Arts

With this issue we do a little re-evaluation. It may be time to establish a better, firmer policy for this bureau. Last issue had very little in it, relatively speaking. There were not any interviews and some of my changes in presentation had been dropped, as if I had gotten lazy about the issue. Actually I was not paying it much attention, due to being swamped. You could call it lazy, as I was seeking respite in doing nothing. Well, a lot of that Incoming Problems has dwindled and there is not as much getting in my way—so am I not right in saying that it may be time to do something constructive?

My interview lack has been well taken care of by George Phillies, who has been sending one name after another to me for interviewing, and all of them are amenable to having an interview; I believe he asked around for interview volunteers when he acquired those names, making use of resources he had or had found and going through established processes, whereas I had gotten all of my interviews *via* Facebook and the well had pretty much run dry. (Notice I am here mentioning things of a business nature taking place, the workings of bureau activity and official activity, which is one change I am making in the outlook expressed here; we have all not been saying anything about the way we do things or what our activity consists of, and it makes us look rather alien not to be showing ourselves any more than that. People need to know what the heck a bureau does and what goes into it or they are not looking at very much besides presentational items. I hope some other bureaus take note of this and get themselves more visible.) Coming up are some interviews that seem to me to be more dynamic than the ones that have most typically been presented here, as they come, for example, from among people seeking publicity and having some involvement in promotional activities.

That's just what I like to find—activity and interactivity. The coming interviews take note of activity occurring between writers, publishers and readers. The ones I've been getting seem very *au courant*, too, much like the interview we had with Nathan Warner was. The "joint" is beginning to "jump".

I often think that science fiction is being rather slowed down or retarded both in its writing and its appreciation of such by the growing environmental effect which is surrounding us of things that were once thought of by science fiction writers as future possibilities; why write something new about what is there? Chain stores may not seem like science fiction to some but they do to me—they affect us sociologically and maybe even anthropologically. Superhighways were seen by science fiction as being what they are now, a perpetual motion of humanity. We now have a huge space program picture and astronomical discoveries and speculations that we hadn't seen much of before, all this happening since the time when there was nothing really happening space-wise until sputnik was sent aloft. Just think of it now, that was before some of us here were born. (My run-on sentences are intentional; I keep looking at wavy green lines beneath them.)

Some of our work here is being done over a great void of inactivity which is appalling to see or be suspended over; I keep thinking that if it is a void, it needs to be explored—are we not explorers of the void? Like, what is a void? As scientists have been saying, it is apt not to be plain nothingness. What lies beyond our expectations? Does the presence of a void not beget creative energy and open thought—bringing the mind to liberation? Heh, it does just that. Think of the scientists, on one planet with a whole universe to speculate about, and likely more beyond that—nothing limits space, and anything might fill it….including things not conceived of at all, at the present time. Well, when there is nothing much, it is up to us to produce something. Then WE will have something to look at, to speculate and re-speculate over, even if no one other than ourselves sees it or knows it exists [a point to be discussed, if we expand into discussions]; and it may be that it will start to become visible elsewhere and that others will join it. One way of making it visible has been to write publicity about it—most of mine has been posted through Facebook, to let some of you in on the secret of what I do and where I get things. I have found that when I mention the National Fantasy Fan Federation on one or another science fiction pages of Facebook, three major comebacks of commentary are disinterest, ignorance and antipathy. This is the same thing I encounter when I say or display anything nice about myself on Facebook, and I notice others there experiencing the same thing—it's traditional to put something down if it seems positive. It would

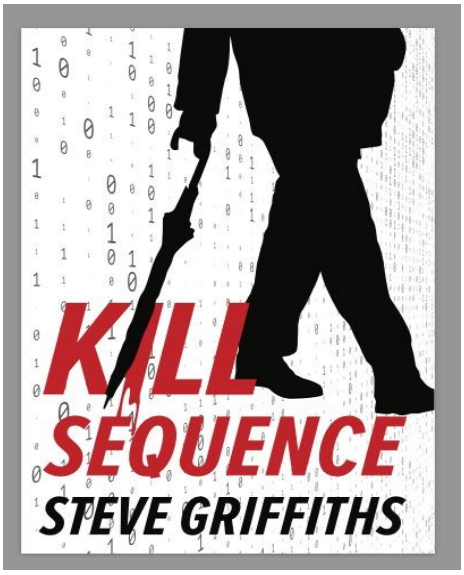
seem to be an assault on the ego, but I find when I post enthusiasm about the NFFF there is the same reaction about the organization, so this is not just antipathy toward individuals. (Here I am discussing the surrounding terrain, part of the environment, rather than not saying anything about it—it is a sort of foray, in the doing of which I am being active.) FAPA also gets put down when someone posts about it, so it isn't just who posts it that gets put down.

Do you see that I am discussing the doing of things here, and outlining what doing some things may consist of? We need to have some idea of what to do before doing anything, and I think those ideas need to be well formulated, and then we are developing into a known and delineated social entity. It wasn't all here waiting for us when we got on the internet—we had to create it or re-create it ourselves, and what we have done so far has been only partial, with many of us looking at what we have done with disappointment since it hasn't gotten fully accomplished. Fandom originally had to be devised; now in this interlude it has to be re-devised. The point in doing it is to do something other than watching it nihilistically vanish because we have stopped doing it or lost interest in it because it wasn't already there complete.

Later on in this issue you will see an article by Jeffrey Redmond which shows what has happened to a lot of fandom. If they haven't been diverted out of their normal activities by the space program, they have been diverted by political interests. These may be something we need to have; they are discussions of what constitutes or goes on in science fiction fandom. They are at where the money is at, the money that rents out a hotel and establishes it as a place where a convention is to be at. But often there is nothing much to a convention besides the being of its being a convention. Everything there consists of getting it all together and discussing the fact that it is being held. Then there are meetings about when the next one will be, and who will win awards in awards ceremonies. They have not established enough happening at the convention, because the politics of it is what is involved. That seems to me to be what a lot of fen are doing and discussing, the making of events, leaving behind any concept of the attending of events or the doing of anything at them. This is because the politics of the matter is that much of an effort. Perhaps we have divisions of fandom—military fandom, political fandom, space fandom, media fandom and our own fandom, which should be considered central fandom. We need, I think, more discussion of fandom—what comprises it and who is in it.

Ionisphere will be swinging over to the investigation of fandom and its recourses and resources in the coming months.

AUTHOR INTTERVIEW: *Steve Griffiths*



Steve Griffiths says this is his first interview. He was introduced to us by Thomas Weiss, who is a member of the National Fantasy Fan Federation and one of three men working on production of the book. As a beginning writer, he is off to a fast start with a book that has a

new attitude toward action thrillers. His email address is griffiths153@sky.com . Here is what he has to say about that first publication.

IO: Your book KILL SEQUENCE is said to be a debut coming out later in February, so it is my pleasure to be interviewing you at the start of being a published writer. How do you view your prospects from this early viewpoint? Will the book sell well, will it meet with good reviews, do you think?

SG: The pleasure's all mine; thank you!

I'm an unknown author, so I'm being realistic with my expectations when it comes to sales—readers will naturally gravitate towards authors they're already familiar with.

That said, I've honestly been moved (almost to tears, in a couple of cases) by the resoundingly positive feedback I've had so far. I do think KILL SEQUENCE will find its audience, but iit might happen more by word of mouth than publicity drives.

I've also been blessed with an incredible cover by the artist Matt Margolis. I was totally floored when I saw it.

IO: It is a very effective cover. You seem to be working from a writing establishment, as I heard first from your agent or promoter, and he said he is gathering publicity for the book. I'd like to know more about the publishing milieu you are involved with. How did you approach them with your book, what inquiries did you make, what did you hear back from them, and what process was followed? I think others thinking about going into writing would like to know about this too. Also, how did you decide on the publisher you have?

SG: I don't have an agent. My contract for Kill Sequence is with Conservatarian Press, who are an independent publishing house.

The process of finding an agent and/or publisher can be too long and painful, especially for an unknown author. I did a lot of research on how to go about selling my book, and started querying agents in March, 2021. Around half of them rejected it; the other half didn't reply at all. I'd heard this was perfectly normal—many successful authors query up to a hundred agents before finding the elusive "Yes", so the key was to not lose heart and not give up. After I'd been rejected by about twelve agents, I started looking into the indie scene—small publishers that will accept queries from un-agented authors. Around July time, I had two offers from two different indie houses, one of which was Conservatarian Press. I had lengthy conversations with both before deciding on CP. My editor at CP, Tom Weiss, really seemed to share my love of the characters in Kill Sequence and was eternally grateful to both parties and I stall stay in touch with the

"other guys".

The process of getting the book ready for release was pretty straightforward. Tom went through the novel looking for plot-holes and inconsistencies, which I then fixed. We did this routine three or four times, until we were both happy. Then came the line-by-line edits, which were a little more technical—sentence structure, dialogue, and of course typos. Then we did it all over again.

IO: What do you think about the competition that exists in this field of writing? Do you think there will be competition that will affect your own success with the book?

SG: There are so many incredibly talented authors out there, it's hard to stand out. Kill Sequence is, first and foremost, a thriller. A crazy-insane SF actioner. It could sit next to a Lee Child book, or a Michael Crichton. Or an Ian Fleming. Or a Harlan Coben. But I don't think there's anything quite like it. I think it bridges a gap between straight-up thriller and hard SF. Can I compete with those guys I just mentioned? Well, no. But let's give it a shot, anyway.

IO: Where and by what means will the book be distributed?

SG: Distribution will be online: Amazon, Smashwords, Walmart, Barnes & Noble.

IO: How do you relate to the supportive establishment you seem to have? Do you mention good relations, do you interact with them very much, are they helpful in what you're doing?

SG: The guys at CP, especially Tom Weiss and Jamie Wilson (Executive Editor), have been fantastic. I already consider them friends and I expect things will stay that way. Tom and I will have a call once a month, and on most days, we'll be firing emails between the three of us. Having that kind of relationship is invaluable—I simply don't take it personally if one of those guys tells me I need to change something in the manuscript; I know they only want the best for the book.

We're all in different time zones—I'm in the UK, Jamie's in the US, and Tom's in Australia. It's a great team and I'm proud to be a part of it.

IO: Do you have an author's page on the net?

SG: I don't yet have my own website, but I'll get to it—I'm told I really should have one. I understand CP are going to add author pages to their website. Also, I'm on Twitter—feel free to follow me @sequence_ready .

IO: What, briefly, will Kill Sequence be about? How did you arrive at having the title for the book that you have?

SG: I'll give you the same pitch I gave CP to grab their interest:

"The bonkers AI in Shawn Nash's troubled mind lets him control devices remotely. Hock them. Corrupt them. Use them, to avenge his murdered wife. But when he sets out to hunt her killer, he leaves a bloodbath in his wake. The AI says Kill, but who's controlling the AI?"

I had the title from the early days of the first draft. It's very specific to the plot, it's not just a cool sounding name, and it could have two, maybe even three, meanings. But it sure helps that it sounds cool.

IO: How did you come to have an interest in science fiction, and in the writing of it?

SG: I can't remember a time when I wasn't in love with science fiction. I feel like I must have been born with Star Trek, Star Wars, and the Million Dollar Man pre-loaded in my mind. As dazzling as the technologies in SF are, though, it's the humanity of the pieces that I'm drawn most to. The question of how the tech changes lives. The cause and the effect.

IO: Is your book in any way critical of modern living and technology? Do you have some ideas you wish to put across to the reader?

SG: First and foremost, I set out to write a ripping yarn, but Kill Sequence is a cautionary tale, for sure. Smart technology is everywhere nowadays, and coupled with social media, our lives have been immeasurably changed. Before long, we'll have smart cybernetic implants thrown into the mix. No doubt about that. Just ask Elon Musk.

IO: What opinions do you have about life in the present time?

SG: I'm frequently stunned by where we are with technology. Just the stuff we already take for granted—smart phones, video calls, self-driving vehicles. Robots that dance and run obstacle courses. I just turned 49, so I honestly feel like I'm living in the future. In that sense, it's wonderful (well, terrifying in terms of the robots). But while all that's going on, we're seeing our society more divided than ever. Social media (or at least the way it's being used) has obviously played a hefty part in that. As our technology keeps pushing onward, I worry about how we'll respond to it as a people.

IO: Do you have predictions about what the future might hold?

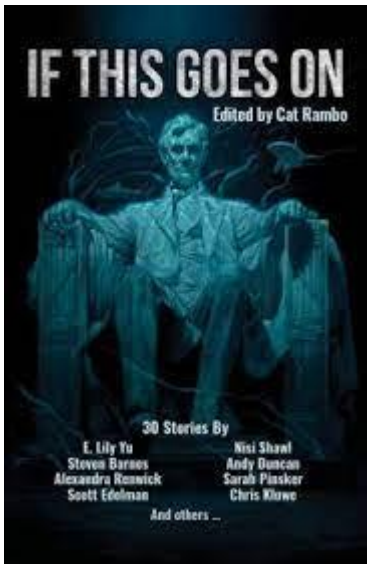
SG: The Singularity has never seemed so likely, and if it happens—if it hasn't already—we'll probably welcome it, if we haven't already.

IO: Are there any more statements you wish to add to this interview, any concluding statement for the readers of the interview?

SG: I hear my book's a blast!

Despite my mistrust of social media, give me a follow on Twitter@sequence_ready . Thanks for the chat!

POLITICS IN SCIENCE FICTION by Jeffrey Redmond



Is politics where the action is?

Science fiction is and has always been a political genre. Of necessity, the politics of science fiction are reflective of the political climate in which it's written—why else do we speculate about the future, but that we're concerned with the present?

Foz Meadows wrote a widely circulated piece on why politics belong in science fiction. The background was this: there has been a flare-up of the culture wars in the SF community, sparked by the odious views of Vox Day, a man of virulent opinions, who apparently helped coordinate a Rabid Puppy slate of nominations to the Hugo awards. The fight seems to be escalating, and it will be interesting how it all plays out at the London World SF convention later this year.

Foz's article does a good job of explaining the background to this, and why these folks are so reprehensible. It was an immediate response to Glenn Harlan Reynolds' meagre article which claimed that politics don't belong in science fiction. Reynolds' article should be understood as part of a long-held right-wing position plea against "political correctness". This particular tactic is to cry at the "censorship" that those poor beleaguered Rightists have to endure in the face to the cruel totalitarian Left. It's a ploy that emerged as a response to the various movements tat emerged from the Sixties, gained currency particularly during the 1980s—the era of Reaganism and Thatcherism—and today used pretty much across the world.

What it always amounts to is this: "The horrible Left criticizes me when I'm racist, sexist and homophobic. That's censorship! I have a right to be racist, sexist and homophobic!" Of course this relies on a terribly distorted version of the word censorship, one which equates criticism with a government policy that makes the publication of an opinion illegal. But it also cleverly shifts the terrain from the politics at hand to another more abstract one. Racism get translated into an abstract question of "rights". Criticism of sexism becomes "bullying". The term political correctness was once used by the New Left (often ironically), but was rediscovered in its modern sense by conservatives in the late 1980s.

Second, it's worth remembering that although Reynolds holds up the Golden Age SF as one where the field was not rent by politics—here he seems to mean the institutions of SF, not the ideology of its writers—actually, it's just plain wrong. For example, before World War Two, back in 1937, Donald Wollheim delivered a speech (written y Johnny Michel) denouncing "the Gernsback Delusion", that idea that technological progress would lead to a glorious technocratic utopia, without consideration to the social

arrangements that would need to accompany them. Many of those techno-utopias were white, as William Gibson critiqued these in his "The Gernsback Continuum". This focus on society obviously marked them off as Leftists.

Wollheim unsuccessfully moved that this, the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, shall place itself on record as opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences and militaristic ideologies, and shall further resolve that science fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life.

This was a clear statement against the rise of Fascism, and the leading lights of this motion—the Futurians, including Asimov, Pohl and Judith Merrill—who should be better remembered than she is—were Leftists. Andrew Milner and Robert Savage have written about this, and they explain it thoroughly.

In 1938 he and like-minded friends formed a committee for the Political Advancement of Science Fiction, composed the "Science Fiction Internationale", and drafted a manifesto with "a lot of V.I. Lenin in it, and a lot of H.G. Wells", according to Pohl's memoirs. In 1939, Pohl proposed a Futurian Federation of the World, thus anticipating Wells' own similar, and only slightly less ineffectual, wartime gestures. The same year witnessed what sf fanlore still knows as the "Great Exclusian Act", when a half-dozen of the more querulous and left-leaning Futurians, including Pohl, Wollheim, and Michel, were banned from the World Science Fiction Convention.

In other words, even in the days that Reynold's claims were blissfully "apolitical", SF was rent with political disagreements. Maybe they quieted down in the immediate postwar period, but they burst forth again in the late Sixties, when Galaxy published two lists of SF writers, one for and one against the Vietnam war.

The organization of the Sad Puppy slate reminds those of us who consider themselves progressive that we too have to organize in the field of SF. Like all cultural fields, SF is fractured politically. That's not something we can avoid, nor is it something we should be afraid of. Science fiction writers are like any other group, responsible for the world we live in. Indeed, as people who are thinking about the future, we have a responsibility to. Perhaps it's even time for a more formally organized network of progressives. Quite what this would look like, I'm not sure, but one thing is certain—we can't leave the field empty for Vox Day and his hench-creatures.

Writing in USA today, Glenn Harlan Reynolds made a case for why he feels that

politics don't belong in science fiction:

"There was a time when science fiction was a place to explore new ideas, free of the conventional wisdom of staid, 'mundane' society, a place where speculation replaced group think, and where writers as different as libertarian-leaning Robert Heinlein, and left-leaning Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke would share readers, magazines, and conventions."

Ignoring momentarily the inference that science fiction is no longer a place to explore new ideas, it is immediately telling that, in trying to demonstrate the former scope and variety of politics in SFF, Reynolds has chosen to make his case. He names three white Anglo men, all of whom began their careers a good 20-odd years before Jim Crow was repealed, before women became legally entitled to equal pay, and before homosexuality was discriminated. Race, gender and sexual orientation certainly don't predetermine one's political affiliations. It seems pointedly relevant that, during the Golden Age of SF, the prevailing laws and social conditions in the UK and the USA both made a certain type of visible dissent. Or rather, visible dissent by a certain type of person, if not impossible, then certainly very difficult, regardless of the forum.

What Reynolds sees as intellectual harmony, a sort of friendly détente between men who held very different political opinions, is, in fact, the end result of a system which privileged the works, views and personhood of men like them so far above the contributions of everyone else as to skew the results beyond usefulness. Golden Age SF wasn't apolitical, nor were its writers; rather, both were the products of an intensely political process.

So when Reynolds notes sadly of the Hugo Awards that "in recent years critics have accused the award process—and much of science fiction fandom itself—of becoming politicized", his claim that it was never political before is fundamentally inaccurate. Rather, science fiction fandom, which has always been political, is now visibly so, not only because groups previously prevented from speaking out, whether legally or through social coercion, are now increasingly free to do so, but because he fan conversation is no longer restricted by factors like physical distance or the preferences of gatekeepers. Just as the internet allows Reynolds to post his criticism of modern SFF online, so it allows others to post this criticism of him.

Reynolds, however, seems to not think so. That's certainly been the experience of Larry Correla, who was nominated for a Hugo Award. Correla, the author of numerous highly successful science fiction books like MONSTER HUNTER INTERNATIONAL and

HARD MAGIC, got a lot of flak because he's a right-leaning libertarian.

This is a drastic misrepresentation of the objections to Correla's nomination. Foremost among which is his prominent association with and support for Vox Day, aka Theodore Beale, a man who recently said of one of SFF's most prominent and popular authors, N.K. Jemisin, who is African American, that:

"We do not view her as being fully civilized…those self-defense laws [like Stand Your Ground in Florida] have been put in place to let whites defend themselves by shooting people like her, who are savages in attacking white people…[she is] an educated, but ignorant, savage with no more understanding of what it took to…"

Because, in the lead up to the announcement of that year's Hugo Award shortlist, Vox/Beale and Correla collaborated on the promotion of what they called the Sad Puppy Slate: a list of nominees, including themselves—most of whom, it must be noted, actually made it onto the short list, including Vox/Beale—that was specifically intended to prove a political point: namely, that despite the criticism folks like Correla receive from the more left-leaning quarters of SFF fandom, they still ultimately sold more books, and could themselves get on the ballot if they wanted.

While there has been considerable debate and outrage about their approach to garnering votes—as, indeed, there is every year, accusations of logrolling, ballot-stuffing and gratuitous self-promotion being par for the course from all corners—ultimately, what Correla and Vox/Beale did was legal. Nonetheless, the backlash against Correla isn't, as Reynolds would have it, simply because he's the inoffensive holder of a particular political stance, but because he has actively thrown his support behind an openly misogynistic white supremist.

To therefore suggest, as Reynolds has done, that the criticism Correla has subsequently received is political, while his Sad Puppy Slate—which was explicitly intended to make a political point—was not, is not just inaccurate, but willfully misleading. The idea that politics are only unwelcome when they challenge the entrenched or dominant powers of society, rather than supporting them, is itself a defensive strategy of dominant politics: a way of conditioning us to believe that politics so normative as to be rendered invisible are simply apolitical defaults, and that any attempt to change, challenge or define them is not only political, but evidence of a political conspiracy—or groupthink, even—so vast and all-consuming as to be the real dominant power.

Says Reynolds: Purging the heretics, usually but not always from the left, has become

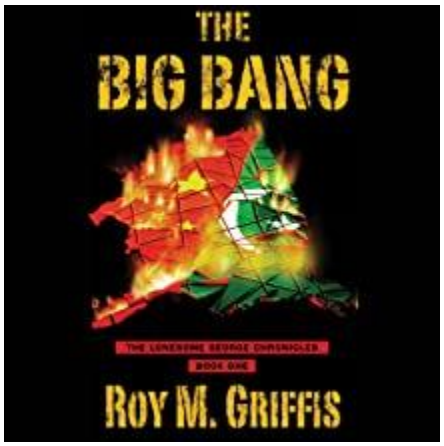
a popular game in a lot of institutions. It just seems worse in science fiction because SF was traditionally open and optimistic about the future, two things that purging the heretics doesn't go with very well.

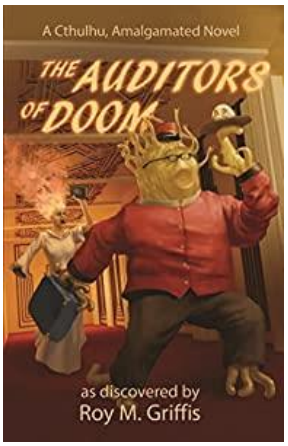
The backlash against Vox/Beale and Correla isn't about "purging the heretics". It's legitimate criticism of a man who both believes in, and is a political advocate for the active disenfranchisement and lesser worth of the vast majority of humans on the planet. And a discussion about why SFF, as a community that includes a rather large number of such humans, is best served by supporting them instead. Correla has thrown his lot in with Vox/Beale in a campaign which, by his own admission, was less about the quality of nominated works than their ability to provoke those with different politics. To try and then argue that such works should be judged separately from the politics which helped to nominate them, let alone the politics of their content, is a hypocritical insincerity of the highest order.

Science fiction both is, and always has been, a political genre. When we tell stories about a future in outer space populated entirely by white people, who constitute a global minority. When we describe societies set a hundred, three hundred, a thousand years in the future but which still lack gender equality, and whose sexual mores mimic those of the 1950s, that is no less a political decision than choosing to write diversely. The political influence on a given community is not restricted solely to those whose politics are made visible by their difference to your own. Swimming against the current might draw more attention, but it doesn't negate what's trying to pull you under. Of necessity, the politics of science fiction are reflective of the political climate in which it's written—why else do we speculate about the future, but that we're concerned with the present?

Politics belong in science fiction, Mr. Reynolds, because it is written both by and about people, and you cannot have one without the other. By all means, criticize a particular strain of politics—criticize context and method and history, result and aim and consequence—but not the fact that politics are involved at all. And especially not when one side is advocating for equal treatment and representation, while the other is saying their gender, race or sexual orientation voids their right to it.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW: *Roy M. Griffis*





Roy Griffis is a very outgoing writer, as may be found by visiting his site at https://roygriffis.com . He has a Facebook page as well, titled ROY GRIFFIS, STORYTELLER, which is well worth a visit. His email address is griff@roymgriff.com . His writings are highly individualistic, ranging from the studious to the riotous. As an interviewee for the Fan-Pro Coordinating Bureau, he is ideal, having the attitudes both of a fan and a pro.

IO: I note that these Cthulhu novels are humorous, which distinguishes them from H.P. Lovecraft's work. Why did you decide to take a humorous approach to the mythos?
RG: To be honest, it was less a decision than a need. I'd been working for several years on my By the Hands of Men historical fiction series (six volumes, about 500,000 words), while raising a family and commuting for my job. In addition, I was doing a lot of research to make this read authentically, which also took a lot of time.

So while finishing the last book in that series (Ringside at the Circus of the Fallen), a great deal of the details of my life changed. During that time, my wife and I moved from Southern California to a small town in Texas. I started work with a new company—and yes, the cliché is both wise and true, "Don't quit your day job, at least until the movie money shows up"—while my wife and I were renovating an older farmhouse we had purchased.

That last task turned out to be a hell of a lot of work. The back half of the house was constructed in 1937, while the front half turned out to be an old Baptist church that was built based on the old rough planks nailed with iron spikes and not steel nails sometime between 1860 and 1880. Since this is going to be my last home (I've moved way too much in my life), we made it the house we wanted, doing as much of the work as we could ourselves.

After two years of almost constant labor in the evening and weekends, we moved in on Labor Day, 2019. I'd finished Ringside and people were starting to notice it, which was great. But I was exhausted from the move, the renno, the new workplace, and all the rest.

Then at the end of that month, my first high school girlfriend, Sandy, died unexpectedly. She was my first love, my first and forever fan. She had been a chef, traveled a lot, and then returned to Nebraska to be near her family. As I was in the Coast Guard and then a single father for a while, we had only seen each other once in the past thirty years or so. But we'd always stayed in touch. I'd send her drafts of my novels and she was always excited to hear about any modest success I'd achieved (screenwriting awards or slowly processing toward a "real" writing career).

But like the rest of us, she had her own demons and battles which she didn't share with me. Having a little experience with addiction myself, I understand how shame can compel a person to keep those "failures" to themselves, which only feeds the cycle. So her death was completely unexpected to me, and as more about her last years (of near poverty and mental health struggles) became known to me, the more wrenching her loss became.

A kind person, talented pianist and artist, undone by genetics (her mother was schizophrenic) and childhood abuse, none of which was her fault, and all of which conspired to lead to lonely death. I suppose you can understand this kind of wrecked me in many ways. The ugliness and unfairness of it. The loss of her…I mean, she was one month younger than me. I expected to know one of my oldest friends for another twenty years.

Then my mom died about six months later.

For a full year, I couldn't write a damn thing.

Finally in October of 2019, after months of pushing that immense Sisyphean cube of grief up a hill, I found myself ready to write again.

I had at least two series ideas, but they felt heavy to me, and with the loss of those two very important women from my life (but not my heart), I couldn't do anything serious. Not Book Seven of By the Hands of Men, which readers were asking me about. And not the two series I'd conceived of early in our move to Texas.

But I had this wacky scene I'd scribbled down one afternoon at work. I had been reviewing resumes and I LinkedIn profiles for candidates when I'd noticed a pattern, almost a corporate trope. In this case, it turned out that everyone was "a thought leader". They were an "inspiring manager and.."
or "motivated team player and…" or "I am a thought leader in Interpretive Tap Dancing and Tibetan Scat Singing".

Something about the term itself struck me as fatuous trendy babble (but that's just me). And as I can't stop my mind from wandering after these odd thoughts, I found myself wondering what description could someone put in their bio that was more pretentious and have less useful content than that one was a "thought leader". A phrase leapt into my mind. "The blithering excrescences from beyond the stars". Well, when you put it that way, the next question is, "Who would this individual work for?" The answer for anyone with the faintest exposure to old school pulp magazines was obvious. This would be a minion of Cthulhu.

That alignment of Cthulhu and a corporate environment (which is its own special kind of torment) led me to another realization. Any organization needs an administrative staff. Somebody has to cut the paychecks, approve travel vouchers, by paper clips and so on. Who would do that for the Cthulhu Corporation?

Of course, it would be Shoggoths.

So to answer your original question…I *had* to write humorously. First, because my broken heart wouldn't bear anything else, and second, the idea was so completely ludicrous that it wouldn't support being told any other way.

IO: What guidelines do you follow in your going over of Cthulhu? Is much of what you're writing in these volumes based upon Lovecraft's delineations, or do you follow other writings about Cthulhu, or both?

RG: Very few guidelines. After a bit of research, I decided to hew closer to Lovecraft (minus the regrettable racism and fear of girly bits). Howard Phillips created the paradigm of Elder Things and Dark Gods and so on I know HP and his homies had fun killing each other off in stories they created within the mythos back in the 20s and 30s, but I certainly didn't want to infringe on other people's work and creative contributions.

So I decided to use his deranged framework, but come at it from a different angle. I'd reference his original creations, but outside of them, create my own.

IO: What liberties have you taken in departing from followers of the Cthulhu mythos?

RG: I suppose one could point to the whole "Not taking it very seriously" aspect of the three novels I've written in the series so far.

IO: What effect are you wanting to have on readers with the Cthulhu volumes?

RG: Time for a true confession: I suspect one of the reasons I don't have a "real" career is that I don't write the same kind of book over and over. That would be boring for me, and my readers, I suspect.

One way I keep myself engaged is y setting a creative challenge with a project. For instance, when I began By the Hands of Men, I decided I was going to write as if the novel were composed and published contemporaneously with the events of the story. That means, basically, no skin, nor boinking, no wildly graphic violence, and very little profanity. That approach seems to have worked to really take the reader into the world.

With CTHULHU, AMALGAMATED, my goal was to create something that honored HPL's vision, but opened it up from an entirely new perspective. And along with that, why not a funny "Thing Out of the Dark Waters Beyond the Edge of the Sane Universe" book that is also just a good old fun read?

IO: What screenwriting have you done? What brought you the screenwriting award?
RG: I loved books and movies ever since I was a kid. Books were a great escape for an awkward, lost, lonely kid who felt like a stranger wherever he went (that would be me to whom I'm referring, by the way). They were the first magic I'd ever experienced that wasn't a counterfeit.

Movies, though, were magic of a different kind. I loved the way a good film could enrapture a crowd of five hundred strangers, take them on the same emotional journey. It seemed like the closest thing we could get to a shared dream.

Of course I wanted to do that. After the Coast Guard and college, I ended up in Hollywood for about a year. My story is so common it's a cliché. I was a member of the Writers Guild for about a year. Sold a TV Movie to Fox, which promptly turned around and fired the VP who'd bought the project, and in the process said project was trashed. I wrote a very well-received screenplay that "almost sold" (again, a typical experience).

Well, at the point the payment for my unproduced teleplay ran out, I had to get real. I was a divorced dad with shared custody of a three-year-old. If it was just me alone, I could have lived in a station wagon at the beach, been a part-time barista and written movies on the side.

But couldn't do that to a little kid. They need and deserve good food, shelter, health insurance, toys for Christmas, hot water, and all that kind of stuff.

Also, I was over the Hollywood "death of a thousand notes". That is, you write your guts out on a movie script you think is entertaining and you believe is worthwhile, only to have your work turned over to a group of twenty-five year old MBAs at the production companies for their input and they will come back to you with notes on what is good and what needs work. I recall the person who read a script of mine set in the Korean War, and said, in all seriousness, "We can't move forward with this until I check and see if it's okay if the North Koreans are the bad guys." I was well brought up enough to not blurt out my thought, which was a largely unprintable version of "You do know who we were fighting in the Korean War, don't you?"

So I moved on from Hollywood and got a job in IT so I could support my son and not be a burden to society myself. However, I kept writing, eventually drifting into novels.

Much like my novel career, my screenplays were all over the place:

SINS OF THE FUHRER (about a hunt for clues to the location of hidden Nazi gold)

TRAITOR OF THE LIVING (Merchant Seaman hunts for the rapacious female vampire who killed his wife)

PHALLACIES, a coming of (middle) age story—about being semi-young, dumb, and trying not to stay that way.

And a few others.

The screenwriting award was from the Smashcut Independent Film Festival. Mid-stream, the organizers got approval from legendary screenwriter John Milius to name the writing award after him. The screenplay was called "Cold Day in Hell", and it was in "Elevator pitch-speak," THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE MEETS THE GREAT ESCAPE.

IO: What brought you to write By the Hands of Man books?

RG: All of my writing (plays, movies, short stories, novels) begins as a question, typically something along the lines of "What if…" or "How come…" or "Why did they do that?" often in response to something I've heard or read.

For instance, two different questions were the genesis of "Cold Day in Hell". One was a random news clipping from the 80s revealing a secret 1953 Congressional Hearing about the fact the Russians were taking US POWs out of Korea and back to the USSR. My brain said, ""Damn, those POWs must have known they were on a one way trip. What the hell would they do about that?" That, along with another question, sparked the story.

As for By the Hands of Men, the first seed was planted in the 80s when an older English lady who was working a community theatre play (one of mine, as it happened) relayed to me some terrible stories from her grandfather, who had fought in the Great War. On hearing those, I asked myself "How could someone be around that and not do something about it?"

So, I began to story. When I write prose, I have a beginning—the infamous inciting incident—and I have an ending. I start writing, and write until I get to the end. In this case, I thought the story would be told in a single book.

I was mistaken.

IO: How would you explain the name of the series? What sort of material is covered?

RG: The name of the series is the essential theme of the books, if not my entire writing career. It refers to the way the characters learn that the Hands of Men can make a Heaven or a Hell of this world, and further, that the choice of the destination we create is up to us.

That theme is one reason I have nothing but loathing for the nihilistic "life is terrible, people are awful, and we should just give up" kinds of literature that are so popular in elevated academic circles. Unless your ass is chained to the wall of a North Korean

prison, an individual has a lot of control over his own life…if only they have courage to assume that responsibility and are willing to pay the price to achieve their honorable dreams.

IO: What histories do these books cover?

RG: It's a saga that begins in a field hospital in France in 1917. It covers two decades and several continents, along with the Russian Civil War, life in pre-war Shanghai, Paris between the wars, the Congo and South Africa, Depression era America, and concludes in Los Angeles in the mid-1930s.

IO: What is to be found in the volume called The Big Bang?

RG: that is my first professionally published novel, Book One of The Lonesome George Chronicles. It's an alternative history novel that imagines (there's that "What if…", again) what would have happened to America if our religio-pathic jihad-loving enemies got their act together and hit the nation with a series of coordinated attacks. It's a bit of apocalypse lit, as about 75% of the world's population dies in the resulting wars and societal collapse that result.

The series follows the social, civil, and political breakdown of our nation, as other groups attempt to opportunistically kick the USA when we're down. It's told in a bit of a Roshomon style, from many differing viewpoints: a famous Hollywood actor, a former insurance adjuster turned guerrilla fighter against the Caliban (local patios for "the California Taliban"), a Congressional aide, the last elected President of the United States, and others.

Book One is followed by "The Fire This Time" and "The Broken Return".

IO: You don't like nihilism—I was rather interrupted in my thoughts by this comment, as I was waiting to ask if your tendency in writing is to be critical of mankind's endeavors. I'll ask anyway, are the doings of man subject to great criticism from your viewpoint?

RG: Let me put it this way: there is no good thing that we humans can't misuse. When Guttenberg got his printing press operational, the first thing they printed was the Bible. I'd bet the next thing off the presses was a "Live Nude Nuns" magazine or something.

So, if I have criticisms, it would be less about man's doings than what man does with what he has done. Not to get excessively theological, but it is a fallen world. But we don't have to stay there, grubbing in the dirt. If we choose, we can stand upright and do amazing things. (See the life of Dr. Ben Carson…his mother was a mentally ill single parent, but she made the kinds of choices that produced a visionary surgeon who changed people's lives.)

But here's the rub, as they say. Those kind of choices take effort; they have, in economic terms, "costs". Water runs downhill for a reason. It's the easiest thing in the world. And to me, nihilism is a choice…the easy one. If there's no point to attempting to do anything different, look at all the energy you saved.

There are an infinite number of events taking place in any one moment of time. Reality becomes what you pay attention to and what you choose to do about what you are seeing.

IO: What is your view of the literary realms of fantasy and science fiction? Are those major interests of yours? Do you regard yourself as a fan, or great appreciator, of these forms of writing?

RG: I started as a fan of the stories and creativity. Ray Bradbury's magical realism (back before it was even an approved literary term), Heinlein's stuff up to STARSHIP TROOPERS, almost anything by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and so on were tremendous escapes for me as a teenager who felt like a teenager everywhere.

I certainly gained a great respect for writers who can craft a tale that is so immersive that I feel like I'm living the story. Those are, in fact, the kinds of novels I try to write myself, and thus I guess I'll never really escape my pulp roots.

Fantasy and Science Fiction aren't major interests of mine, exactly, since most of my reading these days is research of one kind or another. When I do want a break from non-fiction, I am very likely to pick up something decidedly not realistic, be it MONSTER HUNTER, THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE, SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES, or even WATERSHIP DOWN. Again, there are works that are gripping and very emotionally immersive, with a great deal of imagination behind them, as well. I love stories that surprise me and move me, regardless of the genre of topic. Those works that do take me on that kind of journey have my respect, admiration, and gratitude.

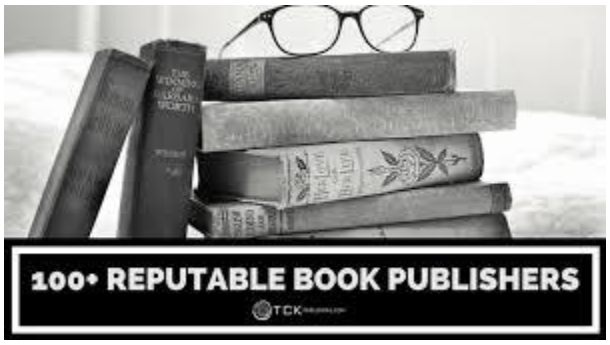
IO: Do you have any concluding remarks about the writing scene, about science fiction writing, and about the literary and publishing world in general? And is there anything you would like to say to readers of this interview?

RG: I'm a story guy, to be honest. I love a compelling story. I don't read for the "beauty" of the language, or the symbolism, or ham-fisted agit-prop. I want to know what happens to characters I care about. Literature, in many ways, seems to have gotten away from the idea of a "ripping yarn", preferring to gore safely well-gored shibboleths, and rarely having the courage to confront the current social and cultural power structures. And the stories are all too often infantile as well as dull.

The publishing world was always a crap shoot, and traditional publishing appears to be even more incredibly clannish and secret society-ish in terms of only letting the "rights sorts" in the door. Learn how to self-publish. You may not make much money, but, let's face it, most of us were doing this for free long before we tried to make it or get our foot in the door or whichever cliché works for you.

With self-publishing, you will be telling the stories you want to tell, and you might find that there are people, complete strangers, who tell you your story is the best one they've ever read. As I said, don't quit your day job, but give people a chance to find your good and decent and honorable work. Don't write things that diminish your readers, but create art that uplifts and ennobles.

NOTES ON PUBLISHERS by Jefferson Swycaffer



Are they reputable? Let's talk this over. (Take it from a pro.)

Every so often it is well to assess the "state of the art" when it comes to professional publication in science fiction and fantasy. The current evaluation is, as is quite typical, both good and bad.

The good part is that science fiction novels are being professionally published, and they are quite good. They are fantastic! They're great! The writing we find today rivals the best of the classical era, the "high water mark" of the era of "2001: A Space Odyssey", "Dune", "Lord of the Rings", or the Foundation trilogy. We are consistently treated to great fiction, rewarding to read, entertaining always, thoughtful enough to qualify under the rubric of "The Literature of Ideas", and stirring enough to evoke the treasured "Sense of Wonder". If one were sentenced by some quixotic judge to read nothing but books published since A.D. 2020, one would find it no great hardship.

The bad part is that this is a grievously difficult epoch for newcomers to break into the field. The Big Publishers have consolidated, and they are, for obvious reasons, more interested in big blockbusters and best-selling series, and far less interested—to the point of exclusion—in "midlist" adventures, lesser triumphs, and standalone books of only modest sales numbers.

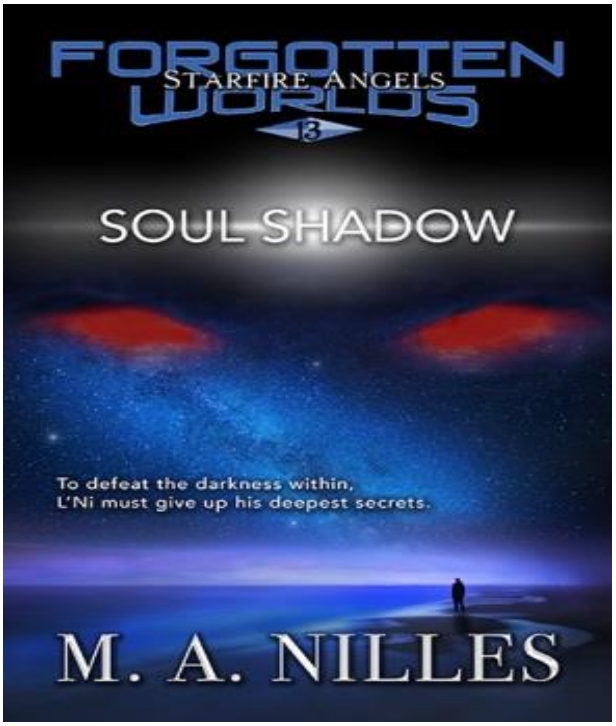
It would be impossible for Ursula K. LeGuin or Samuel R. Delany to begin their careers today. LeGuin's collection of stories, "The Wind's Twelve Quarters" or even Delany's prize-winning novel "The Einstein Intersection", could not be published in today's market environment. They would earn polite, even admiring rejection slips, but they would not be taken up by Harper & Row or Ace Books, the publishers who published them in their day.

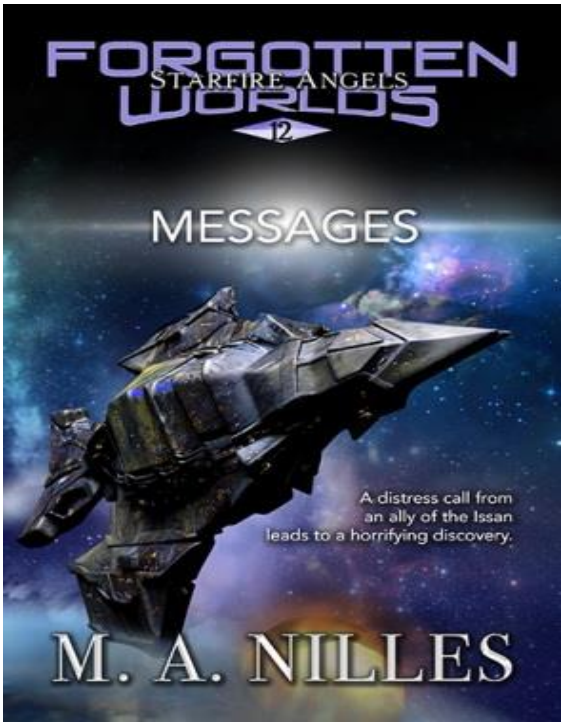
One ameliorating factor is Amazon Books and Kindle self-publishing. This is, in essence, today's substitute for the midlist of yore. This is where newcomers can arrive and be noticed. This is the great democratic sprawl, the free-for-all of the free market, where everyone starts on an equal footing, and success is measured solely by—success! The competition is ferocious, yet condign. The readership participates, not only by their purchases, but by their reviews. There are little angles, like Amazon Advertising, a "cost per click" service useful in promotion and marketing. There are third-party services, like BookBub, that highlight current "deals and steals". But ultimately, success on Amazon is up to the great amorphous readership, We the People, and we like what we like.

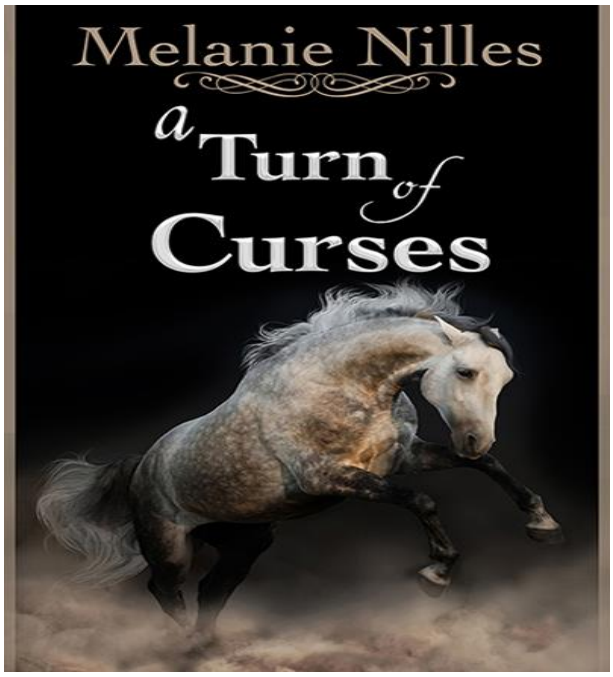
New writers searching for their initial success are warned, sternly, to avoid publishing services, re-write services, agencies that charge reading fees, and the like. Some of these are arrant scams, providing to service at all for far too much money. Others are of some actual value, such as for-hire editors who will correct your grammar and offer suggestions to make the story more exciting. Most of us have good friends who will do these things for us for no cost at all. In the strongest possible terms: never pay someone else to read your work.

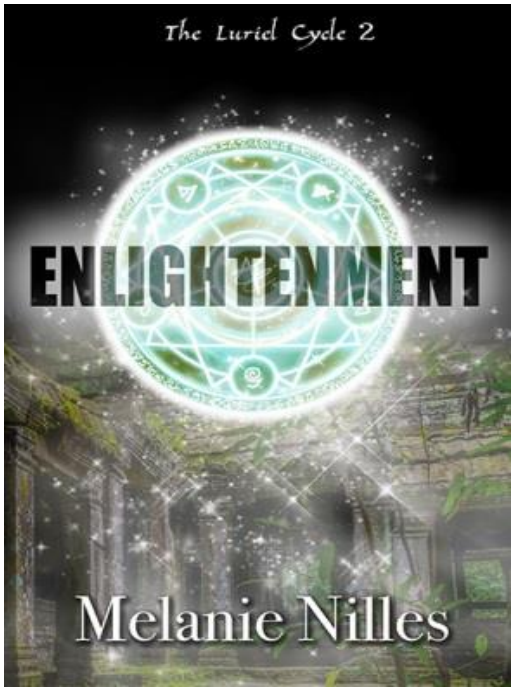
As my first editor said, forty years ago, "Write On". I wish you all the best of luck finding a market and getting paid. But it's a nasty environment and a rotten era, and it is my sorrowful duty to give the discouraging warning: it's a lot harder today than it was in the past.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW: *Melanie Nilles*









Melanie Nilles has gotten what appears to be a firm place in the publishing world. She gained a publishing contract and has been writing and publishing since that time. She has a blog in which she discusses her books and from which she reaches out for communication with

readers, much as Roy Griffis does. She can be found at www.melanienilles.com . Her email address is melanie_nilles@yahoo.com .

IO: I will have to start from the beginning in interviewing you as I have not seen your books. But what we are doing in the National Fantasy Fan Federation is discovering authors and when the interview is published it may be that some people will buy and review the books. They certainly look good on your website. I'll be putting photos of their covers in along with the interview.

My opening question is, when did you begin writing fiction of this type?

MN: I always loved science fiction and fantasy. I actually started writing my first science fiction novel during my college freshman year. I won't say when/ A lady doesn't reveal her age. I will say that it was a long time before ebook self-publishing became possible. I'm so glad too. Those early stories were awful. However, my first attempts had some merit. I've adapted the characters into my latest space opera series set in my most popular series. I'm older and wiser and a much better writer than I was decades ago.

IO: Were there difficulties at first in getting publisher attention?

MN: Yes, because, frankly, I sucked. I had a lot to learn about the craft and my work wasn't near ready for prime time. A story idea is one thing, but learning to fully build worlds, cultures, characters, etc. requires a lot of training and practice. Some people have it naturally. Some, like me, need more time to learn the craft. I worked at it for years with the help of writing books, then online critique groups, and then paid editors.

I finally gained a publisher's attention with one of my fantasy books. It was a small press with a limited contract, so I was able to request my rights back after three years, which I did. I then rewrote a lot of it and republished it as part of the rest of the series. By then, I had self-published several books, including the rest of that series, which was why I had requested the rights back.

IO: What was the first book you published? Which publisher was it?

MN: I guess I almost answered this above. Mundania Press published DRAGON PROPHECY, which is now LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: PROPHECY.

MN: What processes did you go through in getting the first publication?

IO: I sent out queries and waited until they responded with an offer. It was a good feeling to know that SOMEONE was interested in my writing, and their contract was fair, as I mentioned.

IO: What is your main reason for writing? What do you wish to express and convey to readers?

MN: I write first for myself. In the beginning it was because I couldn't find books that I wanted to read and I wanted to tell stories. Writing has always been about having fun with my own ideas. If other people like it, great. If not, I try not to think too much about it. I hope to please a majority of readers but know that it's impossible to please everyone, so I set out to please myself first. If no one ever read my stories again, I'd still write; but if my stories have meaning for someone else, I consider that a blessing. To not be able to write would be a nightmare.

IO: How have your books been doing on the market?

MN: I've been publishing since 2009 and rode the height of the ebook wave that came in 2012. It was in that time that I had enough sales to later qualify for the new self-publishing requirements for membership in SFWA.

It's not so easy now to sell books as it used to be, but that's the business cycle for you. I wasn't among the earliest to jump on when Amazon started what is now KDP but I was there in the early stages. I've seen the coming and going of scammers on Amazon and the different programs they implemented that became more competitive and also the influx of everyone writing and publishing so that it's even more difficult to get noticed. Discovery is the hardest part of book selling. It's hard to get noticed among the nearly endless flood of other books.

Now, you almost can't sell anything without advertising somewhere or keeping a mailing list to send out new release notifications. Back in the early days, just getting on the right "also-boughts" listing on an Amazon item page would get your book in front of people. Now, it seems that the only "Products related to this item" on Amazon are sponsored. You have to pay to play. That's the long way of saying that my books do well as long as I pay for advertising. It's nowhere near the sales I had before they changed their system. (Yes, I do have some resentment about that, because I remember the old way where promotion was basically free.

IO: These are questions asked from the viewpoint of the NFFF. The NFFF president got me your name and arranged for the interview. My interviews are designed to describe how the publishing situation is and to introduce the members to writers, as well as get them interested in books. I have three more questions. First, do you hear back from any readers about what they have read? What sort of things did they have to say?

MN: Over the years, I heard back from readers. Most of those fan emails have been for my STARFIRE ANGELS series, but that was my young adult series when YA was super hot (2009-2012) on the market. Most of my reader letters have been about that series,

particularly how they wanted more Raea and Elis, which is why that ended up becoming five books. Then I wanted to continue with the series but not write that part into the ground and ruin the characters, so I created expansion series with other characters. My own daughters asked me to write more books with the two characters, but I told them what I told the readers who asked for more—I didn't want to ruin the characters. Now, if I touch on them, they have cameos in the newer expansions.

I respond to all readers who contact me. It's this enthusiasm that keeps a writer going.

[Melanie included some quotes from letters from fans of the books. They were very enthusiastic and many described themselves as fans.]

IO: Were there reviews of your books? What would you quote from these reviews?

MN: My books have reviews. Starfire Angels has the most, but I haven't promoted much of the other books. SA is my most popular series and the world in which I enjoy writing the most. In the early years of publishing that series, I found book bloggers to review it and readers reviewed it. I have used review quotes in promotions. Now that retailers allow ratings without reviews, it's hard to get reviews, unless you use services like Booksprout.

IO: Do you converse much with other writers of fantasy and science fiction about the books you are writing?

MN: Oh, yes. I've belonged to different groups through the years that I've been writing. I remember Kindleboards when Amanda Hooking hit the bestsellers and Hugh Downey and Daniel Arenson. I knew them and others who have done well when they were in the beginnings of their careers. Then they participated less and eventually I did too, but I shifted to other groups and focused on Facebook for a while. Eventually, I got away from social media in general. I did find a new writers group and joined a smaller social media network because of them. Writers really never give up the network of other writers. It's a form of support that we need for something that is a pretty solitary activity.

Sorry I didn't reply sooner. It was a busy week—an annual conference that I run for my day job organization every year—and I needed time to recover. It's a lot of fun, a labor of love for me, but also exhausting as I oversee everything going on during the event after putting it all together.

IO: Thank you for the interview.

Going Over the Issue by John Thiel