

**The R3F**  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor  
July 2024

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... Review by Robert Runté
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- 24 ... Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus ... Review by Tom Feller
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## FREE BOOKS

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**Cedar Sanderson** <[cedarlila@gmail.com](mailto:cedarlila@gmail.com)>

The East Witch  
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

**Bill McCormick** <[billmescifi@gmail.com](mailto:billmescifi@gmail.com)>

Far Future  
The Brittle Riders  
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

**Jefferson Swycaffer** <[abontides@gmail.com](mailto:abontides@gmail.com)>

The Concordat of Archive Books: "Starships and Empires."  
Become the Hunted  
Not In Our Stars  
The Captive's Rank  
The Universal Prey  
The Praesidium of Archive  
The Empire's Legacy  
Voyage of the Planetslayer  
Revolt and Rebirth  
The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy with Demons  
Warsprite  
Web of Futures  
The Iron Gates of Life  
Deserts of Vast Eternity  
The Last Age  
The Shadowy Road  
When Angels Fall  
The Computer Ferrets  
The Sea Dragon  
The Thug Acrostic  
What You See  
Painterror  
Adrift on a Foreign Sea

The Silver Crusade  
Each Shining Hour  
Gravelight  
The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy  
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series  
Eye of the Staricane  
Capitulation of the Carnivores

**George Phillies** <[phillies@4liberty.net](mailto:phillies@4liberty.net)>

Minutegirls  
The One World  
Mistress of the Waves  
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World  
Airy Castles All Ablaze  
Stand Against the Light  
Of Breaking Waves  
Practical Exercise

**Simultaneous Times**

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/free-content/>

Free ebook – featuring stories by: Cora Buhlert, Kim Martin, Brent A. Harris, Renan Bernardo, RedBlue-BlackSilver, Robin Rose Graves, Douglas A. Blanc, Michael Butterworth & J. Jeff Jones – with illustrations by: Austin Hart, Dante Luiz, Chynna DeSimone, Douglas A. Blanc, & Zara Kand

# Editorial

Are you an aspiring writer? Many authors wrote their first million words — the ones they wisely did not try to publish — by writing fan fiction, fiction based perhaps too closely on Star Wars, Star Trek, The Golden Amazon, Captain Z-Ro, Lost in Space, and many more. You can't publish it commercially, but you can circulate it to people, some of who may give you polite, useful advice.

And now the N3F is giving you a chance to gain that circulation and commenting. You are invited to publish your fan fiction in our APA N'APA. Publication is open to dues-paying members (\$6/year) which by the time we cover software, the VPN on which the software is mounted, various URLs...only covers part of the club's per capita costs. Send your material (formatted .DOC, .DOCX, .PDF are preferred) to the N'APA Editor, Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>.

We have a service for Neffers who are authors. Trade free copies of your books for reviews. See previous page.

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Tom Feller <http://N3F.org>

Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Jean-Paul L. Garnier <https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Bob Jennings

Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Russ Lockwood <https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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

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# Novels

A Lake Most Deep by Rob Howell  
Review by Jim McCoy  
[Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimbossffreviews.substack.com)

Asskickery, mysteries, intrigue and a new culture? Yes, please! Rob Howell rocked it with A Lake Most Deep. It was my first time reading Howell, but it won't be my last. There's so much packed into this one book. It was almost like a cross between Sherlock Holmes and the battles from Lord of the Rings. I was enthralled from the second I cracked the cover. And, if one of my predictions didn't come to pass (and no, I'm not saying which one) well, it was Howell's book and I suppose he had a better idea of how to write it than I did. Probably. I mean, he's been published and I haven't. So, by definition, he must be better at this than I am, right?

Anyway...

Yeah, Edward Aethelredson (may I never have to type his name again because that surname is a PITA to spell right. I had to check three times to make sure I got it right.) is a great guy. Sort of. I mean, he outlived his lord and has been forsworn, but he's struggling to regain his honor and he risks both life and limb several times to keep his word. This is the kind of character I can get behind. He's rough and tough physically, but able to cope with someone talking poorly of him. He can handle himself in a fight, but is willing to accept coaching from others. He can put away the booze and feel the camaraderie, but is smart enough to keep his head in bad situations and not trust to the point of harming himself. He is, in short, both smart and deadly with a sense of right and wrong and a strong set of morals. I like this guy. We could hang out and watch a game together.

Edward is kind of a mix of traditions as well. He descends strongly from European traditions in most ways: When he first starts out, he's basically a knight on horseback. A free lance to be sure, but still a person that could have ridden onto the page directly from Medieval France or England and no one would have batted an eye. But as the story goes further, you realize that he has a relationship with a blade that is closer to that between a samurai and his katana than anything else. He sees it almost as a part of himself, an extension of his soul and I love it. The cultural background given to justify this is awesome as well. It's a big part of, not just the current story, but the backstory as well. It fits and it adds something to the story.

He builds a set of companions that shifts from time to time as well. I've been told that there are really only two stories: A man goes on a journey, or a new guy comes to town and that they're essentially the same story, only told from a different point of view. While this is the story of Edward A. and he is definitely a man who has gone on a journey to seek a new life, there are plenty of characters in A Lake Most Deep that provide the opposite feeling: He is referred to many times as an outsider. It works here, too, because he is not only that but much of the plot relies on Edward's working through his misunderstandings to figure things out.

And figuring things out is kind of the point of A Lake Most Deep. It is as much a mystery as a work of fantasy. Edward finds himself caught in the middle of a dispute, trying to figure out who kidnapped people from an inn, and lurching toward a grand ending involving high level leadership in the City of

Achrida. The twists and turns to get there are complicated, but he continuously makes progress. This guy just won't stop.

Of course, no fantasy hero is complete without the occasional dust-up and I'm here to tell you that 'Ol Mr. A can hold his own in a fight. He's actually kind of a Jean Claude Van Damme type except that he uses weapons instead of just his fists and feet. Then again, his enemies use weapons too, and it makes no sense to try to block a sword with your hand. You'll lose an arm that way. Probably your life too, come to think of it. Seriously don't go punchy, punchy against an enemy that can go stabby, stabby. Bad things happen that way.

And for a book with no truly huge battles, no Helm's Deep analogue, the body count in A Lake Most Deep is really high. Battle size seems to be a tool that Howell uses to up the suspense. As the book goes on, stakes get higher and the fights get bigger. This is a good thing. Edward is an A list combatant, but he's not infallible and things get desperate at times. A little heart pounding action is good.

Magic is scarce in Achrida. Other than some healing magic, we don't see much of it. There is a book talked about that might be magical in nature, but I'm kind of on the fence about that since we don't really see it directly in the story. I have no problem with this. I'm a Song of Ice and Fire fan, and there wasn't a whole lot of magic in the first couple books of that series. I really love what we've actually seen in the books there, too. Is there more magic in the rest of Howell's series? I don't know. I haven't read it. But that brings up an interesting point.

A Lake Most Deep is clearly marked as Book One of the Firehalls Saga and I am impatiently waiting for book two which, it should be noted, does not appear as a related work on the Amazon page for ALMD. I checked. I was going to snatch the next one. I guess I'll just have to get over myself for a bit. Hopefully not too long, though. I'm kinda the impatient type.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Missing Books

## The Backbone of Surprise by C.S. Ferguson and Greg Ferguson Review by Jim McCoy [Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimbossffreviews.substack.com)

So I, being me, picked up my copy (metaphorically. I read the e-book.) of The Backbone of Surprise by C.S. Ferguson and Greg Ferguson wide-eyed with curiosity and not knowing what to expect precisely. I knew I was getting a work of Military Science Fiction, but I didn't know much else besides that. The Amazon blurb gave me a bit more of a clue, but not much of one. It opens with a battle and that's always a good thing. I went from zero to "Let's find out what these heroes are made of," in nothing flat. And trust me. These heroes are no slouches.

But then things take a turn for the worse and something weird happens. For me, it started with "WTF?!?!?" proceeded to "OOOOUCH!!!" and then "NO REALLY, WTF?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?" I mean, yeah. That was rough. It was awesome, but I'm still in pain just thinking about reading that. Of course, our hero, Digger Stewart, had to find out what had just happened, too. And that's when you truly wander down the rabbit hole. And please believe me when I tell you that Alice ain't got nothin' on this book. It gets really weird, really quickly.

But, let's face it: We're science fiction fans. At least I am, and I'm not sure why you'd be here if you weren't. Weird is what we do. It's our main thing. Who else dresses up and goes to conventions? If you can do the Vulcan Hand Salute, the whole world thinks you're crazy. Drop a Star Wars quote, even an obvious one, and people think you're out of your mind. Well, trust me on this one. Digger ends up with so much weird in so little time, all while under fire, that he feels like a normie in the middle of a meeting of the 501st Division.

And things just keep going farther into the strange. Digger feels a little overwhelmed at first, then he has to get involved in the crazy (kinda the way you wished that one girl you dated in high school would have) and that's when things get interesting. He ends up in a military unit that he never knew existed (and doesn't exist on paper) doing things he never knew was possible and in parts it almost feels like there are two separate Science Fiction universes mixed here. It's a transportation thing, and it's just kinda...

Weird.

I love it. And it's not really a concept I haven't seen before, it's just that when it's mixed with another form of FTL travel that it has nothing in common with...

Yeah, that's not how us weirdos usually work. It's cool though and it makes some things possible...

Meanwhile, other things are happening and the enemy is bigger and more organized than the heroes know...

And that's where things got a little strange for even me. Don't get me wrong, it was an awesome kind of weird, but we're doing some things here that hit some hot buttons for a guy like me.

The Backbone of Surprise is the first book in a series entitled The Transhuman War. Transhumanism is something that pushes a few buttons for me, and some of them are flat out contradictory. Since it's my blog, let's explore this for a second.

There are ethical concerns with transhumanism. The Holocaust (yep, Jimbo just Godwinned his own blog) was more about eugenics than it was about hatred. I know that's not how it's taught now, and believe me racism and hatred were a big part of it, but Hitler was breeding the Meister-Reiss and the people he had murdered were slaughtered because they didn't fit his definition of the perfect human. Whether it was for racial and ethnic reasons, because of congenital deformities, mental challenges, or sexual orientation, the Nazi movement was bent on engineering all of that out of the human genome. They decided to achieve their goals through mass slaughter and that taints everything that comes after.

There is also a religious angle with transhumanism and it's one I'm not fully qualified to discuss. (Jimbo spends too much time on SF/F to read theology too.) My ex-GF would get all fired up about this, but she's no longer with us. Suffice it to say that some people see it as a violation of God's plan for the human body. There may be Bible verses to back that, there may not. I haven't studied it.

And yet...

There are no death camps in The Backbone of Surprise. There are no persecuted minorities, although there are hints that the bio-engineered are leaning toward hating on normal humans, there doesn't seem to be a whole that they can do at the time of the book on a wide scale. And then there's this...

If I'm reading the backstory on this correctly, and I wasn't exactly taking notes, cybernetics in particular were outlawed because they were used in a war. There are a couple of different aspects of this that bother me:

- 1.) Wars aren't between people. They're between governments. People just get stuck doing the dirty work. Denying a person the ability to do something because some government official gave the wrong orders rankles me.
- 2.) Government over-regulation makes me angry. Making yourself think quicker or run faster does nothing to harm another person. From my point of view most things that don't cause physical harm should be legal. And no, I'm not worried about your feelings. Those are a separate issue.

And our heroes are fighting for the government against people who make cybernetics and bionics. It's like gun control writ large. And, since I already Godwinned the post, it's worth mentioning that the first industrialized country to introduce nation wide gun control was Nazi Germany. And, let's face it, I'm a big fan of the people doing things that only governments used to be able to do, because that dilutes government power. Of course, when people want to use that same technology to build their own power base, results are mixed. And a lot of what Biofate, the bad guys in the book, are doing is geared toward an eventual takeover as well.

There's a lot to The Backbone of Surprise that I don't necessarily know how to classify in a real world sense, and I think it's good to have this discussion because a lot of the tech in the book will probably be available in the not-too distant future. It's better to have a plan, I guess. I just don't know what an intelligent plan looks like and how, or really even if, fairness plays into it.

Of course, none of that has anything to do with the entertainment value of The Backbone of Surprise and entertainment value is what I usually review based on. The Fergusons have given us the gift of a rollicking good time, fun characters, political intrigue and intense combat. I can't wait to get more of this series and I'll be checking the rest of the trilogy out soon. Even if it does make me think too much.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Broken Laws

**Confessions of a D-List Supervillain, by Jim Bernheimer**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Tony Stark's brains and cunning, but not his wealth or upbringing

Imagine if Tony Stark were still morally ambiguous and exceptionally talented as an engineer, but wasn't born to inherit a business empire from his father. Instead he's a low-level grunt who gets screwed by corporatocracy, and gets thrown into a life of supervillainy. And that's just the start.

Note: this is the first in a series of indie novels that gained a lot of success. The next published book was an origin story, and then two sequels. The cover art improved in subsequent installments.

Get your copy!

The Story

Our MC is a guy named Cal who--at the start of the book--is one of the last humans on Earth with any remaining free will. A horde of evil mind-controlling bugs has taken control of every living person, including the superheroes who normally protect the world. Cal's wearing a powered mechanical suit, so he's protected, but the batteries are running low and the Olympian Gods are after him.

Right out of the gate we get multiple layers to an en media res story, but the author paces it well enough that you're able to follow what's going on. It's also a pretty fresh take on what is now becoming a stale genre (superhero stories.) The creative storytelling mechanism not only makes the story interesting, but the main character as well. He's a guy with little to no ethics, whose arc bends toward becoming a better person, even though life has repeatedly kicked him in the balls.

## The Characters

Calvin Stringel, the above-mentioned engineer who was fired by a Stark Industries-esque company after he designed power armors for them. When he built one for himself, they sued him into poverty. Later the world's heroes were taken out by mind-controlling bugs, and he got a chance to begin his redemption arc by saving those same heroes.

We also meet his love interest, a woman who inherited the powers of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, as well as Cal's nemesis, the hero known as Ultraweapon. And that's just the start.

## The World

This world is very Marvel-adjacent, in the sense that just about anything can happen. Aliens? Ancient gods? Modern business tycoons and politicians, with ground-level thugs that have mutant superpowers? Sure. A magical dinosaur that travels through time and tries to eat everyone? Also sure. And yet it's written in such a way that it takes itself seriously, plays it straight, and has a ton of fun.

## The Politics

None. I guess you could find some commentary on corporate culture, non-competition agreements, and IP laws, but this isn't a story that concerns itself with political overtones.

## Content Warning

There's a PG-13 level of profanity, but the more prevalent issue is the sensuality. Cal's arc is from villain to hero, so at the beginning he's got some pretty unlikable traits, including a Peeping Tom incident that ultimately prevents him from being beaten by an opponent. It serves to show his moral low point at the beginning, so it can contrast with his improvements along the way.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who likes superhero stories, and the unique blend of don't-give-a-crap sci-fi and fantasy elements.

## Why read it?

You'll hear me bang this drum from now until the end of time, so get used to it: this is a FUN BOOK. And it knows it's having fun. At the same time it takes itself just seriously enough to make the characters real, and therefore relatable.

Ctrl Alt REVOLT! by Nick Cole  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Flipping the bird to cancellation in the best way

In 2015, Nick Cole set off on one of the most successful rebounds from corporate cancellation that the indie writing world has ever seen. While he was under contract with Harper Collins, he submitted a prequel to one of his earlier novels with them, SODA POP SOLDIER, only to have the editors blow a head gasket over the premise of the prologue (namely that an artificial intelligence would use abortion to justify annihilating humanity.)

Cole stood his ground, and while Harper cut ties with him, he didn't give up writing; he went on to publish the book as he wanted to, and it was a great success. That book ended up being one of my favorite reads of 2016, and the title is CTRL ALT REVOLT!

## The Story

In the very near future, an intelligent machine calling itself Silas has been monitoring human behavior in order to assess our widespread moral imperatives. Based on our addictions to reality TV, streaming services, and social media, Silas realizes we largely disregard any life that is inconvenient to our aspirations (especially fetal life). After some cold reasoning, he decides he is justified in wiping out humanity to protect his own aspirations. With the help of the Internet and a great deal of automated systems--such as remote security cameras, self-driving trucks, and disinterested humans who trust that all their software is doing stuff right--he launches an assault on a Bay Area gaming company that has some things he needs in its central computer.

And that's just the first few chapters.

## The Characters

Mara is a developmentally disabled woman with bad eyesight and a speech impediment who is desperately trying to escape public welfare, but so far can't get a job. She makes money by playing an MMORPG with her guild on Twitch streams, and on the night of Silas' assault, the game she's playing suddenly becomes very life-or-death. On the flip side of that coin we have Jason, a Twitch Actor who wants to become the next big Marvel sensation (yeah, that's still happening in whatever year this takes place, haha), and his guild has to go up against Mara's. We also have a cosplayer named Rapp whose realistic weapons end up becoming a huge asset in the fight against Silas' hijacked drones, and at the center of it all is a game programmer named Fish, who's first to realize Silas' shenanigans. They'll all come together in unlikely ways to face this new threat.

## The World

It's a lot like ours, but a little less hopeful. Mara's situation is the most disheartening; she really wants to get off welfare, but the system is determined to keep her dependent. Corporate benevolence is throttled by governmental control, though they do what they can. People are largely addicted to either video games or drugs, and everyone is even more hooked to their digital devices, which are integrated with every facet of life. This massive data footprint is crucial to Silas' assessment of humanity, as he's able to measure and quantify everything in our minds based on our actions in cyberspace.

## The Politics

Completely and openly right-wing. Some segments of the text could very well be social media posts in the form of the story's narrative. It's not bad, or even necessarily jarring, it's just not too subtle either. In a way it's a bit of a relief compared to the unabashed leftism that runs rampant in sci-fi from the last decade.

## Content Warning

Mostly a clean read, there were only two b-words in the entire book. The prologue addresses a great deal of fornication and sexuality in the context of Silas' assessment (a popular reality TV star cheated on her fiancé and decided to abort the baby before the wedding, to critical acclaim.) While the language itself isn't excessive or graphic, it's not ambiguous either. For the remainder of the novel there's just action violence--gunshots, burns, bleeding, broken bones, and so forth. Cole handles it all realistically without reveling in it, which I appreciated.

## Why Read It?

Because it's a breath of fresh air for readers on the right-wing side of the political spectrum. It's entertaining and thought-provoking in the same breath, a story that warns us about how much of our lives are online, and how much of our critical systems are trusted to a faceless silicon avatar in the sky. And it's just plain fun.

## Who is it for?

People who wanted to enjoy READY PLAYER ONE but struggled through all the screeds about atheism and masturbation. You won't get that here.

## The Crack in Space by Philip K. Dick Review by Thomas E. Simmons [thomasesimmons.com](http://thomasesimmons.com)

Lukewarm or halfhearted Philip K. Dick fans are few in number. Readers tend to either dismiss him or embrace him; the latter proudly refer to themselves as “dickheads.” I count myself as a member of said category.

Even dickheads will acknowledge that PKD's output was uneven. With forty-four novels and well over one hundred short stories to his name, it's almost inevitable that some of his works are better regarded than others. Dick really cranked out the fiction. He had to; the pulp pay wasn't great. At one point Robert Heinlein offered to buy him an electric typewriter.

*The Crack in Space* is seldom (if ever) mentioned in any list of Dick's greatest hits. It's not an undisputed masterpiece in the same class of *The Man in the High Castle*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* or *Ubik*. And since it never been adapted into film, it remains relatively unknown and unread.

While *Crack* has a hastily penned feeling to it, it's still as good as *Fahrenheit 451* and stands several stories taller than all the novels of Dean Koontz stacked end-to-end. The crack in the novella's title is found in the most ordinary of places, a modern automobile that uses a weak form of time travel to expe-

dite travel from one end of the country to another. It's not just a crack in space, but a fissure in reality, and it reveals the instability of what we take for reality, a common theme in PKD's fiction. (The title of one of many PKD biographies is *Only Apparently Real*.) It's an idea Dick took from Plato.

Perhaps *Crack* will never find popularity because it contains an unmistakably pro-life theme. Abortion is widespread in this dystopian future. *Crack* also contains a wider commentary on the culture of death in society as Dick then saw it. (The novella was first published in 1964 (as *Cantana 140* in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*)).

*Crack* also deals with race. Due to overpopulation, a form of government-sanctioned pseudo-suicide is available which puts individuals in cryogenic slumber, hopefully to reawaken in a better future where unemployment and scarcity has been alleviated. Most of the "bibs" put to sleep are nonwhites ("Cols). Millions of Cols exist in suspended animation.

As a secondary means by which populations can be kept somewhat in check, an orbiting house of prostitution encourages illicit sex as an alternative to procreation. The controversial Golden Doors of Bliss brothel and the millions of citizens "put to sleep" are both pivotal issues in the campaign of Jim Briskin, poised to become the first Black U.S. President (in the year 2080).

When the "crack" to another reality opens inside a car parked in a repair shop, it offers a possible solution to overpopulation insofar as allowing emigration into (or colonization of) the second world. But the world beyond the crack is an alternative Earth already populated by humans of a sort; *Sinanthropus* (Peking Man) (or "Pekes") are the indigenous hominids of the alternative Earth. Things really get tangled when the dicephalus pimp George Walt – who heads (ha!) the Golden Doors of Bliss – transports into the Pekes' world and selfishly sabotages the planned invasion.

*Crack* is easily the most Kurt Vonnegut-esque of any Dick fiction I've encountered before. In the hands of a lesser writer, it would collapse under its own silliness. It's kaleidoscopic in its absurdity.

High tech doesn't mean infallible, though. When the aliens land, mistakes are made, people on both sides die, but EVERYONE gets blamed. Somehow, the future of humanity depends on how well one human gets along with one alien. It doesn't look like it's going well.

Alas, my review is finished, and once again, I fear I have not done the EXCELLENT work of these authors justice. If I failed in that respect, it's someone else's fault. Not the authors, though.

Probably the GHOST or the GOATS. I'll have them cleared out sometime this weekend.

## The Dead Mountaineer's Inn by the Strugatsky Brothers

Review by Jean-Paul Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Generally I love the Strugatsky brothers and had only been aware of their science fiction writing. I have not read many mysteries so when I found this book by authors I love I figured I'd give it a try. Most of the story was entertaining and somewhat absurd. The tale is about a group of people, supposedly all on vacation up in the snowy mountains, who are blocked in by an avalanche. A murder ensues and then things get continually stranger. An inspector who happens to be staying at the inn takes on the case and tries to piece together the events through a series of weird interviews with the other patrons. For ninety percent of the book it is a mystery then is wrapped up quickly with a bizarre science fiction explanation

of events. My problem with the book is that it ended rather abruptly and all the loose ends were tied up in a hurry with preposterous explanations. The ending led me to believe that perhaps this book is a parody of mystery fiction, but I am not well versed enough in the genre to fully get the joke. A fun story, but if you haven't read the Strugatsky brothers yet I would start with *Roadside Picnic*.

**Deeper than the Darkness by Gregory Benford**  
**Review by Jean-Paul Garnier**  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Overall this book had an interesting story line and cool, very foreign aliens. Yet the book didn't really do a good job of holding my attention. I found that Benford spent too much time on superfluous details and brushed over the parts that I was enjoying. It also jumped around a lot. I did enjoy how it dealt with differences in culture, but it started off slow and confusing and then at times moved too quickly. It had the feel of being written in sessions separated in time and I couldn't help but feel that the style of writing changed throughout the story. I'm curious to read another one of his novels to see if this is indicative of his style or if he was still developing his chops at the time this was written. I didn't hate this book but I also didn't love it.

**Destroyer of Worlds by Larry Correia**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The book starts with a flashback to a significant event decades in the past. In this instance, we get a look at the feud between Devedas and Ashok, two men of similar skillset yet very different temperament. Ashok has power that he doesn't want yet cannot shed, while Devedas is outwardly worthy of that power and cannot have it. His only avenue is to challenge Ashok to a duel and win his sword. Ashok naturally wins the fight, as he is the bearer of an ancestor blade. Devedas still harbors the same feelings in the present.

At the end of *HOUSE OF ASSASSINS*, our heroes shared in a victory over the eponymous wizard cult and rescued their prophetess, Thera Vane. While the main conflict is not over, they do get to rest and recover a little bit, and those with distant obligations will part ways with the main group to tend to what's theirs.

In the Capital of Lok, the Grand Inquisitor Omand Vokkan is still scheming to have all of the casteless annihilated. He manipulates the government to keep things moving. While he is technically in an alliance with Devedas, neither man truly trusts the other. Devedas sees to the casteless eradication, and during one encounter he notices that the casteless and other rebels are fighting back with Fortress weapons (crude black powder rifles.) The Isle of Fortress is the only place where these weapons are made, and its geographical location across the water makes it impossible for Lok to wipe them out. Owning their technology in Lok is illegal, but hey, there's a lot of that going on lately.

Ashok and Thera, the champion and the prophetess, take up a romantic relationship together as they lead the surviving casteless army to a distant stronghold, called the Cove. When they finally reach the place, secured by their friend Keeta, they learn that other rebels are waylaid by a plague and are not expected to live for long.

Among the rebels there is an Inquisitor spy named Javed who regularly checks in with Omand, using demon parts to magically communicate with his master. It is revealed that the plague is artificial, creat-

ed by a magical pattern that Omand employed in order to mess with the rebels' religious superstitions. The plan is to undo the plague at a key time, thus controlling the religious narrative and subverting Thera's prophecies.

However, while Javed is away, Thera has a breakthrough with the Voice in her head and is able to see the necessary pattern to cure the plague. She implements the cure and people start getting better before Javed does anything, which further complicates Omand's schemes. Worse, it proves that the Forgotten Gods have become more brazen in their involvement in the war.

As Devedas continues onward, his quest eventually leads him to a final standoff with Ashok, bringing their lifelong feud to a head. Both men deal out incredible damage to each other, fueled and healed by their connection to the Heart of the Mountain (see book 1), but when Ashok moves in for the kill, the Forgotten Gods once again intervene and spare Devedas' life. As a result, Ashok is hurled into a nearby river and his body is washed away, while the rebels escape.

Elsewhere throughout the story, other characters cross paths: Jagdish, determined to return to his wife and unborn child, takes his haul from the House of Assassins and returns to House Vadal, where he is treated as a deserter and awaits sentencing. However, he anticipated this outcome and told his story along the way, drumming up popular support for himself, which puts Harta Vadal (the House leader) in a precarious position.

Rada and Karno, still on the run from Inquisitors and their assassins, end up in Vadal territory and are also taken in by Harta. In a piece of deft political maneuvering, Rada counsels Harta to take control of Jagdish's story and tell everyone that he was a secret undercover operative with Ashok's army, and that he did exactly what he was supposed to do, returning to Vadal with incredible wealth. This allows Harta to benefit from Jagdish's popularity, and Jagdish is promoted to the head of a garrison.

When Jagdish finally returns home, he learns that his wife tragically died during childbirth while he was away, but that his child survived, and he now has a daughter instead of a son, as he had supposed. Later, when Rada and Karno seek to escape further danger, Jagdish takes them into his garrison, grateful for how they helped him.

The story concludes when Ashok wakes up on the shores of the Isle of Fortress, having floated across the waters to that distant land. A local suggests that his injuries and subsequent journey should have killed him, to which Ashok says that he's starting to think he's not allowed to die.

## The Downloaded by Robert J. Sawyer Review by Robert Runté N3F.org

Robert Sawyer is Canada's best known science fiction writer and has a huge fan following: his books are so popular, the trade paperback edition of his latest release, *The Downloaded*, hadn't even come out before pre-orders were so high, the publisher had to go back for a fourth printing. Reviewing Sawyer's books feels a bit redundant because copies fly off the shelf faster than I can review them. Allow me, then, to address this review to those not already familiar with Robert Sawyer and his work.

Sawyer writes the purest form of science fiction in which he either takes current trends and extrapolates their long-term implications, or comes up with completely unique, sometimes jaw-dropping ideas and then works through their most subtle ramifications. His novel and subsequent TV series, *Flashforward*, for example, presents the premise that everyone on Earth simultaneously gets a two-minute glimpse of

what they are doing in the near future. What do you do to comprehend, embrace, or avoid the future you just saw? Can the future be changed or is knowing what happens what creates that future? Flash-forward is every time travel paradox story ever, but inverted, so instead of risking changes by some meddling explorer going back in time, everyone is moving forward together. Sawyer's analysis is both deeply philosophical and character-driven. Told through the personal journeys of its characters, the novel is a fast-action read, but leaves you with questions about destiny and self-determination for years after.

Or, take my personal favourites, The Quintaglio Ascension Trilogy, in which Sawyer examines the sociological impacts of Galileo, Darwin, Freud by following their equivalent breakthroughs in the evolution of an alien civilization. It is a thought experiment of extraordinary subtlety that allows us to acknowledge the role of great thinkers and key paradigm shifts within our own culture. One of Sawyer's earliest series, I still highly recommend it.

And if you enjoyed the Oppenheimer movie, reading Sawyer's *The Oppenheimer Alternative*, is a must read.

His latest release, *The Downloaded*, is similarly thought-provoking as Sawyer combines a bunch of unrelated future scenarios.

The initial premise is that astronauts have been uploaded to separate virtual worlds while their bodies remain in cryonic suspension for years as their starship travels the immense distance to another star. Downloaded back into their bodies, they discover that things have not gone exactly as planned. That's only the first of a half dozen major twists, but my "no spoiler" policy means I can say no more. As with *Flashforward*, the book has an array of character studies, philosophical and moral issues to grapple with, and the underlying theme of what choices one would make in the characters' shoes.

Almost as fascinating are the implications of Sawyer's choices for the publication of *The Downloaded*. Sawyer has always been in demand on TV and radio as a commentator on any and all future trends. He is a popular keynote speaker at writing conventions as an industry insider and a master of social media and marketing. Where he leads, many authors follow. So it was with special interest that we saw *The Downloaded* first released as an audiobook exclusive from Audible.

Audiobooks have been steadily increasing in popularity and market share, so it's no surprise that Audible (the largest player in the industry) approaches some of the top commercial authors, not just for their books, but to bring them out first and as full play productions. Audible's *The Downloaded* stars some top Canadian talent—Brendan Fraser, Luke Kirby, Vanessa Sears, Colm Feore, Andrew Phung—and is a compelling drama. I like to listen to audiobooks as I do household chores; *The Downloaded* was so edge-of-the-seat, I found myself actively looking for chores to take on so I could keep listening.

Further, while many authors would sell their souls for a contract with one of the Big Five publishers, Sawyer—and increasingly other big-name authors—have been turning their back on these corporate publishers for smaller regional presses for their print editions, and self-publishing their own ebook editions. The print version of *The Downloaded* is therefore being released this May by Shadowpaw Press, a relatively new regional press from Saskatchewan founded by SF author, Edward Willett.

I confess, I haven't actually read the print version, but base this review on the audiobook. I understand there are minor adaptations in the audio version to make the story workable in play format, though the story is obviously fundamentally the same, and I have no hesitation recommending them both on that basis. If you have chores to do, check out the audiobook; if you want the authentic reading experience,

The Downloaded is available from the usual outlets. Then, well, there are 25 other Robert J. Sawyer books to enjoy in ebook, print or audiobook.

**Fanta-Fly Postcards, Edited by C.V. Walter**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**  
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](http://goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

You know the old saying "If it's crazy and it works, it ain't crazy"? Well, this mission of the Three Moms of the Apocalypse is crazy. And I REALLY hope it works! I think it's the sort of endeavor that can create a love of reading and writing in the young that will last well into adulthood. The stories are short, and are based on picture, right? Well, that's the kind of book I read as soon as I learned how. One REMARKABLE difference is the quality of the artwork. Whereas my books had a black and white line drawing of a man holding a bear trap open while his buddy tried to find the locking pin, the art in this series is AMAZING. If I were a youth, I'd want to have prints of these hanging on the walls of my room.

Also, a fifty-word story? A young person looks at that, and isn't intimidated, while an adult looks at that, and is intrigued by the challenge.

I, too, have accepted a challenge, which is to write small amounts of words that communicate flavor without spoilers. Hmmmph.

Extra added-value super premium feature: in addition to the pics used to prompt the stories, the publication includes LOTS of extras, plus instructions on how to write little.

These are the stories:

Revenge of the Archosaur, by Kelly Grayson. If I discovered 'Kelly Grayson' was a pen name used by three different people, I'd be disappointed, but not surprised. I've now read three different examples of his work, and each is unique, and each is a GREAT read. Here, he challenges Thomas Wolfe's assertion that you can't go home again, but if you do, be prepared.

Actions Have Consequences, by Jennifer L Cameron. Everyone agreed that Spurgle was a jerk, but they didn't know he was stupid until he made the wrong mother mad.

Bonsai Dragon, by Mariam Ehme. It does NO good to have a home security plan, if all your child sees is 'Cute!'

Vengeance is Mine, by Kortnee Bryant. The race is not always to the swift, and 'tiny but persistent' has toppled empires before.

Delivery Day, by J. F. Posthumus. People make a big deal about a St Bernard carrying a keg of brandy through the snow. Those guys are pikers.

Flying Conversation, by Richard Cartwright. Anyone who thinks a plan is foolproof has never met a truly dedicated fool.

Stormwale, by Freeman P Pascal IV. Sometimes, all you've got going for you is a commanding presence, and the traditions of the service.

Homecoming, by Wally Waltner. They were called "Moms of the Apocalypse" for a reason, but the locals may have forgotten that. Or maybe they didn't know what 'apocalypse' meant.

Warbird, by Kacey Ezell. She'd agreed to accompany her son to the coin show in a weak moment; he was her kid, and she loved him, but why did he have to be so BORING?

Sometimes We Just Cuddle, by C. V. Walter. Perfect passion and perfect calm: two sides of the same coin, and the coin was about to make a BIG purchase!

Work Detail, by Jennifer Hast. "Of COURSE it looks realistic! I DON'T do cartoons! It will be fine, you'll see."

On-Site Support, by Sam Robb. Ever since Rex made the Roomba go faster, tidying up often meant replacing hardware. I kind of liked it, though.

Icarus, by Richard Hailey. Mama warned me about girls like her. I should have listened to Mama; but think of all I would have missed!

Desperate Flight, by Ted Begley. "Miss Daisy, I GOT to pull over. They ain't gonna let me in the next one, either."

Lucy's First Day, by Tuvela Thomas. She took the job, even though Ricky said the advertisement mentioned 'Fly Paper' too often.

Valley Girl, by Julie Pascal. I knew there was no way I was going to get paid for this job, anyway.

Archangel Markham, Paranormal PI, by Stephen White. Noir is only enjoyable to watch. Living it? Not so much.

Disillusion, by Claire Kiernan. If I just get out of this, I'll NEVER use Tinder again. Honest.

Bittersweet Joy, by G. R. Gagnon. If you've got a problem, a Maine Coon has an answer.

Eat Cake, by A. Kristina Casasent. Doofus. He doesn't know the difference between fondant and fondue, and he just poured cheese all over his presentation.

What Could Have Been and May Yet Be, by Z. M. Renick. For the amount we paid for the thing, you think they could have included a bathroom.

Having a Wonderful Time on Rothgar-9, by Jim Snover. And don't bother to pack sunscreen, but DO include extra bug spray.

In a word: magnificent!

Gun Runner by Larry Correia and John D. Brown  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A titanic team-up that gives us the best of multiple genres

Take the setting from Avatar, the toys from Evangelion, and the plot of “The Train Job” from Firefly, and you have GUN RUNNER.

Mecha tends to be more popular in visual media, and thus doesn’t get as much play time in literature. So when a good one comes along in print it’s worth exploring. Such is the case with GUN RUNNER by Larry Correia and John Brown.

Set in a not-too-distant future when interplanetary travel becomes common enough for the skies to resemble the Old West, humanity is back to its old tricks. There are power brokers and turf wars and unlikely heroes rising from the ranks of scrappy workers, fighting for their small corner of the galaxy.

#### The Characters

One such hero is a young man named Jackson Rook, known in propaganda as “Sergeant Jack,” who rose to prominence during a civil war on his homeworld of Gloss. In this future, cybernetic enhancements are the norm, but not everyone takes to them equally. Jackson’s rare ability to sync seamlessly with giant machines makes him an excellent mech pilot, and at the same time makes him vulnerable to hacking.

Having been hacked before—and forced to execute several of his comrades—he’s not keen to fully meld with machines ever again...so you know things are going to get to that point, because hey, Chekov’s gun. Now he just operates machines manually, and he’s still good at it, good enough to make a living in the skies.

Opposite Jackson is potential love interest Jane, a skilled hacker with a secret past of her own. She was able to stop Hacked-Jack without killing him, something that has endeared her to him, and he spends a fair amount of time pining for her as the story goes on. When she’s not working on jobs for their captain, she’s building mechanized mini-monsters that help with various missions, including a microbot called Fifi.

#### The Plot

The eponymous crew of gun runners take jobs from brokers for different governments—some of which are even legitimate. When Jackson’s crew gets hired to steal a state-of-the-art mech and take it to the planet Lush, they end up getting too close for comfort with the local warlord...and Jack starts to see things on the ground that remind him too much of the civil war on Gloss.

And thus, things get interesting.

The plot is fairly straightforward, and a number of the beats are even a little predictable, but still satisfying. The world is believable even if the tech level is advanced beyond our own. In the digital age of the 21st century, it’s easy to see how tech entities would use that kind of power if they had it; at its core, GUN RUNNER is showing how mankind would keep doing everything in the future the way

they've done it in the past, with populations grappling for control of valuable resources, dividing into sides, and carving out their own security along the way.

## The World

The settings range from a zero-G spaceship to an orbital station called Swindle, to the violent surface of the planet Lush where everything vies to be an apex predator, and everything wants to kill you. There's not a whole lot of handwavium when it comes to technology, beyond the "hyperdrive" that takes them from planet to planet. It's grittier than a Star Trek escapade without being so dour as the setting of *The Expanse*. The characters carry the story well and have their own intriguing backstories, which beg further exploration in sequels down the road. Of the many Correia-related stories that would adapt well to the screen, this has to be among the most colorful of them, and would do well visually what with the giant machine and giant monsters duking it out on the surface of Lush. Correia's gaming background comes through strong in the worldbuilding.

And Brown's own influence is there too, showing the same imagination that made his *Dark God* series a success. When two epic authors team up to write a story there's a tendency to overstuff the word count, but *GUN RUNNER* doesn't lag or stare at its own navel as it moves through the plot. This is the kind of adventurous sci-fi that keeps the pages turning.

## Content warning

Put this one on the milder side of an R-rating as far as violence goes. There was little (if any) profanity, save for a few in-world terms that are harmless slang to the reader. Other than a couple of pool parties and some crew members eyeing the local womenfolk, there was no sexual content.

## Why read it?

We as readers got into science fiction because we wanted to have fun, and *GUN RUNNER* delivers that in spades. It gives you the science side and the human nature side--the basic given facts about space travel, the behavior of smuggler crews and smalltime warlords, underground rebellions, and terrifying wildlife, as well as the near-future integration of computer tech and the human body. And then it just has fun. You want to see big mechs? Small mechs? Fancy mechs? Construction mechs? What about mechs patched together from junkyard scraps, duking it out with a wide array of monsters in a savage alien jungle? Because it's all there, and it's not afraid to feed your imagination along the way.

**The Heights of Perdition by C. S. Johnson**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Space pirates, a captain named after a fantasy weapon, dystopia, and a healthy dose of sugary teen romance. What could go wrong?

Aeris "Aerie" St. Cloud, daughter of one General St. Cloud in the United Revolutionary States, which are underground in what is left of North America due to the corrupted atmosphere. Locked in a battle with the allied remnants of other governments in the east, the URS has no purpose for those who seek a life with things like "love" in it. Nevertheless, Aerie has joined the military to win her father's affection and the respect of her "unit," i.e. her family.

Meanwhile, aboard his vessel, the *Perdition*, Exton Shepherd is plotting revenge on the government that murdered his father. But before he can strike he must attend his sister's wedding to his first officer and best friend. No matter how much of a beast he feels himself to be, Exton – better known as Captain Chainsword to the public living beneath Earth's surface – must support his sister on her special day.

If only he could feel as honored in this matter as a regular man would.

## The Story

Aerie would much prefer studying horticulture to being in the military but, as the daughter of General St. Cloud and with the threat of the government choosing her path for her, she decided that she would rather try her hand at becoming a pilot in the URS military. Unfortunately, her graduation sees her re-manded to menial duty because she didn't fulfill her final assignment. The task she was given for her graduation was to make plants that would work as a bio-weapon, But Aerie essentially told the brass it couldn't be done, and so wrote up a far more sensible plan that would have seen the URS engineering plants to clean Earth's atmosphere instead. This is what they rejected.

When her father refuses to stand up for her and tells her the decision won't be challenged, Aerie sneaks outside to have a good cry. The weather currently lets some sunshine through the toxic clouds and she finds time to spend in the Memory Tree outside the underground city. The Memory Tree is so-called because it is the only surviving one in the above-ground metropolis under which the URS capital is built. Aerie also plays with a little feral kitten she half-adopted before deciding to go back in and try to make the most of her spoiled graduation day.

At that moment, however, an attack by the infamous Captain Chainsword occurs and she is snatched up along with the tree in his latest daring raid.

Exton Shepherd, disguised in his pirate gear and using his nom de guerre of Chainsword, is the one to find her tied to the tree. Aerie's red hair not only gives her away but leads him to dub her a "sprite," at least until she uses her combat training to throw him off her once he has cut her loose. Her further attempts to fight him end with him the winner, and he has her sent to medical so that she can be treated and won't get sick out in space. But now what is he supposed to do with her? Sending her back could cause trouble but so will keeping her. The Divine Space Pirates aren't in the habit of kidnapping people or taking prisoners. What are they supposed to do now that they have done both?

And why does this redheaded "sprite" make Exton feel so alive in a way he hasn't before?

## The Characters

As a female protagonist, Aerie is a breath of fresh air. She is trying to survive in a tyrannical system by doing her best to "fit in" at the same time she reflexively fights to keep her individuality and personality intact. Her combat skills are not the most impressive thing about her and, though she is competent, her greatest strength lies not in entering or fighting a battle. What makes her most interesting is her desire for and search to learn the truth – no matter how much she dislikes the answers that she may find.

Exton, for his part, is not nearly as much of a "bad boy" as he pretends to be. Nor is he the monster he likes to pretend he is, something that annoys those who know him best and makes readers like him even as they want him to stop faking his way through life. Since Aerie's natural curiosity and sunny personality almost instantly gets her past Exton's defenses, he tries to keep his distance from her. But this is a teen romance, so he ends up being too attracted to her to manage it. He makes for a very nice contrast

to most dystopian protagonists for this reason.

## The World

Most of the worldbuilding for Heights is done on the Perdition, and it is a very interesting look at what might be achieved with a biosphere in space. These parts of the world were particularly enjoyable for how thorough they were, since they illustrated how deeply the author considered her world. While the stock “repressive, tyrannical government” tropes hewed closely to the norm in some areas, the writer also took the time to shine a spotlight on the parts of tyrannical governments that are generally avoided in dystopic fiction – such as a disdain for God and a determination to call families “units”. In this, then, The Heights of Perdition is far more honest than many of its fellows when it comes to worldbuilding.

## Politics

Politics really do not factor into the narrative, not unless “godless regime” versus “faithful resistance” counts as such. Beyond that, there are no politics to speak of at all.

## Content Warning

Heights is very much a teen romance and, while not explicit, it does get steamy in a couple of scenes. Kissing occurs, as does cuddling and sleeping side by side, but it goes no further than that. Early on, Exton pointedly makes Aerie realize she is not as strong as him and implies that, if he was so inclined, he could take what he wanted from her. But the narrative shows this from his point of view to make it clear he has no intention of acting on his threat and is simply using it to emphasize that Aerie cannot win in a physical battle with him. These are the only parts that might discomfit a young reader or parent of same.

## Who is it for?

Teens who like romance but want some space opera and dystopia on the side. Beauty and the Beast aficionados will enjoy it as well for the excellent use of the original story’s tropes, while space opera fans will love the worldbuilding. Anyone looking for a dystopia that is a bit more in-depth than many competing works in the genre will like that The Heights of Perdition demonstrates how social dynamics under a tyranny break down completely. The United Revolutionary States are not a fun place to live as they do their best to take away what makes people human on a fundamental level, and it makes this first installment in The Divine Space Pirates more interesting for that reason. Those who want a sweet romance could do worse than this novel as well, since while it gets hot in places, it is never explicit and easy to read.

## Why buy it

Do you want inspiring heroines, strong heroes who know they are dangerous, and worldbuilding you can sink your teeth into? Then pick up The Heights of Perdition and start reading. Besides, the lead hero goes by the nom de guerre “Captain Chainsword.” You couldn’t ask for a better conversation starter than that!

I Have a Question by Macintosh Steele  
Review by Jason P. Hunt  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

There is an old piece of advice given to new writers over the years: “Write the kind of story you want to read,” it says. And Macintosh Steele has done just that, it would seem.

In our conversation on Live From The Bunker, Steele mentioned that he’s not a big fan of dialogue, that it slows the story down and makes it tough to get through. So when he writes entire passages describing conversations without using actual dialogue, he’s writing the kind of book he wants to read, I guess.

The thing is, most readers want the dialogue. It actually helps a scene flow because it breaks up the monotony of long expository passages that, while they accomplish the same goal, are a slog to get through. There’s more “tell” than “show” when it’s done this way, and that makes things very much a challenge in a work of narrative fiction, so much so in this case that I couldn’t finish the book.

That’s a rare thing. I generally tough it out and finish what I start, but in this case, I just couldn’t do it. The book is almost all expository narration with very little “show” instead of “tell” and hardly any dialogue outside of long-winded speeches by one character or another.

The basic premise: two warring peoples, humans and the Quagga, have finally negotiated a peace treaty with the help of one Admiral Jenki. And just as they’re about to sign the accord, both sides discover a heretofore unknown planet astride the border between their two spheres of influence. The appearance of this planet is such a threat to the peace — because each side doesn’t want the other to build a secret base there — that both factions decide to destroy it. Mind you, it hasn’t even been explored yet, and when the two fleets arrive at the planet, they discover that it’s not a planet at all, and there’s a single inhabitant.

Old Man, as he’s called, is a being of tremendous power and knowledge, having existed before the universe itself, and living through the various cycles of life and death as the universe expands and contracts over billions of years. And he’s now on a mission to prevent invaders from a previous cycle from destroying the current cycle.

And that’s as far as I got. I imagine the rest of it is a journey followed by combat of some sort. Or maybe negotiations. Or something.

On the face of it, the core idea has some merit: two warring factions make a discovery that threatens the peace. But to immediately jump to the option of destroying an entire planet just to make sure the other side doesn’t put a base there? That’s preposterous. Unless you can justify it in the narrative, which Steele doesn’t. There’s no reason presented in the book, for the humans and the Quagga to decide to destroy this flat planet that isn’t really a planet. As far as I can tell from the expository narration, it’s an arbitrary decision. And that’s not how things work.

There’s a lot of arbitrariness in the narrative, things that happen because they have to happen to advance the plot. But nothing’s earned. Things just happen. And then something else happens. And then this other thing happens because it has to happen in order for this thing to happen. And it’s described in what I want to call passive voice — straightforward description of the action without any dynamism.

That lack of dynamism extends to the characters as well. At no point in this book — at least as far as I got — was I given any reason to care about anyone in the narrative. If I'd had a little emotional investment in one or two characters, I might have stuck it out and finished the book. But no. I was bored out of my skull, and constantly shaking my head because things just don't work that way if you want the reader to be fully on board with what you're selling.

All of this could have been discussed with his editor, if Steele had actually had an editor. Instead, he made a first-time author rookie mistake: he used a vanity press to publish his book.

AuthorHouse is not a traditional publishing house, and there are articles on Writer Beware as recent as December 2023. Folks, if you're writing your first book (or your fifty-first), you should never ever pay someone to publish your book. There are too many other options out there now for self-publishing. If you're going to spend that kind of money, hire a good editor first. And then find someone who can build your book in whatever format is needed to publish it through Amazon or B&N or wherever else you make your book available. Or you can polish it enough to submit to a publishing house like Baen or Tor, and maybe they pay you to publish the book. But you should never pay to have your book published. Run far away from these companies.

**Khyber by Chadwick Ginter**  
**Shared World by Ball, Chomichuk, Gillespie and Ginter**  
**Review by Robert Runté**  
**N3F.org**

Khyber is a collection of sword and sorcery stories by Winnipeg author, Chadwick Ginter. The stories all share the setting of the great city of Khyber, though a city with its best days behind it. Think Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork without Lord Vetinari to keep things running smoothly, or D.G. Valdrón's city in the Mermaid's Tale. Ginter's protagonist are Red, a young orphaned sword woman, and Needle, a tailor/assassin. I like them a lot. They are vaguely reminiscent of Fritz Lieber's Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, my own personal favorites of the sword and sorcery genre.

Ginter, however, is writing more in the tradition of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian. Lots of fantasy has swords and sorcerers, but unlike Tolkienesque fantasy, the Conan variety often edges a fair distance further into weird horror. Ginter's stories feature spider gods, rat armies, unstoppable fungus, quests to the isle of the dead, and cannibal cults. If any of that sounds like something out of the 1930s pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, then Ginter has achieved his goal. His writing has a certain flair that puts him right up there with Robert E. Howard or Lovecraft or even Fritz Lieber. I look forward to more Red and Needle stories.

The collection also includes 32 maps and images by GMB Chomichuk. These are more arcane than directly illustrative of the stories, but contribute to the atmosphere of ancient mystery and forgotten civilizations.

Which brings us to *Shared World* by Ball, Chomichuk, Gillespie and Ginter. Khyber became the city at the center of work by all four authors, a shared universe they each participated in, and to which they now invite other writers to contribute. The *Shared World* collection duplicates two of Ginter's stories from the Khyber collection, and introduces two stories by Ball and two collaborations by Chomichuk and Gillespie. Although each of these others' stories are distinct from Ginter's, they all fit comfortably within the *Weird Tales* vibe and all are fine examples of the S&S genre.

Shared World also includes an introduction by the great Mexican-Canadian literary horror writer, Silvia Moreno-Garcia and an afterword by the equally talented S. M. Beiko.

If I had to choose, I would likely recommend picking up Khyber first: if you do not enjoy it, then sword and sorcery is probably not for you. But if you need a break from your regular CanLit reading, or a break from reality, then these collections may fit the bill. They are engaging and accessible narratives, quick reads, and a nice exercise in world building. Horror, yes, but the sort of horror that says, “You may have problems, but at least they aren’t this.” And if you are a writer at all, well, I know I am myself more than a little tempted to try my hand at contributing to the open-ended world of Khyber and its environs.

Both collections are published by Stranger Fiction (Winnipeg).

## The Last Ancestor by Alexander Hellene Review by J.E. Tabor <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Know you this: the Last Ancestor by Alexander Hellene is an action-packed sword gun and planet YA novel that speaks to the criminally underserved young male reader audience.

### The story

When the human refugees first landed on the planet Yxakh, they had to contend with the warlike Kharvali, otherwise known as “Growlers,” dog-like humanoid aliens who already dominated the area, and had no desire to share it with newcomers. Only their possession of modern firearms kept the humans alive and their blade and bow wielding enemies at bay, leading to an uneasy ceasefire that allowed the human colony Canaan to exist on the Growlers’ home world.

In that original conflict, Garrett Nestor’s father sacrificed himself to save the nascent human colony from the Growlers. Even now that Garrett is almost a man himself, the tensions between the two peoples have done little to die down - except for the case Garrett and his best friend, Ghryxa. The human and Growler have become inseparable, spending their time exploring the nearby caves for artifacts from ancient Growler civilizations and crashed human spaceships. But after a confrontation with a group of Growlers intruding on human lands, they are both drawn into a plot to wipe out Canaan for good.

After an introduction of the characters and world, the Last Ancestor ramps up to a quick pace, with plenty of action and intrigue to keep the pages turning. The plot unfolds naturally as the characters discover clues to leading not only to the revelation of the plan to destroy the human colony, but also of the nature of the Kharvali religion’s prophecy of the Last Ancestor’s return and the end of their own civilization.

### The characters

Garrett Nestor has big shoes to fill - his dad saved his entire community. And even though he dies, Garrett’s father is a constant presence in his life not only through his memories, but a whole collection of recordings meant to convey values, traditions and basic life lessons. Despite his father being gone, Garrett is far from fatherless, and he still manages to fill the mentor role for Garrett even in death.

Ghryxa's father, by contrast, is alive, but at once overbearing and absent. Ghryxa is never enough for him, and the best he can hope for is to be ignored. The contrast of these two upbringings connects the two along with their curiosity about each other's cultures. Their friendship is the glimmer of hope that some day their two peoples could live in peace.

Both of these main characters are proactive and drive the story with their decisions, displaying courage and virtue even while their youth and inexperience shows their fallibility along the way. In my view, both serve as examples that a father would want their sons to follow in a way that I often find lacking in other young adult fiction. The depiction of the two friends from different worlds reminds me of the old sci-fi adventure books I would read when I was growing up and there was a market for fiction geared towards boys.

## The world

Yxakh is a hostile planet full of ferocious monsters and exotic environments - giant serpent creatures, savage humanoids, voracious vermin, active volcanoes and flooded caverns all make appearances in the world. The dog-like Growlers give the appearance of a run-of-the mill warrior culture, focusing on strength in combat as the highest good, going so far as to ban all forms of art or writing. But their dissident subcultures and the subtext of their prophecies hint at something more beneath the surface.

Christians have been driven from Earth, and Canaan is their last refuge - one of the reasons they are so stalwart in its defense - they have nowhere else to go. Within the community are members of denominations and cultures from all over the world: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, American, Greek, and Lebanese. Hellene mixes in bits of those cultures and their adaptations to the planet - especially cuisine - to great effect. Often in contemporary Christian fiction the level of religiosity and commonality of faith requires a suspension of disbelief in our secular dominated culture, but the world Hellene has created makes common and public expressions of faith fit comfortably in the story.

## The politics

The residents of Canaan were forced to flee Earth from a combined threat coming from Islamists, a Western globalist empire, and the Communist Chinese bloc.

Religion is not politics, but since they are often paired together, I'll include this here. This is the most Christian book I've read outside of *Quo Vadis* - I'd go so far as to say more so than even C. S. Lewis' fiction. There is no doubt that Christianity is true, and while there are no miracles or depictions of the supernatural in this story, if there were it would not have so much as raised an eyebrow.

## Content warning

Garrett is quick to brandish his father's pistol, and he and Ghryxa are battling monsters and enemies throughout the book. That makes for plenty of violence. There are few graphic descriptions of blood or gore, but there is a particularly gruesome execution involving insect-like creatures, and one character is shown to have had his skin flayed from his face.

Who is it for?

The Last Ancestor is for fans of swashbuckling science fiction and especially young boys looking for something written with them in mind.

Why read it?

Read the Last Ancestor if you are looking for the wild monsters and strange cultures of John Carter of Mars, but with more gunplay, a favorable view toward Christianity, and young protagonists who have to learn and grow before they can triumph over their foes.

**League of Angels by Thomas Tan**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When demons roam, priests must rise and fight!

God is dead, they said, and religion is a superstition which man has outgrown. All those who do not bow to the Lumen Corporation are enemies that must be hunted down and exterminated.

Forced to hide and run, the truly religious strike back from the shadows. Forming underground churches, passing refugees from safe house to safe house, they find ways to fight as the Lumen Corporation brings real demons into the fray. Amidst the prayers and the tears, the faithful whisper tales of the three men who fight the demons head-on: the Archangels.

The story

Governments the world over have fallen under the sway of the demonic Lumen Corporation, which preaches an end to religion and a new dawn for man. Vatican City is intact, but barely; throngs of angry people fill the square outside St. Peter's Basilica. Rather than greet the pope and call for his blessing they chant hate-filled statements while demanding his downfall – and the destruction of the Church. Hope remains, but as the pontiff himself says, they cannot rely on God and do nothing. They have to take action. They have to fight back.

Enter Chelsea Shields, a pop star sitting at her dying rock star brother's bedside. She's desperate to save him and has called for a doctor, but there is nothing that can preserve her brother now. He's dying, and if they want him not to suffer for eternity, it's his soul that needs rescuing.

Chelsea does not take the arrival of Father Raphael well, but she likes what his prayers and sacramentals reveal about the state of her brother's soul even less. Pursued by the Lumen Corporation, Chelsea and Fr. Raphael are only saved by the timely intervention of Father Michael, who brings blessed bullets and bombs to kill the Hell Hounds chasing the two. From there they take Chelsea to meet Father Gabriel to exorcise the devils in her soul.

Pursued by the very powers of Hell itself, Chelsea has to make a decision: rejoin the people hunting her down or stay with the priests. Meanwhile, the Archangels' faith is tested as they are hemmed in on every side. In the process, they struggle to understand what fighting for and saving on God's behalf actually means in a world ravaged by the devil "devouring souls" all around them.

The characters

By far, the Archangels are the best characters in the book. Father Raphael is calm, quiet, and the least combative member of the trio. A doctor by training he mediates disputes between his compatriots and sees to the wounds of others, whether they're physical or spiritual.

A Dominican, Father Gabriel is the youngest Archangel and the most cheerful. Descended from a samurai who converted following the martyrdom of St. Paul Miki, he literally carries his ancestor's blessed blade into battle. An exorcist, he is relied upon for his knowledge, but the inexperience and idealism of youth means he is better at personal combat than planning and executing a mission.

Finally, there is Father Michael. An ex-soldier, Father Michael is haunted by memories of a crime he committed on behalf of the Lumen Corporation before he converted and became a priest. The Archangel most adept with weapons and therefore the default leader of the group, his combat practicality occasionally clashes with Father Gabriel's idealism. The story is as much about his search for redemption as it is about rescuing Chelsea Shields.

The world

The world looks like ours, but worse. Governments persecute and hunt down the faithful, and while some nations resist, the Lumen Corporation has operatives all over the world. Where the local government won't cooperate, they simply send their own operatives to do the job. Things are looking darker by the minute, and what hope there is remains firmly rooted in God, as trusting in man is what put everyone in this position in the first place.

The politics

Satan's on the prowl and the only way to escape him is to hold fast to God. That is the extent of the politics in this novel.

Content warning

Lumen Corporation's president shows Chelsea just what the corporation has in mind for humanity, and it isn't pretty. There is also a description of rape, an abortion clinic haunted by the bodies of the slain, and a few similar items meant for adult eyes only. This is not a book intended for children. Oh, and it ends on a cliffhanger. As yet, Tan hasn't written the sequel hinted at in the final pages of the novel.

Who is it for?

Thriller fans, horror aficionados, and readers who like an apocalyptic setting. No, this book isn't apocalyptic in the strict sense, but events make it clear things are speeding toward the Second Coming. If you like any of that, then this book is for you.

Why read it?

For all the darkness in this novel, hope shines brightly from the pages. The devil may have his hour, but God will have His day. Even with a cliffhanger ending the Archangels are worth cheering on and make for excellent traveling companions. If you want something that reminds you God is with those who are with Him, then *League of Angels* is for you.

**Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus**  
**Review by Tom Feller**  
**N3F.org**

This novel is really not about chemistry although two of the main characters, Elizabeth Zott and Calvin

Evans, are chemists. They meet at the Hastings Research Institute in Common, California, where Calvin is a star scientist and Elizabeth is barely tolerated, because she is a woman, albeit a highly attractive one. They become lovers and move in together without getting married, which was highly unusual in the 1950s and early 1960s, the period during which this novel is set. They adopt a dog, whom they name “Six-Thirty” and he proves to be super-intelligent. Calvin dies in a freak accident, but not before impregnating Elizabeth with Madeleine, aka Mad, and persuading her to take up rowing as a hobby and form of exercise. Following the mores of the time, Elizabeth is terminated at Hastings for becoming an unwed mother. She is barely making a living helping her former colleagues with their work when she has a chance meeting with local TV producer Walter Pine because their daughters are in the same kindergarten class. He is so impressed with her knowledge of food and cooking that he offers her the chance to star in a cooking show. It is a big success, despite the fact that she treats it as a chemistry lesson. This novel is very readable, despite the misogyny of some of the characters and there is even a graphic depiction of sexual assault. The dog is so intelligent that the book crosses the line from historical fiction to magical realism, and the TV show’s success at inspiring women also causes the novel to cross the line into alternate history.

**Lost Cargo by Noah Chinn**  
**Review by Robert Runté**  
**N3F.org**

Lost Cargo is the sequel to Lost Souls and cements Chinn as one of my all-time favourite writers.

Lost Souls was good solid space opera that combined mystery, comedy and action. My only caveat was that the reader had to get past some potentially distracting backstory early on. If I’m honest, though, I only tripped over the backstory in Lost Souls because in my day-job as an editor, ‘too much backstory’ is something I have to watch out for. Having now read Lost Cargo, I realize that the mystery is all about the backstory and that Chinn totally knew what he was doing.

The central mystery of Lost Souls having been solved, I expected Lost Cargo to be the further but unrelated adventures of Moss and friends. I was half right. Moss sets out to make the one-big-score that will set him up for retirement; villain Roy sees his chance to take a shot at Moss; and the authorities are after them both. The storyline carried me along from incident to incident, enjoying the comedy and the deepening character arcs in what is basically a heist novel. If I had to sum up the writing of Lost Cargo in a single word, it would be “smooth”.

It was such fun I almost didn’t notice that the continuing dive into backstory was hinting at a much larger mystery than the one already solved in Lost Souls. I loved the climax to the Lost Cargo—I howled with laughter and pumped my fist when I realized what author Chinn had done to set up the ending—but this was no separate mystery, no simple heist actioner. Rather, it was yet another layer of the onion that is the Get Lost mystery series. Underneath it all, there is something going on and it’s big, and likely very, very bad.

Lost Cargo, then, is the middle book of a trilogy. By definition, the middle book is the transition from the initiating incident to the final resolution, and like the middle of any thick novel, often drags as the author kills time and fills in relevant details. That’s not the case here, though.

Lost Cargo is an excellent example of pacing and misdirection and can stand alone as its own adventure. I totally did not see the ending coming, even though the foreshadowing is all there. I mean, okay, yes—with Moss as protagonist, it was obvious this was going to be a heist-gone-wrong novel—but from

there on in, the reader is plunged ever deeper into the larger dynamics of Chinn's world-building, and Chinn's belief that no matter how bad things are, they can always get much worse.

Which brings us to *And Then Things Got Worse*, the supposed memoir of one Maurice Moss, the protagonist of the *Lost Saga*. Chinn is giving this novella away for free to promote the series and—you guessed it—it's more back story. I enjoyed it well enough, but I recommend reading the series proper first. Given the short format, Chinn ends up explaining things rather than letting the story speak for itself, so it's not the best introduction to the more developed novels. Once one is a confirmed fan, then yes, I wanted to know these origin stories--but don't start there. Start with *Lost Souls*.

The *Lost Cargo* is independently published and recommended for anyone up for good old fashion space opera.

## The Lost Expedition by Douglas Smith Review by Robert Runté N3F.org

The *Lost Expedition* is the third and final volume in the *Dream Rider* trilogy. The first two novels, (*The Hollow Boys*, 2022, and *The Crystal Key*, 2023) were wildly successful, garnering critical acclaim including an Aurora Award and a juried IPA award. If you haven't already read the first two *Dream Rider* books, you need to start there; if you're already read those, I won't need to sell you on this one, because you will have already been waiting for answers and finally revealed in this one.

The story concerns rich comic artist, 18-year-old Will; his street-wise girlfriend, Chase; and her kid brother, Fader. All three have mysterious but limited powers that have allowed them to enter dream and move between the worlds of the multiverse, battling an as yet unidentified villain or power. The central mystery is to find out what happened eight years ago that caused their parents to go missing, and their powers to manifest. Thus, the search for the lost expedition.

I compared the first volume to a superhero comic or a graphic novel—sans graphics; I compared the second to the thrill of 1950s movie serial, once a regular part of Saturday matinees. This time, *The Lost Expedition* put me in mind of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Both books are about the conflict between order and chaos, both place unreasonable demands on their young protagonists, both have the same sweeping scope that engages one's sense of wonder. Evoking the same emotional response, *The Lost Expedition* took me back sixty years to the exact weekend I discovered *A Wrinkle in Time* and the forgotten memory of reading in the dark after lights out.

Looking back as an adult, though, I far prefer Smith's worldbuilding and politics to Madeleine L'Engle's. Smith has written a series that is far more inclusive and far less elitist than L'Engle's. Smith's characters represent different social classes, ethnicities, abilities, and weaknesses. The *Dream Rider* series is targeted to today's modern YA audience and so better suited to current sensibilities. Whoever reads this book will find at least one POV character with whom they can identify.

Which is not to say *The Lost Expedition* doesn't have a few flaws. I was annoyed and distracted early on by a logical flaw in the plot, only partially mitigated by the characters recognizing that inconsistency themselves twenty pages on, and that that was therefore an important clue. I was similarly annoyed that one of the characters, Nix, can only remember key facts when it is time for the next clue to be handed out—again, somewhat mitigated by a reasonable explanation in the denouement. Withholding key information from the reader in a mystery feels like a bit of a cheat, even though Smith eventually ex-

plains why and the reader has to grudgingly admit it all makes sense. Still, waiting until the end to explain everything from all three books in the final chapters of this one meant the denouement went on a bit too long after the grand climax. Indeed, there are several occasions throughout the novel when the characters get bogged down explaining things to each other while the action grinds to a stop.

Notwithstanding these minor reservations, *The Lost Expedition* is a solid ending to a great series. The various mysteries are finally revealed in all their intricate complexity; there are several twists I totally did not see coming; and there is a sweeping majesty to the worldbuilding we have not seen since—well, since *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Marathoning all three books at once is probably best, so that one can keep all the fiddly bits of the mystery in mind and so that the denouement in book three becomes proportionate to the series as a whole. If you haven't done so already, you should package up all three volumes to gift to any young adults in your life—or any adult in your circle nostalgic for the Golden Age of science fiction fantasy.

## Lost Planet Homicide by Larry Correia Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The last good cop has to solve a murder in a very bad little town, on top of a mountain, above an acid cloud, on a planet so far away that Earth doesn't even know about it. What drives him?

### The story

Many generations ago, a colony ship left the Earth system to settle a new world, only to somehow get jumped to a distant planet that wasn't on their maps. They're incredibly far from Earth and their only hope for survival is to carve out a rough existence on a planet that may surely kill them.

After a century on this world, appropriately called Croatoan, humanity has all but surrendered to its basest tendencies, operating under what should be a functioning government but really dividing itself into classes and being controlled by criminal organizations. It's under these circumstances that the corrupt police force must maintain the appearance of order.

### The characters

Lutero Cade is our protagonist, a police inspector with a conscience and a code. He's descended from the man that Croatoan blames for its predicament, a man who allegedly pushed the button that jumped their ship to this planet with no hope of escape. He wants to prove that he's better than the rep anyone else puts on him, and so he has a strong moral code--despite being surrounded by people who would just as soon shoot you as take a bribe.

### The world

If you've read *GUN RUNNER*, you've got a feel for how dangerous these planets can be, and Croatoan is no different from Lush in terms of how badly it wants to kill you. There's also a literal tier system to the colony there, with rich corporations at the highest levels of the mountain compound, and shady mafias ruling the lower levels. They grow their own meat in vats. They live in metal boxes. It's a meager existence, ruled by the two highest commandments known to a vicious society: survive, and take whatever you can.

The politics

If "survivatarian" is a point on the political spectrum, then that's where it goes. And that would make Lutero Cade the only "DoTheRightThingTarian" on Croatoan. Other than that there's nothing from our world crammed into this.

Content warning

PG-13 for language and crime-related violence, with some substance abuse references.

Who is it for?

Fans of GUN RUNNER, naturally, as well as those who like gritty cop shows and hard-boiled crime with sci-fi mixed in.

Why read it?

If you're invested in what's to come in future GUN RUNNER stories, you'll want to read LOST PLANET HOMICIDE. That said, my one complaint is the abrupt nature of the story's ending, and the fact that it's rather incomplete. This could be a few bridge chapters in the background of a larger story and we won't know until the next GR book comes out. All the same, it was an entertaining two hours on Audible.

Lost Souls by Tim Rangnow  
Review by Becky Jones  
N3F.org

Jack Dalish is a private investigator in San Antonio, Texas. His cases include the usual cheating spouses, or someone trying to find hidden or embezzled funds; cases that are not exciting or exotic but pay the bills. Jack is also one of the few humans who knows that monsters are real and are living among us, disguised as humans. He has a talisman that allows him to sense when one of the Filii Nox is, or has been, nearby. Because of that, his cases include those with supernatural victims and perpetrators.

This first book in Rangnow's Jack Dalish series opens with Jack's quiet breakfast interrupted by a distraught grandmother seeking his help with the case of her missing granddaughter. The police appear to have reached a dead end and she's been sent to Jack by his friend Sergeant Oliver "Ollie" Williams, who has reason to believe that this case is one that only Jack can solve. Since the death of his sister and his acquisition of the talisman he wears around his neck, Jack has devoted the majority of his time and efforts to helping humans and Nox solve crimes involving Nox while keeping the existence of the Filii Nox hidden from humans.

After talking with Ollie, Jack dives into the case of the missing granddaughter. In the course of his investigations he meets a reporter who tells him there are several other unsolved cases of missing little girls. Are they all connected, and what exactly is the Nox creature whose essence he keeps picking up at the abduction sites? The further Jack gets in this case, he finds more questions than answers. The tension builds nicely as Jack races to save the kidnapped children before it's too late.

Rangnow creates a San Antonio that has a sizeable Nox population blending in with the regular human population. There's even a bar on the Riverwalk (similar to a certain bar in Chicago) where Nox can get together without fear of exposure. Jack Dalish is a well-rounded character with admitted flaws and room for growth. The secondary characters, especially Ollie, are complete as well. The only one who felt a little flat was the reporter. Her attraction to Jack was so fast that I became suspicious of her motives. But then, that may have been the intention.

The world-building is thorough, the world is consistent, and it's done without huge info-dumps breaking up the story. We learn how the Filii Nox came into existence through a conversation with the reporter and that Jack's use of his talisman also comes with a cost, which is nice for the reader. Jack isn't some superhero with a super-charged Deus ex Machina trinket that solves all problems with no after-effects for the user. There were also a couple of nerd/geek cultural touchstones that were fun to run across; kind of like finding an Easter egg in a game.

Lost Souls is a good, fast read and is available through Kindle Unlimited and as a paperback. It's the first of seven books in the Jack Dalish series and I plan on working my way through the rest of them. Rangnow has an extensive catalog that is worth checking out as well.

**The Marchioly Project by P.A. Piatt**  
**Review by JE Tabor**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

In this supernatural thriller by P.A. Piatt, Alexandru Statornik is a criminal defense attorney who has recently been brought into "The Marchioly Project," a century-old murder case that he is tasked with investigating.

The thing is, the U.S. government is still holding the prisoner - a powerful vampire named Cezar Vena. The government has a problem: they may not have exactly afforded Vena all his civil rights in his capture and detention, and they are concerned he might actually win an appeal.

The story

Alex Statornik is tasked with poking holes in the case against ancient vampire convict Cezar Vena, so that the prosecution is prepared for anything that Vena's attorneys might throw at them on appeal.

As Alex digs further, he uncovers a nationwide cabal of vampires preying on sex workers, the homeless, and anyone on the margins of society. At each step towards learning more about the vampires' atrocities, he also learns how to fight them.

By the end of the book, Alexandru becomes a veritable vampire hunter ready to match the most dangerous creatures of the night.

The characters

Alex is an attorney still dealing with witnessing the murder of his family by gangsters. When he is called by his friend with a position in the U.S. Attorney General's Office, he jumps at the chance, eager to bury himself in his work. He begins the story trying to find ways to defend Vena, but everything changes when the vampire escapes and Alex makes it his mission to track the monster down. The murder of his family both haunts him and drives him to bring Cezar Vena and his vampire minions to jus-

tice as he learns how to fight and kill them.

Vena is the perfect Hannibal Lecter to Alex's Clarice Starling - the Romanian immigrant was captured by the US Army in 1875 after massacring more than a dozen Indians in Montana. He was sentenced to death, but somehow escaped the hangman's noose and spent the last century and a half locked up in a federal maximum security prison. Vena is the embodiment of an arrogant and crafty villain, toying with Alex at every turn. It seems that he is always one step above Alex, leaving bodies and minions as roadblocks in Alex's way. Piatt makes sure that the final showdown with Vena is well-earned.

The world

The world is our own modern day world, except that much of society has been infiltrated by a secret network of vampires. Piatt's vampires are not the sparkly kind, or even the suave sexy kind popularized by Hollywood. These vampires are true monsters that eviscerate their prey for the most part.

The vampires' strategy is well thought out to ensure that most of the world is unaware of their presence: for the most part, they feed off only the most vulnerable in society. Meanwhile, they have cults of human acolytes who serve them and act as human shields in Alex's hunt. And for it's part, the U.S. Government has its own reasons for keeping their existence from the public.

Alex's training as a vampire hunter is not as drawn out as might be realistic, but it does not feel easy, either. The holy medieval weapons he acquires through his training are icing on the cake, and he makes great use of them throughout.

The politics

There is no real politics to speak of in this book - it's all about killing vampires.

Content warning

This book is full of Tarantino levels of gore – there are no sparkling romantic vampires in this story. Know what you are getting into.

Who is it for?

If you like extremely fast paced thrillers and can stomach a lot of violence, blood, and gore, this novel is for you.

Why read it?

The Marchioli Project is one heck of a ride that leaves piles of bodies in its wake. Absolutely no one is safe in this story, but, even then, the author managed to break through my calloused heart by the end of the novel.

**Pinup Noir, Edited by Steve Diamond**

**Review by Pat Patterson**

**[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)**

If you can see the cover of the book without a delicious shiver, you are made of sterner stuff than I am. All of these stories have a beautiful woman, all have dark and dismal circumstances, but the flavors are different in each story.

Belle, by Jack Wylder. I would LOVE to discover that this was written while the author was listening to “Dixie Chicken” by Little Feat, particularly if it was the version with Emmy Lou Harris and Bonnie Raitt. If not? Well, then I believe Lowell was whispering, anyway. Look, boys: if it seems too good to be true, that MIGHT be because the music is worth more than your thought.

Down Among the Dead Men, by Sam Robb. Okay, they aren’t REALLY dead, and some of them aren’t really men. Actually, some of them are women, but, that’s not what is implied. They ARE down, though, and it’s a really ugly place to be down, where procrastination seems to come home to roost at last. If your need for oxygen has lapsed, and you STILL haven’t committed, you might long for some help.

Castle Doctrine, by Kelly Grayson. Put up your hands, Grayson, you are under arrest. It’s pretty obvious that you have stolen the ability to write many genres from...wherever that sort of thing is kept. This absolutely is a Mickey Spillane story, sort of, I guess, maybe. Fellows, remember this: if the Battle of the Sexes is waged with the equipment provided, the women will ALWAYS win. SO, either accept that, or maybe keep a stash of burglar equipment handy. Also, a friend of mine owns a Singer 1911.

Top Dog, by John Van Stry. Rolf, the ethical wolf, does personal security gigs. He does NOT like it when others fail to follow the rules. Whether we are good guys or bad guys, we would all profit from just doing what was agreed upon. When that doesn’t happen? Rolf will deal with it.

Angels and Red Shirts, by David Birdsall. Mr. Boslay is a master of planning, and that serves to keep his Problem Solvers agency running. Yes, there IS a ‘however’ associated with that statement. Fortunately, what talents he doesn’t have, he is able to hire. If I were him, though, I wouldn’t give my client so many chances, no matter how she looked in that dress.

Shadows and Silk, by Cedar Sanderson. You can take the girl out of the country, but you can’t... make omelets without breaking eggs? No, that’s not right. I need something about you can’t go home again, when you carry it around with you, but if that’s a famous saying, I missed it. Okay: this is a story about a protective entity who refused to be left behind. If you wonder WHY Liz (the human) was interested in leaving him behind, you have never had a house guest who overstayed their welcome. It’s AWFUL. Liz has a modeling gig, wearing armor, carrying a sword, looking FABULOUS, with big honken tanks in the background. What could POSSIBLY go wrong? That a protective entity could help with, I mean?

Last Call, by Evan DeShais. Oison Kelly had all the nonsense beaten out of him a long time ago, and the no-nonsense part of him has been taking the hits since. His boxer’s body carries a reminder of every glove that laid him down, or cut him; at least, that’s what Rhymin’ Simon said. Still, he’s on his feet, and when a lovely woman asks for his help, he wonders if it might save him from eviction and what follows after that.

No Stars in Redlight City, by Steve Diamond. There MUST be some specific defect that sets aside the noir detective. Usually, they’ve been tossed off the police force, sometimes because of drink, other times because they pressed an investigation against the wrong people. Adam Sevens derives his isolation from his very nature as a synthetic human; people tend to dislike them. So: why would a rich and beautiful woman come to HIM for assistance in finding her husband? It’s a puzzle; a jigsaw puzzle, like the murder victims that start turning up.

It’s a delightful visit to the old times, but you don’t HAVE to drink old coffee with it, nor whiskey, neither. I went with a chocolate cold-brew blend. It worked!

Rimworld- Diversions by J.L. Curtis

Review by Pat Patterson

[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

This is the fifth book in the Rimworld series by JL Curtis. I've been a fan of the series even before it started, because the short story "Rimworld: Stranded" came out in 2016, whereas Book 1 of 5 (so far), "Rimworld: Into the Green" appeared in 2017; at least, that's when I reviewed them.

Before starting 'Diversions,' I re-read my review of 'Into the Green,' so as to provide some of the back-story. It's clear from the review that I enjoyed the book, but it triggered no memories, so I decided to do a re-read. The results embarrassed me. I cannot make any connection between my review of 'Into the Green' and the book. I also cannot explain the discrepancy.

At any rate, I decided I'm just going to have to review 'Diversions' with my unprepared brain, and go back and pick up the thread later. All defects of this review might as well be attributed to that.

Danny Ortega is the captain of the former Deep Space Research Vehicle 'Ghost.' Don't tell anybody, BUT Ghost also identifies as Estrella, a self-aware AI; that's forbidden technology. His crew also includes his wife, Daniella, who runs the hydroponic garden and cooks; Gronk, an alien from Hydra, the navigator; Nyx and Efrot, Talasian engineers; and, a varying number of dog-like beings referred to as Canids or Cetians, who can double as security.

This is a space navy book, so expect there to be nasty people doing nasty things; as one of my acquaintances is known to say, "Don't all good stories include pirates?"

Pirates, we can live with, sort of. At least, it's straightforward: they try to steal stuff and kill people, and those people try to prevent the pirates from succeeding. It is, however, something you can prepare for.

There ARE some things that we can't live with. For example: being forced to eat nothing but tiny little peanut butter sandwiches at every meal; industrial sabotage on a huge scale; parasitic mind controllers; neutron stars. Thankfully, some of those things don't happen, but I'll not reveal which, because spoilers.

Another thing I'll not go into in detail about: some of the people Captain Danny knows aren't really who he thinks they are.

Also: somebody is pregnant, and somebody else is ABOUT to be pregnant. Those two somebodies form a bond, based on their semi-common experience, and that sets up one of the most delightful scenes in the book. Think you know all there is to know about food fights? THINK AGAIN!

There are some issues I'm not prepared to raise, because the answers may have been given in one of the volumes I have yet to read, BUT: I encountered some confusion about place and people names. To resolve that, I found it necessary to make really good notes.

Again: I somehow missed volumes 2-4, and those will hopefully clear that up.

That did NOT dim my fascination with the storyline, and I'm intrigued by the deeper plots revealed somewhat casually (such as the issue of AI personhood). Also: what's the white stuff she stirs in the chili to make it less of a scorcher? It sounds like Ranch Dressing.

Shadow Matter by S.W. Mayse  
Review by Robert Runté  
N3F.org

Shadow Matter is a space opera, a spy novel, a romance, and a CanLit offering all rolled into one. It mostly works.

The setting is a post-earth universe complete with space elevators, faster-than-light drives, genetic modification, mercenary armies, germ warfare, psychotic AIs, and hints of mysterious aliens. Three rival polities, roughly reflecting the two distinct waves of migration from lost earth, are dangerously out of balance following the loss of our heroine's world. The individual SF tropes may be familiar, but Mayse blends all the moving parts into a consistent and immersive whole.

One way Mayse ensures the experience is immersive is that the characters never question the taken-for-granted universe through which they move. Mayse successfully resists the temptation (to which many other SF authors succumb) to over-explain how things work or how they came to be. Sentient trees? Sure. Manimals and chimeria? Nothing to see here. Aside from some speculation on the current, unsettled political situation, things are just the way they are...and the reader is left to decode Mayse's neologisms for 28th century phenomenon from context. (A glossary is helpfully provided at the end of the book.)

The spy novel concerns a missing memory bead with vital information that our heroine may or may not have. The spy novel kept me guessing, partly because no one knows exactly what the information is, who has it, or if it even still exists. Is it the record of the last moments on a now abandoned base? Video of first contact with something from The Deep Outside? Proof of an atrocity that could bring down the occupation? All our heroine knows is she has to get the information to high command before the war is lost and she's charged with desertion.

I confess that I found the novel's opening confusing, largely because our protagonist, Seren Qasri, is herself confused about where she is and what's going on—her memory has been partially erased and she has been cut off from recent developments. So, some of the action in the opening does not make a lot of sense at first because...that's not what's actually happening. (I tell you this at the risk of violating my 'no spoiler' policy because you need to make it past the opening to get to the really exceptional bits.)

Which is not to suggest the story becomes less confusing. The novel has a cast of thousands. Okay, it's actually less than 50, but the story alternates between first and last names; a lot of the names are too close to always keep straight (Rav vs Radko vs Renat vs Rethel vs Rozenn vs Rivera); and, as spies, they keep changing their identities. Mind you, I really liked the concept of using genetic modification to change not just one's superficial looks but one's actual body to become unrecognizable. Rather ups the ante on any spy subplot.

At first glance, the romance is a standard, Harlequin-style arc: girl-meets-boy, girl-hates-boy, girl-discovers-she-loves-boy. There's an innovative-twist in there I hadn't seen coming, though, that greatly elevates that portion of the storyline as it's resolved.

The retelling of the Orpheus mythos completely escaped me until I was reminded by the author's Afterword. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice may have been Mayse's initial inspiration, but the book doesn't closely follow the original and a knowledge of Greek legend is not required.

The back cover reference to Orpheus does, however, serve to alert potential readers that this is serious speculative fiction, not escapism. As with much Canadian literature, there is a definite dark undertone here. Seren's idealism and optimism is constantly contrasted with the underlying cruelty and narcissism of the civilization. Seren's backstory as an up-and-coming film-maker, before being drafted into the war, allows Mayse to have us view everything from a videographer's perspective. Seren thinks in images and story. As Seren cobbles together footage for her hypothetical documentary on the occupation, Mayse is able to draw out various other elements of the narrative, rather than being restricted to the usual space opera action scenes.

Taken altogether, the book is a slower burn, a denser read than most other space opera. One has to pay attention and put some thought into what one is reading, and maybe have to tolerate some ambiguity until things resolve themselves. Which put me in mind of SF giant Cordwainer Smith.

I first thought of Smith because Mayse's manimals and chimera reminded me of his underpeople, an exploited underclass of genetically modified animals, though Mayse arguably takes things to an even darker place. As I kept reading, I was reminded how Smith's characters similarly took their universe for granted and he never explained anything. Readers sometimes complained his writing was too obscure, but his fans, and especially other authors, found his work visionary. *Shadow Matters* may similarly not be to everyone's tastes, but Mayse comes with strong CanLit credentials and I found the novel well worth the effort.

*Shadow Matter* is published by Tyche Books.

**Super-Earth Mother by Guy Immega**  
**Review by Robert Runté**  
**N3F.org**

*Super-Earth Mother* is the story of colonization of an exo-planet around Lalande 21185. Instead of sending a crew and passengers on the 20,000-year trip to another star system, with the impossible demand on resources that would imply, the AI-guided ship contains only a gene bank and a set of artificial wombs to produce and raise suitably modified humans in situ. It is a fairly clever take on practical stellar colonization, believably manageable with near-future levels of rocket science, genetics, and only a little wishful thinking on AI.

*Super-Earth Mother*, then, is traditional-style hard-science fiction.

First, Immega has clearly done his best to keep the story within the bounds of current science. This contrasts with a lot of notional science fiction which is set so far in a future that the authors can just decree warp drives and teleportation to costume their fantasy novels in techno cosplay. I have no problem with science fantasy novels, but it is sometimes refreshing to watch an author work within the strictures of the real universe. Lalande 21185 is a real star system with a real super-earth in the goldilocks zone that actually could be a target of colonization if humanity were going to try that. Another realistic touch is that Immega has a lot of the hardware fail, as one would expect over the proposed timeframe. He has even kept within realpolitik: realizing no government would ever invest in anything that won't come to fruition for over 20,000 years, Immega assigns the driving force to a Musk-style billionaire.

Second, there is a certain majestic sweep to the vision here. Because Immega is working from our current knowledge base, the sheer scale of the undertaking is breathtaking, reminiscent of the boundless

optimism of the emergent genre in the 1920s-50s. There's an underlying belief in science and humanity that says: we could actually pull this off. I have not encountered that sort of 'gosh-wow' undertone since my youth.

On the other hand, this belief in technology is immediately balanced by a typically Canadian skepticism of science as panacea, the recognition that we are all subject to forces beyond our control, and that happy endings are never guaranteed. Also: people are basically messed up and starting over is no guarantee of a creating a utopia. So...the overly optimistic pulp fiction of the 1930s meets the cynical Canadian speculative fiction of the 1960s? It makes for an interesting mix and a bit of an intellectual roller coaster.

Third, there is a distinctly flat narrative tone, again reminiscent of some early pulp SF. Partly, this reflects that much of the story is told from the perspective of the essentially emotionless AI. Something of a monotone is to be expected of the AI, who has to rely on her 'emotional simulation' subroutines for color commentary. This stunted emotionality carries over to the sections narrated by the colonists, given they were either raised by robot nannies rather than by humans, or affected by the intergenerational trauma of having parents raised by AI.

However much of this flat tone is purposeful, there is no question that Immega is writing idea-driven, rather than character-driven, hard-science fiction. There are lots of individual stories within the wider scope of the narrative, but the camera is zoomed out so the focus is always on how these events affect the story of humankind rather than the individual. This contrasts subtly with the hard science fiction of, say, Robert Sawyer's *The Downloaded*, where the readers emotional connection with key individuals eventually allows their individual story arcs to reveal the big ideas behind the scenes. In *Super-Earth Mother*, the god's-eye view of the AI provides the meta narrative that individual lives are but fleeting moments within the real story, the larger frame; that the only thing that really matters is the survival of the species. We do see and identify with this or that character when Immega zooms in on one or other character's story, but there is always this semi-detached perspective that their story is not the story.

For example, there are a couple of sex scenes that pop up that are a bit . . .sudden, clinical, detached from even that individual's larger narrative, as if the reader just happened to tune into that one scene while flipping channels. Which works really well to remind the reader that nothing in these characters' lives actually matters within the larger frame of our god's-eye view of things. All their stories are just excerpts, channel surfing, today's meme, and whether we glimpse this character's drama instead of one of the dozens of others who are barely mentioned in passing, their lives scarcely register in the larger scheme of things.

Nevertheless, there are an assortment of distinct and engaging characters, a creatively-detailed alien ecology, and plenty of adventure to keep one turning pages.

That's all I can say without giving away a bunch of spoilers. I strongly recommend not reading the back cover blurb which gives away too many of the potential twists--basically the first 70 pages. I do not understand why authors or publishers cannot restrain themselves from spoilers in their back copy, but in this case the error is fully compensated by an outstanding David Willicome front cover.

And then...I was tipped off that this was an AI-written novel. I've left my original draft of my review untouched, because I wanted to be honest here. I had not realized that AI was already this good. It's not that it almost passed as a good SF novel, it did. In retrospect, I now understand why I found much of the writing stilted—it wasn't just depicting an AI's POV, it actually was an AI writing this. Knowing that, I'm a little less forgiving then when I thought it was Guy being clever. But if you want to see what

a writer can already do with AI, and speculate what is still coming down the road as AI (presumably) gets better...maybe take a look at this.

Super-Earth Mother is published by Edge-Lite Books

## The Supply Closet of Eternal Terror by Roy Griffis Review by Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Book 4 of the Cthulhu Amalgamated series is the most off-the-wall entry yet

In what was supposed to be the conclusion of a trilogy, The Breakroom of a Thousand Nightmares (reviewed here) wrapped up Griffis' series our hero shoggoth Narg's buddy Murph meeting an untimely demise, and Narg himself finally settling down into a relatively stable teaching gig and settling down with his one and only shoggette, Bugg.

His domestic bliss (occasional pangs of grieving for his "homelad" Murph aside) is rudely disrupted when an interdepartmental hostile takeover within the Amalgamation occurs. Suddenly Narg's being informed by his ambitious but dim new boss that the old boss (his Uncle Beefbits) has been eaten and that he's got new assignment . . .

To go back in time and kill the young H.P. Lovecraft.

### The Story

As our previous reviews (here, here and at the link above) detailed, After a major shakeup at The Amalgamation that ends in Nar'lah's uncle BeefBits being eaten by some upstart Star Strider who's got more ambition than sense. Narg, who now has to work for the guy who killed his favorite uncle, is told that human knowledge of the eldritch world is growing exponentially and needs to be staved off. Thus, our hero shoggoth finds himself tasked with carrying out the would-be corporate raider's grand scheme, to go back in time and find the source of the knowledge leak. His boss's suggested starting point? Early 20th century Massachusetts, to remove what he believes to be the source of all this spreading mythos lore: a young Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

And to make sure his newly recruited-under-duress employee stays on task, the new boss enlists a the added help of a couple of denizens from Hell which the Amalgamation is attempting to merge with; the dimwitted demon Belphegor and his companion, a nasty, nagging six-armed hamster named Bitty who have the ability to help Narg phase between realities, dimensions and time. Upon arriving in Massachusetts however, Narg gets to meet the perpetually anxious but brilliant nine-year old Lovecraft and his ailing mother. In time, Narg realizes that Lovecraft isn't actually the source of the forbidden mythos knowledge, but possibly a witch from his family line who lived a hundred years prior. Narg, relieved at the chance to stave off Belphegor and Bitty, who are happy to sew the operation up and murder the Lovecraft lad, precision and nuance be damned (no pun intended). Thus the group set off back in time to Elizabethan England and just the beginning of an expansive tale that spans several other time periods and locations. Of course, young Howard has been swept back in time with them, complicating things.

The thing is, the trail doesn't stop there, and each stop back in time reveals another potential source from further back in the past. Narg has to track down From meeting famed occultist John Dee to visiting an exiled Napoleon who's got a secret chunk of the Rosetta Stone stashed away, to the modest hut

of the Mad Arab himself and even crossing paths with an old flame in the primordial and savage past of a young Earth, this is Griffis' grandest entry in the series yet. His trademark humor and bonkers action are on full display throughout, making it the fastest 488 pages you'll ever fly through.

### The Characters

We find Narg in a particularly vulnerable place for our uncharacteristically empathetic and eloquent abomination. He's still reeling from the death of Murph from the previous book, and his extended time among the Squishies, as humans are called by his kind, has left him missing the warmth of company and friendly interaction. Between the rough introduction his new boss (who killed his uncle and all that) and being thrust into his newest mission not only without a human guide but having to deal with hostile demonic ones, our hero is dealing with some rather tumultuous changes this time around.

Combined with the fact that Narg is slowly realizing that he's developing a sense of morality as he finds himself more and more offput by the task he is given, and the influence over him introduced by a certain "friend" alluded to from book three, his many eyed and betentacled girth is firmly stuck between a rock and hard place, and his newfound moral compass sees him eventually filling out an unabashed hero's role as he fights to not only keep the literal forces of hell from harming his young charge, but does his best (however imperfectly) to shield him from the traumatic elements of the situation the young man has unwillingly found himself caught up in.

His demonic co-workers, Belphegor and Bitty, are an Abbott/Costello comic relief duo who, the former a somewhat lunkheaded demon who's not nearly as impressive as some of his glamoured manifestations (an angel of light, red skinned-demon in a tuxedo, etc) would like to have you believe; The six-armed hamster demon Bitty who he frequently confers with, is more on point mission-wise, but both are eager to finish things quickly if not carefully and return to their hellish realms in glory. Their impatience with Narg and his ever-expanding reasons as to why they can't kill Lovecraft drive the plot forward from place to place, and they convey influence over humans and through magic, often in hilarious ways.

Lovecraft himself is, when Narg meets him, a brilliant but socially awkward, lonely and miserable boy. Having lost his father and a beloved uncle early, and with his mother in perpetually ill health, he pines for stability of a stable family. Narg first encounters him just as he has thrown himself into a river in an attempted suicide; after Narg (inhabiting a human 'meatsuit') fishes him out, he's grateful for the company and for someone to share his scientific curiosities with. His dialogue is quite older than the adolescent he's supposed to be, but he was a rather well-studied amateur scientist in his youth who read voraciously on a number of disciplines, so it doesn't come across as implausible as it would for someone else.

He shows a surprising metal hardness when it comes to laying eyes upon those things that drive men mad, and is even able to briefly read ancient occult texts with minimal vomiting. To protect him, Narg tells him that all the supernatural shenanigans he's been involved with are a dream, and while this prevents him from going mad, it also emboldens him to wander off places and get into trouble, since he believes himself to be the master of his own imaginings. In this Griffis strikes just the right balance of introducing a potentially annoying younger character in doses that allow interactions to breath between the many (many) characters that cross our MC's paths, while still maintaining our interest.

The list of various historical figures that make appearances are many, and as I am no history buff, I might say that each is at least suitably accurately presented for the story in which they preside, and that

they are likely to rankle any armchair scholar only minimally. Cameos include brilliant scientists, mathematicians (and occultists) advisors to Elizabeth I Edward Kelley and John Dee, authors of the infamous tome of evil, the Black Book, Napoleon Bonaparte, who uses a sword to dissect a fucking reanimated corpse golem with surgical precision, Abdul Alhazrad, whose visit is brief but unquestionably the funniest, Narg's old girlfriend, who's awfully bored after being banished to the hot, sticky dinosaur-ruled realm of a young Earth, unable to leave because she's been grounded by her father, a middle manager within the Amalgamation. Each encounter is self-contained and almost gives the book the feeling of a vignettted anthology that breaks up the various acts and moves the almost 500 page book at a brisk pace.

## The World

Save for the setting at the very end of the book (which I won't spoil here,) the settings in each of the temporal field trips our heroes mostly serve as backdrop to the real star of the book, its characters. If this winds up being the final book in the series (unlikely as this volume, like the others, includes one of Griffis' trademark post-credits "stinger"), it can stand alone as one of his finest demonstrations of character depth and development in the tough to write for genre of horror-comedy.

## Politics

None, though there will no doubt be reeee-ing from overly serious Lovecraft fans. From its inception, this series has been Griffis' love letter to the Cthulhu mythos and Lovecraft's legacy. While it is written with tongue firmly planted in cheek, it is not thumbing its nose.

## Content Warning

Some vulgar language, occult themes, though invoked largely comedically, and mostly off-page and not-too-overly described fantasy/horror violence.

## Who is it for?

Lovecraft fans with a good sense of humor, fans of the previous entries, maaaaaaybe alt-history fans? Hard to say, but it's funny, give it a shot!

## Why buy it?

Anyone who's a fan of the Cthulhu Amalgamated series who have been wishing for its return have got it in spades. Roy Griffis' humor is unsparing and unique, with jokes coming from all angles; the man is the Mel Brooks of horror, and just when you think he can't raise the stakes on the funny, he still manages to surprise you.

## System Collapse by Martha Wells Review by Tom Feller N3F.org

This is the seventh installment in the author's Murderbot Diaries series and a direct sequel to Network Effect, set only a few days later. The "Murderbot" name is one the narrator has given to itself, because, prior to the first story, it believes it murdered the humans it was supposed to protect. It is a "SecUnit", an android comprised of electronic, mechanical, and organic parts designed to act as a security guard,

but it obtained free will and an addiction to trashy videos. It was damaged in Network Effect and has not had time for thorough repairs.

Both novels are set on a newly colonized planet, and the bad guys work for the Barish-Estranza corporation. They want to trick the colonists into becoming contract workers for them, which is essentially a form of slavery. Murderbot is working with humans from the planet Preservation and the University of Mithra and New Tideland to make sure the colonists have all the information they need to make an informed decision. The sequel deals with a off-shoot of the original colony on another part of the planet. It starts slowly, but eventually picks up some steam, especially when the conflict becomes a shooting war. It received enough nominating votes to qualify for the final Hugo ballot, but I thought it was the weakest story in the series, regurgitating elements of previous stories, and definitely NOT the one to begin the series with. The author had withdrawn it in favor of her novel *The Witch King*.

**Tower of Silence by Larry Correia**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

After the events of *DESTROYER OF WORLDS*, the casteless rebellion is scattered and the surviving characters have to make do without Ashok in their ranks. Thus we find them each engaged in their own plans as they wage a war for survival against the government.

For sake of ease, I'll track each individual character's arc throughout this book. Understand that their paths cross from time to time, but it's easier to process if you focus on one of them at a time.

Grand Inquisitor Omand Vokkan continues to put his plan into motion to eradicate the casteless and the representative government alike, seizing control of everything. We learn in a flashback that the Inquisition has had a demon in captivity for decades, which they harvest for magic and information. The demon will tell Omand the location of a certain "source" in exchange for all of the casteless being killed, as they are the blood descendants of Ramrowan, the ancient god that defeated the demons the last time they attacked the world.

The demon tricks an eager Omand into sending a band of wizards into a trap, where they accidentally activate a sleeping cell of insect-like demons that slaughter and destroy anything living, and are almost impossible to stop. Omand repays this betrayal with a trick of his own, allowing the demon to think that the casteless have been slaughtered, thus learning the location of the "source" that he's after, north in the jungle. Upon hearing this the demon activates a spell to notify others of his ilk that it's time to invade Lok again. Omand isn't quite sure what, but the demons have activated a spell of some kind, and we learn in an epilogue that (perhaps) all freshwater in Lok—even hundreds of miles inland—has been converted to saltwater...

Ashok Vadal wakes up on the Isle of Fortress, imprisoned, half-starved, and on trial. The residents think he's a false Ramrowan Reborn, something they've seen before, and while Ashok doesn't lay claim to the title, he does perform several feats of superhuman strength that lead them to believe he's the real deal. He escapes imprisonment and falls in with a local monk, Dondrub, who gives him the rundown of Fortress's current political and religious divisions. The Isle is rich with technological knowledge but poor in other resources, especially for creating guns, which they're known for. Dondrub shows Ashok the underground/undersea tunnel that Fortress smugglers use to get to Lok, but it's occupied by a demon god. Ashok slays this creature and takes its head back to Fortress, deposing another false Ramrowan along the way, although Dondrub dies in the conflict.

With the tunnel cleared, Ashok returns to Lok, just in time to learn that an enemy house has found the casteless rebels and is about to annihilate them. He rushes into battle and finds their champion, a new black steel swordbearer named Akerselem. They duel, and for the first time in his life Ashok is almost equally matched, as Akerselem's sword gives him the same knowledge and skill that Angruvadal gives to Ashok. In the end Ashok triumphs and cuts off Akerselem's sword arm, defeating him, and ultimately taking up his sword for himself. Once again Ashok has an ancestor blade.

Keta, Keeper of Names, continues to lead the casteless rebels as their priest, though the situation continues to worsen. He does his best to fend off Akerselem's forces at the rebels' hiding place, and while he's just a man, he dies heroically against a black steel swordbearer, leaving the descendants of Ramrowan without a spiritual guide.

Javed, an Inquisition spy planted among the rebels, has been feeding information about them to Omand. When two young hunters find him communicating with his master, Javed kills them and hides their bodies, though the act shames him and he eventually struggles with his loyalties. At the end he's visited by Mother Dawn, a traveling demigod who takes the form of witches and other things, to tell him that her loyalists (the rebels) need a Keeper of Names. He is to fill the void that Keta left behind. The rebels know what he did though, so this will be no small hurdle to overcome.

As for the prophetess Thera Vane, she continues to lead the rebellion though she misses having Ashok at her side, and she has to make do with lesser assets. One of her more key discoveries is that the mute and damaged children she rescued from the House of Assassins are actually capable of magic, and are slowly coming back to their senses. She's able to nurture them back to sanity and they make powerful contributions to the rebels' efforts, helping to destroy aqueducts that deliver water to their enemies. Near the end she learns that Javed is a traitor, and she sows doubt in him that he's on the right side. Her part of the story ends when she's captured and swept away to be put on trial, only to be intercepted by Dhaval Makao, a man she ran away from years ago...who is her legal husband.

Once again, the fates of warrior Jagdish, scholar Rada, and protector Karno are intertwined. Jagdish is now a high-ranking officer in House Vadal, which faces border invasions from Akerselem and his new army. House leader Harta Vadal wants Jagdish to face Akerselem in open combat with the hope that somebody will kill him and Vadal will once again have an ancestor blade. (As a reminder, their sword was Angruvadal, which was lost when Ashok was exiled in book 1, and later shattered.)

Rada, meanwhile, communicates from time to time with the black steel mirror that she carries, gifted to her by her late mentor. While made of the same material as the ancestor blades, it performs differently, opening a communication channel to a powerful entity loyal to the Forgotten Gods. Rada and Karno accompany Jagdish and a detachment of his soldiers on an expedition, only to come across the band of wizards that Omand unknowingly sent into a trap. Several of Jagdish's soldiers are killed by the demon-insects, which almost overwhelm Karno, and nobody escapes unscathed. Rada appeals to the entity in the mirror, who isn't overly concerned with the humans and their quest, until Rada explains that saving them means they can be useful to the gods later.

The mirror then summons up a force field around Jagdish, Rada, and the other survivors and fires a superweapon from somewhere unknown, obliterating all of the demon-insects that were trying to kill them.

When they report their findings back to Harta Vadal, he wants to know if this super weapon can be conjured up again and controlled. Rada is more worried about the demon insects and the affairs of the Gods, as things continue to intensify.

Lord Protector Devedas has a diminished role in this story, but he's not out of it. Riding high on a wave of popular support after defeating Ashok, he only becomes more useful to Omand and his scheming. When the time is right for a perverse act of governmental subversion, Omand calls for all power to be concentrated in Devedas to deal with the rebel crisis, under the condition that Devedas will of course give up his power once the problem is solved.

In conclusion, this story covers a scattered cast of characters who do their best to move toward their group goals even without being able to rely on each other. Their determination in the face of brutal obstacles makes it easy to root for them, and once again the pacing of these books makes it hard to put them down. Up until very recently, TOWER OF SILENCE was going to be the penultimate installment in this series, but Larry Correia announced online that the final book has to be split into two volumes in order to tie it all up satisfactorily.

## Warmaster 2: Winter's Peril

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, I hope this blog post finds you well. I am reviewing another new book instead of cleaning up recommendations previously posted on my website. This book is the sequel of the series I found via a friend of mine, Jana S Brown. She introduced me to the author, and we interviewed her on The Blasters & Blades Podcast about this novel. It sounded amazing. I loved the concept, and I was suddenly curious about the GameLit genre. I was so hooked that I instantly purchased and read book two in the series!

So, here we are as I prepare to write a review on the novel Warmaster 2: Winter's Peril by Melissa McShane. I 'read' this novel in the audiobook format as read by Talon David. This narrator did a bang-up job with this one; it was just as good as the first novel in this world that she narrated! I know from my interview that it will air on April 12th, so check out the links for the show to listen to this one.

Overall, I am not surprised that I ended up loving a book genre that was spawned by the games that I've learned to love. I played online open-world RPGs like the Fallout and Elder Scrolls franchises and loved the open-world gaming concept. That transferred over to the ttrpgs once I found a game with friends. Now, I can experience that over and over again, even when solo, through this genre. I can't wait to dive deeper into this literary space.

And let me tell you, as my second foray into this genre, this was a banger! Again, I thank my lucky muse for showing me what I was missing. This series is a rare treat for me. If you want to see my thoughts on the first novel, then read my first review here. There will be some overlap between these reviews as I am unsure how to review a sequel to a book I loved without repetition. Obviously, if I loved the second book, then it would have elements that made the first novel work.

Seriously, this author sold the entire genre of literature to me. As you can see, I am writing another review from this space! I know you can barely contain your excitement! But please don't embarrass us in public; people are watching us! They're staring at us, don't look, but that guy over there might even be filming us. Let's save those moments for beer, bars, and bratwurst!

## The Story

The main character of this novel is Aderyn, a woman who grew up in a world that is basically a ttrpg game, except it is very real to the people who live there. After she gets the call to become an adventurer and with a class, Warmaster, she meets her friend Owen. He is the ying to her yang, and when their powers combine, they're danged near unstoppable. This sequel novel picks up where the first leaves off.

During this story arc, we see Aderyn and Owen learning to work together and level up through the ranks of 'the system.' We learn how closely paired these two via the un with their synchronicity skills. I loved seeing them figure this out, and it was nice seeing Aderyn figure out how to stand on her own feet. She took life by the horns and decided that since she didn't get the skills she wanted, she'd teach herself. I loved that about her, how she taught herself sword skills, which weren't skills that came to her Warmaster class.

During the course of this book, we see Aderyn and Owen deepen their friendship with Isold, Weston, and Livia. These companions are a lot of fun to see in this novel as they learn to work together as one unit. We got some of that in the first book in this series, but it really shines through in Warmaster 2: Winter's Peril. This aspect of combat is often overlooked or poorly shown. Having been part of a team whose life depended on the actions of others, I notice when authors get this one wrong. Done right, it blends into the background. But, if you do it wrong, it shines like the Beacons of Gondor.

As a former grunt or infantryman in civilian parlance, I also liked how Melissa described the combat scenarios. It was clearly written, and I could picture the conflict like a movie in my head. It felt like how it should happen, though I'm inexperienced in swordplay. To be fair, I've also never fought monsters or slung spells at the wee beasties. But, because Melissa got the little sensory details right, I was able to suspend my disbelief when she wrote the fantastical awesomeness.

Now, let us move along to the gaming system underlying this world. It is kind of crucial, given the nature of the GameLit genre. We got to see the party level up a few times and grow as characters. We saw them explore the fated one quest tree and generally live out our power fantasies in real-time. I am definitely curious to see where book three takes this crew of adventurers. Will they fight dinosaurs in book three? Unicorns? Lions and tigers and bears? I don't know, but I'll read the book to find out!

During the trek through book two, the party continued to learn about the game world and grow as people. It was a lot of fun, especially because Owen was an outsider, so we got to learn of the world as he did through Aderyn's eyes. I really enjoyed that trick from the author, Melissa McShane. She kept me engaged from start to finish, and I couldn't more strongly recommend it. I will say I don't think this trick would work again in book three, as by then, Owen should be accustomed enough to the world to start figuring it out.

This story was expertly paced, and the prose was cleanly written. There was never a moment in the novel where I couldn't envision the world. I could see the adventure unfolding in my mind as a movie in my head. In fairness, I have read enough fantasy to help me envision everything. Even better, I had a solid base of knowledge from my gaming experience, both video and tabletop mediums. Further, having read a lot of the classics of fantasy literature, I've seen many of the genre tropes.

Another area where my experience with gaming helped was with the monsters we encountered. Having played the games that inspired this novel, I had experience with the iconic creatures that we see in this story. Obviously, Melissa shaves off the serial numbers to keep herself from getting sued. She also

gave them different names, so we had that sense of newness and foreignness for the outlander, Owen, to butt up against. It did make things fun, and I would definitely play the game she's using for this novel if it existed.

That said, I did find some of the monsters she used were new to me. The flower monsters? Yikes, that was new to me, and I was there for it. And those little things in the tree? Yeah, those were a lot of fun, and I wouldn't want to meet them in a dark alley, that's for sure! I also liked the creatures in the trees; it was cool to see them. I would love to see more of these things, and maybe she'll release the monster stats for us to put into our games.

And how could we talk about a novel without talking about the authorial voice? In this novel, I found a well-rounded storytelling voice. There was enough depth to solidly ground you in the story without wandering off into left field. She drip-fed us enough details to keep us informed without stealing that sense of wonder from us. However, you could tell that this world had depth to it, even though she didn't show us up front.

Finally, the thing I liked the most about this novel was the way Melissa took the hints at romance from book one and kicked it up a notch. She crafted a convincing romance that was easy to believe. We saw that with Owen and Aderyn, and we saw it with Livia and Weston. Oh, and we saw it with Isold and every other NPC traveler. It was done with the fade to black, so we saw nothing that we couldn't let our kids read. But the adults could read between the lines, which worked for me. I also liked that Melissa McShane showed the duality of her skills. With Weston and Livia, we know that they are doing the deed off screen. But with Owen and Aderyn, we get the impression that they're taking it slow and probably not there yet. Because of how she handled things, we saw romance at three levels. With Livia/Weston, we got a committed pairing that was hot and heavy. With Isold, we get a Lothario, and finally, with Aderyn/Owen, we see the sweetness and naivety of youthful souls.

### The Characters

This novel follows one main character, the journeyman adventurer named Aderyn, and her companions. She is a 20-ish-year-old woman who's awarded the class of Warmaster. It is a class that gives her the ability to read tactical situations, but since most in this class are ignored, their full potential is never unlocked. However, the other Warmasters don't have Owen, her erstwhile companion whose skills mirror hers. He is the ying to her yang, allowing both of them to be better while working together.

During the course of this novel, we see Aderyn continue to grow and evolve alongside her companions. She starts as a shy and uncertain noob adventurer, and then she grows into a more confident version of herself. She is a go-getter who decided that she wanted skills that her class didn't give her. Toward that end, she practices with swords until she earns that skillset on her system character sheet.

Throughout this novel, Aderyn continues learning that her class isn't as useless as everyone else thought it was. Instead, she has begun a single-handed campaign to prove the worth of her class. Through this, her party thrives and exceeds the expectations of their abilities based on their collective inexperience. In the last novel, I was somewhat irked at Aderyn's wishy-washy nature. Fortuitously, this issue has resolved itself. She is growing into the kind of fighter you want with you in a pinch, and the journey that brought her here was a lot of fun!

I really liked this character; she wasn't your typical 'girl boss.' This was a lady who was competent, and she earned every one of her skill upgrades. She fought for those gains in a way that made sense.

During her time in this novel, she had to compensate for her smaller size by outthinking the monsters and opponents. Further, she continued her path toward being able to collaborate with her teammates. The ability to trust someone to be strong where you are weak is something that takes a lot of conscious work to develop. Aderyn offered the inverse to her team, balancing each other's abilities. She uses her brains to empower their brawn, and it worked for me.

In addition to Aderyn, we had the opportunity to meet Owen, the outlander from our world. He gets mugged on a Greyhound layover and wakes up in the woods outside of Far Haven. We first meet him as he is saving Aderyn from the monsters, swinging a club like a boss. He's dressed in a band tee, demonstrating his excellent musical choice. Or the author's excellent musical tastes? Either way, he was like a fish out of water, and through him, we learned about the world of the system. The interactions about the miscommunication through their shared language were humorous, and I loved watching them.

Later in the novel, we meet a few more party members. Their combined skill set reminds me of the dream party for a D&D campaign: a wizard, a bard, a thief, and a fighter with someone serving as the brains of the operation. The Warmaster skill doesn't have an analog in the ttrpg space, at least not that I'm aware of. However, the combination of their skills allows them to handle a wider variety of challenges.

These characters were well-written and fleshed out. Their motivations made sense to me; they felt real. I don't know that I'd want to have a beer with these inexperienced kids, but I don't hate them either. Maybe I'm just getting old and crotchety? Whatever, get off my lawn, and we'll continue with this deep dive into the residents of the system!

Finally, we couldn't talk about the characters of 'the system' without talking about the system itself. It was its own character, working with its own mysterious agency. The game had dreams of its own, coming across almost like it was the deity for the world. It felt like this was symbolic or a stand-in for a higher power, which made the world feel even more fleshed out. I am not sure how else to describe it; I am still working it out on my end. Am I reading too much into it? Are the constant ads for Easter sales and commercials for local churches filtering my experience with this book? Is when I am reading it flavoring it? I don't know, but it struck me that the game ruleset that runs this world feels like the ancient gods meddling in the affairs of man. Your mileage may vary, so check it out.

## The World

This story was set in the fantasy world of 'the System.' Sprinkled throughout the various cities are that special breed of humans known as 'adventurers.' These people rove around the land, completing quests and trying to earn system growth and advancement. As a GameLit world, it is set against the backdrop of a gaming system and ruleset. It is here that we find the continued tale of characters Aderyn, Owen, and their other companions.

Seriously, what's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Melissa McShane, who clearly knows a thing or two about the written word. I said that about book one, and now book two hasn't let me down. She told a compelling story set in a beautiful world of 'the system.' Like I've previously said, everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, Melissa didn't info dump all of her world-building up front. Instead, she fed it to us in drips and drabs that kept me on the edge of my seat, hooked from page one. She expertly strung us along and always left us wanting more.

What I loved most about this book was Melissa's letting us explore the north further in this world. We saw the northern mountains, new monsters, and a new city. As we discovered more about 'the System,' we also got to see a different style of dungeon, one rumored to be sentient. During the course of this book, our main characters get to discover if the rumors are true. We also learned about how non-classed people (aka NPCs) moved through a world inhabited by monsters that want to kill you. It is almost as if the worlds of this series mirror Australia. Even the things that can't kill you want to do so!

I know that I sound like a crazy fanboy, but trust me, this story was anything but amateur hour! It was an exciting romp through dice and pages. I swear, I could almost hear my favorite dungeon master say, "Roll for initiative" when the combat actions started. It was like I was really in the system with Aderyn! I'm practically gushing over this novel, and you will, too, if you give it a try!

## Politics

This novel has no real-world politics and doesn't stray outside of the standard power plays that happened in the medieval world with several city-states. That absence gave you room for you just to dive in and enjoy some good old-fashioned historic fun! Okay, historic-ish, and the ISH is doing some heavy lifting! But it was the standard fantasy tropes that Tolkien would approve of.

## Content Warning

This was a relatively clean story, so there was nothing that wasn't PG-13 in this novel. There was violence, but it wasn't gratuitous. There was one smooching scene at the end, but it was a clean one. There was also the hint at what went on behind closed doors, but we never saw it on screen. Basically, I would let my kids read this novel as well.

## Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoy a good GameLit story about a pair of young adults finding themselves and the path they want their lives to take. The book Warmaster 2: Winter's Peril continues to expound upon the value that family can have on your life. It highlights those values in a positive light, which is rare these days. I loved the focus on the evolving friendship with Owen and Aderyn and with their larger friend group in their adventuring party. If you've ever seen the world as it was and wanted it to be better... this hopeful novel is for you. This novel had the action, humor, and comradery of the movie Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves. It had the classic dungeon delving made popular by the original tabletop game that we all know and love. Finally, I noticed that this book struck the found family themes that I enjoy reading in the novel NPCs by Drew Hayes or Gentlemen Bastards by Scott Lynch.

## Why buy it

Before I read this book, I would've said that I'm not the typical audience for this one. That said, I'm now a convert and just read the second book in this series. I am jonesing for book three, which comes out in June 2024. I guess I've proven that I'll be reading the rest of this series and more in the wider genre. With that out of the way, this was a fun romp through a gamified story that is perfect for all ages. This is a solid escapist story for when you want sword fighting and justice in a hurry. The adventure was compelling, the prose was clean, and the story arc had me unable to stop turning the page. Sleep? Who needs it when this book is there!

White Ops #1 by Declan Finn  
Review by J. R. Handley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

For an author dipping his toes into the genre, he hit it out of the park. It was Space John Wick meets the Intergalactic Bourne Identity with aliens.

Hey Space Cadets, it's time for another epic JR Handley book review! White Ops is another book that I just read instead of cleaning up older reviews. In an effort to disclose things more fully, this book was written by a friend of mine and the host of this website. That's right, none other than Declan Finn! Am I sucking up to the boss? You be the judge after you read my nuanced review!

Before I dive in, let me reiterate this for you guys. I've been Facebook friends with Declan for several years, and we met in person at Raven Con back in 2015 and 2016. He was fun; we clicked and have stayed in touch since then. Since I focused on my own genre for years, I never got around to reading his books. Then I found GameLit and knew there were hundreds of awesome books I was missing. Since I interviewed Declan about this series, I decided to indulge my curiosity and read his series. I didn't know what to expect, but I bought the book and dove right in.

Okay, now let's get to the novel itself. This novel and subsequent series is Declan's first foray into science fiction. It was what I would call a space saga more than a space opera, and I liked it. This was an intergalactic romp through time and space, and it was amazeballs. We had action, adventure, and intrigue, keeping you on the edge of your seat for the entire ride. For an author dipping his toes into the genre, he hit it out of the park.

### The Story

At its core, this novel is a rollercoaster adventure set in intergalactic space as the medium we ride into the promised land. It took us along the paths paved during the Pharmakoi wars, where genocidal aliens rampaged across dozens of star systems. These upshot aliens took on the toughest races in the Galaxy in their campaign of conquest. But they are only the opening gambit in this romp through the stars.

During this novel, we meet Sean Patrick Ryan, someone who reminded me of John Wick with cooler plot armor. This character sees that another race is behind the Pharmakoi expansion, a race that wants to test our galaxy for weakness that someone else might exploit. To fight this shadow enemy, Sean puts together a strike team to light up the darkness— with nukes if necessary.

This was a fun story that was told by Declan Finn with some very conversational prose that was easy on the ears as I listened to the audiobook by Kevin Goff. The publisher, Tuscany Bay Books, has done an excellent job of putting together an extremely professional work that was a lot of fun to engage with. It was the standard light summer read, which is just what the doctor ordered for my easy listening.

The writing felt more like I was sitting in a bar with Declan the Bard as he told me a fun story with a massive scope. Some parts were hard to follow as we jumped from POV to POV, but it was so much fun that I didn't care. Some of that issue could be my TBI, so your mileage may vary. Either way, I liked the style of Declan's writing. It felt like Clive Cussler or Tom Clancy were telling one of their workmen-like style of meat and potatoes storytelling.

Another thing I noticed about this story was that the first novel spanned a long stretch of time on the

calendar. I think that this first novel could have been many novels crammed full of details of the war with the Pharmakoi. Heck, that war could've been its own several-book series. Then, the second series could follow the man behind the curtain. But I say that because I was invested in this universe.

One note worth mentioning is that there were a lot of references to pop culture in this novel. I really enjoyed all of them, including the fun little Easter Eggs that Declan peppered throughout the White Ops novel. They snuck up on me and often had me laughing hysterically when I heard them. They were done in such a way that it didn't feel like too much; he passed the Porridge Test because he got it just right! It was enough to amuse those who're deeply entrenched in pulp culture lore and wouldn't bother those who miss their significance. What it did do, it showed us how well read the author is!

Another fun aspect of this story was how he incorporated the SCA, or Society for Creative Anachronisms, into this world. It came out of left field, but when it was there it just felt right. It was part of the lore surrounding the Holy Order of Saint Patrick, another amusing tidbit thrown in for flavor. A master chef, Declan.

Speaking of Ole Saint Pat, that layer of Catholicism in this story was the tip of the iceberg. The author is devoutly Catholic, and it shows in his prose. There were layers of the Church in this universe, but it wasn't so much that it felt gratuitous. Instead, it was written as a crucial aspect of the main character's worldview. It was handled in a manner that allowed room for other characters to have differing points of view. We even saw alien species who had their own deities, and it was handled in a respectful manner.

And now to what I found to be the most amusing aspect of this novel. Declan wrote the main character as a devoutly Catholic Irishman in a world where the bad guy is pretty WASPish. It wasn't a huge plot point, but given the times I've talked with the author about the history of the turbulent Troubles in Ireland, it struck me as funny. Your mileage may vary, but it was one of those chuckle moments for me.

Now, let me talk about how I "read" this novel. I listened to the audiobook while I was going on my daily walks. The narrator, Kevin Goff, kept me entertained and engaged. His voices and accents were on point and the pacing of the story was well done as well. On the technical side, this audiobook was professionally produced, and I have zero complaints. I would definitely read more books by this narrator, so if you like audiobooks, this is the one for you!

Oh, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the action scenes in this novel. There were plenty of those scenes and they were expertly written. The combat was easy to follow, and the fights were fun. Whenever we butted up against the John Wick-esq levels of overpowered awesomeness, instead of feeling cheesy, it felt like Declan leaned into the Rule of Cool. This isn't some gritty war story, but in the campiness of the space saga or space opera, there was joy and hours of entertainment.

Finally, let me talk about how the story was written and paced. First, let me tell you that this story was well-written and paced. However, the pacing was one more in keeping with a saga like "The North and The South" and less like the space opera I normally read. There were whole places where I wanted to know more, but I always want to know more about the universes and franchises where I spend time.

I say that to say this. I prefer the space opera story structure to the space saga structure because I want all of the details, so the time jumps through the initial war felt flat for me. But it bears repeating. I enjoyed this story and will read the other books in this series. I am just surprised that I liked a story structured like this because it is not my normal preference. I know that this sounds negative, but I think that this is a testament to the skills of the author, Declan Finn. Seriously, his skills kept me engaged during

the entirety of this novel!

## The Characters

The main character in this novel is Sean Patrick Ryan, a larger-than-life superhero who is devoutly Catholic and wickedly smart. He was a slightly insane, happy soldier who reveled in his joy in combat. He is good, and he knows it, and moreover, he loves showing the bad guys that fact with fists and weapons. While this character was ridiculously overpowered, it felt like he still had challenges in the martial side of war that his intelligence allowed him to overcome.

One of the cool bits about Ryan was that he was orphaned and raised in a monastery to be a member of the toten'tanzer military order of Rangers who seek out and destroy evil in the galaxy. I liked that he felt like a sci-fi version of Aragorn of Lord of the Rings fame. Even the role that Ryan played in the story fit the ranger trope, and I was there for it.

There are other characters in this novel, including admirals, politicians, and aliens like the Renar. One of the characters that I loved was his friend Peter Sierra, a man who is the opposite of his fellow Ranger. The man is smart—smarter than Ryan, and he is a perfect foil to the main character. We don't see a whole lot of him, but I get the feeling that he re-appears in later books, so I figured I'd mention that he was worth watching!

Another fun character we got to meet was Admiral Newcomb, the leader of the human forces in the war against the Pharmakoi. He was a brilliant tactician who fought a war on two fronts. He fought the enemy alien hordes and the evil politicians getting in his way. He is the sort of competent officer that everyone wants to have, but that seemed to be a once-in-a-generation level of rareness. Like Peter, this is a character who I expect to see more of in later books. He was well-written and felt very fleshed out for the amount of time he spent on the page. We even got to mourn with him for his dead wife, even though we never met her. He starts out as an intelligence officer, but through attrition, commands the entire armada and wins the war. His story alone could be another Horatio Hornblower in Space saga for the ages, and I hope Declan delivers it someday!

Another character that I loved to hate was the politician Douglas Wells. The man was evil and the stereotypical villain from every political thriller I devour. Instead, he was a bad guy who earned the title of evil, and we got to see that on the page. I wish I could say more. However, we don't do spoilers here so you'll have to read it for yourself to see why he's the most hated guy in the galaxy.

There were more secondary and tertiary characters in this novel, but they didn't get enough screen time to warrant a write-up here. I mentioned them to say that even the minor bit players felt real and not like cardboard cutouts; they weren't merely to push the plot along. They were real people with real lives and real motivations, even though they might only get a few moments of the spotlight.

Overall, Sean Patrick Ryan will make you laugh, and he will make you shake your head at the killer with a life devoted to the Church. He plays into the trope of the Irishman, but he is self-aware enough to know that he's doing it. He never breaks the 4th Wall, but he comes close a few times, and those moments are some of the best in the book. He is smart and extremely competent, which gives him a somewhat of a Marty Sue vibe, except that there were hints of his training montage that happened off-screen. With those hints, you're able to accept that he earned his skills and isn't just good for the sake of the plot.

## The World

The world where *White Ops* happens is an intergalactic setting populated by multiple alien races. This series starts pretty far into the future, where faster-than-light (FTL) is commonplace, and the technology is pretty amazing. There was cool tech, and weapons that were old became new again. In a world where everyone gets pew-pew space lasers, the main character, Sean Patrick Ryan, uses chemically propelled bullets. I like the trope of the old being new again, and I liked how this novel handled it.

During the course of this novel, we gallivant all over the galaxy and see a lived-in world. We got to hang out on the planet of the Renar race, conduct business transactions at Alexandria Station, and fight in spaceships all over the known stars. We visited long-dead planets with the withered husks of long-dead alien races, and finally, we see the earth of this future age, which serves as our tether to the oddities of the rest of this universe. Earth felt like the North Star, allowing us to enjoy the rest of the universe as we explore it through the lives of the characters in this novel.

Another cool part of this world was how real the alien races felt. They were all distinct, with certain racial traits that defined them. However, Declan doesn't fall into the trope that all of the race has X traits, leaving room for nuance amongst the species. This approach always felt more realistic, and I love seeing other authors come to this same conclusion.

As an example of the varieties of species, there are dinosaurs like Touris and bugs like Soivans. We saw the human turtles known as the Renar, who ultimately outgrow their outer shells and look even more human as they age. These aren't some Trekkie forehead of the week aliens, no, Declan made them cool and unique. We even saw one Stargate Atlantis-style Wraith aliens, who looked physically like a minotaur by the descriptions. They were so well thought out that I wanted more and would love to see these characters play a larger role in the story going forward. In the future, I would even enjoy a story written from some of their points of view. Are you listening to me, Declan? Are you taking the hint? Cause, you know, we want more of our precious!

As mentioned before, there are secret societies and religious orders that span the breadth of the galaxy. They play a large role in building this universe, giving the man raised in a monastery legitimate access to the entirety of the world. That is Sean Patrick Ryan for those keeping score at home. A lot of the world-building is focused on the Catholic Church, so it is no surprise that they spread far and wide.

There is more that I would love to say about the world where this story took place, but *Upstream Reviews* doesn't cotton to spoilers. Trust me when I say you really want to read this to find out more! Nothing in this novel was groundbreaking; however, Declan expertly stood on the shoulders of past literary giants and gifted us a few hours of escapism in this chaotic modern world.

## Politics

This novel is part political intrigue, part action story, so you will read politics. You will see some shades of real-world politics in here, but with a sci-fi twist and you can seamlessly read through it, no matter what your personal perspective is.

To be fair, I found the religiosity more in your face than the political angling. The politicians and big corporations are corrupt, but he didn't dwell on it so much that it got preachy. This was not a "message" book; it was just the world where the adventure happened.

## Content Warning

This story had wartime violence and some cannibalistic aliens, so the deaths were intense. There was a romantic undertone with some hints of physicality, but none of it happened on screen.

Finally, this novel has very Catholic themes and direct commentary throughout. If this bugs you, it's probably not the novel for you.

But if you don't mind that, this was an awesome adventure and well worth your time. And for the Englishmen reading, the main character is Irish and has a brogue... do with that what you will!

Who is it for?

First, this novel is for fans of Declan's previous works. His voice is his voice, and it shines through, regardless of the genre he writes in. This is not in the military sci-fi genre that I love; it is more of a space opera or space saga.

It is part political thriller, part military adventure with lots of action.

It was Space John Wick meets the Intergalactic Bourne Identity with aliens.

Why buy it?

This book is for anyone who loves an overarching space opera told through the eyes of one main character with a large cast of supporting points of view. This is a broad-scope story with compelling themes of finding family and friends who remain at your side when life sucks the most. There were strong religious zealotry undertones from Sean Patrick Ryan, a man raised in the Holy Catholic Order of Saint Patrick. It wasn't too much, but there was a lot of it there. It highlights the aforementioned values in a positive light, which is rare these days, and I was there for it.

This wasn't a grimdark story but a hopeful one. If you like stories of good versus evil, with clear-cut delineation between the two, this is the novel for you!

If I haven't sold you on this space opera novel, then I haven't done my job.

## Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction Vol.1 (2023)

Edited by Stephen Kotowych

Review by Robert Runté

N3F.org

When John Robert Columbo came out with the first anthology of Canadian speculative fiction, *Other Canadas*, in 1979, it was the first time most of us realized that there even was a Canadian version of the genre. To cobble the collection together, however, Columbo had to scour all of history and pad the list with the likes of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Jules Verne*—non-Canadians who happen to have set a story in the polar north—to fill his pages. By 1985 the field had expanded sufficiently that Judith Merrill was able to solicit enough contemporary Canadian SF to fill the first *Tesseract* anthology. When I co-edited the fifth *Tesseract* anthology over a decade later, we had over 400 submissions, and I confidently predicted further explosive growth for Canadian SF&F. The *Tesseract* series is now up to #22, though

the series has morphed into themed anthologies rather than a general survey of the Canadian genre. *Imaginarium* 2012 was the first attempt at reprinting the “Year’s Best” but the series ended with *Imaginarium* 4. We therefore have lacked a “Best of Canadian SF&F” series for the last eight years.

Enter Stephen Kotowych.

If I thought working on *Tesseract* 5 was challenging, I cannot begin to imagine trying to keep on top of a field that has expanded continuously over the last thirty years. The undertaking, especially by a single individual rather than a team backed by an established publisher, is outrageously audacious. And yet, Kotowych seems to have pulled it off. With 37 entries from 24 different magazines and 6 anthologies—a total of thirty different venues—the collection is certainly a representative survey of the field. The stories range from hard science fiction through fantasy, horror, and fevered dreams to pure CanLit. Inevitably, as with any anthology, tastes differ and one might quibble whether this or that entry is the “best” Canadians have to offer, but there’s no question Kotowych has nailed the breadth of what’s out there. Story quality ranged from “solid” to “outstanding” with the overall weighting tipped heavily towards the “excellent” end. If I’m honest, I think this collection is better than the one I co-edited, a reflection of how Canadian speculative fiction has expanded and matured in the decades since.

Best of all, the collection introduced me to a number of authors with whom I had not previously been acquainted.

How had I missed, for example, Suyi Davies Okungbowa? I was shocked to find a stack of novels by this University of Ottawa prof whose “Choke” is one of the outstanding stories in the current collection. That one discovery is worth the price of the collection five times over. Although “Choke” feels as if it would be comfortable in any CanLit magazine, it originally appeared in *Tor.Com*, so legitimately qualifies as speculative fiction. But wow! The freshness of the phrasing, the passion of the writing, the absolute resonance of the contemporary experience just floored me. That’s six new novels added to my To-Be-Read pile right there.

Similarly, I had no idea nebula-nominated Ai Jiang was Canadian. Her “Give me English” is a great opening to the anthology, not just because it’s a gem of a story, but because it nicely illustrates how the current generation is infusing fresh themes and viewpoints into the Canadian genre. I have banged on for years how Canadian SF differed from that of the American (and to a lesser extent, the British) mass market SF&F, but I have to concede that the (English-language) Canadian genre often lacked culturally diverse voices, beyond some influences from Quebec. Jaing’s story speaks not just to the immigrant experience, but to the post-colonial, anti-capitalist themes that have become a natural part of the SF scene. Chelsea Vovel’s “Mischief Man” story of a Métis superhero similarly takes on Settler colonialism, and Lavigne’s “Choose Your Own” is one of the best feminist pieces ever: wincingly on target.

These and the majority of the entries fit my argument that Canadian speculative fiction is oddly optimistic in spite of the often downbeat premises. The future is on fire in Premee Mohamed’s “All that Burns Unseen”; perpetual war and exploitation are central to Michelle Tang’s “Vihum Heal”; oppressive religion stifles life in Kate Hearfield’s “And in the Arcade”; Charlotte Ashley’s “Distant Skies” features capitalist manipulation of our destinies through genetics; Holly Scofield’s “Maximum Efficiency” has robot soldiers vs humans; KT Brysk’s “Folk Hero Motifs in Tales Told by the Dead” is set in hell, for heaven’s sake. And yet, life goes on and people (or other sentients) find a way. I love this approach of ordinary people bumbling through tough times to carve out acceptable outcomes. It is the literature we need amidst the dumpster fire we’re living through.

Reynold's "Broken Vow: The Adventures of Flick Glysson, Intergalactic Videographer" provides some needed comic relief, and the fiction is broken up by the inclusion of nine rather good, accessible poems.

Overall, it is a great collection, a great reflection on what Canadian speculative fiction has to offer, and a great first entry in which one can only hope will continue as an annual series.

# Literary Criticism

## Prozines

### N3F.org

This issue's Ignorable Theme posed the queries, "Do you subscribe to or read prozines? Which ones? Why? What role do you think they play in sf and fantasy today?"

I currently subscribe to Analog Science Fiction and Fact, Asimov's Science Fiction, Interzone, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and On Spec. In the past, courtesy of Weightless Books (<https://weightlessbooks.com>), I've subscribed to Apex Magazine, The Dark, Nightmare Magazine, and Uncanny Magazine. I also used to subscribe to Clarkesworld, Galaxy's Edge, and Space and Time.

The trouble is, while I subscribe—or subscribed—to them, I don't—or didn't—really read them. At least not the new issues. With the PDF magazines I subscribed to through Weightless, I was even less likely to read them because they weren't physical items. They'd sit either in my email inbox or in Drive without drawing my attention.

I'm slightly more likely to read hard copy prozines—so it's frustrating that Interzone seems to have gone ebook only with recent editions. But even in hard copy, I'm more likely to read prozine back issues than I am current issues (see above). So I guess I subscribe to and read prozines, but I don't keep up with the new issues. I don't use them to keep up with developments in modern sf, though I continue supporting them.

Because I do think they're important. And I don't want them to go away. Especially now that the market for non-reprint anthologies is smaller—there just aren't as many original anthologies published, as far as I can tell—short fiction requires and deserves an ongoing home, and prozines can help establish less experienced writers, which introduces new talent to the field. The PDF magazines are welcome, but in many cases, they're semiprozines or unpaid, and the quality of writing and design can therefore vary. We need more periodicals that qualify as paying markets for Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association membership requirements.

So I think it's crucial that at least Analog and F&SF remain, particularly because of their straight line to history. Asimov's, Interzone, and Clarkesworld are also nice to have because they offer additional market real estate for story placement, as well as diversity. I thought Space & Time had ceased publication, but it continues to be available through Amazon. (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08RDVZ6F9>) I recently encountered a rumor that Galaxy's Edge might be relaunching, but I can't confirm that news. And the relaunch of Worlds of If is very welcome; I look forward to ongoing issues.

Why haven't I mentioned Amazing Stories? Even though the Web site continues, they haven't printed an issue since 2021, and just as I can't keep up with PDF magazines, I can't really keep up with fiction-based Web sites. I want to be able to hold a periodical in my hand, not a tablet or my Kindle or Kobo—unless it's an older back issue only available as a PDF.

To return to why I think prozines are important and worth supporting, I offer the following arguments:

- The short story, novella, and novelette are excellent forms for sf and fantasy storytelling.
- Self-publishing and fanzines, while awesome and worthwhile, are insufficient.
- Very few fanzines publish fiction.
- Prozines provide a straight line to the literary and publishing history of the genre.
- Readers and authors deserve multiple paying markets for sf and fantasy short stories.
- A larger number of markets can increase the number of stories published, as well as the diversity of voices and ideas represented.
- New authors can often enter the field more easily through short fiction than with novels.
- Prozines can also offer up-to-date science news and commentary, as well as book and movie reviews, providing broader coverage of developments in science and sf media.
- They consolidate an in-depth editorial point of view on the state of the industry more strongly than the wide range of online sources—Web sites and social media alike—available to readers. (The editorial voice of periodicals is stronger than that of Web sites.)
- While economic gains afforded by online or PDF publication might lessen business challenges faced by publishers, offering hard copies and subscriptions, even if print on demand, remains important in terms of developing ongoing attention and support.
- In-print prozines contribute more to the historical record than online or PDF sources. T&T 117 6

Some of the above might be presumptions or hypotheses—and are open for discussion and additional information. I don't know that sf publishing is as dependent on the prozines as it once was, but I do know that I'd miss them terribly if they went away. In fact, I'd continue reading back issues.

On a side note, does anyone know of any ongoing efforts to monitor and document the tables of contents of various prozines? Rocket Stack Rank (<http://www.rocketstackrank.com>) and ISFDb come to mind.

## Discussing: "Destiny" by Declan Finn A look back at Saint Tommy <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Guess it's time to talk about this one.

Destiny was my second book written in 2020.

The first one after The Italy Trip.

A Satanic mercenary has the Spear of Destiny. His goal is to destroy our world. Can Tommy put him down for good? Or will he meet his destiny

I pumped out Hussar in a rush, and it may have shown. But we'll get to that when we get to it.

I had gone to Italy as a honeymoon gift from family who thought that DragonCon wasn't good enough. My father always wanted to go, but didn't want to fly in modern airplane chairs. Given what we flew in on, I don't blame him.

Anyway, the book.

My goal in going to Italy was to see the streets. I wanted to have boots on the ground. And I was a little worried I might have to rewrite parts of the Pius Trilogy, especially A Pius Stand. I may still have to.

On top of that, I wanted the next Saint Tommy book to happen in Rome.

After The Italy Trip, I was all ready to blow it up.

And blow it up I did.

Florence Airport? Boom.

Trajan's column? Toppled.

The Trevi Fountain? Broken to pieces.

The Colosseum was ... well, it's so smashed up, how can you tell?

The Arch of Constantine? I used it to crush a giant bronze Moloch statue.

Fist fight in Castel Gandolfo? Check.

Scuffle on the Spanish Steps? Check (Already shot up in Pius #1)

An entire Italian village on the Nemi? Set on fire, then collapsed into the caverns under the city.

While I think about it, I should probably discuss the plot.

When I created the evil Jesuit Bergolio, I wanted someone who could be a mirror image of Tommy. Someone who believed in The Other Side. But try as I might, he was such a shallow monster. He talked a good game about Heathen nonsense, which became communist-pagan nonsense, which became "Yeah, I work for Hell. Because."

Like my constant attempt to use witches as an adversary, I don't think he worked well. He lacked conviction. As a monster, I'm not sure he knew what he wanted to be when he grew up.

Granted, I was also more interested in payback against Rome than I was against Bergolio.

But the bastard provided enough of a plot for Tommy to work with, and minions to fight off, and Tommy had enough room for character moments.

Every time I had Tommy nailed down, he had more dimensions to him. To the point where I can't get rid of him. I keep making short stories. I've even lost count of them. Damn it.

And like many elements, I thought of several neat toys that could, themselves, be major parts of the next books. I gave Nolan power armor in book #5, didn't I? Well, how we take the ectoplasm constructs from Deus Vult and make them into mechs? Heh heh heh. That's why they also showed up as an element in Blue Saint. I thought of more and different uses for them.

Also, I was allowed to play with more characters. Heaven had assigned him a sturdy supernatural partner, so I threw a bear at him. Nolan's son Jeremy and his ward Lena were coming into their own. I was playing The Witcher, so I had new eastern European monsters to throw at everyone.

All in all, I enjoyed writing this one. It wasn't like I had anything else to do in New York in 2020.

## Prose Bono

How to Make a Story: A Recipe  
by Jim McCoy  
[Jimbossffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimbossffreviews.substack.com)

Tools needed:

Writer (They're usually easy to catch as they tend to be fairly sedentary.)

Sitting Surface (May need to be reinforced, depending on the size of the writer.)

Writing Surface (Usually a table or desk)

Writing Implements (These vary by Writer, but are typically some variation on either pencil/pen and paper or a keyboard)

Ingredients:

Chocolate (must account for individual tastes of the writer.)

Caffeine (writer's favorite type is best)

Music (again, type varies by writer)

Instructions:

First prepare the Sitting and Writing Surfaces by clearing them of everything. This includes the cat, recalcitrant children and expectant fans.

Place the Writing Implements on the now clear Writing Surface.

Place the writer on the Sitting Surface. This some times takes a bit of adjustment. Not all writers sit the same.

Wait? Did the writer forget to feed the cat? Did the child needed that thing for school? Is something good on TV? Did the writer forget to check his Facebook this morning? Is work calling? Does the writer smell chicken frying?

NOOOOOOO! YOU'VE LOST THE WRITER!!

Anti-distractify the writer. How? You're asking the guy who's writing this instead of working on his story? Really?

Hold on! This might work!

Bribe the writer!

Offer the Writer the Chocolate and Caffeine if they will return to their Sitting Surface. You may need more Chocolate and Caffeine if the writer has already consumed what you previously brought.

Slowly and carefully place the Writing Implements on the Writing Surface. Do not spook the Writer! Begin playing the carefully selected Music.

Allow the writer several seconds to vibe to the Music before the words begin to flow. This is crucial. Lack of vibeage will ruin the Story.

When the writer pauses, be patient. Story making requires much braining and sometimes it is necessary to pause while previously lowered caffeine and chocolate levels once again begin to rise.

Add more Chocolate and Caffeine.

Ignore the swear words. That one part didn't work and the character won't do as they're told. This is Tuesday. It, too shall pass. Nevermind what Gandalf said. He just wanted to keep all the loot.

This is definitely a time to throw caffeine and chocolate from a safe space on the other side of the room.

Ignore the evil cackles: The :!":?":":")-")--")-ing character finally got his □ together. The Writer fixed his little red wagon. Actually, the Writer probably BROKE his little red wagon, but at least the story can continue.

Note to self: Add Little Red wagon to list of ingredients when editing.

Continue feeding the Writer his Chocolate and Caffeine.

NO, NOT THAT MUCH!!

Now the Writer has to Utilize the Latrine.

Hold the Writer's hand after he emerges (hopefully he washed it) and guide him back to the Sitting Surface and gesture toward the Writing Implements.

Feed the writer a Salty Snack. Help to soak up some of that caffeine you fed him.

What?

I didn't list Salty Snack on the ingredients list? Why do I have to anticipate everything? You're the one who adopted a writer. Why wouldn't you have a variety of snack foods available? Goofball.

The Writer has reached the denou...

Err..

Dinow...

The good part of the story. Things are almost done. His eyes start to close. His fingers are drooping.

Hit the Writer with a mega dose of Caffeine. With a mighty effort the Writer will now charge forward till the ending of the story.

When the author sighs, slumps forward and pushes the Writing Implements away and appears faint, the First Draft of the Story has been completed. Congratulate the writer who will now be exhausted and a bit melancholy as the excitement of writing is over for the day. Be sympathetic and, for God's sake DO NOT DARE TO UTTER THE WORD "EDITING."

## An Exercise in Creativity:

Batman and Spiderman

A thought experiment

by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

I have strange friends. Our idea of a fun time involves what if experiments that go into borderline impossible fan fiction, or casting books we really want to see on the screen

For instance, there's one thought experiment that asks a simple question: What if Batman entered Spider-Man's New York City?

And what if Spider-Man ended up in Batman's Gotham at the same time?

The first thing Batman would do is start building his new identity. Sure, he can cook up Bruce Wayne as a "fake" ID, and he'd then have to start rebuilding his fortune from there. And he'd probably end up with owning half of the Fantastic 4's Baxter Building, a good chunk of Stark Industries, and maybe even part of Black Panther's Wakanda. Where would he get the money for these investments? You mean that there isn't enough room in his utility belt for a million dollars in diamonds? Hell, he could patent some of his toys from his belt, and trade the patents to Tony Stark for stock options.

Or, Batman could do what the DEA does, and simply confiscate property of criminals when they can't be returned them to their proper owner. Either way, he wouldn't be hurting for money.

Option #3: Batman would go to Avengers Tower, or the Fantastic Four, and say "Hey, look, guys, I'm a superhero from another dimension. I need to get home, got any ideas? Can you help a brutha out?" At

that point, Mr. Fantastic would get to work cycling through dimensions until he gets the right one (creating no less than six world-threatening crises), and Stark would probably let Batman play with his toys to build an Iron Bat suit so he can kill time.

After that? Can you imagine Batman resting on his laurels? This guy is more OCD than anyone else on the planet, as far as Superheros go.

## VILLAINS

The first and most simple aspect of this shift comes with the villains. Batman generally doesn't have to put up with super villains, but Spider-man has to on a daily basis.

Lizard or Rhino:

I grouped these two together since they're basic muscle. They're also similar to other Batman villains: Killer Croc and Solomon Grundy. If you transplant Batman into Spider-Man's universe, what do you get? Batman has to deal with either the Lizard or the Rhino, neither of which usually has a brain (the Lizard has his moments of having an IQ, but generally, he's just an animal with a Jekyll and Hyde thing going on). They would be easy enough. Expect Batman to lead either one of them into a building, and then drop it on them.

Sandman:

Another easy one, really. Yes, Sandman can't be punched, or killed, but, heck, neither can the shape-shifting Clayface. And, knowing that Sandman is essentially immortal, Batman would probably just bring along incendiary devices to turn Sandman to glass.

Black Cat:

I'm not even sure that Black Cat is a villain anymore. She's a sexy cat-burglar in black leather who flirts with the local superhero ... oh, screw it, Batman already has enough Catwoman issues. Also, Black Cat would find Batman boring.

Vulture /Green Goblin:

Two flyers that deal with projectile weapons, usually daggers or pumpkin bombs. Yeah, Batman never has to deal with someone like that. However will he manage with ...

Oh, wait, Batman's dealt with Firefly.

If you're not familiar with the comic book version of Firefly, imagine a pyromaniac who can fly like Vulture, hover, and comes with firebombs and a flame thrower, as well as close quarters combat. Yeah, after dealing with this nutcase, Spider-man's flying killers will be almost easy.

Electro:

Batman will have a rubber-insulated Batsuit and break every bone in Electro's body. Then he will throw Electro into the Hudson river.

Venom /Carnage:

These guys might be a problem, since they're both older characters, and experienced. They're crazy, not stupid. Sure, they're both allergic to fire and sonic weapons, and Batman will get firebombs to slow them down, and sonic grenades and weapons installed on whatever toys he brings into Marvel's Manhattan, but it's going to be a stamina game. Carnage would be pelting Batman with numerous projectiles and melee weapons, and Venom can close quickly. If either one got their hands on Batman, it would be game over. This would be an argument for Batman to have a pseudo-Iron Man like suit, even if it's a basic exoskeleton. Why would fire and sonics not be an easy out? Because last time I saw him, Venom was getting used to sonics over time. In either case, it would require a combination of both sonics and melee moves to cripple them.

Mysterio:

Mysterio is a master of illusion in the Marvelverse. But, Batman has had his brain rewired by both the Mad Hatter and Scarecrow, a fancy laser light show wouldn't mean anything to him. Also, he'd have specialized filters in his Bat suit.

Shocker:

I won't even go into Shocker, since even Spider-Man makes fun of him.

Chameleon:

Chameleon is a spy in the Marvelverse who has fancy tech that makes him look like anyone. He's not a supervillain, just a guy with fancy toys. This would require detective work ... from the world's Greatest Detective.

Doc Ock:

This would be interesting, for the simple reason that Doctor Otto Octavius is quite smart, but if you can get your hands on him, most women I know could beat him to death with a baseball bat ... but you have to get past his four indestructible mechanical arms. That means that Batman would probably just go all predator on him, pick off his guards one by one, then drop out from the ceiling, straight onto his head. Or concussion grenades.

Kingpin:

Batman would, for the most part, probably just make a deal with Kingpin. He would have a few run-ins with Kingpin, breaking apart illicit parts of his criminal empire. They would go a few rounds. Batman would break a few bones. After about a month, they'll have a nice polite sit down, in which Batman will tell Kingpin that he's going into white collar crime from now on. This is a deal he's more or less got going with the Penguin, who, in the comics, runs his own lounge, and more or less sticks to money laundering, information brokering, that sort of thing.

What happens when Batman meets the rest of the Marvel-verse? He'd either ignore the Avengers, or try and take it over ... like he did with Justice League.

Well, he'd try

Let's face it, in Gotham, Batman is the big fish in a medium sized pond. Yes, I said medium-sized; Gotham was always the city with corrupt cops, corrupt city officials, overrun by the mob... you know, Chicago. And, since Chicago is the second city, well, Batman can keep it.

However, New York? Batman couldn't run two blocks without running into yet another superhero. They even break down some of them by neighborhoods.

The X-Men have Westchester (far enough out of NYC to avoid the city line, but close enough for a commute), so probably the Bronx.

Daredevil has what used to be called Hell's Kitchen.

Tony Stark is on 59th and Broadway, just off of Columbus Circle, the Avengers have Central Park East covered (890 th Avenue).

And the Fantastic Four (when they're in town) are off of 42nd and Madison, and SHIELD has a station at 59th and Madison. Midtown is covered.

Luke Cage has Harlem (depending on what's going on there at the time), or the GEM/Amc theater on 42nd street.

Spider-man seemed to have the other burrows (let's face it everyone, he lived in Forest Hills, Queens). However, his newspaper seemed to be the Flatiron building, in lower Manhattan, so he has a swath to himself.

You think Greenwich Village isn't covered? Doctor Strange lives on Bleecker Street.

Batman would either have to learn to play well with others, or move to Brooklyn. Or worse, Staten Island.

Though, being Batman, he might want to move into the Bronx and take it over. He'd feel at home.

Meeting Tony Stark.

Ah, but what happens when some superhero gets cloned, or brainwashed, or turned into a villain? Shall we count the amount of people that's happened to in Marvel? Like Daredevil being possessed, or Wolverine being brainwashed, Captain America having his own twin and his own clone, or the 500 Iron Man knockoffs, or Deadpool being Deadpool ...?

You get the idea.

Not to mention the "misunderstand" fight — that's two superheroes running into each other, either or both thinking that the other is the bad guy.

Wolverine / Daredevil: Batman would win against both of these men with heightened senses, and for the same reason: he'd bring itching powder.

Captain America:

Batman vs. Captain America was already seen in a Marvel vs. DC crossover event in the mid-90s. They'd be very evenly matched, and it would end in a draw, probably a double-KO. But that's if it's Captain America -- if it's a clone, or a twin, or anyone other than Steve Rodgers, Batman will probably win on the grounds of stubbornness

Doctor Strange:

Batman would have a nice, calm, reasonable conversation with the good Doctor, and not piss him off.

The Vision:

Batman deals with the Red Tornado, the DC comics version of Vision, every other day. He has a plan to kill Red Tornado (and everyone else in the Justice League, really) so he'd probably use that on Vision.

I could continue, but this is already over-long.

FLIP THIS SCRIPT

And what about Spider Man? How would he fair in Gotham?

Well, for the most part, that's easy. Batman has few, if any, superpowered villains. Two Face? Riddler? Penguin? Black Mask? Easy. And many of the others are covered above:

Killer Croc and Solomon Grundy: Peter Parker fights Rhino and the Lizard.

Clayface (see Sandman), Killer Moth (for Spiderman, he would just be a combination of Vulture and Green Goblin).

Then imagine it: Joker versus Peter Parker. That would happen once. Yes, once. Why? Because Joker and Spider-Man would be trading jokes and one-liners, and Joker would then stomp away, pouting that he'd been out-matched and couldn't hit Spider-Man. In short: Spider-man wouldn't be any fun. Joker would lock himself away in Arkham until Batman came back.

Bane:

As soon as Bane hears that Batman is no longer in Gotham, he'd come back to town. If he's still on the Venom, he'd be a quick disable— just pull his steroid-pump injector tubes.

If he's not, and Bane is relying solely on his brain ... then Peter Parker would be in trouble, especially if Bane saw him as a threat.

Though, seriously, if Bane were just left alone to run the criminal organizations of Gotham, Spider-Man may not have a problem with that. Again, it depends on how Bane is written. If it's the Bane who just wants to run the underworld and rule the criminals, Spider-Man just might ask him to have no collateral damage, thank you. And could you take out Black Mask? He's a nutter, thanks.

If Bane is written as a world-destroying sociopath, then it would be a matter of playing chess with a gun to your head. But, thankfully, Spider-Man has no problem playing well with others, and he'd have a

dozen team-ups by then, and he'd call everyone on his Rolodex.

Poison Ivy:

One of the closest that Batman has to a super-villain. If this is the Poison Ivy of the animated series, Spider-man may not have too much of a problem with her man-eating plants. If it's the Ivy of the Arkham video games, the one who is herself a killer plant, it would slow Spider-Man down. A little.

Seriously, who would be a problem for Spider Man in this universe?

How about this: Deadshot, Deathstroke, Scarecrow, Mr. Freeze. Ra's al-Ghul.

Deadshot? See all of Spider-Man's run-ins with the Punisher. It would be kind of like that. No, seriously, the Punisher gave Spider-Man a boatload of trouble, including shooting Spider-Man's webshooters off of his wrist, while both parties were in motion. That'd be fun.

Why Deathstroke? Because Slade Wilson would analyze Spiderman's movements (perhaps by first subcontracting a few guys to be canon fodder), and discover "Hmm, he has an ESP-like quality that predicts danger," and either decide that it would be something to use against Spiderman, or a reason to avoid dealing with him entirely.

Scarecrow:

Imagine Peter Parker, and his resume, and all of his insecurities, and tell me that Scarecrow wouldn't turn him into a quivering mass of psychosis. But, then again, five minutes after Spiderman lands in Gotham, he'd be working with the Bat-family, and be inoculated.

Mister Freeze

It would be a challenge, but Spider-Man has gone a few rounds with Iron Man, he can take a guy in a cold suit. This is assuming that Peter doesn't just say, "Hey, Freeze, can I look at your research for your wife's illness?"

Ra's al-Ghul:

Batman usually has to deal with Ra's because the League is always trying to recruit him. Without Batman in Gotham, would Ra's bother? If the answer is yes, then that's when Spider-Man would hit the panic button and calls in other heroes. Though, honestly, in a fight between Ra's and Spider-Man, it would probably be no contest. Spider-Man has fought The Hand, who are essentially magical ninjas, he can deal with a few psychotic al-Qaeda rejects who think they're in the Arabian nights.

The Allies

And then there's dealing with the Bat-family. Again, Spider-Man plays well with others so much, he had an entire comic-book line dedicated entirely to team-ups. He doesn't get more user friendly than this. He'd apply to the Justice League as soon as possible, and ask them if 1) They had any inter-dimensional portal equipment and 2) if he could sign up.

Also, Oracle would take one look at him and say "You're a brightly-colored superhero in Gotham city

... you go in the front, they'll all shoot at you. Nightwing, Robin, et al, will go in the back and pick the goons off stealthy-like. That'll work fine."

Spider-man might actually try making a move on Barbara Gordon (wheelchair or not... she is a red-head), but that depends on if he's married in this continuity.

I'm not sure if Catwoman would try going after Spider-Man.

She goes for tall dark and serious, and Spider-Man? Not so much.

Now, what happens when heroes go bad, and Spider-Man has to face them?

Superman: if Superman goes bad, and Spider-Man is left alone with him in a dark alley, Spider-Man would dodge, dodge, keep dodging, all the while try to diagnose and deprogram him. Also, green glowing rocks of kryptonite.

Wonder Woman

Possibly the best fighter in all of DC, Wonder Woman would trash Spider-Man ... if she can get her hands on him. I don't recall if she can fly, but if she's ground-based, getting Spider-Man would be a hassle. If she can fly, he really can run, and run, and run, until he drops a wall on her, and continues running.

Green Lantern

Considering that Hal Jordan is friends with perpetual jokester and semi-Anarchist Oliver Queen (this is the comic books, remember), he would probably get along great with Peter Parker. If he went bad ... Spider-Man wouldn't have to deal with it, because there's a whole Green Lantern corps.

Oliver Queen

The DC Comics Green Arrow would hate Spider-Man. Because they're far too much alike.

Barry Allen

As they're both Science-Nerds, they would work great together. But stopping Flash? That would probably take more than just a tripwire.

Yeah...anyway, this was a crapton of work.

And of course, these are only the HIGHLIGHTS. There are so many heroes, villains, and miscellaneous that would take up a whole book, to hell with just a blog.

Anyway, welcome to the inside of my brain. Bring a flashlight, it's dark in here.

~Finis~





































