

The **N3J**
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
June 2020

EDITORIAL

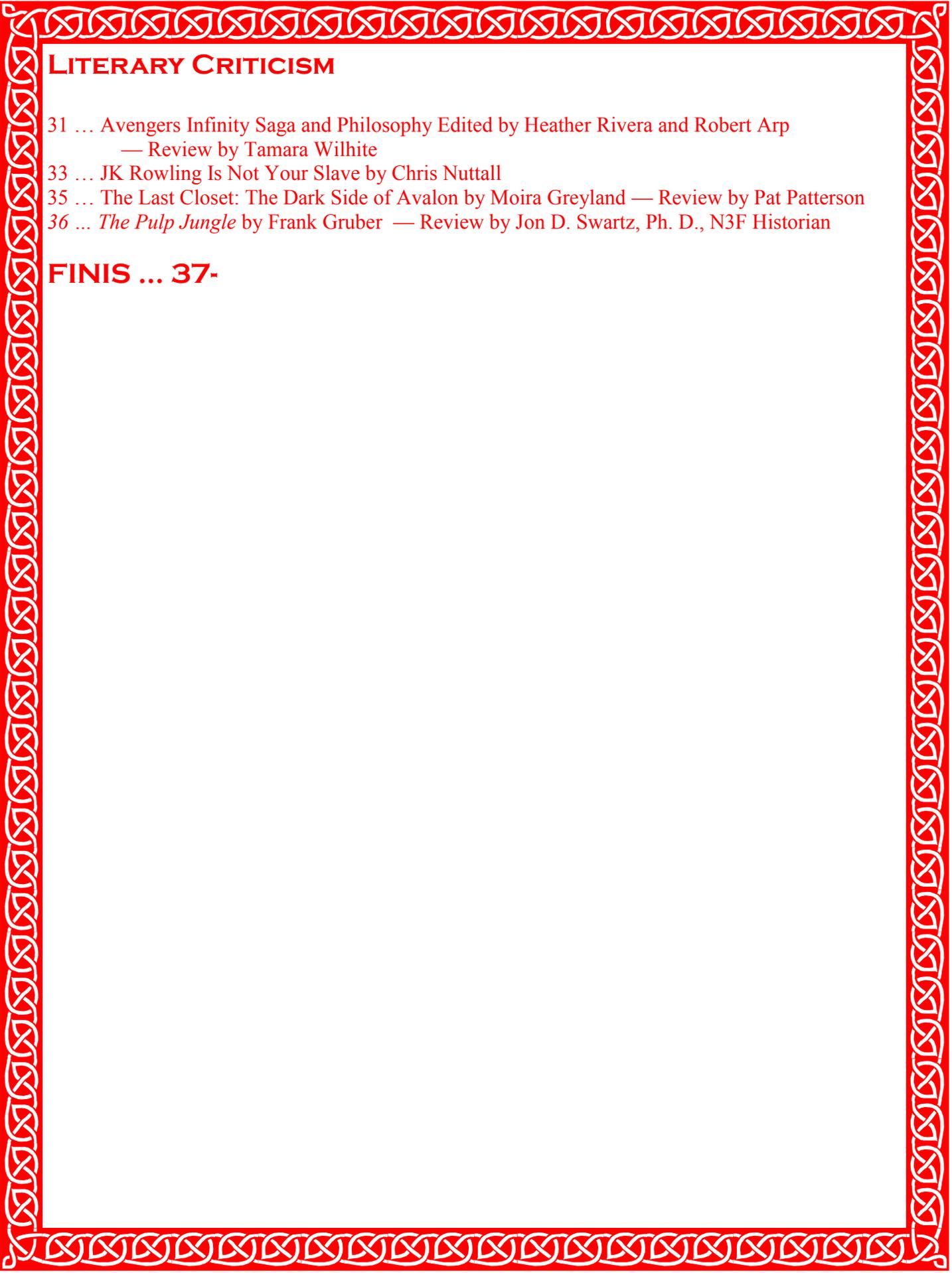
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Editorial

We continue to search for new reviewers. If you write novels, note we will accept your reviews of novels by other authors in your genre. And if they review your work, that's also within reason allowable.

We exist because our writers and editorial staff contribute their unceasing labors to our cause. We would be delighted to publish more reviews if we could get them, not to mention articles on literary criticism or prose bono—better prose. We are always grateful to new writers to let us consider their reviews.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row, Tamara Wilhite, Heath Row, and Samuel Lubell. Jagi Lampighter and Cedar Sanderson give us peerless writing on creating and marketing sf/fnal prose, art, and marketing. Their articles are an invaluable contribution to the future writing efforts of every reader.



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Novels

A Pius Geek by Declan Finn Review by Pat Patterson

Marco and Amanda are two people with supernatural powers who are in love with each other. They are also both masters in a number of fighting arts, with sticks, blades, firearms, as well as unarmed combat.

What else? I know there was something else...

OH, YEAH! They are both devout Catholics!

That's the super twist, you see. I'm not sure I've encountered the tension so well displayed in my past reading. I loved the character of the Philosophical Strangler in Eric Flit's books, and Nigel Bennett and P N Elrod have a series about the difficulties faced by Sir Lancelot, who was healed of a mortal wound by vampirism, but neither of those really lay out a complete eco-system the way Finn does.

The sexual tension is tremendous. Both are gorgeous examples of humanity, and their admiration for each other is obvious to everyone except themselves from the beginning. As they remain in contact with each other, the depth of their interest grows, but they don't DO anything about it. In conventional literature, or in a movie or television show, they would have gotten into bed with each other immediately. However, both have moral and other practical reasons for not doing so.

First, Amanda is an OLD vampire. She has lived long enough that she knows that if she gets involved with a regular human, they will die, and she will grieve.

Second. Marco is a...something. He doesn't really know WHAT he is, but he knows he is different, and that he turns bloodthirsty when under threat. Because of that, he's very hesitant to get involved.

Those are the practical reasons. The MORAL reasons are founded completely in their Catholic faith, which both of them take seriously, as regular communicants, going to confession, and remaining sexually chaste outside of marriage. Sound old-fashioned? Maybe it is, but it's working for them.

The BIG twist, revealed through the vampire Amanda, is that not all the tropes about vampires are applicable. As it turns out, vampires are like the rest of us: they can choose the path they want their life to take. If they choose to self-indulge, that's where the problems with light, aversion to religious symbols, etc. spring from. The more evil they are, the more those things impact them. On the other hand, Amanda rejected the dark side, and strove to remain inside the Church after she was turned, and she can handle crosses, rosaries, silver, and a certain amount of sunlight, without any problems.

And in this book, it all comes to a head, as demonic evil forces renew their efforts to take over the world.

Marco, already having been 'something,' is greatly strengthened, but not turned, by sharing blood with Amanda. And then, he's bitten by a werewolf, and he's GOING to change, but nobody knows what; just

that it's going to be big and bad. The redshirts get cleared away, and those who have been on the fences are forced to take a side.

It's just not common for popular fiction to take the Christian worldview seriously. I am aware there is an entire genre out there called 'Christian fiction,' but that's not been something that I found attractive. I like exploding spaceships. And, to make that happen, you have to make all kinds of assumptions that just don't fit with Christian theology about the End of Days. I'm not arguing against or in favor of that; I'm just trying to describe the way it is, the way I THINK that it is. In my last review of an anthology in the Four Horsemen series, there was a story in which the protagonist was wrestling with the idea of the alien as a being with a soul; THAT'S taking it seriously. And, as I said, it's just not common to find that in popular fiction.

And it might not be commercial, either. I love seeing Denzel Washington act; he made an outstanding post-apocalyptic movie called "The Book of Eli" that went NOWHERE commercially, because the main character was a blind Christian being led on a mission from God to take a Bible across the devastated continent. Great action, great story, great actors: went nowhere.

Maybe that's gonna happen with this book/series as well.

I don't know. I'd hate that. Finn's writing is so good, his characters are so real, his action scenes so (literally) explosive, that I hope his writing affirmatively of a Christian lifestyle isn't a cyanide pill. I hope there are enough people like me, who aren't automatically turned off at the scent of 'religion' as a plot point, that he sells a million copies. Who knows? We all need escape literature.

The Burning White by Brent Weeks Review by Jim McCoy

I know I'm not alone in this but the last book (or movie) in a series is a big deal to me. A well done series can easily be destroyed by a weak ending. There is nothing like building up a story across literal years only to let it fizzle out and die.

Seriously, let me tell you a story:

When I was just a wee little Jimbo, and probably too young to be reading it, one of my friend's mother's suggested that I read Jean M Auel's Earth's Children series. She wouldn't let me borrow her books, but I found out that my Aunt Janice had them, so I borrowed them from her. I was too young to have a job and therefore money to run out and buy them for myself.

At the time, the first four were out. I read them, my dad borrowed them from me and then returned them to his sister. We all loved the books. We talked about the books. It took FOREVER for the next one to come out. I don't remember exactly how many years it took, but I was twelve when I read the first four books, and married by the time I read the fifth one. Unfortunately, my father had passed before it was released, but I still got to call my Aunt Janice and talk about it with her.

It took another eternity for the last book to come out. I couldn't wait. I knew I was going to hear it from my then-wife for buying the book in hardcover, but I had waited for Shelters of Stone for two decades by then (no, I'm not exaggerating) and I wasn't waiting for the paperback release. At the time I had never read an e-book and I wouldn't swear to you that they existed. All I knew is that I was going home to

read it and I had tears in my eyes because I had lost my Aunt Janice by that point and wouldn't have anyone to discuss with.

I took that thing home and I sat down and cracked the spine on the book. I was going to school and working full time, but I put my whole life on pause and read that thing. I regret every second of it. It was terrible. It felt like the conclusion to a scholarly paper. Auel simply regurgitated the first five volumes. It was like reading the Readers' Digest Condensed Book version of the series.

I hit that book with the hardest diss I could imagine. The exact words that came out of my mouth were, "I miss Dad and Aunt Janice, but at least they never had to read THIS."

It was that bad. I'm a book lover. I've read all kinds of works. I have never, and I mean ever, in my entire life been so angry with an author. Yeah, it had a big surprise at the end, but I almost gave up on the last book in the series and missed it. It was that terrible.

Don't ask me why I felt like I had to spend five hundred words venting about something that has nothing to do with the book I'm reviewing, but it felt good.

Anyway...

The latest last book in the series I read was freaking amazeballs. Seriously, Brent Weeks needs to take a bow, because *The Burning White* is a worthy ending to an awesome series. I've reviewed a couple of the earlier books right here on this blog, and I loved those too, but this was magnificent. Weeks brought everything together the way it all needed to end, at least in my opinion.

Weeks has a gift for writing action and *The Burning White* is no exception. The battle scenes are amazing. He knows his stuff, not just in plain old fisticuffs, but also about muzzle-loading firearms. He has apparently studied chain weapons somewhere and he seems to know more than just a little bit about military strategy and tactics. (If you don't know the difference, read Von Clausewitz.) He's done some serious reading. In his acknowledgements, he apologizes for *The Burning White* taking so long, but I'm telling you that if it took this long (well, till last November) to come out because he was doing his research, it was worth it.

The character arcs in this book and across the series are crazy impressive. I saw characters change completely from what I (and they) thought they were. My entire perspective on two major characters changed over the course of this novel, and I never thought that would have been possible. I had those two set in stone in my mind and well...

I was wr...

wro...

w...

Yeah, maybe they hadn't been portrayed accurately previously. Totes not my fault. Seriously, how was I supposed to know? I was right, but they changed. Well, that's actually sort of right. At least one of them changed. The other one, not so much but I got to see a part of their personality I hadn't seen before. I was in awe of the way Weeks worked one particular person around to make them sympathetic. I never would have believed it could have happened. I still don't and I saw it happen.

As someone who has studied history and lamented the loss (albeit sometimes temporary) of ancient knowledge, I was really impressed with the way that Weeks worked some very similar things into *The Burning White*. You won't actually find any Rosetta Stones here, but still there are things about history discovered that definitely influence the action in the present. There's a lesson here for me as a novice author and it's one I won't forget.

Politics (of the fantasy world, not our world) are very present and believable in the *Lightbringer* universe in general and in *The Burning White* in particular. I love the horse trading and maneuvering. Political debate in Weeks's work is just as intense as the actual combat. It often decides even more and when it doesn't it's usually setting up a battle that will. Weeks and David Weber write politics that makes sense and entertains those of us who have a realistic view of why politicians act like they do.

There is so much backstory to the *Lightbringer* series that it's crazy. Not just the ancient history I was talking about, but backstory for the current cast of characters, many of which participated in *The False Prism's War* but there is nothing written about it except for the odd recollection here and there. Yet, it very obviously has an effect on just about every major character in the series on one level or another. I mean, I'm not trying to put pressure on the good Mr. Weeks to write the books, I'm just saying I'd buy them if he did. And so would a bunch of other people. And I'd imagine he's got bills to pay, and selling all of those books would probably help. But no pressure at all. Don't think about us, Mr. Weeks. Think about what writing that series of books could do for YOU.

The *Lightbringer* series has included a very elaborate system of magic and it is here in all its glory. I love the way it works. Of the works that I've read, there have been precisely two authors who have based magic on light and color, at least in part. Weeks's version is captivating. His “drafters”, as he calls them, are capable of some truly amazing feats. Some drafters have one color, some have two. Others have multiple colors, up to and including being able to use all of them. The more colors, the rarer. In Weeks's World, magic has a price. Too much drafting leads to a shorter life expectancy. When a caster drafts, they draw the color in through their eyes. This creates “halos” inside their corneas. When the “halos” get too big to be contained in the cornea, they break and drive the caster insane. Their fellow drafters are often required to kill them to prevent them from a berserk rampage.

I love this system and being a TTRPG player, I thought about adding it to my campaign. But uh...

Yeah...

I'm not up to writing the rules for it. If someone out there has a working set of mechanics for drafting in an RPG, I'd love to read through them. As a matter of fact, if Weeks is working on an RPG (and he'd be crazy not to) I'd love a chance to play test for him. I've got a good crew of guys with a buttload of gaming experience who would line up for a chance to test a new product. I promise a review of the game afterward too! I'd love a chance to experience more of the *Lightbringer* universe.

Then again if you read any of the 9889797997909078978 epilogues of *The Burning White* you'll know that there is a ton of potential for a sequel. I mean, the current story lines are tied up but Weeks could go a ton of different directions with the *Lightbringer* universe. There exists not only the possibility of a sequel series with his current characters, but he has enough young characters that have the potential to have kids that we could be following their kids around when the next series hits. I'd buy those too, and it's not like he has to choose one or the other. Weeks could potentially do both.

Of course, if you're a fan of the *Night Angel Trilogy* (like your friendly neighborhood blogger) then you know he may very well decide to write something completely unrelated to any of the above. That's

okay too, because he's established two fantasy universes already and is obviously capable of inventing another when he needs to.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Curving Cannonballs

Dissolution by Lee S. Hawke Review by Jim McCoy

Welcome to a city where everyone and everything is owned by corporations. This is a place where the outcasts are known as corpless, because they have no corporation to care for them. The city is known as Unilox. The book is *Dissolution* by Lee S. Hawke and it is way too easy to get sucked into this one. I'd be careful here folks. This is one of those "I sat down for a sec while my coffee was perking and thought I'd start it. Then I ended up half an hour late to work" kind of books. This one moves quick right up until the end and it's well imagined and engaging.

Dissolution is a highly Dystopic work. I like that about it. Society has gone too far to the uhh.. something. An all-encompassing government (and in effect that's what the corporations in the book are) exists to provide for their citizens and squish as much work out of them while owning all of the proceeds is Leftist. A totally unregulated economy is Rightist. A total lack of religion as shown in the book is Leftist. The society of the corpless on the edges of town with no real government who help each other without having to be told to are showing Rightist values. I don't know how to classify this one politically. I'm guessing that people on the edges of either side are going to see a lot of the other side in this work. I find it fascinating.

Be prepared to be shocked by this one. It's pretty edgy. The story starts with our heroine, Madeline preparing to be auctioned to a number of corporations. She's hoping to go for over a hundred-thousand credits, a "century" as she calls it. I don't do spoilers so I won't reveal what happens but it's nowhere near what she expected - and that's what launches the rest of the book. Things go from bad to worse to hopeful to "Wow, did that really just happen?" and it's the journey that makes it fun.

The characters in the book are awesome starting with our very own Madeline, who sees her world turned upside down and won't stop. She is resilient when many others would not be. She strips herself of everything she is used to. All of her comforts and advantages as an Experimental are cast aside when she needs to go dark to avoid the people pursuing her. She manages to thrive and succeed anyway. This is a young girl with the intestinal fortitude that I would hope for my own daughters to show in a situation as crazy as Madeline finds herself in. She's hardcore.

The rest of the cast is equally as interesting. Madeline's parents are very believable as people who want the best for their daughter and risk themselves and everything they have to get it. From her boyfriend who helps her, to his boss who is apparently part of some resistance movement. The good guys are the good guys. That's not to say that there isn't some nuance or that the actions of the characters don't make sense intrinsically but there is a clear line between those who are working for a better world and those working to support the status quo.

Part of the fascination of this book for me is that a lot of the people within the story are so steeped in their own society that they don't see what's wrong with it. Madeline begins the work excited because she is about to be auctioned off to a corporation. She dreams of bringing in a good price. Her parents wish her luck on her big day and assure her that she'll be bought by the corp that she desires. The librarian in the book is a member of the resistance (I think) and uses her monetary value to shield herself

from harm. I approve of the woman doing whatever she could to defend herself, but I don't know that I would have ever thought to use the threat of a lawsuit to save my own life. Kudos to Hawke for writing an internally consistent story and making it work in just the right ways to keep the action moving and the story believable.

Despite all of this, the work has one major problem for me: It's too short. This is a one hundred seven page book that takes a HUGE leap on about page ninety-three. I don't want to go into details, because it would spoil the ending, but there needs to be something else here. I'm thinking some planning, some sneaking and some wiring for starters. I like the ending. I really do. I just think it comes up too quickly with too many of the details missing. I get the fact that this would have taken longer to write and edit, but I think it would have been worth it. I mean this as a compliment to the author. I want to see more of your work. I wish it were here.

Speaking of seeing more of Hawke's work, I'm hoping she writes more in this universe. There is a lot of potential here. Some of the characters in the work deserve their own books. I don't think we'll be seeing much more of Madeline, although it is theoretically possible. Still, the existence of a potential resistance in this environment is something I find exciting. I'm hoping that before too long there will be a story released that will fill in a couple of the blanks in this book. I'd love a chance to read through something along those lines.

Despite the fact that there are some things missing, I really enjoyed this work. Granted, it was short but I literally read it in less than a day. I just checked Amazon and Ms Hawke only has one other work out and that is a collection of short stories. I intend to pick that up in the not too distant future, but I'm really hoping for some longer fiction as well. She has the ability to do it based on what I just read. I'm hoping to see it happen soon.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of five Uconns

Dragon's Code: Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders of Pern by Gigi McCaffrey Reviewed by Sam Lubell (originally in The WSFA Journal Nov/Dec 2018)

People inherit property from their parents all the time. So it is not surprising that children can similarly inherit fictional property. For instance, Christopher Tolkien has edited his father's drafts into posthumous books. Brian Herbert teamed up with author Kevin J. Anderson to write new Dune books after the death of Frank Herbert. And Gigi McCaffrey's brother Todd collaborated with their mother on additional Dragonriders of Pern novels and also wrote a few solo. Considering this, it may not be surprising that Gigi (Georgeanne Kennedy) would pen her own adventures on her mother's planet of Pern.

Most of Dragon's Code is the plot of Anne McCaffrey's The White Dragon told from the point of view of Piemur, the former child singer (and friend of Menolly) who appeared in Dragonsinger and was the main character of Dragondrums. In Dragon's Code, Piemur is a spy for the Masterharper, keeping tabs on the Oldtimers, dragonriders who came from the past to help fight Thread, in the Southern continent. So Piemur reports on conversations between disaffected Oldtimers and wonders why one is so insistent that a picture of a cove include the stars above it (not realizing that the stars are a convenient way for time-traveling dragons to navigate). When an Oldtimer steals a queen dragon egg from Benden Weyr, Piemur does suspect the cove may be used to hide the egg, but it is returned before he can do anything.

Piemur also investigates a plot to kill Jaxom, the young Holder of Ruatha hold and rider of the white dragon Ruth and efforts by the kin of lords who want land of their own.

Gigi McCaffrey does a very credible job writing in her mother's voice and the book reads like an Anne McCaffrey novel (which was not always true for the books by her brother Todd). The author echos both the virtues and flaws of her mother's style. The characters are likable, but there is a tendency here to tell rather than show, especially when Piemur reflects on his changes since he lost his singing voice and wonders what he will do with his life.

The real problem with the novel is that The White Dragon was already written and seeing the same events from Piemur's perspective does not add much that is new. So this book is really only for those who really like Piemur from the earlier books. I'd be interested to see what Gigi can do with a new adventure.

Hostile Territory by T.L. Knighton Review by Pat Patterson

I don't recall being so strongly aware that some books just have a perfect length. That's the impression I got with this one, though, and it impresses me that Brer Knighton called this one so well.

There is PLENTY of room for exposition. Although I read and enjoyed 'Sabercat,' the first book in this series, I don't THINK that someone who picks this book up without that background will be perplexed.

If anything, 'Hostile Territory' makes me want to go back and read 'Sabercat' again, just for the enjoyment.

This is a straightforward adventure series. There is room to grow, but 'Hostile Territory' tells a complete story between the covers. The crew of the Sabercat are on a mission to recover a data chip, and to do so, they have to go to one of the most repressive planets in the universe, an ecological paradise, run by a tyrannical cult. The action is well-depicted, cleverness overcomes brute force, and they get lucky without a deus ex machina event.

I'm finding that I still miss the physical cues that a paperback gives me as to how much is left in the book. There is, of course, a progress indicator at the bottom of the screen, but I'm afraid that the 50+ years I spent reading dead tree versions have left my senses hopelessly in the analogue world, rather than digital. I can't convert centigrade or kilometers in my perception, either, although I can do the necessary math conversions to Fahrenheit and miles. At any rate, I was pleasantly surprised to look down at the progress indicator and find that I was approaching the end of the book as I was approaching the end of the story. I look forward to reading MORE of the story, when the next book comes out.

The Last Pendragon by Holly Chism Review by Pat Patterson

I really don't know how many versions of the legends of King Arthur I've read, but it's a LOT; I don't even know how many movies on the topic I've seen. Mostly they have been good, although the one with Clive Owen was just stupid.

The main elements of the story, though, are sad, just sad. Arthur's beloved wife Guinevere cheats on him with his best friend Lancelot; he is killed by his son, Mordred. Sad, sad, sad. As much as I have

loved the time spent immersed in the telling of the myth, almost always I get so deeply immersed that I'm in a bit of a funk when the lights go up, or when I close the book.

Holly Chism to the rescue!

Most of the book isn't directly referencing Arthur; instead, the male lead is Mordred, his son. And, in this telling, he did NOT seek revenge on his hated father; instead, he sacrificed himself to continue his father's dreams.

Oh, yeah, and he's a dragon.

And he lives in North Carolina. In a cave. It's a well-appointed cave, though, with all the modern conveniences as well as old-style luxuries, like bear skins on the floor.

The book opens with Sara, a doctoral student in linguistics (probably the Ph.D. in sociolinguistics offered at North Carolina State University in Raleigh) being chased through the woods by a pack of werewolves. It's a neat intro: toss her into action/danger, get us hooked, and along the way, reveal the fact that she's a pretty tough cookie who wishes she hadn't had to sell her guns. It's really well done, indeed.

So is the rest of the book. Sara's background in linguistics, combined with a previously unknown ability to do magic, allows her to develop an entirely new method for accessing magic, IF, in fact, that is really what it is. You see, her understanding of SCIENCE gives her a fresh insight, so it may be, perhaps, that she has invented a sufficiently advanced technology. I suppose it's all in the perspective.

Lancer One by Kevin Ikenberry Review by Pat Patterson

I was introduced to Kevin Ikenberry through his work in the Four Horsemen universe, and really liked what he did with characters and story there.

This novella is not set in that universe. It's in a universe where things like retro-active birth control appear to be possible. That's NOT a story feature; it's a publishing feature.

'Lancer One' is the prequel to "Runs In The Family," a popular book which was kicked in the head when the publisher had to close the doors due to health reasons. 'Lancer One' was written because Ikenberry was implored to provide back-story on one of the characters in 'RITF.' It's not necessary to be familiar with the universe before reading 'Lancer One' (I haven't read it), but it's possible that some scenes will be clearer; at least, it took me a bit to realize what was going on with the story.

However, it's more likely that my confusion is due to the story beginning with exploding spaceships, and disintegrated command structure. Tony Richards, fighter pilot, is in the midst of a horrendous space battle, and he is all by himself. Except for the voice in his head. How did that get there?

It's explained through a series of flashbacks, going back to Richards' days in flight school. Not gonna do a spoiler here, but I will say that it involves mean and possibly paranoid-schizophrenic people in command, and boffins with gadgets.

In the combat story, however, Richards' job is to see that refugees are able to climb to orbit safely, and get aboard transports, while the bad guys (Greys) attempt to knock them down. He is forced to be more

than a hot pilot by the circumstances; he is placed in charge of other fighters by circumstances, and has to come up with tactical dispositions, er, on the fly.

This book is BEST read electronically. Ikenberry tosses in some historical references, which are VERY easy to follow-up with a mouse-click and Google. I fear that in the old days when all knowledge was stored on paper, such references would be lost to all but the select few.

This book was so good that I grabbed another short selection by Ikenberry, 'Ship Minds and Ice Cream,' and read it before starting this review. I was not disappointed, and I guess I'll be reviewing that next. I'll also be keeping my eyes open for future releases, as well as picking up works of his I've missed.

Monster Hunter International by Larry Correia Review by Jim McCoy

I think we've all had the boss we didn't like and got sick of putting up with. Maybe we've even gotten a major ass-chewing that made us wonder if our boss was a werewolf. I don't know of a single person, myself included, that has ever thrown said boss out of a window in order to save our own lives. Well, unless you include Owen Zastava Pitt, protagonist of Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International. Owen is a bad man and a hardcore survivor. An encounter with a boss who tries to eat him is merely his introduction into a shadow world where monsters exist and so do the people who fight them.

I'll be honest here and admit that I've read this book many times and felt like writing about it. I've been a Correia fan since not long after Baen published this and have followed him ever since. If this review comes about a bit fanboyish, well, guilty. That much being said it was this book that my fandom of his work was based on and believe me, he's earned it. If I hadn't been hanging out on the Baen's Bar site and seen it talked about repeatedly I never would have picked it up. That's weird because once I got it I couldn't put it down. It's that good.

The world of MHI is well conceived and executed. There are monsters. The government knows this. The government has both worked with and banned monster hunting in the past. At the moment, they've just eased off the ban and now Monster Hunters International (the corporation is recruiting) decides to sign on a big, smart, gun geek of an accountant. The story centers around Owen's recruitment, training, and early missions.

Owen is discovering a whole new world around him, based in ours. This works well because we learn about Correia's world as Pitt does. There is no need for the vaunted info dump. Correia Heinleins his details in a manner that keeps us all interested and tells us what we need to know. This may honestly work better because Pitt is at the beginning of his career as a Hunter and leans heavily on those around him. He's smart enough to know that he needs help and as he gathers whatever information he can from whatever sources we're learning as well. This is something I struggle with in my own writing and I refer to this book occasionally to try and steal his techniques.

The amount of things that can go wrong on a monster hunting mission are apparently endless and the pace of this book is relentless. Whether it's personal problems between the Hunters, the pursuit of a beautiful woman or actual outright violence there is always something going on. There was no chance to get bored, no time when I suddenly remembered that I needed to get the laundry done. There may have been a time when I showed up late to my ex-wife's mother's house for dinner because I lost track of time reading but I refuse to confirm or deny those accusations. I enjoyed the pot roast that night,

though.

Correia is a Certified Firearms Instructor and his book reads that way. As a gun owner myself, although not an expert to the level he is, I want to slap some authors for the obvious mistakes they make with firearms. That is not a problem here. Correia knows his stuff and he very obviously enjoys sharing his wealth of knowledge. This is a good thing. I like reading about guns that work like guns actually work. If he jacks with his ammo a bit to make it kill monsters that's good. He mixes monster mythology with firearms reality really well.

Pitt's reactions in the book are pretty much what you would expect from a heterosexual male. I would know, I am one. This has bothered some people who were offended when he noticed how pretty a given character was and actually, GULP, thought about it. This may not be the book for people who are fill with liberal butthurt about men who like women. I will say this though: If this woman was half as hot as she sounds in the book, I would have been thinking about it as well. Why? Because that's what straight males do. Julie, the extremely attractive female in question, is also an extremely good shot herself, partial owner of the company and one of its leaders. She is by no means only her looks as some have alleged but, well, men are men and they notice these things. It makes sense and, given later developments, it needed to be there.

This is the first book in an ongoing series and it sets the scene well. We're introduced to the threat from the past, the threat from the deep past and a bunch of new ones to boot. I don't know how much time Correia spent planning out his entire series while or before writing this book but I'm guessing it was a bunch. There's too much in her that leads to well into what's coming for it to all be happenstance. He did it with malice aforethought and he did it well.

Correia's views of government are fairly apparent as well. The government Hunters, the Monster Control Bureau, are a bunch of overconfident, insufferable pricks out to keep everything under their own jurisdiction. They want to keep the private companies out of the way to do the job. They're well trained to fight human opponents, but not to fight monsters. They have more resources and accomplish less with them. That sounds like government to me too. One solution fits all and we can handle everything with no innovation is the standard Washington response to everything.

I do have one complaint about this book: Correia is a big guy, a gun nut and a retired accountant. Pitt is a big guy, a gun nut an accountant and a Hunter. I hate to use the phrase Mary Sue, but uhh... well... umm... Pitt's an ENTERTAINING Mary Sue? Seriously the character is a lot of fun with plenty of complications and everything but yeah. It couldn't be any more obvious. Pitt even uses some techniques used by real life competition shooters. Correia has shot competitively. I struggle to find a different way to put that but there it is. That much being said, this book still kicks ass.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Silver Bullets

Noumenon Infinity by Marina J. Lostetter **Reviewed by Sam Lubell** (originally in SFRevu Feb 2019)

Noumenon Infinity is the follow-up to Noumenon. This is high idea complex far-future science fiction that requires careful reading.

The original book followed the adventures of Convoy Seven, which had the mission of visiting a star to

determine the cause of its variable output. In that book, the convoy launches in 2125, arrives at its destination in 3075 and returns to Earth over a thousand years later. As a result, the book is structured as a series of linked short stories with different characters. Noumenon Infinity continues that episodic structure with the further adventures of Convoy Seven. However, this book also tells a continuous story with Convey 12, which suffers an accident sending them into the far future.

The book opens with Reggie Straifer's Intelligent Personal Assistant, an AI device called C, uploaded to Convey Seven to become its Inter Convoy Computer (ICC), which plays a major role in both books. Seven years later, Dr. Kaufman, the scientist who discovered subdimensional travel (used by the space convoys) tells Vanhi Kapoor, a former student of his, that Convoy 12, one of the planned convey missions, is based on faked science and so there is an opportunity for her to take it over for her experiments on a faster subdimensional drive. She later finds out that the science behind its original mission was correct, but Kaufman had bribed people to change the data to give Vanhi this opportunity. She reluctantly goes along with the mission and becomes the senior scientist of the expedition. An accident throws the convoy far into the future and causes Vanhi to become unstuck in time, randomly fading out for days from the point of view of others, although her reappearance is instantaneous to her. And then they discover what they think are live aliens.

In the far future, Convey Seven has returned to Earth and then relaunched itself as Noumenon Infinitum with a mission to return to the variable star and complete construction of the alien megastructure. On this mission, they have to deal with a disagreement over their mission that threatens to split the convoy into Noumenons Infinitum and Ultra. One of the engineers starts seeing and hearing the voices of his long-dead predecessors causing his sister and even the ICC to think him crazy or hallucinating. And they have to cope with a star-killer device.

Naturally, the reader assumes these two strands will merge. However, it takes nearly the whole book, with many further adventures, before they do.

The result is a story even longer and more complicated than the original Noumenon with chapter headers not only giving the Common Era year, reaching 8406 AD, but the years since relaunch (or days since the accident), and occasionally a third date referring to a previous incident. Characterization is stronger than in the original novel since the Convey 12 sections are a continuous narrative. And much of the struggles of Jamal the 18th are internal. But the characterization is still relatively weak, and even the author manipulating the plot to build a romantic relationship for Vanhi does not make it believable.

Readers who liked Noumenon will enjoy Noumenon Infinity which in many ways is a more unified novel. It would be possible to read Noumenon Infinity without reading the earlier book, although readers would be confused at the start so this is not recommended. There is no summary of the original book.

Readers who enjoy wide scope science fiction and venturing into the unknown will find much in this book to their taste. Others may want more action or interesting characters. I recommend starting with the first book and treating it as a story collection, stopping at the end of a section if you do not like it.

P.A.W.S. by Debbie Manber Kupfer
Review by Jim McCoy

I've always said that good Young Adult literature can -and should- be enjoyed by adults. Once again, I was proven right *buffs fingernails on shirt* by Debbie Manber Kupfer's P.A.W.S. which is a coming of age/finding one's self story starring a young girl named Miri who inherits a charm from her Omama (grandmother) that allows her to transform herself into a cat. Along the way she faces many and massive changes to her life as well as threats from an outside force and the sudden reappearance of a family member she had never thought she'd see again. Oh, and this is just the first book in the series. I'd bet the rest of them are going to be crazy.

Manber Kupfer treats us to a story of a hidden world, one where shapeshifting is common and functioning magic is not unusual. One where werewolves exist and have the choice to be good or evil. It is a milieu where some inherit their shape-shifting ability in the form of charms passed down since time immemorial, and others have to study and work to learn the magic necessary to change forms. Nothing is as it seems to outsiders - and not always to insiders either.

Miri receives her charm from her Omama, but she does not at first realize that her powers actually exist. Even upon realizing that she can shift forms into a cat she does not realize that other powers come along with the gift. She suffers through trying to learn about her power and thence herself throughout the book. This, along with the struggle against an evil werewolf named Alistair, forms the two main problems of the book, but the desire of Miri to learn more about herself is where this book really shines.

P.A.W.S. is a story about a teen aged girl trying to find her place in the world. It feels real mainly because it's a struggle we can all identify with. At some point in time pretty much every human being has to figure out who they are and what they want. Miri is no exception. She flounders a bit, but that's okay because we all do. She has to deal with some problems with bullying as well. That's something that many of us, including myself, have dealt with as well. Miri finds herself in many situations that hit hard, not because of their unusual nature but because I've been there and done that. This is a little girl that I have a lot in common with.

The flip side of that is that she gets to do things that those of us who actually exist can only dream about. What would it be like to change into a cat and scamper away from trouble? If I could sense and project the emotions of others what would/could I use that for? If I could chuck my humdrum existence and enter into a magical world, I'd do it in a minute. Miri is a bit more hesitant but it's easier to say that I'd change my whole life in a minute than it would be to actually do it.

Miri is, in some ways, the kind of person we all wish we could be. When one of her former classmates shows up at P.A.W.S. Miri manages to get along with the girl. When a long-lost relative show up, one that Miri feels abandoned by, she does her best to comfort them as they are recovering from their wounds and get to know them. I got the feeling that Miri could very easily have been a very bitter young girl. It's not hard to picture her rejecting people and crawling into a shell. The fact that she does not do so is a credit to her. The fact that this works in the story is a credit to Manber Kupfer. Forgiveness is something I've been struggling with. I could take a lesson here.

P.A.W.S.'s main antagonist is also easy to understand. Alistair is a flat-out criminal who covets power for its own sake. He surrounds himself with others who wish to serve him to gain power themselves. Added to that is the power of mind-control. He can literally force people to do things against their will

or prevent them from doing things that they want to simply by telling them not to. This isn't just a form of intimidation. They are completely unable to resist. This adds a bit of a horror element to what is otherwise a work of urban fantasy but the more the merrier... and it adds to the story which is important. If you don't hate Alistair by the time you've finished the book, then don't ask me why because I can't help you.

He treats the titular organization with hostility because they are a threat to expose and defeat him. He is every inch the conniving, manipulative bastard that men like Hitler, Lenin and Stalin were. He's just not as successful. Then again, he spends the entire story trying to gather more power to himself. He may be on his way. If you want to know how successful he is, I guess you'll have to read the book. It's worth your time.

All that being said, this is not a perfect book. A bit more description would go a long way. The majority of the book takes place in the P.A.W.S. compound, but I never really got a good grasp on what it was supposed to look like. This is a story that is very similar in some ways to the Harry Potter saga, but it doesn't quite rise to that level and one of the reasons is a lack of imagery. Harry's first view of Hogwarts was epic. Miri's first view of P.A.W.S. is kind of ho hum. This doesn't ruin the story, but it does keep it from reaching its full potential. That much being said, this is still a solid story and well worth the time I took to read it. I'll be contacting Mrs. Manber Kupfer shortly and inquiring as to how I can get hold of the sequel.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Charms

Prisoner of the Mind by Kal Spriggs Review by Pat Patterson

The protagonist starts with no memory, and no information on where he is, or why. A person in authority explains that he had been placed under protective custody, because he had used psychic powers to kill and injure innocent people.

The grief overwhelms him, and he asks to be terminated.

His protector/captor tells him there is another option. If he allows them to train him, he will be used to prevent such things from ever happening again. With warmth in his heart for his benevolent protectors, and shame at his own guilt, he signs up for the program.

There is a lesson in this book for super-villains, and even regular villains, I suppose: you can't control all the variables in an environment, and that's probably going to be a deal-killer right there, BUT: could you at least TRY to maintain a consistent front? It's hard to maintain a facade of benevolence when one of your trainers is a psycho sadist.

What, did you think he could control it?

In this future, nobody really controls anything. All political authority is in the hands of an oppressive Chinese ruling class. They THINK they have control, but what they really have is the ability to order the execution of anyone who displeases them. That MIGHT work, as long as there are no outside influences.

Since there are outside influences aplenty, the only thing they can say is 'Curses! Foiled again!' or words to that effect.

In a slow reveal the protagonist discovers his identity, and his powers. The book ends with much more to come.

Note: the version I read had one example of a word choice error, and one example of a firearms error. I notified the author, and by the time you read the book, those should have been corrected.

Shadow Lands by Lloyd A Behm II Review by Jim McCoy

Welcome my friends to the Fifth Annual Jimbo's Awesome Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews Memorial Day Extravaganza, where we will be honoring the veterans of the United States Military (any branch) by reviewing their work. We love our vets here at Jimbo's and we wish we could do more for you, but hey, I'm a book reviewer. Ya'll are stuck with what I can do rather than what I wish I could do. You folks deserve it.

Up first, we have Lloyd A Behm II. He served as a Machinist Mate in the United States Navy, rising to the rank of Machinist Mate First Class before leaving the Navy for civilian life. He served no deployments while enlisted, but became a civilian contractor in support of the US Marine Corps. He worked in various places in Iraq, eventually rising to Senior Logistical Coordinator for City Services in the Green Zone. Color me impressed.

And, now that MM1C Behm has been properly introduced...

Have you ever been totally mistaken about the nature of a book until you read it? I know I was. I purchased Shadow Lands awhile back and never got to it. I was kicking myself because I was dead certain, in the way only a person who is completely ignorant of a situation can be, that this was a high-fantasy, elves, dwarves, trolls kind of book. That's all it ever could be, right? I mean, do you play video games? I do. I've been to the Dreadlands, the Dire Lands, the Firelands, and probably some other lands somewhere. This was high-fantasy and I was going to love it. Loving high-fantasy is what I do. But uhh...

That whole, "thought I knew everything thing?" Yeah, I was wrong. This isn't epic fantasy. It's somewhere in between urban fantasy and horror. Don't get me wrong. It kicks ass and has a Correia-like feel to it, but it's not high-fantasy. I got over that fact quick. If you give the book at least one hundred words (WORDS not pages) you should too.

Our hero is Father Salazar, a priest lately of the Marine Corps. The good Father is what makes this book. There is just something endearing about a hard-swearing clergyman. I mean, it's kind of funny but that's not all there is to it. As a devout Christian myself who is looking to go into a prison ministry, I find myself using words that I really shouldn't. I feel Salazar's pain on this one in and I really identified with him, even though I've never been a combat exorcist.

Wait, did I just say combat exorcist?

I think I did.

No, I'm SURE I did. As a matter of fact, Salazar is really good at this whole combat-exorcist thing. He has a tendency to overdo things at times, but when it's his life and everyone else's on the line, I think we can forgive him just this once or twice or...

Well, let's just say that Christians believe that God is forgiving and Salazar and his mouth probably both appreciate that. I know I do.

The enemy throughout Shadow Lands is a group of demons. Given the nature of the main character that works like a champ. Salazar knows his stuff and knows how to use it. Something that people sometimes forget is that faith makes a potent weapon. Behm doesn't and neither does Salazar. Nothing will put some steel in your spine like the belief that the Almighty is looking out for you. I know, because I've been there. I really enjoyed this part of the book.

Now that's not to say that Shadow Lands is some kind of religious treatise, because it's not. It is, at heart, an action novel with an urban fantasy flare and a touch of horror thrown in because, why not? It works. I'm pretty positive that Behm has a giant cauldron somewhere and that the manuscript for the tome originally started with the words "Double, double toil and trouble." (Don't worry Lloyd. I don't know how that security camera got pointed at your garage either.)

Oh, and Salazar pretty much pwns at the whole "combat" part of combat-exorcist. If some of his weapons are things that wouldn't work against a more common Earthly foe then so be it. He's not fighting common Earthly foes. Some of this stuff is pretty bad-ass and I'm somewhat suspicious that Behm has played World of Warcraft at least up until the part when a particular monster shows up, but what do I know? I've only killed a million of them (give or take).

I did mention a Correia-like feel to Shadow Lands and let's face it, a lot of it comes from both gun- and bomb-porn. Behm seems to be a member of the school of thinking that any problem can be solved with a sufficient amount of high explosive. I'm not one hundred percent sold on that theory, and I may have to read the sequels to get more input but I like 'splody things and I like fiery things and I like lots of dakka and big rounds and...

Yeah, one gets a feeling that perhaps Behm spend a bit more time around Marines than is suggested by the Surgeon General's RDA. That's a good thing though, because he learned something doing it.

At any rate, things get moving in this one quickly and they don't freaking stop. They do slow down for about five words here and there so that Behm can get us all relaxed and feeling good before he blows things up, but that's kind of necessary, even if I am a bit of a Michael Bay fan.

Yes, I know, I like story, but I mean BOOOOOOMMMM!!!! (And no, Michael Bay couldn't tell a story with J.K. Rowling and Robert Heinlein coaching him, but Behm can.)

Somebody should let me hang out with some Marines and blow some stuff up sometime. Seriously.

Listen, I'm babbling. It's been a long day and I had planned to be in bed by now but know this: Shadow Lands is a book worth buying and Lloyd A Behm is an author worth reading. I mean, unless you're into boring, angsty teenage girls who like vampires that sparkle, or you're a peacenik or something. If that's your thing, maybe you should buy a book on crocheting, or daisies, or crocheting daisies or sumfin'

If, however, you like good stories about competent people doing important things and persevering, with

a side of gratuitous violence and maybe a couple of gross-out moments (and are willing to forgive the possibility of some wasted pork chops) then pay your money and read the book.

Actually, I'm pretty sure it's on Kindle Unlimited (I straight up bought the thing a few years ago and just got to it) so if you've got that, you can read it for free. And seriously folks, if this isn't your thing then I'm not sure why you're reading my blog.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Holy Water Sprayers

She Called It, Wolf: Revised and Updated Edition

by Cyn Bagley

Review by Pat Patterson

After a number of tours in the Army in the Sandbox and the Rockpile, where she fixed the comm gear wrecked by the sand, climate, and rough handling, EJ Hunter is going home. She has one of those Military Occupational Specialties that isn't nice to people; when I was in Germany, I had an NCO who had pulled three tours in Korea, one in Okinawa, and one in Viet Nam. The Army sends you where it needs you, not where you want to go.

The trip home is likely to be her last; her only known living relative, Uncle Harry, has asked her to come see him, because he is growing very ill. So, she's stressed because of that; she's stressed because she is strongly contemplating leaving the Army, having completed this enlistment; and then, there's the stress of flying around the world in military and chartered aircraft, where the meal choices are what you brought with you and the inflight movie is the back of the seat in front of you.

She wasn't expecting to be able to smell gophers in their burrows, though, or to be able to hear snoring coming from barracks on the other side of the airfield. That's her first clue that something has happened to her, and she puts it aside, since it's unexpected.

The second clue that something has happened to her is an ALERT response, as she is out-processing; a terrorist attacks the unarmed soldiers going through processing with an M-16, and she discovers (by doing) that she has the ability to shift-change into a wolf, and kills the shooter while he reloads.

Army processing things ensue. At the end of it all, EJ is free and clear, with a medical discharge and retirement benefits. She heads for the only home she has left, the desert community of Felony Flats, Nevada.

And that's when her adventures begin.

Arrayed against her: evil bad rotten mean dark contractors working for the government; her total ignorance of what's happening and who is waiting for her; cramped and primitive living conditions; an ancient marriage broker.

Assets: A tightly-knit community; a beagle named Barkley; previously unknown relatives; things Uncle Harry left for her, including a shotgun; ancient wise people with stores of wisdom; a herd of singularly unusual goats; the mating rituals of wolves, based on pheromones, which cut the Gordian knot of courtship.

The book has what I suppose are obligatory sex scenes, of which I am not a fan. I value adult activities as a participatory, and not a spectator sport. That said, I don't think most people will be alienated by the bits that are explicit. It does mean that it's not a book you want your mixed-gender middle school reading group to read.

Things I PARTICULARLY appreciate:

1. I am compelled to learn more about the herd of goats. No, I'm not teasing; they are intriguing, for reasons you will discover when you read the book.
2. I find myself bored to tears by the story of the young woman who moves into the community and engages in a long, drawn-out incorporation into social life, becomes the object of affection of the most eligible bachelor, is snubbed by his former girlfriend, blah blah blah.

If you want that, watch a Hallmark movie. In THIS universe, wolf rules prevail. You smell right? I now pronounce you man and wife. 3. There are SEVERAL themes which can be developed further, without the volume ending on a cliff-hanger.

I'm looking forward to the next in the series

Shipminds and Ice Cream by Kevin Ikenberry Review by Pat Patterson

I first encountered Kevin Ikenberry's work in the Four Horsemen universe. More recently, I read 'Lancer One,' and was so pleased by what I found there that I broke my reading/reviewing queue to pick up this little gem.

Two (probably) unrelated short stories. The first, 'Shipminds and Ice Cream,' requires a world of future tech in order to work. The second, 'Flat Out,' does exist in a world of advanced technology, but the story is pretty much that of Cain.

In the first, we learn of a father who has identified encroaching Alzheimer's Disease, and wants to say goodbye to his children. We don't know HOW it will be accomplished, but we do know that he has willed his body to the use of the military.

The story will have particular poignance for people who have loved ones taken by this living death, but to everyone, I hope the meaning is: 'Good-bye' means 'I love you,' and we never stop saying it.

In the second story, the protagonist is literally on the run, but he has been without a home for a very long time. He has no hope of rest; the best he can hope for is a temporary reprieve, and a warning before the executioners come for him again. The technology serves to highlight the fact that regardless of any other changes in how we get food, do work, or kill others, Cain is always Cain; he slew his brother, and now he is hunted through the land.

Silver Shackles: Revelations by Fiona Skye Review by Jim McCoy

I'm thinking that perhaps angering a queen of Faerie would be a bad idea of the "really should have found something else to do that day" variety. I'm guess that Riley, heroine of Fiona Skye's Silver

Shackles would agree with me. Fervently. If you're not sure why she would think this, or how she angered the Neve, the Queen of the Unseelie Fae then you really need to read more. You can start with *Taming Shadows: Revelation*. Go ahead. I'll wait.

In this book, Riley faces the wrath for what she did last time around. I don't do spoilers so that's as far as I'm going to take it. For now we'll just say that from the antagonist's point of view, she's done more than enough to face a reckoning and an airing of grievances the exact nature of which was alluded to in the first book. What starts out as a mysterious phone call goes off the rails and things happen at an incredibly quick pace. This one cooks with grease. (I'm sure that's a metaphor that Skye could agree with given the fact that both of the books in this series end with recipes that sound outstanding. Well, except for the fact that she mentions cheese enchiladas in the About the Author. *SIGH* The best enchiladas are made with beef! At any rate...)

Skye has clearly done her research into the monster of myth and legend. Every being has a weakness to exploit and a strength that is terrifying. Even Riley transforms into a were-jaguar capable of extreme violence and possessed of heightened senses. It hunts deer better than I can too but don't tell my family I admitted that. We've got people that can only be killed with cold iron, a demigod that can be controlled with a horn, a vampire with the associated weakness, etc. The part that makes it work is that all of the above are well aware of their soft spots and do whatever they can to guard against them. There is no monologue followed by something incredibly stupid. The bad guys are bad but they're not dumb. A good villain is a villain that falls prey to something the heroes and/or their allies do and Skye nails that here.

The heroes are not infallible either. As a matter of fact I'm left wondering if David isn't out there somewhere kicking himself after missing something that was clear in retrospect. Riley isn't exactly perfect herself and gets caught up when she probably could have avoided doing so, but here's the thing: Both make mistakes that are perfectly in character for who and what they are. Neither does anything forehead slappingly stupid when they should have done the exact opposite. Every person, real or imagined, does something they realize later that they shouldn't have done at some point. The key is making the mistakes make sense and Skye makes that happen.

Parts of this book are quite frankly horrifying and that's good because they need to be. The revenge of a Queen of the Fae is a terrible thing to behold. Some of the details of the torture she suffers are just plain sick and twisted. Some of what she puts herself through mentally at the end of the work may possibly be worse. All of it adds to the story though and none of it seems to be there just for the sake of being there. Through all of the pain we get to know more about both Riley and Neve. We also learn just how far Neve's followers are ready to go for her. This is a woman with not just a lot of mystical power but a lot of political power as well.

I'm excited to announce that the end of the tome sets us up for a sequel that I'm very much looking forward to. It's not quite a cliff hanger but there are some loose ends that are mentioned very prominently at the end. I don't want to go into detail here because spoilers but when the thread of this book runs out things are still really unsettled and there are a million and five different ways they could go. I can't wait to find out what's next. Is it too soon to start pestering the author still? I haven't really gotten on an author in a bit but I'm not against doing so. I guess we'll just have to wait but dammit, I don't wanna.

I do have one complaint about *Silver Shackles* and it's fairly major: This book needs to be a lot longer. David finds himself convinced to take along a new partner far too quickly. One of his/Riley's partners (Onyx) from *Taming Shadows* antes up and decides to come along for the fight. That makes sense, but he was a major character last time around with a major part to play this time, and he's barely in there. He needs more uhh.. screen time? What he has is just not enough to do the character justice. He's not

the only one either.

The part I missed the most was the fight. Skye mentions that one is going on and we're alerted about a couple of the wounded and/or dead (with some characters it's not clear which side they fall on and I'm guessing that's intentional) but not much actual action. David, in particular, is stuck in a situation where he is forced to sneak around but it's completely left out. Granted, it is entirely possible that I'm just a spoiled reviewer but I think not. I grew up on the tradition of the grand battle. Lord of the Rings is full of them. The battle for the crown at the end of Dragons of Spring Dawning was epic. There are many battles against Thread in Dragonriders of Pern saga. There just needs to be more here.

It's not just the love of slaughter that leads me to say that either. The ending of this book feels a bit rushed. It's almost like Skye was in a hurry to get it finished and decided to leave some things out to get it done sooner. I guess I'll never know her reasoning but it should have been here. There are enough details filled in later to keep the thread of the series moving but it would have been far more entertaining to see it all as it was happening. That much being said, this was a damn fine novel and I'll be picking up a copy of the sequel as soon as it comes out.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Summoned Brownies

Torchship Captain by Karl K. Gallagher Review by Pat Patterson

Michigan Long, her husband Guo, and the rest of the intrepid crew of the freighter Joshua Davenport continue in their fight against the Betrayers, AIs who have gone rogue and moved to eradicate mankind.

Most of the book deals with the run-up to the climactic battle with the AIs. Mitchie has been delegated to bring the most splintered of the splinter groups into line with the main human battle groups. Immediate problem Number One: nobody in place as a faction leader wants to give up ANY authority. Immediate problem Number Two: hatred for other factions is a more powerful force than the desire to eliminate the AI hazard. Thus, some governments are actively working to subvert Mitchie's mission, in the hope that Hated Enemy A and Hated Enemy B will go to war with each other, leaving them to sweep in and conquer the remnants, and use those left-overs to defeat the AIs.

A re-run of the French Revolution/Reign of Terror occurs on planet Pintoy, complete with blood in the streets, guillotines, and a Committee of Public Safety. Even some of the characters see action again, although in different roles. Professor Corday provides much of the philosophical underpinnings and leadership of the early movement, although his namesake in the French Revolution, Charlotte Corday, is known only for stabbing Jean-Paul Marat in his bathtub.

A bit of political/sexual nastiness follows. 19 year old Stakeholder Guen, rescued by Mitchie in the previous book, has become the de-facto leader of what passes for government in chaos and anarchy that follows the purge of Stakeholder leadership. I'm not a fan of explicit sex scenes in books, preferring participation to spectator sport, but beyond that, I find Mitchie's action in pushing her husband Guo into sexual activity with the willing Guen to be reprehensible. Later, Mitchie is given the opportunity to explain her position, and states that her approach is the same as any wartime captain, who would knowingly send troops to die if necessary to win the war. It's an interesting topic to discuss, perhaps, but it's

the equivalent of 'the end justifies the means.' That stance is a minefield, and there is no path cleared through it.

Lots of great battle scenes, but I think I enjoyed the AI battles and the resulting peace conferences the best.

The Wasteland Chronicles Omnibus by Kyle West Review by Jim McCoy

One day, I realized that my queue was empty and that I didn't have any more books to review from people who had sent one to me to review. (Not that that's a hint or anything. I mean, sure, if there were an author reading this and they sent me their work they'd be next up. But feel free to ignore that fact if you want. I can always review stuff I've gotten off of Bookbub or Netgalley. On the other hand, I'm always very appreciative of the authors who do submit. I wuvv them and stuff. So if you've got a SF/F story of at least novella length the submission guidelines are to send either a .pdf or a .epub to thatjim-boguy@gmail.com and ask for a review. If you add a .jpg of your cover I'll use it at the top of your review. If not, I'll post the review without one.) So, I went back into Mount To Be Read on my Nook and decided I'd dig up something that looked good that I hadn't read yet. Lo and behold, I came upon an omnibus edition by an author I had never read. The Wasteland Chronicles: Omnibus Edition was just chilling on my home page on my Nook looking neglected. It sounded good and I've been a fan of post-apocalyptic works since probably Mad Max (the original not the new one) and in print since at least Battlefield Earth. This one sounded good. I was right. It's got it all.

Fans of the blog know that I avoid spoilers whenever possible. I'm wondering how possible it's going to be to avoid them this time. There is a lot to these first three books (Apocalypse, Origins and Evolution) and there are a lot of twist and turns. Even when things look like they're getting better they get worse. West doesn't drop boulders on his characters, he drops entire worlds. In one case literally as the Apocalypse has passed not in the form of a war but in the form of the Sweet Meteor of Death (ok, so he names it Ragnarok) come to crash into the northern United States. Things then go from bad to worse.

The United States government established a bunker system before the asteroid struck. It was believed that the bunkers would provide the manpower necessary to repopulate the United States after the initial shock of the strike and associated environment issues died down and things were back to normal-ish. Then the bunkers started to fall, one by one and nobody, or at least nobody in Bunker 108, where our hero Alex Keener is from, knows why. It is believed that some probably fell prey to bandits. Some others were too big for that to be the case though. Case in point being Bunker 1, home of the President of the United States and his Cabinet. It fell years ago and the reason it fell is a mystery. One day it was there and broadcasting. The next day it stopped. That's all we know at the beginning of the book. The reason later becomes obvious, but I won't say why here.

I mentioned Mad Max earlier and it's a fit comparison. Not so much the battle over fuel per se but the existence of the Wasteland and the danger of traveling. Actually, Alex begins the story on foot and alone in an area with no law and order. That's about as safe as you would imagine under the circumstance. He gets lucky at one point. That's as much as I'll say for now. It really does move the story forward at this point and gets us involved in the larger world.

At first, it's a simple introduction into the wastelands of California. It's much colder there than it would be now because of the dust thrown into the air by Ragnarok. Vehicles are scarce to the point of being

almost unheard of. Batteries are considered to be a form of currency. Food is scarce and gangs not only abound but hold most political power goes along with gang membership.

Then things get weirder. We find out about Blights, where fungus grows and monsters live. Eventually we find out where they came from. There is some serious weirdness here, but it explains what happened in Bunker 108 when this whole series started. Then we find out why they're spreading... And I'm revealing too much. Just believe me when I say we end up understanding better because Alex has to understand it.

I like the way this works though. First, we learn about our main character. We start to care about his and his motivations. He shows us some guts. Just as we fall in love with Alex, he moves forward into a world that is much bigger and more complicated than he realizes. I like this for another reason as well: Since Alex doesn't know much about the world around his bunker, we can learn about the environment along with him. This works well because West can tell us what we need to know without info-dumping for pages on end. It's a good technique; enlightening and entertaining.

The rest of the cast is easy to believe and fits into the world nicely. From Makara, the Raider turned good-guy to Anna, the warrior woman with a katana, they all fit into the world nicely. They do what they should given their established personalities. They make us care about them. The bad guys work as well: Emperor Augustus of the Nova Roman Empire is an evil man by our lights: He uses slaves and holds gladiatorial games to get rid of his enemies. By his lights though, he is a hero. He has managed to build an empire and establish law and order within its boundaries. He has protected his people from the predation of those from outside his empire and established economic well-being for many. Sure, he's a power mad dictator, but he doesn't see it that way. It's all for the "greater good of the people."

I'll be honest about something here: I bought the books as an omnibus. They work perfectly as a seamless book but I'm not sure how they would do separately. That's not to say that they would be bad, but I actually had to look at the table of contents at what point to find out what book I was on. I thought I was still on the first one and it turns out that I was about halfway through the second one. There seriously is no definite ending to these books that I noticed. That doesn't make them bad stories. It's just kind of weird.

I do have one other complaint about the works in question: I'm guessing Mr. West doesn't have much experience with firearms. Alex carries a nine millimeter Beretta throughout the series. Don't get me wrong. I've been trained on the M9 Beretta. It's not a bad firearm for what it's used for. It's just that it's a handgun and no one in their right mind goes into a situation expecting a problem with a handgun if you have any chance at all to upgrade it. Rifles have longer range and hit harder. The reliance on a handgun is a bit strange. I'm guessing he just didn't know any better.

I have not yet read the last four books, but I don't know that I'd start The Wasteland Chronicles in the middle. A lot of the same reasons I gave for liking what I've read so far would make it difficult to catch up if you start in book three or four. West Heinleins his world building wonderfully, but his lack of info-dumps and filling in past details may make it difficult to catch up. That's alright though. The first book is Apocalypse. Just start there or with the Omnibus, the way I did.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Batteries

The Wielder: Sworn Vengeance by David Gosnell Review by Jim McCoy

Arthur McInerney and his crew of summonings are back and this time it gets even uglier. Welcome to David Gosnell's *The Wielder: Sworn Vengeance*. We're glad you could join us. Don't get comfortable though: This one is a rough ride with accusations, betrayal and the search for vengeance. Arthur's methods aren't gentle and they shouldn't be. When the goal of the enemy is no less than the invasion and capture of the Earth by the demons of hell, the time for subtlety is past. Arthur and his friends go through the wringer and come out again. Whether they're stronger or not is questionable.

This one starts off with a bang. Malgdorath, Arthur's nemesis and all around evil creep, is at it again and he is succeeding in his plan of promoting religious strife to bring the world closer to Hell. It's a scary time with news broadcasts showing violence daily. Enemies aren't always who we think they are and friends aren't always bound to a human frame of reference. Some "friends" just flat out aren't friends. The whole world has lost it's mind and things are continually getting worse.

It's into this environment that our hero, Arthur McInerney, finds himself thrust as a result of his failure to destroy Malgdorath in *The Wielder: Betrayal*. He's in for the fight of his life and he knows it. That is, IF he can find Malgdorath. You would think that finding an evil demon would be easy, but not so much. Much of the book involves fighting and looking. Frustration abounds.

Arthur, of course, also has to deal with personality conflicts among his summonings and this time it gets nasty, with his succubus turning herself into a hag because she's having a snit. I found it funny. Arthur sometimes manages to say things to his summonings that cause all kinds of problems without meaning to. That makes a lot of sense because how many of us have hurt someone without meaning to, simply by saying something? I know I have.

The fight scenes in this book are awesome and once again very reminiscent of a battle out of a MMORPG. This time it has more of a boss fight feel than a Battle Ground feel but it's definitely there. I was into the book on one hand and on the other I couldn't help but hear my raid leader screaming "Kill the adds!" Seriously. They were well written and fast paced. There was definitely one fight that didn't end quite the way I expected it to. It did, however end in a logical manner that sets up the next book.

The scary thing about this book isn't the demons. It's not the magical conjurations or even the attempt to turn Earth into a literal hell. No, I see this book in light of my history degree. The terrifying thing here is that much of the conflict in *The Wielder: Sworn Vengeance* could happen at any time. Christians fighting Muslims is nothing new. Vlad the Impaler earned his nickname (No, his mother did not call him her "little impy" when he was growing up.) by impaling his enemies and those who had betrayed him and his kingdom as a Christian at war with Muslims. (And he's still considered to be a national hero in Romania because he kept the Muslims/Ottoman Empire out.) ISIS is beheading Christians daily. The attempts by the demons to draw Israel and the greater Jewish community into the fray ring too true for comfort. I really liked this part of the book, but it haunts me. We could see something similar emerge in the near future and it wouldn't take a supernatural event to make it occur. This one is going to keep me up at night.

Gosnell has a feel for just how much reality and vice versa. Too far one way and this book becomes a cartoon. Too far in the other direction and it becomes a half-assed documentary. Somehow though, he manages to blend them in seamlessly and in the right proportions. We're on the edge of our seats the whole way wondering if this thing is going to tip.

Maybe equally as important is the fact that Gosnell doesn't take sides in the religious conflict in his book. There is no over the top moralizing. There is no proselytizing. Gosnell writes the narrative as a narrative and not a religious tract. He's not asking you to take side against anyone but Malgдорath and company who are basically using people of all faiths for his own ends. I looked for a moral. Not only did I not find one, I didn't find so much as an attempt at one. That's good. If I want to be preached to, I'll go to church. Gosnell doesn't do that.

I really have one complaint about the work and it's one I've brought up about a lot of books that I've reviewed: I hate cliffhangers! He's an asshole! Look, I was going to buy the next book anyway. There's no reason to do this to me. I quit watching prime time TV for exactly this reason. I don't need to be left hanging for months/years an author writes the next one. It's just frustrating. I've hated cliffhangers since the Star Trek: The Next Generation episode The Best of Both Worlds. Oh noes the Borg have Picard. What's going to happen now? I guess we'll find out in September... Ugh. My opinion of cliffhangers has not improved since.

Having said as much, I really did enjoy this book. I went through it in like a day. It was a roaring good time. I'm looking forward to the next one. For all my whining about a cliff hanger, I didn't read the pre-view at the end. Fortunately for me I just checked Amazon and it looks like there has been a sequel released already. I'll be picking that up before too long, rest assured. It sounds like a good one.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Swords of Light

Wild Cards: Texas Hold'Em.

Edited by George R.R. Martin

Reviewed by Sam Lubell

(originally published WSFA Journal May/June 2019)

Superheroes have been running in comic books for generations and have become super-popular in the movies with many Marvel movies in the top moneymakers in recent years and DC having five television shows on the CW network. So it is not surprising that books of superhero adventures are become more common.

George RR Martin's Wild Cards has been providing fans with prose superhero stories and mosaic novels since the 1980s. While the volumes range in tone from light fun to surprisingly dark, Texas Hold 'Em is surprising light considering that it is focused on the Jokers, those whose bodies are deformed by the alien Wild Card virus, rather than the more super heroic appearing aces (of course, appearance does not necessarily reflect morality and some of the jokers have powers of their own.)

The authors are Caroline Spector, Max Gladstone, William F Wu, Diana Rowland, Walton Simons, Victor Milan, and David Anthony Durham. As a Wild Cards "mosaic novel" the book divides the stories into pieces and then reassembles them as braids within a novel.

Texas Hold 'Em is, of all things, the story of a high school band trip. Of course, since the band is comprised of jokers and the chaperons include aces Bubbles, Rusty, and Rubberband, there are lots of super powered hijinks. Naturally the kids learn lessons about prejudice and growing up. And they discover an ace who needs to learn to be open about her powers. Their floor of the hotel is haunted. And this doesn't even begin to cover the ordinary misadventures of band teens away from their parents. Even super powered chaperons won't stop kids from getting into more trouble than they can handle. This book is fun and stands alone even if the reader has not read any of the dozens of previous books in the series.

Prose Bono

The Importance of Having an Editor – And How to Work with One Chris Nuttall

A change from politics here ...

A few months ago, I was having a chat with another author at a convention (a few details have been changed to protect the guilty.) We were comparing notes on editors and she told me that her editor was an absolute pain in the posterior. She talked about the editor as one might talk about an abusive partner, a nagging gas-lighting manipulator who enjoys making you second-guess yourself and (eventually) give up completely. This was clearly a relationship that had gone deeply sour and I advised her to contact the publisher, explain that the editor wasn't working out and request a new one.

(Most publishers, like most managers, tend to assume there isn't a problem if they don't hear anyone squawking.)

But what struck me was her insistence that she didn't need an editor. Her experience with her editor – and a string of bad editing suggestions – had convinced her that editors were worthless. And while I tended to agree that this editor was clearly a poor choice, I had to disagree that all editors are worthless. Writers need editors.

No writer ever born can avoid making mistakes. The human eye is lazy and tends to skip over mistakes because it knows what it should say. Each page of the manuscript is the result of considerable effort, even for the best writers. They need someone to take a look at the manuscript with a fresh eye and point out the mistakes.

This is not a pleasant process. I have often reminded myself, after receiving a manuscript covered in MS Word edits, to love the editor even when I hate the editing. No writer enjoys even the simple copy-editing process, let alone the more substantive rewrites that are sometimes suggested. But it has to be done. The editor may see your mistakes, but if you remove them before the book is published no one else will see them. (And you don't get reviews that say "this idiot made hundreds of mistakes.")

Why is this important? There are authors, some of whom you can probably name, who are such big names that they are effectively 'editor-proof.' These are the authors who can force a publisher to accept a manuscript without major edits, even when the manuscript requires major edits. The publisher may not realise that there is a substantial problem until the sales start to drop, by which time it is too late to fix the problem. An editor might well have been able to keep the problem from turning into a nightmare.

The thing authors have to bear in mind is that they, not the editor, are the one who will have their name on the cover. They are the ones who are credited with writing the book. And they have the final say, in a well-run publishing house, on which changes actually make it into the final manuscript. The editor is meant to point out potential problems. You – the author – are the one who has to decide if the author has a point.

(Have a look at the above line. See the mistake? I nearly missed it ...)

So ... how to deal with editors?

If your book is picked up by a publishing company – small or large – the company will probably have a stable of editors they've worked with before. These editors will be familiar with the type of books the company publishes – they'll be familiar with the conventions of the genre and suchlike. In this case, all you have to do is establish the ground rules (see below.)

If you're self-publishing and you don't have anyone to refer you to an editor (there's a list of people I've worked with here), you need to be a little more careful. Word of mouth will probably lead you to a few possibilities. Otherwise ... if you find an editor's website, ask them directly what sort of books they edit. Don't be afraid to ask questions, or for references, or even for them to do a free sample. Most editors I've met are happy to prove they can actually do the work. If they refuse ... danger, danger, indie author.

(If you're written a series, you want the editor to be familiar with the series too.)

Sort out payment first, including details like how the payment is to be transferred and what sort of timetable you want. (Most editors will skim the manuscript, then give you an estimate.) Be careful of non-standard requests – money is quite understandable, but co-author credit or future favours is not. Do not make any profit-sharing agreements. They tend to end very badly.

(Regarding co-author credit, that's a very unusual request unless they're literally rewriting the entire book. In that case, you might consider it worthwhile.)

Once you have an editor, sort out the ground rules. Most people have a preferred way of doing things. (I prefer to get a manuscript with all changes clearly marked so I can check them, one by one.) Make sure you get this done before any work is actually done because editors tend to get annoyed if you ask them to do something again. You may have to argue with the publisher, if they have a different way of doing things. It has to be done.

(Tip – get them to do a little editing, then send you the edited manuscript. It's useful to make sure you can actually see the changes before they start work on the whole thing.)

I generally divide editing into two subsets – conceptual editing and line editing. The former is correcting mistakes in the storyline itself or suggesting improvements. The latter is spelling and grammar mistakes (etc). Most editors will prefer to do them together unless they have some pretty serious conceptual edits to suggest. If you want to take them separately, however, make sure they do it. This might, of course, cost more.

Once you get the edited manuscript, read through it from start to finish, then go for a long walk. You'll need to calm down. Some of the changes will seem like pointless nitpicking, others will seem unbearably stupid. Do not send back outraged justifications, insults or anything else. Think about the suggestions first. Generally, I find that:

-I've written something that doesn't make sense.

-I've left out a piece of information that readers need to understand what's going on.

-The editor is wrong because [whatever].

With the first two, fix the problem. With the latter, write back and explain – calmly and reasonably – why the editor is wrong. Bear in mind that even if the editor is wrong, you may have a problem because someone read something you wrote and got it wrong.

Remember, the editor is on your side! No matter how mind-numbingly stupid his remarks may sound, they have to be taken seriously. Don't dismiss his remarks without a solid reason why you're disagreeing with him.

But at the same time, remember ... the editor is not your boss.

Go through the manuscript, make the changes, then send it back for another look. It may pass muster or there may be other issues. Deal with them. Hopefully, by that point, you'll have a far better manuscript.

We all talk about wanting people to tell us the truth, the unvarnished truth. And let's face it – most of us are liars. We want people to sing our praises. That's why most authors run into trouble when they show their work to someone who doesn't feel obliged to be nice (i.e. a reader who thinks he just blew thirty minutes on a useless book) and tells them precisely what they think of it.

Think of the editor as the guy who always tells you the truth, the guy whose job it is to point out the problems in your work. He is the epitome of 'good is not nice.' He isn't there to flatter you. His job is to make your work better by making you aware of potential problems ...

... And learning to work with editors is one of the keys to a writing career.

Dredits by Cedar Sanderson

Dread Edits, only when I was thinking this through I ran the two words into one in my head. I don't think I'm alone in dreading the editing process. It's tedious, it can make a book you enjoyed writing into a boring chore, but it's necessary. Editing is part of the process, even if, or perhaps especially if, you're sending the manuscript to someone else for more editing.

I'm not particularly good at editing. I dread it, I put it off, and although proofing isn't horrible (I tend to read the story backwards, to catch things. That lack of continuity trips up my brain. I started to do this with papers in college and it works well. Your brain is a tricky beast, and it will fill in words that are all wrong, in the interests of helping you. Not helping, Brain!) trying to catch structural issues seems to catch me up in the worst way. Which is why beta readers are invaluable, of course. They aren't living in your head, with access to all the bits you didn't bother to write down, but should have in order to make things perfectly clear to the reader.

Which does not mean that you ought to write everything in your head down in the story. I was amused, while reading a novel, to discover a perfectly lovely passage on novel-writing, as was explained to a young woman who had just written her first novel. This is from *Anna and Her Daughters*, by DE Stevenson (yes, a relative of that Stevenson). Since DE Stevenson wrote more than 40 novels herself, and was rather successful, I like what she said.

“It’s a sort of build up. You have to describe__”

“You don’t build up this sort of story. You don’t describe the scenery and the characters. This sort of story is an entertainment for people who can’t be bothered with long and detailed explanations. You must plunge straight into the middle of the story on the very first page.” She smiled and added, “Here am I telling you how to write a novel... and I couldn’t write a novel to save my life.”

All the same she was right. The beginning was too heavy and it was not until Chapter Four that the story began to get going.

She’s hit on something here that made me stop and think. Editing has flavors – far more than the ‘structural, continuity, and proof’ it has to understand the genre. A romance is going to be paced differently, with different beats, than a science fiction novel will be. And while you can transpose some of those things, because it’s never a rigid structure, if you do too many, the readers will wonder what you are playing at. This is why we talk about reading in your genre when you want to write in it. If you don’t, the book is going to be an Odd Duck, and not necessarily in a good way. Most likely it will be neither fish, nor fowl, nor good red meat (and what does that leave? Cricket flour?). Being fresh and original, oddly, requires a firm foundation in what you want to break away from.

But I shall finish with DE Stevenson’s advice again:

“There were a few other small mistakes... in several places my critic [her friend helping her edit] objected to the phraseology and made me alter it. By the time we had done all this the manuscript was in a frightful mess and I said I would re-write the whole thing.

“Indeed you won’t!” declared Mrs. Millard. “Give it to me at once. If you rewrite the story you’ll change the wording and take out all the freshness and spontaneity. You aren’t experienced enough to leave well alone. We’ll pack it up here and now and send it to be typed.”

She’s right, you know. Once you have done the necessary edits, leave it. Send it to your editor, as this is past the beta reader stage – the changes she was incorporating were those that betas would suggest – and then stop worrying about it. Rest, take a long walk, read loads of books that interest you, and then begin on the next book!

Wright’s Writing Corner: Interior Dialogue L. Jagi Lamplighter

Interior Dialogue: Readers don't trust dialogue. Have your characters think and have what they think be juxtaposed to the dialogue, showing a new angle.

This one I learned the hard way.

When I first started writing novels, I was under the impression that the best writing was like a screen play, all dialogue. So, I set out to write just that. I put everything into dialogue. I would figure out what the character wanted or was thinking. Then, I would find a way to have him speak this thought aloud.

Back then, I had two friends reading my work—the same two who set me right about senses (Thank you, Von Long and Danielle Ackley-McPhail!). When I finished a chapter, I would send it to them, and, invariably, they would write back (along with a request for more sense impressions), “What is he thinking?”

To which, I would stare at the page in absolute puzzlement and then, gesturing at it wildly, cry out, “But I just told you what he was thinking! He said it out loud!”

Then, one day, it struck me.

They did not believe him.

No matter what I had the character say. Unless I did something to indicate in the text what his opinion was—unless I showed them his thoughts—they did not know if he was telling the truth.

They did not know if his happiness was true or feigned. They did not know if he agreed with his words or was just saying them to be polite. They did not know if he actually liked the guy he was talking to or was secretly wishing the bloke would take a long walk off a short pier.

No matter how much of his heart the character poured into his dialogue, it never occurred to them that this was also what he was thinking.

And that was when I realized that internal thoughts are another form of “The Trick”—another chance for an author to show contrast in the story. In this case, the contrast is between what is being said and what is being thought.

In writing, as in drawing, contrast is what brings out three-dimensionality.

Now, adding contrast does not mean that what a character is thinking always has to be the opposite of what he says. Characters don't all have to be pathological liars. Some characters say what they mean—but very few characters, even the most honest, say everything they mean. Showing the character's thinking gives the author a chance to fill in the story, to add details, nuances—shading.

Is the character worried about what he is saying? Is she excited for a reason she has not yet put into words? Is he tired, so that his main attention is not on his dialogue, but on how quickly he can get home and relax. Is she actually thinking about cheese? Or chocolate? Does he have a hidden agenda? (Hidden agendas do not need to be bad things—picture a character trying to subtly discover a friend's schedule so she can plan a surprise birthday party.)

Finally, thoughts can just be a chance to put across information no one would bother saying in words: how long people have known each other, where the character's watch came from, some tidbit of background information about the setting, that sort of thing.

Interior or internal thoughts and feelings can be indicated in two ways. The first is to put the thoughts on stage:

1) She loved the old couch. It pained her to see it in such bad shape.

Or, even:

2) She thought: I love that old couch. How sad that they let it get like this.

The second is to show without telling:

3) She ran her hand slowly over the old couch, stroking its worn upholstery and running her finger along the crack in the polished wood of the arm.

Or, show with some tell.

4) She ran her hand slowly over the old, worn couch, sad to see it in such a state of disrepair.

Which method is better?

Whichever one fits the story.

Most authors use a mix. The second one is probably the least common. Direct thoughts in conversation form are rare. Often, if they appear, it is to emphasize irony.

Modern writing books push the third: showing with no telling. Showing is great for two reasons. One, you often have a good chance to use either visceral reactions or sense impressions, both things that can make the story more vivid for the reader. Two, that is how we tell what other people are feeling in life, by seeing their expression, how they move, and what they do.

Sometimes the show-only method works. I think it's relatively clear in my example above what is going on. As a reader, however, I find sometimes this method does not work. Not every reader has the same expectation of what a certain gesture or action means.

If the reader's expectations do not match those of the author, the reader is left scratching their head and saying, "Huh?" This happens to me with certain writers. (They have all been women, though whether that is causal or by chance, I do not know. Still, I think of it as 'that mistake women writer's make.) I get to a scene, something happens, the character has an emotional reaction, and I am left going ... "Bah?" with no idea of what caused the character to have that reaction. Sometimes, I can't even tell what the reaction is.

The internal thought responsible for the motivation of the character did not communicate it self to me in the scene.

I also notice that my husband and some of my guy friends are even more puzzled by these passages than I am. They entirely miss subtle emotional subtext. So much of what happens in such 'show not tell' scenes is totally lost on them.

So, personally, I prefer either example Four or a mix of One and Three, unless the particulars of Three make the meaning so plainly obvious that even a drunk monkey could follow the scene. If I were writing the scene in the examples above, I would decide which option to use based on the purpose of the scene. If the woman's emotional reaction to the couch was important to either the plot or character development, I would go with:

She ran her hand slowly over the old couch, stroking its worn upholstery and running her finger along the crack in the polished wood of the arm. She loved the old couch. It pained her to see it in such bad shape.

If the matter were of very little importance, I would use something more like Example Four.

I would not use Example Two on something as unimportant as a couch, unless I were writing *The Haunted Sofa, A Gothic For Our Time*, and her direct thoughts were being overheard by the mind-reading entity dwelling in the old couch.

Or, if it was **THE AMAZING SOFA!***

Am I good at internal dialogue? Sadly, no. I believe it is my weakest area, but, at least now—thanks to my friends questions—I am aware of the need, which is: to use internal dialogue to add contrast to the story, help fill in background, and hint to the reader the causes of the characters emotional reactions.

When done right, Internal Dialogue gives the reader a deeper sense of three-dimensionality and depth, hopefully, without weighing the story down.

I learned the hard way. Maybe, just maybe, you won't have to.

(**THE AMAZING SOFA** is a superhero invented by my ten-year-old son, Juss, who always writes the words in all caps and italics. Oddly, **THE AMAZING SOFA** actually is a mind-reading couch.)

Literary Criticism

Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy
Edited by Heather Rivera and Robert Arp
Review by Tamara Wilhite

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a rich vein for philosophers. It presented two robots debating the fate of humanity. It has shown us competing moral systems in literal conflict in “Civil War”. The Avengers “Infinity Saga”, the combined “Infinity War” and “Endgame” movies led to a collection of over thirty philosophical essays by the publishers of the “And Philosophy” series.

About "Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy"

Chapter 1 presents the ethical conundrum of the return from the snap ranging from the risk of starvation to property rights disputes. Chapter 2 applies existentialism to life after the Snap. The author suggests Iron Man can best be understood through Sartre’s worldview, Bruce Banner by Camus and Captain American via Levinas. Hawkeye is relegated to Nietzsche’s nihilism. I suggest brushing up on Nietzsche, because he’s cited often in this philosophy book.

Chapter 3 analyzes the nature of grief in the post-Snap world and the psychological impact of collective trauma. It presents Thanos as the God of Death. Natasha is presented as his counterpoint. Chapter 4

asks why grief hurts so much.

Chapter 5 seeks to define the logic of time travel in Endgame and points out the contradictions in the plot. It tries to offer a solution via multi-verse theory. Chapter 6 discusses Nebula's time travel paradox, killing her earlier self. It then tries to solve the paradox via subjective timelines. Chapter 7 asks us to define "genuine" time travel. Then we're back to defining the rules of time travel in the MCU.

Chapter 8 asks why Dr. Strange would withhold knowledge and compares the amount of knowledge he has on potential outcomes with a God. Chapter 9 presents a philosophical analysis of Captain America versus Tony Stark, a conflict that goes back to "Captain America: Civil War". The author suggests Tony Stark is a consequentialist and Captain America is a deontologist. It argues Captain America is right given the concept of the multi-verse, because those who act based on the likely outcome of their actions are paralyzed by the Butterfly Effect.

Chapter 10 compares the narratives of Gamora and Natasha's sacrifices. It also discusses the ethics of each as well as how Natasha's self-sacrifice met the criteria for getting the Soul Stone. Plato's Symposium on the Nature of Love is invoked. Thanos' sacrifice of Gamora is described as a futuristic, utilitarian trolley problem.

Chapter 11 focuses on population ethics. It breaks down the ethical weight of the Snap using totalism, averaging and what is called "person affecting view".

Chapter 12 discusses the nature of sacrifice. It presents examples of literal blood sacrifice in various religions. It loses points for intellectual dishonesty when having no problem comparing Natasha's Christ-like sacrifice to save the world to Christian tradition but refusing to link Muslim suicide bombers to Islam. Chapter 13 uses examples in "Endgame" to explain the concept of abduction and adductive reasoning.

Chapter 14 is one of the first essays addressing the moral system Thanos is using. This one draws parallel from Japanese warrior culture. It then argues the Avengers only succeed by embracing death. Strange probably had to die so that Tony was alive to do the reverse-Snap. Natasha literally sacrificed herself. Tony died to save the world.

Chapter 15 links death and humor but avoids gallows humor. Instead, it looks at Loki's repeated efforts to cheat death. Chapter 16 outlines the four philosophies of death and how Endgame parallels Christian narratives. Chapter 17 dives into the environmentalist doomer mindset. It begs us to believe the Greens' predictions of the end of the world, so be the hero and sacrifice quality of life so we don't all have to die. Chapter 18 is an analysis of Tony Stark's life, and more importantly, death.

Chapter 19 compares Abraham and Thanos and concludes he's no Abraham. Chapter 20 argues Thanos was the hero of the movies. This isn't a unique view, because I've read others who outlined how Thanos' journey in the "Infinity War" movie perfectly matches the classic hero's journey. "Endgame" in theory deconstructs it as well as reverses its outcome.

Chapter 21 spells out the differences between Thanos in the comics and Thanos in the Avengers movies. Chapter 22 compares Daenerys Targaryen in "Game of Thrones" to Thanos. It argues they are both made evil by nurture, nature and messianic destiny. Chapter 23 states that Thanos was moral but lost his compass, thus he committed evil acts with good intentions.

Chapter 24 analyzes the critical moment where Thanos says, “I am inevitable” and Tony Stark says, “I am Iron Man.” It compares this debate to the Christian tradition of “I am” statements. Chapter 25 outlines why Thanos was a good villain. (If you want terrifying, look at the sheer volume of dialogue arguing Thanos is right in concept and even in action.) It also takes a look at Ultron’s worldview and similar end goals. Chapter 26 argues that Thanos is a hero through the lens of Nietzsche’s philosophy. It says his failure was using master morality on what is arguably a slave universe and missing the need for internal controls like those naturally regulated systems have.

Chapter 27 suggests Thanos is the modern version of Thanatos, the god of death. It then analyzes Martin Heidegger’s “Being and Time”.

Chapter 28 asks us what makes Steve Rogers good. What did he do and believe that made him capable of wielding Mjolnir. Chapter 29 studies the transformation of Tony Stark from his introduction as a billionaire playboy to heroic savior.

Chapter 30 is the second climate doomer essay. It argues that we need to follow Socratic ethics to literally be good and save the world from destruction. Chapter 30 is slightly better, since it has Nebula arguing with Socrates. Chapter 31 concludes the set and asks if Hulk had a soul separate from Bruce Banner.

Summary

The MCU is funny and thrilling in equal parts. The Avengers Infinity Saga gave us amazing parallel arcs, philosophical debates and logical puzzles that will be debated for decades while the Marvel Avengers movies themselves will be taught in theater class as the gold standard in how to tell stories, develop characters and keep the fans and general public equally thrilled about comic book movies.

“Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy: Go for the Head” is a great read for those who want to mine the philosophical and ethical issues behind the busy action scenes barring the few obvious conflicts like Iron Man versus Captain America in “Civil War”.

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JK Rowling Is Not Your Slave by Chris Nuttall

So this article pops up in front of me today. Why Dumbledore must not be the token gay person in Fantastic Beasts.

Must not. Interesting choice of words, isn’t it?

If I am forced to be honest, I am one of those nerds who will happily spend hours creating whole universes or trying to figure out the real-world implications of a change in history, society or culture. The question of how homosexuals fit into wizard society is an interesting one, well worthy of a reasoned debate. Do they have full civil rights, such as they are in a society that isn’t big on granting civil rights

to anyone? Are they tolerated, as long as they produce children? Or are they regarded as traitors for removing themselves from the gene pool rather than helping to expand the population?

But what does this matter?

JK Rowling is a fantasy writer, not a writer of erotic fiction. And she is writing for children, not adults. (Come on – do you think kids won't demand to go see *Fantastic Beasts*?) Sex and sexuality were never a very big part of Harry Potter because they were children's stories, not adult stories. The handful of kisses exchanged during the series is about as far as JKR could reasonably go. Why should JKR focus on such matters when it has nothing to do with the series?

But there's a more serious point here that needs to be addressed.

JKR is not a slave. Nor are the producers of *Captain America: Civil War* or *Frozen II*. Why in the name of all that's holy do people think they can make demands on them? Why must Sirius Black be gay? Why must the next *Fantastic Beasts* include a homosexual relationship? Why should Steve Rogers get a boyfriend? Why should Queen Elsa get a girlfriend?

What sort of sense of entitlement allows people to make such demands?

Mrs. Rowling gets this a lot, it seems. People complained about cultural appropriation and the absence of Native Americans, then whined that the American Magical Society is apparently an unpleasant place. Such people seem to ignore the simple fact that such appropriation may make perfect sense in-universe, or – for that matter – that British Magical Society is not the sort of place anyone would realistically want to live. Or the racial balance at Hogwarts, even though JKR's racial balance in the books makes a great deal of sense.

And then people complain about Sirius Black not being gay, having quietly forgotten that there was a perfectly good reason everyone was quite happy to accept the official story of his treachery. You want role models? What sort of role model is a bullying braggart who commits an attempted double-murder at fifteen because he thought it would be funny?

It is a great deal easier to carp and criticise than it is to actually write a book, direct a movie, figure out what sells or build an acting (or whatever) career. What is it that makes the critics think they own the people who do? That they have a right to dictate their actions? Why don't the critics try to write themselves?

JKR does not have a monopoly on wizard school stories. The first such story dates all the way back to 1953. (TV Tropes has a list of such stories.) If the critics want to write a wizard school story set in America, why don't they try? Or they could write something more in line with Native American traditions – perhaps a young man, descended from a Native American tribe, is invited to study with his great-grandfather. Why not blend together Native American mythology and Western stories? You could include Native Americans or African-Americans to your heart's content. Your main character could be homosexual, if you wish. Or bi ...

Hell, you could just write a fan fiction. God alone knows how many slash stories there are out there, or stories set in other countries, or stories in different eras, or ...

But you have to learn how to tell a story.

There are so many plot holes in Harry Potter that the entire cast of characters could fly their broomsticks through them. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that JKR crafted a story specifically designed to appeal to its audience – young children – that also managed to reach out and touch adults. That's the true magic of writing. Ticking off boxes on the diversity checklist is not writing. Making your characters one-dimensional, focused on a single trait, is not writing. Writing is creating compelling characters and making readers, just for a while, enter your world.

Harry Potter does not belong to the critics. It belongs to JK Rowling. The idea that JKR has a 'second chance' (one assumes to create something more in line with what this critic wants) is absurd. This is her chance to create something she wants ...

... And if the critics don't like it, perhaps they should try to do better.

The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon by Moira Greyland Review by Pat Patterson

I could not understand how this person could be alive, must less well-functioning, after all the abuse. There was NO ONE in her environment who was supportive of her. My gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, and I often refer to strong Christians in our families as the reason that we were able to survive adversity. But Moira had no one like that. At first, her parents rejected all forms of religion; later, they both became very active neo-Pagans, holding ceremonies in their home. Finally, they were ordained by one of the 'clergy' who brought young boys to the house to be used as sex slaves; they named the church they created "Gnostic Catholicism," and continued in their depraved ways. In no case did they ever provide her with any of the spiritual tools needed to offset the abuse and neglect. Thus, I was amazed to come across this passage:

"I had quietly become a Christian a few years before. When Jesus came to me speaking in a small, still voice, He told me that I was His and He would take care of me. I couldn't tell anyone, of course."

This is the ONLY resiliency factor I have found in her life. She does have a staggering intellect, but was placed in substandard schools where she was rejected by other students and even teachers for being so smart; so, brains MIGHT have helped, but overall, it appears that it was just another thing that separated her from others.

Ultimately, she found affirmation through her singing ability, and later with her savant-level skill on the harp. And finally, beginning, I believe, in 2014, the world has affirmed her, by repudiating the treatment she received at the hands of her parents.

Alas and alack, there remain some morons. I read today a comment by the president of the Science Fiction Writers' Association, a certain Cat Rambo, which attempted to defer criticism of their devotion to MZB by invoking Donald Trump.

Donald Trump? What in the great green world does Donald Trump have to do with ANYTHING related to this story? Just how much power are people ascribing to him, anyway?

I had the great good fortune to watch online Moira's very first EVER public speech, to a gathering of

Children Of Gay Parents (COG). In that presentation, as in the picture in this blog, the lighting gave her a halo. That was consistent with the power in her speech; she commented later that she was so nervous that she felt ill, but you would never know it by seeing how well she did. She was composed, a bit whimsical over the fact that the person introducing her pronounced her name wrong (it's pronounced MOY-ra, I believe), and she freely and honestly spoke of her own years of misery, suffered at the hands of her parents and their friends.

It's ONLY because I had seen her that I was able to keep reading her book. I kept encountering the most depraved incidents; in some cases, they seemed impossible. And yet, I'd research the most extreme example of pedophilia, and discover there was plenty of documentation to support it. The fact that Moira, today, is a reasonably functioning human being, able to give and receive love, able to perform beautifully in public, is the reason I was able to keep slogging through examples of the misery she faced on a daily basis.

I hope that she progresses in her healing. I hope that her voice is heard, and that there never, ever exists another community that is so willfully ignorant of the torture and exploitation of innocents.

And I hope the community of those who support her grows and grows, and that the community that wishes to cling to the idea that depravity is acceptable is exposed to the light, and vanishes.

The Pulp Jungle by Frank Gruber Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph. D. N3F Historian

While working on a bio-bibliography of Jack London, and looking through my many reference books on writers, I came across the Frank Gruber autobiography, *The Pulp Jungle* (1967), which I have read at least a dozen times over the years. In it Gruber tells how reading London's *Martin Eden* encouraged him when he was at a low point in his writing career.

The Pulp Jungle is one of the most entertaining books I have ever read. If one has an interest in the pulps, and/or what a struggling writer who wrote for them went through in the early 1930s, I recommend this book highly. I have bought three or four copies of it over the years; I keep loaning it to people who don't return it. Almost every time I picked it up and glanced through it, looking for an incident I only half-remembered, I found myself reading the entire book yet again!

Gruber's summary of the writing he did on a Remington portable from August, 1932 through June, 1934, almost brings tears to my eyes every time I read it. It's a true horror story for a young, would-be writer.

In *The Pulp Jungle* Gruber details many of his struggles he had in becoming a successful writer. At an Automat on Broadway, at least once a day (and often more frequently), he ate tomato soup – which consisted of free hot water in a bowl, with free crackers crumbled in, and half a bottle of free tomato ketchup added. He had this “meal” for years before he became a successful author.

While living in New York, in a rented hotel room, he met and became friends with, numerous fellow writers and would-be writers. One of these was L. Ron Hubbard, and there is an amusing anecdote about him, as told by Gruber:

“This writer began to relate some of his own adventures. He had been in the United States Marines for seven years, he had been an explorer on the upper Amazon for four years, he’d been a white hunter in Africa for three years. As he waxed enthusiastically about his exploits, I made a few notes, and after listening for a couple of hours, I said, ‘Ron, you’re eighty-four years old, aren’t you?’

He let out a yelp, ‘What the hell are you talking about? You know I’m only twenty-six.’

I read from my notes. “Well, you were in the Marines seven years, you were a civil engineer for six years, you spent four years in Brazil, three in Africa, you barnstormed with your own flying circus for six years. . . . I’ve just added up all the years you did this and that and it comes to eighty-four years [He] blew his stack.”

It’s easy to see why so many of his fellow writers later failed to be impressed with Hubbard’s claim that, after years of research and experimentation, he had created “a new science of mental health.”

In addition to Hubbard, Gruber knew several other writers and editors, including Edmond Hamilton, Leo Margulies, Lester Dent, Mort Weisinger, Walter Gibson, Otis Adelbert Kline, Arthur J. Burks, F. Orlin Tremaine, Cornell Woolrich, Ken Crossen, Donald Keyhoe, and Richard Sale – to name only a few. Neffers with knowledge of our genre’s history will recognize many of these names. When he was a struggling writer in New York in the 1930s, Gruber’s best friend was Steve Fisher, who later became a very successful Hollywood screenwriter.

In 1967 Gruber wrote: “I have written western stories, mysteries, fantasy and science fiction. I have produced love stories and spicy stories. I have turned out reams of Sunday School stories. I have written virtually every type of writing that is published today and some that is no longer being published.” At the time he wrote this (at age 63), he had published roughly four hundred stories, fifty-four novels, sixty-five movie screenplays, about 100 TV scripts, and more than 150 articles.”

Moreover, he also created three successful TV series: *Tales of Wells Fargo* (1957 – 1962), *The Texan* (1958 – 1960), and *Shotgun Slade* (1959 – 1961).

Gruber wrote a bio-bibliography of Horatio Alger, Jr. (1961), and a biography of legendary western writer Zane Grey (1975). I have read both of these tributes to writers Gruber admired, and they are excellent reference works. Alger’s novels had inspired him to become a writer himself when he was a nine-year-old newsboy in Chicago; and he had admired Grey’s novels since he was twelve, when he read *The Light of Western Stars* as a serial in the *Michigan Farmer*, a magazine to which the farmer for whom his family worked, subscribed.

Gruber didn’t write a lot of SF/F/H fiction, but one of his genre stories, “The Thirteenth Floor,” has been reprinted in a dozen or so anthologies.

If more information about Gruber is desired, he was the subject of one of my “neglected genre author” articles that appeared in the June, 2018, issue of our club’s monthly fanzine, *The National Fantasy Fan*.

FINIS

