

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
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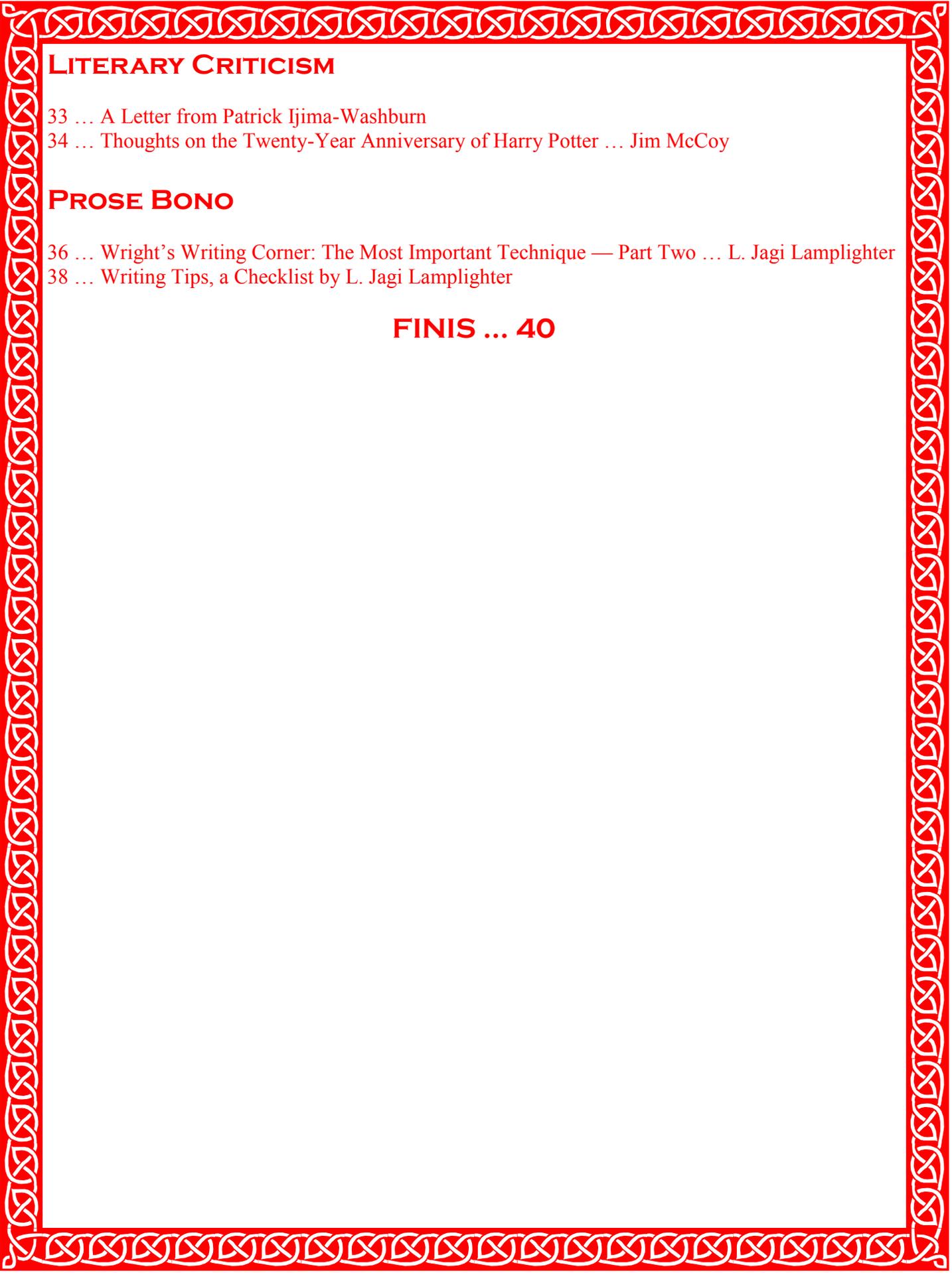
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Editorial

First, welcome to new writers Patrick Ijima-Washburn, Jeffrey Redmond, and Thomas E. Simmons.

An important feature of literary magazines is that they contain a vigorous and largely civil debate between writers having different opinions on literary issues. We are finally approaching this happy situation. Note under Literary Criticism the exchange between Jim McCoy (last issue) and Patrick Ijima-Washburn (this issue). In these unfortunate times, political opinions — which we seek to avoid here — sometimes serve to inform literary analysis. In this respect, your attention is particularly drawn to Thomas Simmon's excellent review of Rebecca Rainhorse's *Black Sun*, to be contrasted with Jeffrey Redmond's fine review of the same work. In general, reviews should concentrate on the novel, not the author, but here the two are so tightly interwoven that they must be considered together

The mission of N3F is to help members enjoy and discuss science fiction and science fiction fandom, in all media. The N3F welcomes the membership of fen of all nations, backgrounds, and political persuasions.



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Patrick Ijima-Washburn <http://patokon.com>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperversiveSF.com>

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

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

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

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

Jeffrey Redmond's writings also appear in the N3F zines Origins and Ionisphere

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

Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>

Tamara Wilhite also appears at <http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

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Fiction

All Made of Hinges -- A Mormon Steampunk Anthology

Edited by James Wymore

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Mere Pulp, by D. J. Butler. It's my understanding from reading the intro that D J Butler is the other primary mover of this anthology, for which we accord him due accord. He has written some EXCELLENT alternative history, published by Baen, in the "Witchy Eye" series, the last of which, Witchy Winter, was a finalist for the Dragon Award. The quality of writing extends here, in a plot/subplot/counterplot steampunk detective story, concerning a plot to reanimate the body of Brigham Young and purify/save the Church, and the non-believers can go jump in the lake.

Marching On to Glory, by John M. Olsen. This one is exciting! It also manages to bring in the truth that military leaders frequently do not take into consideration the strengths and limitations of their troops when they make their plans for conquest. It's also a good example of that genre of literature which demonstrates that a prophecy may be fulfilled in more ways than one. Join the troops of the gigantic airship, as they make their way to battle the mechanized monsters of the South, and on the way get a glimpse of what the Eternal City must be like. This one, as others, makes lovely reference to the genius works of John Moses Browning, one of which is strapped to my right hip at the moment.

A Strike to The Heart of the Cannon Lord, by Stephen L. Peck. It doesn't matter whether we are discussing steampunk, magic, Iron Age implements, or antimatter devices, SOME Bozo is going to find a way to make people miserable with it. And some force, even it dwindles down to a Remnant, will defy the Bozo. And someone is bound to fall in love, even in the middle of a war. In this case, the Bozo is the Cannon Lord, and his superior use of steampunk tech have prevailed, up until now. A pitiful handful makes the final assault.

Avenger's Angel, by Elizabeth Mueller. She's just a poor orphan girl, down to one faithful retainer and the last bit of technology left to her by her father. Alas, whatever shall she do? Well, she can become a bounty hunter, using her feminine wiles to win the confidence of wicked evildoers, and then clap the bracelets on them, and turn them in for the reward. Lately, though, a tall, dark, and handsome stranger, mysteriously costumed while remaining devastatingly gorgeous, is getting the drop on her, and shooting the bad guys before she can turn them in. Alas, whatever shall she do? (Hint: she isn't gonna quit.)

Ganesh, by Scott E. Tarbet. It is ingrained into the nature of men under arms, or engaged in some other death-defying career, that when the moment for rest comes about, they talk about what brought them to the place where they are. This is one of those conversations, more engaging than many. That it takes place between a sentient airship and a mecha-man is irrelevant; the best parts are still about fidelity and love. I couldn't say whether this story is most similar to Kipling, Jack London, or O. Henry, but it has that pleasing comfort those stories can bring.

The Pipes of Columbia, by Jay Barnson. Premise: the steel of Deseret has properties not found in other metals. In this case, it is the acoustical properties that are of particular value to a miscreant. A lovely lady in distress reaches out for help to a man crushed beyond endurance. And then, we have a very fine detective story.

Napoleon's Tallest Teamster, by Joe Monson. Dippel's Oil, in this universe, is more than an obsolete animal and insect repellent. It actually acts as a restorative agent, which permits the construction of reanimated men with mechanical enhancements. However, although the substance may generate activity, it is the actions and ethics of the Teamster that drives the story. The loyalty and determination that drives him is thus entirely his own creation, and may thus commend to his Ultimate Maker, though his earthly maker finds him repellent. Nicely based on real events taking place in those years when France was having more difficulty than usual.

Reversals of Fortune, by Amanda Hamblin. It is in this story that I found my ignorance of Mormon history to strike the hardest. From the descriptions, I get the feeling that these characters represent actual persons; if not, then they are singularly well-drawn. A dark-skinned Methodist girl, on her way to Italy, to work with their advances in steam technology, intercepts a young white girl whom she believes is intent on some sort of sabotage. Two Mormon evangelists look on and render what assistance they can.

The Machinations of Angels, by Christopher McAfee. This is a ghost story. There is a moderate amount of Mormon references and steampunk devices, but the essential nature is that of BOO! What would YOU do if an angel appeared, offering technology thought to be lost forever? We may not be able to count the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin; in fact, COUNTING appears to be one of the last things you will want to do with angels. (Spine-tingle!)

The Best Among Us, by Jace Killian. The details of the story include steampunk elements, such as airships, steam-powered guns, and mechanical legs. However, it's the message of alienation, repentance, and restoration which set this apart.

Strange Pilgrims, by John D. Payne. A house elf and a robot walk into a bar...

Well, it's not a bar, it's a cargo hold. However, they DO strike up a conversation, just as strangers will sometimes do in a bar. What is the nature of man? It almost always comes down to that, doesn't it?

Tracting Out Cthulhu, by Lee Allred. (Did you ever want to write Cat Hewell Hugh, and then get into an argument about the correct spelling? Never mind.) This installment has the best bad guys, and what might be the best good guys, and the goofiest pun. You'll know the pun when you get to it; it's the name of a robot. The heroes include Japanese schoolgirls, and genius John Moses Browning is respected for his works, one of which I have strapped to my right hip at the moment. The sufficiently advanced steampunk technology is indistinguishable from magic, and a wicked-efficient airship captain spits tobacco. Nasty human bad guys are attempting to restore Cthulhu to power, and their location is hidden, and must be determined by sending Mormon missionaries door-to-door. Help! Help! The world is under attack!

Ark Royal by Christopher Nuttall Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

What happens when humanity becomes confident that they're the only species in space and gets comfortable? What happens when no one plans for conflict with an alien race? How about if humanity is so worried about border skirmishes with other Earth nations that they're not looking outward for trouble? Well, if they're in Christopher Nuttall's Ark Royal they start off getting their asses kicked. It makes sense.

Ark Royal features a few classic tropes that just make my day. The first and most obvious is old-ship-comes-out-of-mothballs-to-kick-ass. I like this trope, but Nuttall does it better than most, simply by providing a reason that the Ark Royal is able to light it up. Simply put, the Ark Royal is armored. The new ships are not. The older ship can take a beating that would leave nothing of the newer ships but a debris pile. I like the trope and it's even better when it makes sense. Nuttall got this one straight as well.

Ark Royal is a tale of redemption not just for the ship but for her crew and her captain. The vast majority of the crew was stationed on the ship because they were problems. Commodore Sir Theodore Smith is the captain of the ship... but he should have been cashiered because of his drinking problem. He starts off the book hung over and craving another drink. He manages to bring himself back from the abyss though. The whole crew does.

In a weird sort of way (and I'm not sure if Nuttall intended this or not) the redemption of the crew is also the redemption of humanity. The human race has become complacent. It has done nothing to protect itself from outside attack. Humanity has not armored its carriers. It has no workable plans in place to protect itself from attack and no one trained to handle a peaceful first contact. Yet, when the Ark Royal's crew gets itself together, things get better for the Earth. The first victories against the aliens are led by a recovering alcoholic and his misfit crew.

It's odd too that the Ark Royal is a ship of the British Royal Navy but is put together from parts of only God and her captain know how many various nations. Honestly, I'd almost bet that the captain would have to sit down and count. This reflects the fact that all nations of the Earth are going to need to work together to repel the alien threat. Again, I'm not sure if Nuttall meant it this way or not, but the ship again takes on the mantle of the entire human race. The juxtaposition is a fascinating aspect of the story. I'm just not sure it was intended.

Nuttall's alien invaders are mysteries throughout this first book. I like this approach. The humans know nothing about their enemies. They just know that these things showed up and started killing people. They're not even sure why or what the enemy wants. They work out how to fight them based on trial and error. It's all they can do. I am often a fan of the reader knowing things that the protagonist does not but this time I think Nuttall has done the right thing.

Now, I will grant that there are eight books that follow this one (Ark Royal is the first in the series) and at some point, I hope that Nuttall makes more of the alien thought process known to his readers. That only makes sense. In an ongoing series more will most likely be revealed. I just started this series though, so I can't comment on whether or how it happens.

The combat scenes in the book work well. It helps that the aliens aren't stupid. The Ark Royal has a weapon that the ships they've fought previously have already abandoned and it catches them flat footed. It makes sense in the context of the story. Just as important though, is the fact that the aliens respond and find an intelligent way to fight back. This leads humanity to adjust their tactics... and so on. This is how wars actually work in the real world though, so that makes sense. Both sides use whatever information they can find about the other side against them.

Commodore Smith's superiors don't trust him as much as he would probably like and that makes sense too. He is a known alcoholic. It's interesting though, to see how the loyalty of the people under his command shines through when they're asked to spy on him. It's twice as interesting to watch how the perceptions of one particular character change over the course of the book. Nuttall does a good job showing the interlocking and sometimes conflicting duties and loyalties of a member of the military. Loyalty is key but it's not always clear which loyalty is more important. Nuttall shows this clearly and

his characters agonize. It fits. The battles with family/marital loyalty make sense as well. He even teases a problem with for the next book. I'm betting dollars to doughnuts that I've figured out at least part of it, but I could be wrong. I haven't bought it yet. (Sorry, Mr. Nuttall. Rent was due.)

Smith and crew are hardcore and resilient. They think outside of the box. In short, they're precisely what they need to be to defeat a force that superior in both technology and numbers. It's often a close-run thing but they fight and/or find a way through. Their missions turn out at least marginally successful because they refuse for them not to. This is a crew you can really admire. I'd go to war with them.

I'm trying to find something to complain about and it's just not working. I'm not going to say that this is a perfect work of Science Fiction but there are no MAJOR flaws that I could detect. I was never thrown from the story. The only characters I found annoying were the ones that were supposed to be annoying. I'm no expert on the tactics of space combat but everything in the book made sense from a fan's point of view.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Mass Drivers

Black Sun by Rebecca Roanhorse Review by Thomas E. Simmons

thomasesimmons.com

The author of *Black Sun* is Rebecca Roanhorse. After receiving her law degree from the University of New Mexico, Roanhorse clerked for the Navajo Supreme Court and practiced law on the Navajo Nation's Reservation before turning to fiction as a career. Her prior speculative fiction featured Diné (Navajo) tropes. Roanhorse qualifies as a Diné-in-law as her husband is an enrolled member of the Diné tribe. She is Black, biracial, and has claimed an ancestry traceable to the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo (although she is not an enrolled member of that tribe). Her breakout novel, *Trail of Lightning* (2018) featured a postapocalyptic world populated by Native gods. If Indigenous fantasy is a subgenre, she is at its forefront.

Her latest novel – the first of a planned trilogy – is *Black Sun*. It weaves the narratives of four geographically separated and culturally distinct youthful protagonists: Naranpa, an impulsive female sun priest, Xiala, a hard-drinking lady sea captain, Okoa, a soldier, and Serapio, a blind Christ-like ascetic. Each is given their own point-of-view in scenes in which they are featured. Each is fully realized in their setting, a pre-Columbian Americas world with a richness approaching Middle-earth. It's non-historical. There are no historically recognizable locations, ethnic groups, religions, or languages. But the author manages to communicate an Americas sensibility or worldview, populating the setting with crow gods, giant water striders, myth, and magic. Like most of Ursula K. LeGuin's *oeuvre*, there are no villains, just protagonists opposing one another.

Although classified as an adult fantasy novel, *Black Sun* boasts some of the salient elements of successful young adult fiction – authentic characters who still have some growing up to do; whose flaws function both as foils and footholds for heroism; who don't always fit in. The most compelling of Roanhorse's four principal characters is the non-heteronormative Xiala, a banished Teek with a special connection to the sea. When not expertly captaining a ship, she seems to progress from one tryst and hang-over to the next. But at the helm, she can command dozens of surly and superstitious sailors. At once marginalized, resourceful, and central to the action, she is also – perhaps – non-human.

While Xiala may be the most compelling of *Black Sun*'s characters, Narampa is the most fully realized.

Narampa grew up in the Coyote's Maw – a dark and outcast borough – and she rises improbably to the status of Sun Priest, buffeted by the complex politics of scheming aristocrats from the Sky Made clans who threaten her at every turn. Narampa must navigate webs of opaque subterfuge and double-crosses. It's a poor place for an empathetic and inexperienced idealist.

It would be too neatly biographical to claim that Narampa is Roanhorse herself inserted into this epic, but also too irresistible not to at least suggest it. Although Roanhorse's biological mother is Indian, Roanhorse was adopted at birth and only reconnected – awkwardly – with her birth mother as an adult. As a result, Roanhorse probably finds herself out of place whether in a Black, Indian, or Eurocentric crowd. Expectations are complex, hazards are unmapped, and missteps likely. Roanhorse's experiment with *Trail of Lightning* and its sequel was one such misstep. The books generated protests of Navajo myth appropriation and the label “the Elizabeth Warren of the sci-fi set” was hurled at the young author. Others have labeled *those* accusers Anti-Black. It was a nasty intellectual altercation with Roanhorse at the epicenter.

I'm unqualified to weigh in on those concerns. I cannot say whether appropriation is a fair accusation. It's not for me to say. But I do see the point in Diné contentions of appropriation and misuse. After all, it's one thing for Rick Riordan to cut and paste Greek and Roman gods into a novel. It's quite another to mine and refine living Diné traditions, some of which are off limits and not designated for consumption by a colonizing culture. The blame heaped on Rebecca Roanhorse personally, however, was insensitive and unnecessary.

Black Sun makes a much more nuanced and imaginative use of Indigenous textures. As a result, it's politically detuned. It's also more accomplished. It must have taken an impressive reservoir of courage, discipline, and creativity to complete. Roanhorse could have steered clear of further controversy and made a comfortable living sticking with Star Wars novelizations. But she chose to return to non-European American fantasy. I'm personally grateful for that. *Black Sun* is quite a ride.

The pace of the novel's accessible narrative is unrelenting. A count-down to the winter solstice in the heading of each chapter might seem like a cheap gimmick, but it works. Plenty of foreshadowing that something big is coming keeps the reader on edge. And while the singular draw of the solstice might otherwise result in a one-dimensional narrative, the varied perspectives of the different characters keep things lively, and the positioning of myth and magic are accomplished additions. The descriptions of games, meals, and costumes are cinematic. The explorations of inner thoughts are naturalistic and engaging. If no one in Hollywood has yet optioned the rights, they will soon.

This is a captivating novel. It features a proficient worldbuilding effort, with matriarchal and matrilineal societies, third-gender individuals, myths, and maps. True, Roanhorse's past fiction has generated accusations of appropriation, commodification, and subversion. But with this renewed attempt to uncolonize a genre, *Black Sun* removes a sizable link of chain mail from the armor of white Eurocentric fantasy fiction. In doing so, it opens avenues for other fantasy writers. It's heroic on several levels.

Roanhorse pilots her plot with the same sure hand as Xiala pilots her massive sailing canoes. *Black Sun* presents a magic-suffused landscape so effortlessly, it's natural to imagine an avalanche of imitators following her. Would that those writers are welcomed, rather than labeled.

Black Sun by Rebecca Roanhorse
Review by Jeffrey Redmond

A powerful priest, an outcast seafarer, and a man born to be the vessel of a god come together in the first of Roanhorse's Between Earth and Sky trilogy.

The winter solstice is coming, and the elite members of the sacred Sky Made clans in the city of Tova are preparing for a great celebration, led by Naranpa, the newly appointed Sun Priest. But unrest is brewing in Carrion Crow, one of the clans. Years ago, a previous Sun Priest feared heresy among the people of Carrion Crow and ordered his mighty Watchers to attack them, a terrible act that stripped the clan of its power for generations. Now, a secretive group of cultists within Carrion Crow believe that their god is coming back to seek vengeance against the Sun Priest, but Naranpa's enemies are much closer than any resurrected god.

Meanwhile, a young sailor named Xiala has been outcast from her home and spends much of her time drowning her sorrows in alcohol in the city of Cuecola. Xiala is Teek, a heritage that brings with it some mysterious magical abilities and deep knowledge of seafaring but often attracts suspicion and fear. A strange nobleman hires Xiala to sail a ship from Cuecola to Tova. Her cargo? A single passenger, Serapio, a strange young man with an affinity for crows and a score to settle with the Sun Priest. Roanhorse's fantasy world based on pre-Columbian cultures is rich, detailed, and expertly constructed.

Between the political complications in Tova, Serapio's struggle with a great destiny he never asked for, and Xiala's discovery of abilities she never knew she had, the pages turn themselves. A beautifully crafted setting with complex character dynamics and layers of political intrigue. The perfection read.

Commander by Mel Todd
Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

I have already reviewed No Choice, the first in Mel Todd's excellent Kaylid Chronicles series. It's one of those books that remind me why I go to conventions – I get to meet great people and their awesome novels. Seriously, these books have been out for years, and I had to find out about them, and Mel, through conventions.

Anyway, with book two, Commander, while book one could have been urban fantasy, book two is where we go into science fantasy.

Because at the end of book one, our heroine, McKenna Largo, is hearing voices. At the start of book two, the voice is having full conversations ... with everyone else.

The ability to shift doesn't come from anything mythological, but from nanotechnology.

And oh boy, does the start of the flap copy say it all.

It can always get worse, unfortunately. Discovering an Artificial Intelligence lives in your head, strike one. Having the Artificial Intelligence explain aliens are the origin of shifters on Earth, strike two. Having it announce you are the commanding officer of the earth shifters, strike three.

Deciding there is only so much one person can handle, McKenna Largo ignores the strange new voice in her head and focuses on her law enforcement career. She soon learns there are other aspects to being a shifter. Who knew cougars had such a great nose for drugs? Her career prospects increase with each drug bust, but so do her enemies. Still, McKenna insists on living as normal a life as possible. After one too many successes, these enemies target not just on her, but also her family and friends. Finding herself in a situation she never imagined, McKenna must step up and be the leader they need, a true commander. Now if she could just devise a plan that won't get them all killed.

TLDR: just do what I did and buy the whole series already.

For this specific book, there is, surprisingly, not a lot of action. This is probably because the last 30% of the book is almost solid action. The majority of the novel is heavily character based. In some respects, it's sort of like a John Ringo Vorpal Blade novel – the first half of the book is how things get done, and the second part is where the plot happens. And the flap copy describes the plot. Thankfully, it still doesn't give you a lot.

The funny thing is that the action scattered throughout the novel is very cleverly executed. Because that action isn't real – they're simulations. As said above, the shifters are caused by alien nanites. The reason? The shifters are to be foot soldiers for an alien race—mostly mindless, obedient drones. Why terraform the planet when you can terraform the people – and wage a Von Neumann's War without losing a single one of your own kind? It's almost like John Ringo's Darhel had come up with a better plan to screw over people. So, of course, the nanites come with their own AI, and the AI come with battle scenarios that read like set pieces from a Halo game.

So now if the plot gets slow, we can throw in a full space commando raid. Which was a nice way of inserting action into a story that, in other cases, would be considered slow... though, to be honest, we didn't need the blow by blow of the scenarios to keep the story going. The story carried itself along well enough on its own.

Once again, one of the most impressive bits about this series is just how much thought goes into the impact of shifters suddenly existing in the world. It covers politics, sociology, mythology, science, medicine, and culture on every single level. And if Mel Todd doesn't cover something, wait a chapter, she'll probably cover it eventually. I'm almost certain that she came up with a lot of different impacts on plenty of different cultures, and anything she couldn't show you in-story, she made a paragraph long vignette for a news story that topped each and every chapter.

And that's just the side content. Mel puts in a ton of thought in on the individual elements of how things work. Again, it's very John Ringo. Just going into the details of “Yes, you now have the sniffing ability of a drug dog, but with the higher processing function of a human being. Welcome to the drug squad,” was wonderful. She even had the legalities of such a sniffer cop down pat.

But yeah, I like the character building. I like the world building. I liked the progression of the story, as each book raises the stakes, and segues right into the next book.

Hell, I'll tell you just how much of an impression this book made on me. When reading a book for review, I always make notes – either in the Kindle copy, or on a note pad (write on books? What are you, a heretic?). I haven't even needed to reference my notes once during this entire review. Doing so now only provides some details – such as dealing with the foster care system, or that Mel Todd has a great way of delivering exposition that carries the plot, and an effortless way of conveying character backgrounds. Or that the little asides at the start of each chapter could be the plot of a book by themselves.

Who am I kidding – Mel Todd even manages to make a reporter appear to be somewhat human. We won't even go into the reality show.

Negatives: There are some editing issues here – and they're issues that I recognize. A word left over from rephrasing a sentence, but it doesn't fit in the new sentence. Or a left over "I" from a first person narrator ... even though the current edition is very much third person personal. I can't say they were more numerous than the errors in the first book (I remember none from No Choice, to be honest) but they were more jarring. They kicked me out of the story for a minute or two.

The second problem is that the ending of book two is similar to the ending of book one. While book one ends with McKenna and a bunch of shifters kidnapped and forced to work on behest of criminals, book two ends with ... with McKenna and a bunch of shifters kidnapped and forced to work on behest of criminals. Granted, the mission is different, and the stakes (and threat level) are higher.

Anyway, all the negatives aside, the book is 5/5 material. Just read it.

Darkship Revenge by Sarah Hoyt Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Have you ever sat in a cab at three in the morning with no fare in the back reading when you should have been taking a nap? Have you ever gotten home from a thirteen-hour shift driving a cab knowing you only had five hours to sleep before you went back and did it all over again and sat staring at words on a cell phone screen anyway? If not, I'm guessing that either:

- A.) You've never read Darkship Revenge by Prometheus Award winner Sarah Hoyt.
 - B.) You don't drive a cab and work midnights.
- or
- C.) Both.

First the disclaimer: This is the third book in a series. I think it would work pretty well as a stand-alone, but I've read the first two. The reader may want to start with Darkship Thieves and Darkship Renegades. Then again, you don't really NEED to unless you're anal about reading a series in publication order like a certain blogger we all know and love. *COUGH*

The story centers around Athena Hera Sinistra, daughter of Goodman Sinistra, ruler of one of the seacities in Hoyt's future Earth. Athena is an interesting character, possibly in the sense of the ancient Chinese curse. She was raised to be a body donor for her father. He did what he had to do to attempt to control her. It didn't work very well. I wouldn't want to be the guy who tried to control Thena. I guess that makes me smarter than him. Then again, Daddy Dearest was gene-engineered to be smarter than the rest of us, sooo... yup. Smarter than anyone who would try to control this chick. She's a little out there. But what do I mean by a littler out there? Either she is;

- 1.) Totally off her rocker (I don't believe this, but she seems to.)
- 2.) A little "off" (Totally possible)
- 3.) A sociopath who somehow manages to care about her family, if not anyone else (I'm thinking no, but some of Thena's thoughts about herself seem to tend in this direction)
- 4.) A hardcore pragmatist who ignores humanistic concerns (This sort of works, but not really. She does act like her nuclear family and her in-laws. Also, her treatment of the boys in the story is both

pragmatic and humanistic.)

or

5.) The only sane person left (This option scares the hell out of me. What she does works too well to be crazy, but if THIS is what sane looks like...)

Since Wonder Woman was my last review, let me say this as well: This is how you do an empowered female character. Thena is a take-no-prisoners, no-holds-barred type who sees what needs to be done and does it. She won't take no for an answer and she survives things that would kill most people. Thena doesn't give up when she has a goal in mind, ever. She has the protective instinct in spades and she cannot be stopped when it comes to defending her own.

Thena has a child in the first few pages of the book and, while she doesn't think she will make a good mother, she actually does in her own fashion. I mean, I'm not sure that having an infant strapped to your chest during a firefight is all that great of an idea even if you can't find a babysitter but Thena manages to do it without getting either one of them killed so... It's all good... I guess? Right?

The supporting cast is also impressive. Thena's husband Kit lives and breathes as much as if he were sitting next to you on the couch. The kids Thena and company end up saving come across as true to life as well. I started out wanting to hate these kids but the time the story was over I wanted to adopt one. (I'll admit that it didn't hurt that they had named themselves after famous fictional characters. OK, so maybe I'm a little testy about a story that includes a Christopher Robin but no Tigger, but I'll get over it.) Nat, Luce, Simon all seem real. I could almost feel the stress these guys were going through myself.

The story itself has a relentless pace. I've heard it said that if an author feels their story becoming boring they should drop a mountain on their characters. Well, I'm guessing that Hoyt believes in preemptive strikes and that the Himalayas are missing a few peaks, because the hits keep coming and the action doesn't stop.

Part of why I like this story is because I love a good villain and Hoyt's Good Men are the type of person I can totally love to hate. Anyone who would send down a plague to wipe out most of humanity in order to enslave the leftovers is worth killing. What they do to the children in their care is quite frankly disgusting as well. Hoyt has obviously taken great care in gifting us with people we can root against. She's done a damn fine job. It's not often that an author can make me hate a group of characters badly enough to want to choke them all to death but Hoyt manages it with aplomb.

The technology in Darkship Revenge is either really cool or horrifying. Gene-engineered space plants that grow power pods that you can run a city with are sweet. Characters fly around on anti-gravity powered brooms. Flying cars are everywhere. And of course, the plot revolves around defeating a biological weapon that is devastating.

There is one facet of Darkship Revenge that drives me batshit insane. Hoyt's characters shoot at each other with weapons called burners. They're kind of a cross between a phaser pistol and a welding torch. In and of itself that's okay. The problem emerges with the unbelievable shooting skill her characters display under pressure. I mean, the miracle head shots displayed in The Walking Dead make me crazy but what these characters do with burners is at least an order of magnitude more difficult. That being said, it's called The Rule of Cool for a reason. All in all though, this book kicked ass.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Brooms

The Ethereal Squadron by Shami Stovall

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

First, a word about the artwork: competent. The cover art, in color, shows an amazingly clean figure of (perhaps) uncertain gender, in uniform, with a background of what might be trench warfare and a skyline of burnt-out buildings. The figure is carrying what may be an Enfield Pattern 1914 rifle, although the sling attachment is not correct for that rifle. At any rate, it is not the rifle issued to the characters in the book, the SMLE Mark III. After the cover art is a monochrome silhouette of a similar figure. In both cases, the book title really pops, and on the cover art, the author's name can be easily read, and the text does not obscure the artwork.

Note: I said (perhaps) uncertain gender. It is a central point of the book that the protagonist, mostly referred by her codename of Geist (German for ghost or spirit), is a female, disguising herself as a male. While the figure's uniform certainly gives no clue as to gender, the way the face is drawn, and the slenderness of the arm gripping the sling of the rifle, strike me as being distinctly feminine.

Once we are past the cover, however, we get into the glorious word of the text, and there we have many happy hours.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist, Geist, is actually a young woman masquerading as a man in order to use her sorcerous talents to fight in the British Army against the wizards of Austria-Hungary. As I read the story, I began to consider: How many battles can you fight at once? Geist is, first of all, fighting against bullets and bombs coming her way. Secondly, she is fighting against the magical powers employed against her side, along with her fellow members of the Ethereal Squadron. And finally, she is fighting to keep the other members of her company from discovering her secret; and that's the most difficult battle of all. After all, in war, people get hurt, and medics are always too delighted to cut off their clothes to get to the wound and stop the bleeding. That would be an instant tip-off, and Geist anticipates being tossed ignominiously out of the service if her secret is discovered.

Fortunately, Matron-in-Chief (Head Nurse, I think) Mattie Johnson, codename Cross, was instrumental in getting Geist past the initial physical so she knows her secret. Not only does Cross provide her with needed medical treatment, it also provides both of them with a much needed confidant in the debilitatingly stressful conditions of near-front-line combat. This sets up an aggravatingly humorous situation, when loutish team member Tinker bursts into the examination room right after Cross has conducted her healing treatment on Geist and is having a 'moment.' Geist, bare from the waist up, has to pull Cross into a tight embrace to deceive Tinker, and the ruse works. Unfortunately, it also provides Tinker with a great amount of ammunition he can use to heckle Geist over the course of the rest of the book.

Note: it takes a special kind of stupid to harass a team member under arms, when you are going out into the field with them again. That's how people get fragged. Geist, fortunately or unfortunately, is above such petty reprisals.

Gradually, Geist's most personal battle is revealed: the reason she risks all to fight against Austria-Hungary. And that one falls under the category of spoilers, so I shall say no more.

The brutally rigid class structures of pre-WWI Europe are intensified by the linking of super-powers with bloodlines. Dynastic marriages not only knit kingdoms together, they also breed superior giftings into a family. Geist's special ability is a power to become materially transparent, so that bullets and

shrapnel pass right through her flesh, although her uniform may be torn by their passage. She also can pass her hand into the body of an enemy, then materialize it enough to pull out inner organs. Other members of her team, also assigned code names based on their abilities, have a different power, almost always only one. Buttons can materialize to a location where one of his buttons has been tossed. Little Wick can set fires (there is a Big Wick, too). Albatross can fly. Victory and Blick, brothers from the aristocratic Hamilton family, can see future outcomes and perceive on multiple wavelengths (heat, etc.), respectively. And a third Hamilton brother, known as Percival before his initiation into combat, has the ability to enhance or amplify the powers of others.

On the first mission of the book, Geist is charged with rescuing captured wizards from a German strong point. She discovers it's too late for two of them, and a third appears to be near death. As combat rages closer, she struggles to assist the person, identified by his dogtags as American William Black, to get to his feet; during the process, he is near to passing out again, and tells her his name is Wilhelm Richter. Immediately thereafter, Geist takes a bullet in the side to keep it from hitting the weakened Black, thus placing him in her debt.

Which is good, because he almost immediately discovers her secret, when she has to partially expose herself to treat the wound.

The mystery surrounding Black's identity causes friction in the unit, with some insisting he is a German spy. His determination to protect Geist (even when she doesn't want him to) just furthers the problem. However, he has the power to cause rapid decay in any substance he touches, giving him the name Vergess, an abbreviation of the German word for destruction.

The story works on several levels.

First, it is technically superior. (The wrong rifle on the front cover is not the author's fault.) There were a couple of scenes in which I wasn't sure the action could quite go that way; in particular, an early scene with parachutes and dirigibles. However, I did my research, and discovered that the author was right, given the basic assumptions of this world. It ONLY requires suspension of disbelief for the basic premise: sorcerers exist. After that, everything follows. I contrast that with a book I read several years ago. The basic premise was time travel, and I had already granted that. However, in the first scene, the protagonist pulls a harmonica out of his pocket, without that being established as part of his standard equipment. That's the sort of thing that makes for stupid stories, because there are then essentially NO RULES that limit the actions of the characters. First it's harmonicas, then you discover an intact Apache attack chopper, then buug-bugga the alien drops food for you and your family. That doesn't happen here. In this book, Geist has to continually be on guard that she does not expose her body; she also has to manage the frictions existing between members of her team; guns run out of ammunition; it hurts when they land with an overloaded parachute. REAL issues and events limit the characters, which is good for a story.

Second, there are some truly exciting action sequences, which is particularly nice for guys like me who like our exploding spaceships. There weren't any exploding spaceships, but there was a spectacular exploding dirigible, which Geist and the character formerly known as Percival do NOT wish to be on, either when it explodes, or when it crashes.

Third, the gradual reveal of Geist's primary motivation in participating in this war as an active combatant makes for an excellent background for her character development, as well as some of her teammates.

Fourth, I think ALL of the group dynamics are treated with insight, from the two big brothers smacking around Percival the runt, to the idiot who just won't shut up with the funny jokes that aren't funny. There is also a commanding officer who goes against type and admits his error to a subordinate, when she turns out to be right in the end. These are not unicorns; there really ARE some bosses like that. And finally, the author is not above killing off characters, without utterly destroying a major story influence after the fashion of a certain very wealthy gentleman with extra initials. You really DON'T know when they go out on a mission who is going to return alive, which keeps you on your toes.

What about follow-up books in the series? There are enough issues left unresolved, including Bad Guys needing comeuppance, that there is ample material to build on. However, I don't mean to imply that this was a cliff-hanger. I felt satisfied with the resolution that came with the story.

I had occasion to look over the reviews I have written in the past year, and I have read some REALLY great books, including finalists for the Dragon Awards. This will be the 81st book I reviewed in 2018. More than half of those I reviewed received less than 30 reviews. What that tells me is that there are a LOT of good writers out there who are being paid based on luck, rather than good writing, because everything I rate at 5 stars is something I think could be best-seller.

Which I hope this book is, and you betcha it gets five stars.

The Fae's Amulet by J.F. Posthumus Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Catherine Woulf is a witch. (DON'T get technical with me! I KNOW she is a necromancer. It's all "witch" to me!) She is a rather well-mannered and well-behaved witch, although she has retained the ability to act otherwise. In fact, at one point she reveled in personally acquiring power, but she was one of the very few to hold an unchallenged hold on the top position long enough to discover that this, too, is vanity and striving after wind. This can be attributed to her lineage (fae, on her mother's side; her father is a warlock) with DNA coded for exceedingly long life, as well as her skill in avoiding numerous murder attempts. Today, though, having tired of the game of power-for-the-sake-of-power, she spends her resources locating and validating the strange artifacts people lose track of.

However, when tall, dark, and handsome Fergus Sterling, a VERY powerful figure from her past, shows up with a job offer, she intends to reject it. She does not for two reasons:

1. The missing artifact is of such a nature as should NEVER fall into the wrong hands, and she realizes that she could be doing humanity a GREAT service by recovering the artifact; and
2. She has the hots for Fergus Sterling something fierce. The fact that she is centuries old has somehow NOT worn the shine off a good, looking, sexy, man of power (and oh, how many times have I heard THAT before), and she rationalizes all she wants to, but end up entering into a business contract with him, all the while hoping it will lead to something more.

Ultimate Power relationships are not spelled out in detail, which permits ambiguity not present in conventional stories about monsters and devils. That gives the writer a great deal of flexibility in the motivations of her characters: werewolves can be good guys, or they can be bad guys, but that is a function of their choices, not the nature of a curse laid upon them. The same thing holds true with other supernatural people, such as vampires, dwarves, and dragons. The ONLY way to be labelled a complete jerk

is to use whatever powers you have (natural or supernatural) to manipulate others against their will, or to provide you with a personal benefit at their expense.

That bit is nicely done, as it is a much more accurate reflection of human dynamics, consequences, and the integrity that is required for power than I believe is typical for the monster genre.

Lots of good bit players, some consequential, others not so much. (A nicely snarky sidekick in the form of a dragon's skull; he's a bit dangerous, as well.) Lots of good problem solving, sometimes accompanied by making things explode, other times by observing and reasoning. Because most events are resolved via natural consequences instead of overpowering resistance with SHAZAM, it's actually a fairly moral story. I think the book was well-executed in every respect, and it's clearly got lots of growth room. Much was resolved, but much was left to be developed later in additions to the series.

And that's why, DESPITE the fact that this is not my genre, I assigned the full five stars.

Goldilocks by Laura Lam
Review by Jeffrey Redmond

When Earth is ravaged by climate changes that poison the air and water, five women steal a spaceship to colonize a new world in this feminist SF thriller.

Thirty years after she made history as one of the Atalanta Five, the botanist Dr. Naomi Lovelace is finally ready to tell her story. Lam's (Shattered Minds, 2017, etc.) novel slips forward and backward in time, tracing four decades of Naomi's life with Dr. Valerie Black—the entrepreneur who raised her after her parents' tragic deaths and the woman whose company developed the Atalanta spaceship. Designed to warp from Mars to a distant, habitable planet called Cavendish, the Atalanta orbits Earth, awaiting the arrival of its all-male crew. The erosion of women's rights on Earth means that Naomi, Valerie, and the others—who will become known collectively as the Atalanta Five—have been forced out of their jobs, but Cavendish offers them something none can claim on Earth: the chance to start over.

Although the novel's earliest tensions involve mechanical failures and miscalculations, the drama shifts quickly to interpersonal conflicts that threaten the integrity of the Atalanta's mission. Each member of the crew has a well-developed voice and her own drives and ambitions, which makes the novel increasingly difficult to put down as betrayals and double-crossings play out aboard the claustrophobic ship. The unexpected ending will leave satisfied readers searching for read-alikes in its wake.

A slow-burning fire of a novel that begs the reader to keep turning the page, after page, after page

Hero of Corsindor by Cyn Bagley
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Not every good guy is good, nor is every bad guy bad, but kill every magician you can.

Cover art is FANTASTIC! The credit is given to artbymel, and I don't know if I have run across her work before, but it has a beautiful photo-realism. If I was ridiculously famous, this is one of the art covers I'd purchase to adorn my man-cave. If it was infinitely large. I don't know if the art is generic. If it does have a story tie-in, I missed it.

LARGE cast of characters here: I had to take notes, because I am so bad with names that if two or more characters have names starting with the same letter, I get confused. That was particularly helpful in THIS case, since it appeared to me that a couple of the young characters could have gone in more than one direction with their romantic attraction. This, by the way, happens to be a characteristic of people in real life, so I'm not complaining about it; just that I had to use my notes a couple of times to remember which S was interested in which M, or J, or whatever.

A wicked, wicked queen hatches a wicked, wicked plot, and we hates her, yes we does, my precious...EXCEPT you might want to hold on to your horses there. Seems that an even MORE wicked demon has been having an undue effect on her. Is she really wicked? Or weak? Or both? And yet, she sits by the dying king, and strokes his face...

Bagley is really excellent with this sort of thing, giving us characters with real depth and ambiguity. She tells stories beautifully, and her characters are real. If she has any faults, it's that sometimes it seems that the spirit of Ernest Hemingway starts handling the typing, and we get a series of short, staccato sentences, before she returns to the flow. Again, I don't know if this is faulty construction, or a device she is using to set scenery, but it does pop up from time to time.

I don't recall hearing this, but I'm guessing that this is the first book in a series. There seem to me to be a LOT of characters with VERY rich stories, and there certainly is a lot of history that's passed over with little explanation. If the book is a stand-alone? Well, okay; but I want to know:

How it is that a person who can see ghosts and heal demonic diseases came to be working as a scullery maid?

I want some more back story on the not one, but TWO orphan foundlings; and I DEFINITELY want to know about the tiny sprites that flit from flower to flower and fight the bees. Are they a part of a magical eco-system, as are the short people?

And the OTHER nightstalkers?

This is a strong 4 star rating. There is too much left un-told for me to QUITE assign it the fifth star (although it is close), but I absolutely will come back and edit this review when more volumes are forthcoming.

You may not need to take notes; I have ADD, and I absolutely INHALED this book during all-too-brief intervals that were a function of life with children and cats, so notes were essential in this case. However, I may start doing that with all my reviews, since I did find it to be a great memory aid.

Lab Gremlins by Cedar Sanderson

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A LONG time ago, I worked in a lab in the Army. Nothing happened.

Well, I did spill some endo-broth on the wall, from cracking open the vials too enthusiastically.

But I know how mind-numbing it gets to run the same procedure over and over and over again, and

know that tomorrow your day is going to consist of collecting another fifty samples, which you are going to process over and over and over again. And then do it over. Same thing next week.

A little excitement might be welcomed!

Ummmm...not so much, if it involves missing equipment! Not even Breaking-Bad-style meth-cooking equipment. Just essential equipment that you have to have to do your job. A job YOU have to do, because everyone else outranks you, and THEY don't want to have to run all those samples.

Look: the autoclave baskets didn't grow legs and walk out by themselves, did they? But who would steal AUTOCLAVE baskets?

Nobody, that's who.

But they are gone!

Must be...GREMLINS?!!

Okay, I'll give you a clue: gremlins ARE real.

That doesn't mean they stole the autoclave baskets, though!

Ummmm... ya see, sometimes the people who have been around for a while like to play tricks on the newbie. (There TOTALLY are gremlins, though!) And sometimes it can get out of hand, it's all fun and games until somebody loses a lung!

But then, it gets....worse. Because in addition to playing jokes on the newbie, OTHER people think they don't have to follow the rules and explain things and discuss danger. Nope. Just, "Here, newbie, take the fusion bomb and go sit in the truck, and I'll be right there."

Okay, that part about the fusion bomb? Totally made that up. But the gremlins are REAL!

Do yourself a favor: take the plunge into this world NOW. Then we will all pound on the table with the handle of a broom, demanding MOAR!!!

Legion by Leo Champion

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Have you ever had a bad day? I'm talking about the kind of day where the best-case scenario is that you've ruined your life for the next five years and the worst case scenario is that you end up dead or maimed? We're talking about the kind of day where you involuntarily leave behind the career you've spent years building because you got a little too drunk last night. Oh and, just to make it worse, you were promoted last night. I mean, I've had some bad days in my time, but this might legitimately be the worst day in history. It's okay though. If Paul Mullins hadn't had the worst day ever then he wouldn't have joined the United States Foreign Legion and there would be no Legion by Leo Champion. That would make me sad because Legion is a really good book.

Our hero is Paul Mullins. After he somehow managed to get so drunk at his own promotion party that he ends up enlisting into the military without wanting to, he struggles. His goal is initially to get out of a contract that he was tricked into signing by an unscrupulous recruiter. He eventually ends up just trying to keep himself and his buddies alive. At the beginning of the story, he's not used to struggling. By the end it's all he knows.

I find myself liking Mullins. He's hardcore. He made a bad decision, but he decides to roll with it. He does try to get out of his contract because he was tricked but he simultaneously pushes himself to be top in his class and survive. He works hard on missions that he never would have been on if he hadn't been tricked. Basically, Mullins finds himself in a situation where he would be perfectly justified in throwing a whiny bitch fit worthy of a Stephanie Meyers' protagonist, but he never does. I mean, if I ever accidentally joined a branch of the military and then found out my odds were what they are in the USFL I think I'd freak out. Mullins holds it together though.

Mullins matures a lot in other ways as well. At the beginning of the book, he's some business guy with better things to do. By the end he has accepted responsibility for his entire unit and called in air and artillery strikes. He has been promoted to radio man, knowing and accepting the fact that his new assignment is even more dangerous than his old one. The only part he seems to worry about is that it'll get him to shorten his hitch. He is promoted once and is being looked at for going further. He really seems to have it all put together by the end of Legion and I respect that,

The titular Legion is more properly known as the United States Foreign Legion. It's based on the model of the French Foreign Legion, which recruits anyone but mainly gets convicts and foreigners. French convicts are offered a chance at redemption in exchange for their service. I like the concept. As a matter of fact, offering a convicted felon a choice between imprisonment or service used to be fairly common in the real-world US. (True story. My grandfather got arrested for running shine and was offered a choice between prison and the military. He chose prison, but not everyone did.) It has since been ruled unconstitutional by a partisan court. I wouldn't mind seeing the practice brought back though and Champion posits a very realistic way that it could return.

The USFL lives up to its reputation as a bunch of trouble-making convicts as well. Whether they're stealing equipment from the Army or participating in a brawl that is several blocks long, they're always up to no good. They loot places as well. It's weird, though, because on one hand they're thieves and brawlers but on the other hand, these are the guys who take on the toughest assignments and succeed.

The relationships between the characters in the book are amazingly well done. Not everyone gets along, but that's life in any large organization. They all manage to pull together when it's their asses on the line though. It just works. The NCOs are mean when they have to be and helpful when they can be. The officers (and one lieutenant in particular) give orders knowing that it's going to get their men killed and then agonize about it afterward. And yes, there is the inevitable shitbird but that happens in every unit too. I'm not sure if Champion has served or not but his unit reads as true to life as it gets.

His use of tactics makes sense as well. The Legion gets all the most dangerous assignments and is not the most well-equipped branch of service, but they do things in an intelligent manner. There is no lone wolfing. The soldiers work together toward the goal and they have each other's backs. They use suppressing fire and grenades when it makes sense to. Kudos to Champion for being the one guy who writes members of the military as having enough brains to fight well. They call for artillery and air support at the right times. They accept help from wherever they can get it when it's their asses on the line. Everything about the way they fight makes sense.

Fans of diversity done right will love this book. Legion is a good story featuring characters of color. The minority characters are believable, and they serve a purpose in the story. There is mention of suffering due to racism but it's not the focus of the book. There is no navel gazing here. This is a book with plenty of action to keep things moving, that includes minority characters who do things for their own reasons, not necessarily to follow crazy rules as laid down by political bullies.

All in all, I really enjoyed Legion. I couldn't find any real problems with it either. There was no jarring moment that threw me out of the work. It didn't shy away from the world's problems but it didn't focus on them to detriment of everything else. This thing just worked.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Signed Contracts

Murder at Mondial Castle by Issy Brooke Review by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

So! Reviews are coming back. I make no promises. I hadn't been reading much at all for a long time, and I can't and won't read in genres I am currently writing in. Which leaves out large swathes of SFF. Besides which, my comfort reads are, and always have been, mysteries. Specifically Brit Myst, which likely stems from my early love affair with Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham. They say you never forget your first love.

I was binging Agatha Christie. I had trouble relating to Miss Marple when I was young and first exploring the literary world. Now? I find myself enjoying her gentle insights. Poirot amuses me. Knowing that Christie, like myself, was a chemist also adds to my appreciation. There is a reason she is the Grand Dame of mystery. But I say this, to explain how I came across *The Murder at Mondial Castle*. I was looking for more Christie in Kindle Unlimited. With a tight reading budget, the ten bucks a month for all-you-can-read is a blessing. I'd run out, so I was squinting suspiciously at the recommendations Amazon clutters up your search results with. Most of these, following Sturgeon's Law, are not even worth a free download.

Something about this one caught my eye. Maybe it was the blurb, but more likely it was the unusual pairing of a husband-and-wife team, and an older couple, at that. I like the Regency era (Georgette Heyer is another of my all-time comfort read favorites) and Victorian is close enough. Besides which, as I started to read this, it really is unusual. In a very good way.

What's even more rare? The First Reader came to me after I started reading Book 2. "What happened to that historical mystery?"

"Wait, you were reading that? I never thought you'd like it, so I returned it!"

Needless to say, we are both reading through the series and enjoying it. He identifies strongly with Theodore, the detective Earl who has trouble empathizing with people. It's great fun to talk to him about the book we are both reading! This is very, I emphasize, rare for us. We do share some tastes – that's where *Pixie Noir* came from! – but recently he's had all the time on his hands to do nothing but read. I have been having trouble reading fiction, 2020 was the year of non-fiction for me.

So what else do I say? I'm not going to spoil the plot! I hate reviews that do that. The unlikely detective pair are an Earl who was a medical doctor before unfortunate family deaths squashed his career, and his matchmaking wife who honed her skills on their seven daughters. She has all the people skills, while he has a gift of perception. They can move through upper society in a way no policeman of the era can.

Speaking of that – the author is a scholar of the Victorian era, and it shows nicely. Not in a heavy-handed pedantic way, but in little details and well-thought-out period correct settings. I'm very much

enjoying that she does not attempt to moralize. Well, not in the modern lens, anyway. Victorians did enough moralizing without another layer!

And with that, I've hit the upper level of 'how long should a review be?' so I will merely suggest you go explore the book for yourself.

Overlooked Again by Jon Mollison Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The old poem goes:

There was a man upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh how I wish that he would go away.

He's back and he's armed in Overlooked Again

Yes, this is the return of superhero Joe Smith, Jon Mollison's contribution to Silver Empire Press' "Heroes Unleashed" series. And dang is it fun. Mollison's Phoenix Ring series may be the best part of the universe in a neck and neck race with Kai Wai Cheah's Hollow City thread... though that may be unfair, since Mollison and Cheah are the ones who I have read two books of (No, Cheah's next book isn't released yet. But I had early access. Heh heh heh). And at this time, there are two other authors who I haven't read yet.

In Overlook, Joe Smith, a prime with the power to be ignored, encountered the Phoenix Ring, a grand conspiracy that looks like if Dean Koontz designed the Illuminati,* and bringing in an element of The Man who was Thursday. But Joe also found a counter conspiracy. After crushing the ring in Serenity City, now, Joe has been quietly keeping the ring in its place -- in the graveyard.

But like any good villain, the Phoenix Ring has its own counter move. Because they found not only one, but two people who can pierce Joe's powers, and hunt him down. So it's a good idea for Joe to leave town for a little bit.

Joe's new mission: go to Halo City (last seen in Cheah's Hollow City) and make certain that the Phoenix Ring can't rig an election for alderman.

But the Phoenix Ring hasn't gotten to where they are by lying down. They have all the forces of governments behind them. And Joe Smith is their primary target.

Overlooked Again is fun as much for what it does as what happens in the plot. The book is well written, obviously. As I said, I think there are a few references to The Man who was Thursday, some bad puns (The Phoenix Ring runs Firebird Industries? Ugh. How did I forget that from the first book?).

And the villains. How could anyone forget how absolutely evil these bastards are? They lack the mustache twirling of the most recent Dean Koontz novels, but they are no less pure evil. Imagine if the Chicago Machine was the tool of Satan... No jokes, please. I'm saving that for another novel I'm writing.

But what happens when a former sniper becomes the man who wasn't there? He becomes a ninja. No, I'm not really joking. You'll see him in action in the first chapter. Which starts out as very by the book, and ends in a tense, and interesting chase.

In the middle of all of that, Jon Mollison pulls off an excellent data dump that both recaps the last book, tells the reader what's been happening since then, and does it all without reducing a bit of tension. It's information discussion on par with David Weber (Or, see: David Weber orders a pizza)

Along the way, Jon has two interesting people after our hero. The first is a French hunter, the Owl, a prime who can hunt Joe, and fight him to a standstill. The other is ... well, you'll have to read it to get it, but it's a lead into what Jon does with this book.

While I am not able to track what phases the Heroes Unleashed universe is in with this book (probably phase two), we have now entered the phase where there is overlap between the main heroes we're working with. It really begins to show off the shared universe all these players live in. No, I don't mean simply that Joe goes to the city created and written by Kai Wai Cheah, but this is also a world where the Atlantean (and Lovecraftian) magic of Richard Watts is an active threat.

And of course, they're all out to get Joe. They lead to moments where my only note was just "Aw f***"

The writing is also enjoyable. Little comments and phrases, like how "he could have completed the ensemble, but he would have stuck out like a disco ball in Church." Though I hear some megachurches already have those...

I also liked the very casual "You can't just murder your way out of this problem."

And everyone here is well written. The villains are colorful and three dimensional. The supporting cast beautifully compliments our hero. And the upper villains are pure bastards.

Anyway, it's all very well executed, and I look forward to reading the next one.

5/5. Buy it here from the Publisher (Amazon link forthcoming)

*Yes, I have read the Jane Hawk series, where Koontz had something like the Illuminati. But this goes back much farther.

The Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follette Review by Jeffrey Redmond

The Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follett is an epic masterpiece set in 12th century England encompassing the construction of a cathedral in the small town of Kingsbridge. It is the first novel to the Kingsbridge trilogy and its prequel – The Evening and the Morning – having come out recently, I thought it'd be a great time to re-read this epic humongous novel once again. Having said that, I'd like to thank Pan MacMillan India for sending across both these brilliant works of historical fiction as part of the #PanMacHistoricalReadathon!

Coming back to the book, the plot kicks off with the sinking of The White Ship, that's what triggers a set of dominoes to fall – the civil war in England, the rejection of a proposal, the loss of a job and the death of a prior and a bishop. The sinking of The White Ship in general is considered to be a major

event in medieval history for England with multiple speculations about why it happened. As Peter Konieczny writes, “It was perhaps the worst maritime disaster of the Middle Ages, not just because it cost 300 lives, but because one of them was the heir to the Anglo-Norman Empire. One scholar has a theory that the sinking of the White Ship on the night of November 25, 1120 was not a tragic accident, rather a case of mass murder.”

The Pillars of the Earth very clearly captures the politics, greed, passion, and barbaric nature of humans during a power struggle when the opportunity to acquire more arises. It captures the lives of Tom Builder and his family, of an outlaw Ellen and her son, of William’s barbaric behaviour, of the prior and bishop of Kingsbridge and of Aliena and her brother Richard across a span of 50 years (1123-1174).

The book is divided into six parts and there’s a constantly swinging pendulum of favour between the good guys and the villains. It’s a roller coaster ride when it comes to emotions – greed, passion, love, violence, joy, cruelty and happiness. Despite the daunting size of this book – 970 pages – the entire story and the lives of all the characters has been woven together with a delicate thread. If you’ve seen medieval English TV shows or even read about them, the world building for this book will be quite easy and understandable for you too.

Follett has done a brilliant job to say the least in writing this story from the point of view of every single character. The description of how the cathedral was being built overwhelmed me a little as I don’t understand the intricacies of architectural designs. Overall, the book is well-paced and filled with well-established plot twists.

I rate this book 5 out of 5 bookmarks, since I did re-read it and of course loved it as much as I did the first time. If you’re looking to travel back to 12th century England and trying to understand the political power struggle back then, I highly recommend this book, though I’d like to add a trigger warning for rape and violence. But these are, of course, quite common in so many works of this genre.

Star Wars: Light of the Jedi by Charles Soule Review by Jason P. Hunt

Light of the Jedi Is Pretty Dim

Light of the Jedi is now out. I’m not impressed.

It’s the first book in the “High Republic” cross-platform publishing initiative, and as such it has the responsibility of setting up a lot of what comes after. So you would think that Soule would start the book with something engaging.

He doesn’t.

The first eight chapters were made available online to generate interest, which is a hint that maybe they really want you to read it, please? But it’s not interesting. The overall narrative spends way too much time on things that don’t matter and not enough time on the things that do. The first chapter gives us a ship’s captain touring her vessel with numerous mentions that “all is well” throughout the ship, which is telegraphing that all will not be well by the end of the first chapter.

And then we have the overall disaster that sets up this entire narrative, and I never get any sense of doom, no real feeling that anyone is in jeopardy, mainly because no one in the story acts like they're in any real danger. The characters aren't doing anything yet. There's a lot of standing around talking about what's happening, but there's no action other than what the Jedi are doing. And ever then, there's no real sense of danger. I mean, come on, there are unidentified objects flying into a populated star system at near-light speed. Somebody should be sweating a little...

Several times I found myself asking how we got from plot point to plot point without the necessary action that should go between them. A couple of times characters suddenly have information that they didn't have moments before, and there's nothing to indicate just how they got this data — a comm signal? Telepathy? Carrier convoy?

Now, there's a very real possibility this story starts to pick up the pace and get interesting later, but after the first eight chapters where I'm not caring about anyone or anything happening, it doesn't really matter. There's a lot of "tell" and not enough "show" — and a lot of tell doesn't even have anything to do with the action going on at the moment. A lot of character backstory infodumps in the middle of what should be harrowing excitement. The solar system is facing imminent doom! And Soule spends his time weaving in material that could be revealed gradually — and in dialogue — instead of dropping the whole thing in the midst of "oh yeah, we're saving a civilization, I guess"...

Overall, it's just boring. And not worth the time or the money.

Storm Between the Stars: Book 1 by Karl Gallagher Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Anyone who follows my reviews knows that I've long been a fan of Karl Gallagher's books. He delivers character and plot, even at times when you don't know which he's delivering on. His Torchship series was a better Firefly than the original product. His Lost War series is criminally underrated, even though I think it's even better than Torchship.

And now he's back to a slightly harder SciFi, with a bit of a twist to it.

Storm Between the Stars: Book 1 in the Fall of the Censor is his latest release. I was worried about spoiling the key threat in this book... but the series title has already given that away.

To begin with, Niko Landry is Captain of a family-owned and operated freighter. Like all shipping companies, he makes a lot of deals based off of what will sell better in X system over Y, and never leaving his cargo hold empty.

When Niko and his crew find himself lost in space, he finds himself in the midst of a great business opportunity. After three thousand years of a human diaspora caused humans to flee Earth and being subsequently cut off from the home system, they find themselves to be the first ones to have found a way back.

Since the Landry family business is private, they don't have to report anything to anyone. They're the first ones back to the home system, and therefore, the first ones to find what new resources and technology may have been developed in the last three thousand years.

But Earth and the associated systems are now ruled by something called "the Censor." And what seems to begin as a system of bureaucrats is slowly revealed to be a creepy, terrifying system of oppression. Each new revelation makes the reader feel new levels of dread every time. It goes from "aw Hell" to "aw f***" to "why aren't they running?"

Karl essentially unveils a system, piece by piece, that builds into 1984 / Fahrenheit 451 IN SPACE, and ends with an interstellar space chase that David Weber would have been happy to have written. It feels a little like the end of On Basilisk Station, only our heroes are being chased, and they don't have real weapons. Their only weapons? Physics.

This is what happens when a rocket scientist writes science fiction.

Karl does a good job of developing a world. Many of the ideas are sane Libertarian. I have to make that distinction because there are the libertarians I know, versus the ones I've seen in public. He has a smart and sane approach to extended families, marrying into a family business, barter to get around taxes, how to work around oppression, and a lot of cultural elements that would make some libertarians I know scream like a sunburnt vampire.

There is also a great bit of work on language. I haven't seen this much effort put in since John C. Wright's Somewhither. It's not as extensive, but it works well for the story.

And there are nice little touches here and there. Character names that are very ... Welsh. Details on spaceship cargo loading. Human zebras (long story). Bringing back the zealots.

The only problem with this entire novel? We could have spent five pages on the crew being a bit more impressed with "This is something no one on our side has seen for thousands of years." In the book, they were all business, no wonder. Five pages would've been enough. It's a minor quibble, but I have to find a flaw somewhere.

In short, it's great world building. And I definitely enjoyed it. At least a 4/5. Maybe 5/5. I definitely recommend it. There's sequel bait, but there's there isn't a cliffhanger. So this won't cause you to throw your book against a wall.

The Valley of Shadows by John Ringo and Mike Massa

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A bit of a rant, first, but I will attempt to be accurate, precise, and not launch into ad hominem attacks:

1. A sizable contingent of reviewers appear to have grabbed the book without reading enough (or any) of the blurbs & publisher descriptions. "There are no stories about Faith!" They express profound disappointment that this book centers on the actions of Tom Smith, the banking security brother of Steve Smith.

Well, you didn't do your homework. If you had just read what's on the Baen website, or what is on the Amazon website, you discover that the FOCUS of this book is on the efforts of Tom Smith to get all of the necessary people off the island. His appearance is VERY limited in the first installment, "Under A Graveyard Sky," and we get NO information about the maneuvering of the principal players in the dis-

integrating city. At 384 pages, there was no room for that exposition in "Graveyard Sky;" it leaves us knowing essentially nothing about the guy who set it in motion, saving their lives, and perhaps civilization, by sending a text alert to Steve.

Read that sentence again. It's pretty clear that the narrative supports the idea that the actions of the Smith family in doing boat rescue, etc, provide the spark (and that image is milked for all it's worth in the orientation film) that turns the rest of the survivors from shivering items in the outdoor zombie pantry, into a foundation to rebuild civilization. And yet, they would have died on the streets and classrooms, just like everyone else, if Tom doesn't send the text.

This volume provides some back story about the bug-out plan, what sending the text might have cost Tom, and how ELSE he spent his time when he wasn't trying to save his family (and keep Faith away from zombies). It also gives some new character arcs to explore.

2. They say "There is too much talking, and not enough action!"

Children, let's play nice. There is more to a story than gunplay; besides that, I didn't notice anything LIKE an absence of action. BUT: missions are not accomplished because I have my six-shooter, and gun the bad guy down on the street. You got to have bullets and beans; you have to have them in place, at a particular time, or they do you no good. I am NOT yielding the field to those who state there is no combat, but I am saying that THIS book tells you about the massive number of details that have to be coordinated to make anything work. That's ESSENTIAL, in any response to disaster.

3. They complain: "It's not John Ringo; it's Mike Massa." I have no idea what percent of this book is pure Ringo, and what percent is pure Massa. From the bio of Massa, though, I'm gonna point out that he has a LOT of expertise in doing the things that Tom Smith had to do. The ONLY place I thought I could identify as non-Ringo was the references to tinnitus from loud sustained noise and the sharp reports of gunfire. I don't think I have seen that emphasized in prior Ringo series. I also don't recall Ringo ever pointing out the significance of taking the boss' salt. It's an old military reference, and some emphasize it; haven't seen Ringo do that. (David Drake does, in the Raj Whitehall of Bellevue series). Mostly, though, I couldn't stick a knife blade in between what Massa wrote and what Ringo wrote. Even if I could though: IT WAS ALL GOOD WRITING!!!

Concerning the alleged tension between describing logistics and describing combat: I loved Tom Clancy's earlier writings, because he gave attention to details. In the book "Sum of All Fears," Clancy describes in precise detail the sequence of events leading up to the detonation of a nuclear device. I LOVED that sort of detail! He wasn't describing how Jack Ryan ties his shoes, or how much time he spends picking out his clothes. He describes items significant to the plot. And whether it was Massa or Ringo (and I REALLY can't tell), that's what gets described here. It's a feature, not a bug. Hereby Endeth the Rant!

As Faith was going through her zombie fighting in the beginning of the book, I had "Under a Graveyard Sky" at hand; I'd read the way it's described there, then switch back to this text. I just did that for my own enjoyment, but the two merge VERY nicely indeed.

With the release of "Strands of Sorrow," I was rather afraid this Ringo series would have ended. Not so, not so! There are SO many more stories to be told. For one, what does that psycho OEM Director got planned? Will Risky get frisky with Tom? And will I EVER stop flashing to the "Freehold "Universe, thinking about Kendra Pacelli, when THIS Kendra gets mentioned? (I was glad I finally identified the reference, though, because it was bugging me.) Will Ghost figure in what's going to happen next? I liked the linking of Ghost at two points: first, the liberation of the women from the brothels, including a

young Risky, and secondly, having them as a source of vaccine. I'd actually like to find out if that lone Siberian tiger gets to repopulate the range, so Ghost's people can go back to collecting rugs.

Buy the book; then, buy the next one in March. And buy WHATEVER comes our way!

The Way Things Seem by Mackey Chandler

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

David's father died, and left some strange codicils in his will. Fitting, since the family is strange, and, in David's case at least, estranged as well. His father's second marriage to a white woman, David's mother, was a disturbance in the force. Never expressed to David's father, since he held the power and control of the purse strings, the family found expression for their distaste in their contacts with David. His older half-brother gets ten million bucks, and David gets ten million bucks, BUT he also gets a chance to inherit the rest of his father's gargantuan fortune. To do that, however, he has to return to Ethiopia, and go on a spirit quest, with a guide he will meet later (actually expressed as a "take a walking pilgrimage with an elder versed in the traditions of our clans."

That's bizarre enough, but then it gets weird.

It doesn't HAPPEN now, but the transition from America to the out-country in Ethiopia is a good place to mention a personal discontinuity. After giving it a fair amount of thought, I conclude that it is the precision of his words, and the depth of detail that have me riveted to the story. David looks out of the window of his jet, and sees lightning, and I can see it as well. However, these are all environments which I have experienced, so it was not until David lands in Africa that I was REALLY struck by the immediacy and freshness of the descriptions. I spent a total of perhaps two hours on the African continent, in an airport in 1975, and that is the absolute extent of my experience there. Perhaps it is the craft with which Chandler writes, perhaps I experience a sub-clinical epileptic seizure when reading it, but the reality of David's experience is palpable to me.

That continues as he meets his guide, Bouh, who directs David to call him 'Uncle.' It continues as Bouh arranges, in stages, for David to transition from the clothing of a wealthy Westerner to that of a fellow countryman. And it is a part of the narrative as David and Bouh spend the first few days on the road, learning about each other. The only unusual event David encounters is that Uncle can throw a rock exceptionally well.

But then, Uncle Bouh lights a stick on fire with his mind, and the "unreal reality" fades into the background, and "what the heck is going on now" emerges.

I cannot tell you if the precise wording and attention to detail remain, because of the shock of the transition. Note: the shock doesn't come from a flamboyant exercise of singing and waving arms and pointing; it's simply a stick, catching on fire.

All of the intrusions of the Otherworld are similarly delivered, in a matter-of-fact presentation. David is introduced to the world of seeing and manipulating a reality that is sort of an overlay to ours. Bouh presents things David has never thought possible, and always in a routine fashion. And gradually, David learns what he can do, and what he can't. He discovers he won't be able to kill rabbits with rocks as easily as Bouh, but not because he lacks magical powers; it's just that he can't throw rocks well at all. He

finds that he can see things that Bouh can't, because David understands radio waves and how electricity works, and Bouh doesn't.

And then, SO abruptly that there just HAS to be a yet-to-be-revealed plot point in there somewhere, David has to flee Africa and return to the US. In the process, he discovers that certain others can detect his power over the Otherworld and react violently to him because of it.

Then it gets more intense, with gangsters, bad cops, and Amish hexes.

A very few story lines get resolved; this HAS to be book one of at least five. If I thought this was a one-off, I'd give the story ONE star, for being such a tease, but the author has no history of such things. I want to find out what happens in Africa, how the Penn-Dutch hex woman figures into the story, and about five more things.

I haven't read the other reviews, but I'm going to that when I get a chance, mostly, because I want to see if anyone else remarked on the realism of the first part of the book. First, though, I had to revise this review, because the previous version suffered by being written under a self-imposed deadline.

When the Axe Falls by Jon R. Osborne

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The best part? Knowing that the Evil Doom planned wasn't going to work.

Context of the book, sort of:

I'm not certain, but I believe I have been following the Four Horsemen Universe for a year and a half. The series actually started in December 2016, I believe, with "Cartwright's Cavaliers," but I missed the roll-out. Some pretty excited words were coming out of Liberty Con 2017 (I think) and that's when I got onboard, and I swiftly brought myself up-to-speed on the series. It was MARVELOUS! Not only were the original miscreants churning out the stories, there were quite a few new-ish writers joining in, as well as some with a lot of experience. The main story arc was maintained, and all of the little side-pockets were explored as well. I was current with the story, until Dragon Con reviews came due, and then the months recovering from that.

Tiny recap:

The aliens came to Earth, told us we had nothing they wanted except raw materials, and waved incredible technology in our face. "You can have this translate device for 15 mountains of gold." That sort of thing. Then, they discovered that we could fight, which DID have substantial market value.

What's happening now:

So, on Earth, all the traditional commerce structures are destroyed. Governments survived by taxing the commissions paid to mercenaries and paying everybody else a subsidy. Therefore, everybody hates them on Earth, because nobody REALLY wants to live on leftovers.

Off Earth, the humans have another problem: they are too good at what they do, AND they haven't been in the Union long enough for the powers behind the curtain to have good blackmail material on them.

So, they need to be brought to heel.

Lots of things go into that. The most evil, wicked, dastardly, nightmarish part of the plan takes place out of the scope of THIS book (accomplished in part by the incompetent bumbblings of a well-intentioned lieutenant, IIRC), and THAT'S what I referenced in the headline of this review. I did NOT know if the troopers of Bjorn's Berserkers would end the book as red mist and pink mush; BUT, I did know from clues in the book that they weren't going to fall into the common trap set for everyone else. It was a relief!

As it happens, Bjorn has an additional issue to deal with, besides the resentment of Earth and repression by the Union. He was set up by a narco-trafficker to run afoul of a competitor. The incident ended as intended, as it MUST end, due to the pride and insanity of the other cartel leader: Bjorn defeats him in a fight, gives him a chance to yield, then has to kill him when he persists. And that sets up one of those insane blood feuds that seem only to serve the interests of the mortician.

In addition to the people dynamics, which are what make any story great, this also has some ancient technology popping in, and some novel battle applications of existing hardware, both of which combine to make this great story a science fiction great story. Because this is a part of a series, we have the delight of seeing further character development from earlier books. I particularly love long-suffering Chaplain Jim, who cannot dissuade the troops from calling him "Padre." There are four love stories, if I counted right, and all of the action is appropriate for all audiences (I think). Not everything works out right, BTW.

Verdict:

This volume is every bit as solid as those that came before, which sounds rather pathetic as I look at that sentence. The problem I have is with expressing my superlatives, here. Military science fiction is my literary drug of choice; to that, add the fact that it was Starship Troopers, with those INCREDIBLE fighting suits, that was probably my introduction to the genre, and you can see that reading these books is more fun than eating pie for me. Let me put it a different way: If I was collecting books in PRINT form, this one would go on TOP of my bookcase, where I keep only my Heinlein, Pournelle and Niven, David Drake & Eric Flint.

Buy this one today.

Non-Fiction

An Interview with Katt Dunsmore by Tamara Wilhite

Tonya "Katt" Dunsmore writes short stories. Her stories have appeared in "Crime and Suspense Magazine", "Mouth Full of Bullets", "MicroHorror", "Bewildering Stories" and anthologies like "The EX-Factor: Justified Endings to Bad Exes". Her illustrations and graphics have appeared "Reggie & Ryssa and the Summer Camp of Faery", "Cracker Wisdom" and a number of other publications.

Tamara Wilhite: Horror and crime drama seem to affect every aspect of your life. For example, your bio says your cats are named Psycho and Schizo. What is your background, if I may ask?

Katt Dunsmore: I have a Bachelors Degree in Criminal Justice that is heavy in Forensics and Abnormal Psychology. I worked for several years as a Dispatcher for a County Police Department near where I live, as well as having several years' experience with law enforcement prior to that through my work on a Volunteer Fire Department when I lived in Florida. Now I've been a Social Worker in a homeless shelter for the past ten years. As for the cats, because I know people will ask; Psycho is a feral rescue from the shelter I work at. We have a large feral cat colony there. Almost nine years ago, as I pulled up to work and got out of my car one night, she ran up to my feet. She had gotten away from her momma, and some of the bigger cats were after her. She was about four weeks old, so I took her into my office, fed her shrimp all night, and took her home. She was so wild, that one day I called her a little psycho. That's how she got her name. Schizo's name was chosen long before he was given to us. He's two. And yes, they are both spoiled rotten!

Tamara Wilhite: How does this impact your day job as a social services case worker? Or does your work influence your writing?

Katt Dunsmore: I see a lot of things working with the homeless that would break most people's hearts. That often breaks MY heart. I've dealt with almost every situation over ten years that you can imagine. I've also seen a lot of heartwarming things, things that give you hope for humanity. People have a very skewed view of the homeless. Most don't seem to realize that the majority of us are only a few paychecks from being homeless ourselves. I use my Criminal Justice and Psychology background more now than when I worked in Law Enforcement. But as to whether or not my work effects my writing...EVERYTHING affects my writing. It could be something I see or hear at work, or the grocery store, or see on a street corner on the way home, or a snippet of conversation... My ideas come from any and everywhere.

Tamara Wilhite: How did you end up illustrating multiple children's books when you write so much horror?

Katt Dunsmore: I was working with Bo Savino at Koboca Publishing on the idea of The EX-Factor when she mentioned one day that she was writing her book, Reggie & Ryssa and the Summer Camp of Faery, and was looking for someone to do a book cover for it. I told her that I had been painting and drawing for years, and that if she wanted to see some of my work, I'd send her some to look at. I was cringing on the inside the entire time, because I'm my own worst critic and I never think my artwork is up to snuff. But she wanted to see, so I sent her pics of some paintings and drawings. A few days later I was slated not only to paint the cover, but to do inside illustrations as well. A few months after that, I got the commission to illustrate Cracker Wisdom. And then after Reggie & Ryssa came out, all these requests started coming in to do children's illustrations. I said something about the writing horror, illustrating children's books thing to Bo one day, and she just laughed and said it gave me balance.

Tamara Wilhite: You've written dozens of short stories. For example, you've had stories show up in Flashshot and Microhorror. What is the market for very short stories like this like? How much public demand is there for them?

Katt Dunsmore: The flash fiction market can be very competitive, though I've always found it to be a friendly, tight-knit community. In my experience, a LOT of readers love flash and even micro fiction stories. I'm not sure if it's the quick conclusion, the short read, or what, but it just seems to work for a lot of people. Maybe it's the busyness of today's society, where some people feel they don't have time to cozy up to a big book.

Tamara Wilhite: Have you ever written a novel? And are there any anthologies that are just your work?

Katt Dunsmore: I have two novels started. I have every intention of eventually finishing both, I just haven't had the time. An anthology fully of my own work is in process as we speak, and it will have old and new stories in it.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you working on now?

Katt Dunsmore: Those new stories for the anthology. Once I put the finishing touches on them, they go to my beta readers. When I get their feedback, I'll make any needed changes and go from there.

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Katt Dunsmore: I'm just getting back into writing after an almost five year hiatus. I have missed it like you cannot believe ... and I'm having some of the best ideas of my career. My beta readers and fans should probably buy new bulbs for their night lights.

Tamara Wilhite: Thanks for speaking with me.

An Interview with Allen Goodner By Tamara Wilhite

Allen Goodner is a writes modern fantasy and what I'll call classic fantasy novels. His bio reads: "Allen Goodner has been telling stories for entertainment since he was 10. Now he shares those stories with the world. Allen enjoys reading (what writer doesn't?), writing, watching TV, playing with his dogs, and playing table-top Role Playing Games (D&D is merely the tip of the iceberg, friends). He lives in a travel trailer wherever in whatever city he wants with his patient wife, exuberant children, and a sometimes-well-behaved dog."

I had the opportunity to interview him about his work.

Tamara Wilhite: What have been the biggest influences on your writing?

Allen Goodner: Dungeons and Dragons (well, lots of role-playing games, really), and my Christianity. I've been playing D&D since I was little and I grew up in a very conservative Christian household. In fact, a lot of what Michael believes in the Angels' Executioner books is based heavily on my own faith - modified for the fictional world in which he lives, of course.

Tamara Wilhite: I like the premise of your fantasy novel "Heaven's Hitman", an executioner working for God. How does someone end up with such a job?

Allen Goodner: In his case, it was sort of the divine equivalent of joining the Army or Marines to avoid jail time. I may get into this in some sort of prequel, but Michael went through some very dark times after the death of his wife and got into some very destructive habits. As you might imagine, the "destructive habits" available to a mostly-immortal, nigh-invulnerable half-angel are rather more extreme than are available to others.

Tamara Wilhite: What else can you tell me about the book?

Allen Goodner: Heaven's Hitman is an Urban Fantasy thriller book with a lot of western flare. Michael was born in pre-Civil War Texas, and because of his nature, fought in the Spanish-American War, WWI and WWII; his attitudes and mannerisms reflect some of that.

It is also unapologetically geared toward men. Don't get me wrong, I know women who like the book and I hope more do so, but - especially for Christian men - it gets very hard to find books that are geared toward us anymore - especially in Urban Fantasy, where the tropes so easily turn into Paranormal Romance. Basically you've got Larry Correia and Jim Butcher, and that's about it for authors with active series. Correia's MHI is a fun ride, and Harry Dresden is freaking awesome, but I think there's room for more.

Also unique, as far as I can tell, is that its cosmology and the rules of the fictional world embrace the idea that God is real and the Bible is real (if sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted) history. That idea has consequences that play out in the book, and will continue to unfold as the series continues.

Tamara Wilhite: You've also written what I call classic fantasy, namely your novel "Fire and Frost". What is it about?

Allen Goodner: Fire and Frost is my first novel, and the premise is fairly weird. The world is an alternate dimension-type world into which humans were accidentally pulled hundreds of years ago. Attached or anchored to the main world are six elemental realms - though humanity only knows about four of them. Long ago a demonic entity tried to take over and nearly did, but the magic of the people who lived in the world at that time bound him in mystical chains which were supposed to last for eternity. It was their final act, more or less.

As always happens in these things, those "eternal chains" turn out not to be eternal. The story centers on Alaric Dell as he's just trying to protect his home, the Barony of the Fire March along the border with the elemental plane of fire, called Ignus. Along the way, he brushes against the plans of the demonic entity.

Tamara Wilhite: What else have you published? I know you contributed to the planetary anthology / short story collection "Pluto".

Allen Goodner: Yep, my only other published story currently is "A Clockwork Dragon" in the Pluto planetary anthology. It's a steam-powered mecha retelling of St. George and the Dragon. That was fun to write.

Tamara Wilhite: "Heaven's Hitman" is described as book one in a series. When does book 2 come out? Or are you working on a sequel to "Fire and Frost"?

Allen Goodner: Book 2 is in the works right now. I'm hoping for an early summer release. Beta-readers have it now, and we'll see what feedback they've got. The title is Grave Injustice, and it pits Michael against zombies. Because who doesn't love some fun zombie action?

The sequel to Fire and Frost is the Book Which Will Not Be Written. I've tried to start it like five times now, and I always throw away what I've got. I'm hoping that after I've got a few Angels' Executioner books out, I can come back with some better ideas.

Tamara Wilhite: What else are you working on?

Allen Goodner: Mostly, I'm just trying to be a good husband and father. That takes a lot of thought, attention, and effort. Worth every sleepless second, but it does mean there's not a ton of time for extra pursuits.

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Allen Goodner: Whether it's Heaven's Hitman, Fire and Frost, or someone else's books, nothing is more important to those of us who write than reviews. Please, please, please review books you read, especially when the author is independent or lesser-known. Beyond the business side of it - and that's important to us, let me assure you - there's the fact that radio-silence inhales with great vigor. I'd rather know you hated the book because X, Y, and Z than just not know. If I know something isn't received well, I have a chance to fix it. When we don't hear anything, we don't know if you liked it, hated it, or just dropped it in your TBR pile.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Allen Goodner: Thank you.

Writing Survival
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

No, this isn't about the survival of books, or writing, or even of the writer, although there are days! Instead, this post is taking off on something I'd been asked to touch on with my livestream chat (which you can watch here, although I suggest skipping the first few minutes as I was tired and rambly) and I'll be blogging about on my personal site. Survival: man versus nature.

It's been a while since I played at this seriously, and thank goodness, I've never been in a situation where I'd need all my skills to survive in the woods. But as a writer, I can tap into what I learned when I was a teen and it was a fun game, and since then as an adult who was interested in gathering wild edibles for the table.

I'll recap what I said in the video as I began the topic. If you got dropped into the winter woods, the ones I was hiking in yesterday, with what you had on you, life would suck, and then you'd die. Which is why most writers are careful, if they want to be realistic about it, to set their characters up with somewhat more ideal conditions. Because it's no fun for the reader to have the character lurching about through the frozen woods trying to figure out how to make fire, how to catch squirrels they are probably going to have to eat raw, before finally succumbing to exposure in surprisingly short order.

Let's give our Hero a shelter, and a means of making fire. We're being generous. If you crashed into the woods in your, say, let's do SF! in your flying saucer, and there was no civilization within walking distance, you might be able to use your wreckage to help you stay warm and dry. And you have some kind of way of starting a fire. Nice. Now... what? Do you have any idea what is edible, and what isn't? Let's posit you can eat the animals safely. Tasty, tasty meat. Mmm. Now what?

Well, as I talked about in the video, when I was wandering through the woods (Ok, I was moving rather briskly, it was quite cold, below freezing, and I wanted to stay warm) I was looking for green things. We've had a mild winter here, and there's no snow on the ground. So I knew I'd find something green. Even if it were covered in snow, you could dig down and find green things, waiting for spring to grow

again. I found, on my short hike, green onions, chickweed, and violet leaves. All edible, all helpful in staving off such deficiencies as scurvy. Had I walked on a different trail, on the verges of a field, I'd have found wild strawberry leaves, which are high in Vitamin C and were once steeped into a tea that helped early settlers and natives stave off the scourge of scurvy, which wasn't just a thing that plagued pirates. There is a reason, gross as it sounds to our modern sensibilities, that the contents of an animal's stomach used to be eaten after a kill. The greens were lifesavers.

Man cannot live on meat alone. He needs green stuff, and he needs fat. Wild game is, generally speaking, very lean meat. One source of fats in the wild are nuts. I took a photo of a shagbark hickory while I was looking for forage on this hike. The chances of finding many nuts on the ground, this late in winter here, are slim. Squirrels, deer, insects... there is a lot of competition for nuts, because they are a magnificent food source. So let's make our character have the advantage of gathering nuts as they fall. What then? Has he got the ability to store them someplace dry (nuts will sprout! They are intended to grow trees, after all, not to be food) and most importantly, someplace only he can access? Mice, voles, and their vermin ilk can penetrate into the most unlikely places, as many a housewife through the centuries has discovered to her dismay. This is how we came to share domiciles with the cat, after all.

You begin to see the scope of the problem we have, then as a writer of survival. There are so many factors that can casually kill our Hero dead, or leave him crippled through nutritional deficiency, or... he's going to have to overcome many obstacles. Let's see, he isn't going to get enough nuts from the frozen forest floor, and although there are a few squirrels scuffling through the dry leaves, they aren't abundant enough... and how is he going to catch them? Have we given him a firearm? You can hunt deer without one, although I wouldn't recommend hand-to-hoof combat. He's likely to reel away from that slashed to ribbons by hooves and antlers. He might even make it back to his flying saucer home before collapsing and dying of blood loss or infection. No, he doesn't even need to be vulnerable to this planet's pathogens – he has enough of his own riding around with him that, once introduced to his bloodstream, can take him out.

So, what's a source of fat and protein that isn't speedy and clever, or armed with sharp pointy ends? Oh, look, rotten logs. Loaded with small, squishy edibles squirming slowly in the winter's cold. Our Hero is going to have to lose any squeamishness he might have had. Grubs and pupae will possibly keep him alive. Maybe.

Maybe I need to title this 'a thousand ways to die' and muse on how it's amazing any of us managed to be descended from intrepid settlers and explorers. Most of them, they had some help. You really have to go back far in history to the hunter-gatherers (and most of them stuck to areas with plenty of food-stuffs, and didn't usually stay in winter woods as they could move around). Isolated incidents of humans lost in the woods largely end tragically. Look at the number of missing persons in the national parks, for an example. There are some stories of survival, but they take a terrible toll, mostly.

Still it's an interesting thought exercise, and it starts to give you-the-writer new and weird ways to torment, er, plot your characters as they might not have any conflict with other characters at all. It's hard enough to stay alive in nature! Which won't care as it kills your Hero. Over and over. Poor sucker, he never had a chance.

Literary Criticism

Editor:

This is in response to the essay “Don't Make Me Use My Dad Voice” by Jim McCoy in RoB Dec 2020 where he says “If someone tells you that women have historically been ignored or pushed aside in SF/F they are either a liar or an idiot.”

Well, in my humble opinion, I think you can be uninformed without being either a liar nor an idiot, but I thought I would poke around the question and see what I could dig up. What I found was an informative interview with Lisa Yaszek, Regents Professor of Science Fiction Studies at Georgia Tech (<https://geeksguideshow.com/2019/01/24/ggg346-lisa-yaszek/>).

Here is a rundown of what I found interesting:

Even before the 1970's there were many, many women writing speculative fiction. In fact, the early SF community was welcoming to women and many “really made names for themselves especially in magazines that were edited by Hugo Gernsback”.

The ratio of women writing science-fiction during the pulp era was apparently 15%.

Women adopting male pseudonyms weren't necessarily doing so to get published, and though many did adopt male or gender-ambiguous names, many others did not. In fact their pictures were often published alongside their stories removing all doubt as to their sex.

However, in response to the question “Why were so many women writers lost to history?”, Yaszek replied that “the main reason is that editors kept writing them out of history.” Early SF anthologies were published “during a backlash against first-wave feminism, and the male editors such as John W. Campbell and Groff Conklin specifically excluded women from their lineups”.

I also took a look at my 1970 edition of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame Vol. 1 (1929 - 1964) ed. by Robert Silverberg and there is exactly one story by a woman (Judith Merrill) and 26 stories by men [4%]. In Vol. 2 (A and B) (1973/4) there are a total of 22 novellas with only one co-written by a woman (C.L. Moore) [5%]. Vol. 3 (1982) had 16 stories, novellas, and novelettes with one woman contributor (Kate Wilhelm, see below) [6%]. Vol. 4 (1986) seemed to take up much of the slack with 5 contributions by women out of 14 stories, novellas, and novelettes. The selections in these volumes were chosen by the Science Fiction Writers of America and definitely show a trend toward more recognition of women writers but not until the mid-eighties [36%]. The total over all four anthologies is 7/80 = 9%.

My 1979 A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction by Baird Seales, et al. was quite comprehensive as it was an encyclopedia of authors and their works and listed 20 women authors among 200 total [10%]. The authors I hadn't heard of are Zenna Henderson (her stories long out of print until one anthology in 1995 and one in 2020), Naomi Mitchison (known more for historical fiction; two SF novels were out of print for over 30 years until 2011), Doris Piserchia (books out of print but available on Kindle since 2012), Marta Randall (first woman president of SFWA; books available in print through self-publishing after decades of being out of print), Margaret St. Clair aka Idris Seabright (mostly out of print, some works collected in 2016, 2019, and 2020), Pamela Sargent (still active and in print except her pre-1980 work),

and Kate Wilhelm (1977 Hugo award winner who became more well-known for her mysteries and her work as a writing workshop instructor; her SF works out of print until 1998 and 2013). This pattern of once-lauded SF falling out of print until ebooks made it feasible to bring them back isn't restricted to women, but it seems unfortunate that many of these went out of print in the first place.

The 320 page Oct. 1979 "30th Anniversary" of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction which I inherited from my Uncle X had 3 stories by women among a total of 20 [15%]. The stories were chosen from a poll among contributors and lifetime subscribers, thus editorial bias is likely minimal. Here I see the first story in Zenna Henderson's The People series which I just learned about and so I plan to devour it right after writing this.

After all this, what did I learn? That there are several important women writers pre-1980 that I had no idea even existed. Only my luck of having access to some vintage materials and my pouring through them looking specifically for women writers allowed me to find them. My conclusion is that in the end, many women SF writers who were "well-known and celebrated in their day" are still unknown to the general and SF-reading public and dedicated efforts have to be made to re(dis)cover them and reintroduce them. The ebook collections and anthologies are a start. So, yes, in some eras women SF writers were lauded, but in others they were "ignored or pushed aside". So I would say that Mr. McCoy's suggestion of looking into history is a good one, but his conclusions ignore a) actual examples of suppression of women's voices and b) the fact that many important women SF writers (especially early ones) are for all intents and purposes completely obscure today.

The historical record is important in regards to marginalized voices, but even more important in my opinion is that we start to engage with these authors again. Uncover them. Rediscover them. And we might just see what "the canon" is missing.

Patrick Ijima-Washburn
patokon.com

Thoughts on the Twenty-Year Anniversary of Harry Potter Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Long, long ago (circa 2002) in a galaxy far, far away (better known as Clinton Township, Michigan) I received a book for Christmas. It was Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling. (Yeah. I'm an American. We're not smart enough to know what a Philosopher's Stone is.) It was a book I had sworn to never read. I mean, it was kid stuff, right? What adult was going to read it? There was only one problem: I was dating my ex-wife at the time and she loved it. She wanted me to read it so she gave it to me. I wasn't working at the time so I couldn't tell her I was too busy, so I read it.

I loved it. I had stayed over at her place one night and started reading it the next day while she was at work. By the time she got home that night I was halfway through Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. I was hooked. It was that good. At the time, only books one through four were out. I read them all in a matter of days. I saw the first movie at the second run movie theater that only charged a dollar fifty that weekend. I saw the second movie a week later and paid full price. I attended the release parties for the next three novels sans children. I got a few weird looks but I got all three books on release night, so it was worth it.

I have since read every HP book at least twice and watched the movies with my kids more time than I would care to count. I'm actually pretty upset with myself that I didn't read these sooner. When I split

with the ex, one of the things I made sure to take were the HP books. I could live without that woman, but I needed those books. Yeah, they're that good.

I've heard a lot of literati types hate on the Harry Potter series. Apparently the fact that the books are popular means that they're not true literature. You know what? Fuck that attitude. I mean that.

Rowling's works have popularized an entire genre of fiction. Before Harry Potter, Young Adult fiction was a joke. Now it's one of the fastest growing areas in all of publishing and every YA author that gets published owes a debt to Mrs. Rowling. She wrote the works that opened the way.

J.K. Rowling is literally the most influential English language author of the last century. Only Tolkien comes close and for the same reason. Tolkien revitalized the fantasy genre. What separates Rowling from Tolkien is that Rowling popularized a genre that had never been big where Tolkien brought back an old genre.

She did it not by writing message fiction for a certain group of editors and critics, but by telling an awesome story with awesome characters. Rowling's characters are quirky and strange, but they are believable in their actions and motivations. The conflicts escalate continuously. Every time Harry and friends win their enemy gets tougher. It's not till the end of the final book that a final victory occurs.

Let's talk about some compelling characters:

Harry Potter: He's an orphan. He's been, at the very least, mentally and emotionally abused by the Dursleys. He has to feel at least partially responsible for the deaths of his parents, who lost their lives defending him but he never gives up. Harry fights against a force that is bigger than him. No one would be able to blame him if he decided to pack it in and go home but he doesn't.

Looked at another way, he is the chosen one. He could easily let that go to his head and turn in to an arrogant snob, but he doesn't. He's smart enough to know he needs help and brave enough to get the job done.

Hermione Granger: Raised by Muggles and starting off in a world like nothing she's ever seen before, Hermione thrives. Her amazing intellect and drive to excel push her toward greatness. Without Hermione, Harry fails. It's that simple. She even saves the day while petrified. But there's more to Hermione than just that.

Hermione is everything I teach my daughters to be. She is also a lot like my girlfriend. She is strong, proud, smart, tough and brave. I spend as much time rooting for Hermione as I do Harry. Plus, she starts off the series as a nerd and that's something I can identify with. Oh, and her drive to free the house elves amazes me. No one else even cared.

I'm intentionally omitting Ron as I see him as a cross between Samwise Gamgee and Carrot Top with a little bit of that fat kid from that one episode of Little House on the Prairie thrown in. He's a necessary character but not one of my favorites.

Speaking of Weasleys though, how about Molly? I love that Rowling cast her not just as the helpless housewife but as the mama bear. Molly is sweet as sugar until you endanger her family and then LOOK OUT. Her worst fear is something happening to her family as we see when she faces down a boggart. All this and she still manages to keep her whacky husband moving forward.

Even Tom Riddle, AKA Lord Voldemort, is a compelling character. He's a man who was mistreated as a child and now hates everybody like those who hurt him. He's mad for the power he needs to get back at them. No one likes this guy but his motivations make sense even if his methods are too extreme. He's sick and twisted yet we can see how he ended up that way. And despite all of that, Rowling makes us hate him enough that his death is a crowning achievement. I could go on for days.

It's also obvious to anyone that pays attention that Rowling has done her research. Almost all of the monsters come straight from mythology. The parallels between Nazi Germany and some of the actions taken by the Death Eaters are legion. I have a sneaking suspicion that the Triwizard Tournament was somehow inspired by the Labors of Hercules.

All of this adds up to one of the most amazing stories ever told. Rowling amazes me with what she managed to pack into those books. There are ups and downs. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. The books start off fairly laid back but by Deathly Hallows they're dark as all get out. No one and nothing is safe, even if we wish they were. It's a crazy world but it's entertaining. How entertaining you ask?

Rowling's books have sold hundreds of millions of copies. She is considered to be the world's first billionaire author. All this because she created a story about a boy and his friends and refused to give up on it or herself. She submitted book one dozens of times before it was accepted and maybe that's the biggest lesson of Harry Potter: The odds may be against you, but you should never give up. J.K. Rowling didn't. Harry Potter didn't. You shouldn't either and neither shall I.

Prose Bono

Wright's Writing Corner: The Most Important Technique — Part Two by L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Last week, we discussed the Payload Moment—the moment that lifts or deepens a given scene or character. This week, I promised to discuss how to do this.

But first...a confession.

In *Gone With The Wind*, the little slave girl Prissy declares boldly that she has helped women give birth many times. But when the moment of truth comes, she cries out, in one of the movies most famous lines: “Miss Scarlett, I don’t know nothing ‘bout birthin’ babies!”

This is my moment of truth...and, folks: I don’t know nothing ‘bout birthing payload moments!

Or, rather, I have no idea how to teach someone else to do it. But, like Prissy, faced with the immediacy of Miss Melly’s baby coming, I will run, grab some hot water and towels, and see what I can do.

To write a payload moment, you gather the threads of the scene together in your mind, juxtaposition them so that they are taught and then torque ‘em a bit, until something pops up, and that is your payload moment.

And if you can understand what I meant from that description you did not need this article to begin with.

Okay, more seriously now: writing, like art, is all about contrast. Adding shading to a circle makes it look like a sphere. Adding contrast to a written scene makes it feel three-dimensional, or ‘real’. Contrast in character makes the character come alive. Contrast in a scene makes the scene move.

I have talked before about how two things must be going on in any scene. Otherwise, the scene is static. It might be funny, or romantic, or scary, but, unless there are two separate issues going on in the scene, there is something stolid and undynamic about it. The tension between these two issues—whatever they might be: plot and character development, two plot issues, character tension and humor, romance and terror—is what produces the contrast that makes the scene come alive.

But a scene coming alive and finding its Payload Moment are two different things. A living scene is enjoyable and interesting to read, but that is not enough to make it necessary to the story. The Payload Moment is the moment when the scene becomes necessary, when something changes so that the story is different afterwards than it was before.

Finding the Payload Moment is to writing what the punch line is to humor. The punch line in a three-line joke is the moment when the contrast set up in the first and second line comes together in an unexpected way. It is the unexpectedness of it that makes it funny (even if you think afterwards—or perhaps because—Oh, I should have seen that one coming!)

The Payload Moment is the moment when the ideas in the scene come together in an unexpected way. (That torquing thing I mentioned above.) It takes something we already know and shows us another side of it. Often, it brings out something that ‘we should have seen coming’ but that we did not expect.

Let us take a closer look at the scene from *One Piece* (correctly identified by intrepid reader wilddomestic.) that I mentioned last week.

The scene was that the pirate Buggy the Clown has trapped our hero, Luffy de Monkey, on top of a platform. Luffy had climbed the platform because it was where, 22 years before, Gold Roger, the King of the Pirates, was executed. Luffy wanted to see where his hero died. Buggy—being a pirate—has a cutlass in his hand. He raises it to cut off Luffy’s head and is struck by lightning (which was actually set up. Several people had stopped to comment about the weird weather.)

For those who do not know this story—or who have been turned off by how astonishingly, freakily weird everything looks—Luffy is a boy who has declared that he will be King of the Pirates. (Even though he is less pirate-like than you are. And I write that with some confidence, even though I do not know who will be reading this.) He has eaten a Devil Fruit, so his body is made of rubber. This is very useful against many things...but it does not protect him from swords.

The lightning bolt, while amusing, is not the Payload Moment. Or rather, it could have been the Payload Moment, since it was properly set up, had the scene ended there. However, it would have been a lesser moment than what follows.

The Payload Moment comes when the Navy man, Captain Smoker, who is looking across the square at the event, sees Luffy the moment before the lightning bolt—the moment before he is about to die. Luffy is smiling...just the way Gold Roger smiled when he was executed...a sight Smoker remembers from when he was a child. Smoker, who had been relying on one pirate to rid him of another (He is not

aware that Luffy is a good guy, only that there is a bounty on his head.) is shocked. He pauses to wonder if the heavens, destiny itself, is on the side of this young man.

Now...we the viewers know that destiny is on Luffy's side. He is the main hero. He is utterly brave. He has the hugest heart ever, and he is nigh invulnerable. We have also seen him do impossible things and be surprisingly lucky. But nothing before this point indicated that the universe Luffy lived in thought destiny was on his side. Drawing the implications of this into the story increases the scope...it hints that Luffy might be up to something more important than just one boy carrying out his dream, something that will affect his entire world.

Discovering that the heavens have an interest in your character is a big Payload Moment, but payload moments don't have to be so big. They can be small things, a sudden reevaluation of a character, where we see her motivations in a new light. It can be a plot twist...Garlot's not dead! It can be a romantic realization, like the zings we spoke about earlier. Or it can be melodramatic. "But it is my fault!" In each case, however, it has to be something that illuminates either the character, the plot, the background, or—as in our scene with Luffy—the greater universe.

When you sit down to write, what you have to ask yourself is: what can I put in this scene that will take what I have already established and build on it. What action, revelation, or interpretation will make the reader go "ah!" or "oh, of course!" or even "oh, no!" What makes me so bursting with desire to tell someone this idea that I have to either write the scene right now, or go call my best buddy and tell him the idea? (Go for one! If you do two, you might lose the 'must write this' drive.)

That is your Payload Moment.

If you prevail, your manuscript will gain depth and dimension. It will gain life. And, like Prissy, you will be able to smile with please at the dynamic thing you just helped birth.

Writing Tips, a Checklist by L. Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

The below list is writing tips I have jotted down for the purpose of reminding myself of various writing tricks and techniques. Occasionally, other writers have found them helpful, so I include them here.

Two Strings: Two separate issues need to be going in each scene.

The Trick: Raising expectations in one direction but having the story go in the opposite direction. It sounds simple, but it may be the most useful writing technique of all...the book Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier is just the trick over and over again.

The Foil: The trick applied to people. Use other characters to showcase the strengths of your main characters and to make them seem extraordinary. Example: Nausicaa's guys.

Senses: Add three to five senses to every description.

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.

Open active: Start scene changes underway and then explain how you got there...unless change significant.

Measurements by example: Tall as a man, rather than six feet high, where applicable.

Romantic Tension: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3 To make a character seem attractive to another character (at least to women) list a character trait of character A and an emotional reaction to this trait from character B). (example: she had an air of mystery that intrigued him. Or, her shy retiring manner made him wish he could protect her.)

Payload: Part 1, Part 2 Every scene/fight/sex scene should have some moment that moves the plot along or heightens awareness, drawing the reader into something greater. Villains should reveal something important during a fight, and romantic partners should learn more about each other or reveal secrets.

Also, every character should have at least one paragraph/scene where the inner motivation of that character is revealed.

Dicken's Trick: Using action in description: "There is not just a kettle on the fire, it is boiling over." "Horses at the cab stands are steaming in the cold and stamping. When people enter a room, they are sneezing or hiding something in their pockets."

Ping Pong Dialogue: Have some dialogue go back and forth quickly, taking less than one line on the page – leaving white space – to increase readability.

Pink passages: Add visceral reactions – physical involuntary reactions – to heighten connection with reader...but not too much.

Character dynamics: To make a character come to life, give him two conflicting goals. Also, add a scene where he shows a trait at odds with his main traits—this has the same effect in print that shading does in an illustration. It adds a sense of three-dimensionality.

Eyes Ahead: To give a sense of motion, and to increase the readers sense of anticipation, make sure you let the reader know what the character's goal is in both scenes and story archs.

Long Live Exposition – Use the Long Live the Queen system to evaluate where to put exposition.

Dave Barry Endings – Tie the beginning and the end together — balance satisfaction and surprise.

Checklist – To check every scene:

What does it look like?

Senses...what does it smell/sound/feel/taste like?

What is the character feeling?

What is the character doing to express this? — nonverbal reactions

What Visceral reaction can the character have?

~Finis~

