

The N3J
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor
August 2025

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Editorial

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

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Novels

A Beautiful Friendship by David Weber

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

The best way to follow up a super serious post about a graphic novel covering an important subject is by reviewing a Science Fiction novel about treecats.

Listen, this blog is a work in progress and sometimes it gets messy.

All of this to say that I recently read David Weber's novel A Beautiful Friendship. You purists out there may be tempted to point out that I did it because I was going to a meet up with a couple local chapters of The Royal Manticoran Navy: The Official Honor Harrington Fan Association. You may even be right. The fact remains that I helped plan the outing and I picked out the book (along with my buddy/Commanding Officer David) so neener, neener, neener. I read it. I loved it. And, put bluntly, who needs purists anyway?

So, right, the book...

This is the third time I've read the thing, and the first time I've reviewed it. My excuse is because this book is so old that I read it twice before I started my blog in 2015. No system's perfect, right. Better late than never?

I mean...

Yeah, the book.

A Beautiful Friendship is part of the Star Kingdom series which is in and of itself a part of the Honor Harrington universe aka the Honorverse. I've been following these books for about twenty-ish years now, going back to right around the time I met my ex-wife and before I had kids. My oldest is eighteen now. Suffice it to say that I'm a huge fan.

A Beautiful Friendship is a prequel leading back to the origins of the Star Kingdom (later Star Empire) of Manticore and also of the Harrington clan's beginnings as citizens therein. Stephanie Harrington, our heroine and all around likeable young girl, is on a quest to find something to do. Her family has recently immigrated to the SKM after living on a much older, more settled planet with a larger population, more forms of entertainment and people her age who aren't boring. The planet Sphinx is largely still wild with a small contingent of humanity on the planet, trying to make their way and build something.

Enter Stephanie who, quite frankly, is everything I taught my daughters to be; strong, smart, proud, tough and brave. She has a bit of that teenage brashness about her as well but that makes sense because she's a teenager. So when human settlers start reporting that celery is being burgled from their greenhouses (Sphinxian winters last a long time) she is intrigued. When celery starts disappearing from the Harrington greenhouse, she sets out to find out who or what is doing it. And what she catches on camera...

Fans of the mainline Honorverse books all knew what I was when they read the word "celery." What she discovers is the first treecat known to humanity. And when she finds out it has and uses a net made of local fibers, things start to get interesting. Treecats aren't the first sentient species known to humans, but there haven't been many and she's a kid. She's also afraid her parents will find out that she snuck out after dark, in the rain...

As adults we sometimes forget how badly it sucked to have to listen to parental instructions about everything. As parents, we know why they were necessary but that doesn't change the fact that we hated it. Weber does an awesome job of putting us back in that teenage mindset, wanting to do more than we're allowed to and frustrated because we can't. Of course, Stephanie is a Harrington and doesn't lack for personal initiative. She's also quite a bit less disciplined than her more famous descendant and finds ways around rules.

Seriously, I had to pull out my copy of *Better to Beg Forgiveness* and make sure that it was indeed written by Michael Z. Williamson and not David Weber, because little Ms. Harrington lives that philosophy to its fullest. And, if it gets her in trouble from time to time, that just makes the whole experience more fun. Every story needs conflict after all.

I don't want to spoil too much of the book, but this isn't just a book about Man(girl) vs. Nature or Man vs. Parents. There is some serious villainy here and some more subtle danger emanating from pretty much everywhere around Harrington. She deals with it with equanimity for the most part. Stephanie Harrington is a girl who can keep her cool during a crisis. She's the kind of person I'd want along with me if I were doing something requiring guts and a calm mind, even if I might wish for a person with a bit more life experience.

There is a lot of really cool stuff here about the first few humans who bond with treecats, becoming almost the equivalent of a Treecat and their spouse. It's pretty cool if you've been following the series for a long time and maybe even cooler if you haven't. Those of us who are familiar with Honor and her treecat Nimitz take certain things for granted. Having read the later books, I know how smart treecats are. I'm used to the fact that they can bond with people and some very clear indications of the psychic abilities of treecats and their utility are listed in the later works.

If you haven't read those books though, a lot of it will come as a surprise. It's a voyage of discovery for Stephanie, her treecat Lionheart and indeed the entire human and treecat species. No one had a way to anticipate what was possible before Lionheart accidentally bonded with Stephanie, and the world takes a weird turn afterward because neither one of them know what to expect, either. As experienced readers we know some of what's coming, but even then, not all of it and the human element in the book leads places I never expected it to go.

A Beautiful Friendship was one of the first books I managed to get my hands on and read after my divorce in 2012. Times were rough then, and it helped me get through a pretty rough time. It's a lot easier to enjoy it this time and I'm glad I took the time to reread it. The writing hasn't changed but I have. This is exactly the right type of book to read if you need a quick distraction from life to make you feel better. People are surprised when they find out that I didn't turn to drinking or drugs when my depression got bad. It's thanks to writers like David Weber and books like *ABF* that I'm not stuck in lifelong drug/alcohol rehab. If a pick me up is what you need, hie thee off to the bookstore and pick yourself up a copy. If not, buy one anyway. It's a good book regardless.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Carry Nets

The Bones of the Apostle by John Amos

Review by Jason P. Hunt

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Historical fiction is sometimes pretty tricky to get right.

We join Flinders Petrie and Thomas Pettigrew as they're stewing in their place on Baker Street, just across the street from the Holmes residence (yes, that Holmes). It's a Victorian era tale of two detectives who've grown bored and are needing one more adventure. And in between the witty repartee — such as it is — and the redecorating, Petrie and Pettigrew spend a great deal of time doing... nothing.

Until the case comes along. It's an unusual one: the mortal remains of the Apostle Thomas have been stolen, and our two heroes are hired to retrieve them. In the course of their preparation, they pick up assistance from one Gazelda Jones, a retired witch with a lot of book knowledge but little field experience.

Now, on the surface, that's a pretty interesting premise, and I even interviewed John Amos about the book a while back on Live From The Bunker:

Unfortunately, most of the book is spent totally ignoring the main point of the book. Instead, we spend a lot of time — a lot of time — inside Petrie's head as he ruminates about things in the present that remind him of things in the past. He and Pettigrew also spend a great deal of time talking about events from the last time they went to the Arabian Peninsula, much of which doesn't really impact their actions on the current case.

There's a lot of banter. A lot of dialogue that feels like it was lifted from a film made in the 1940s, witty quick single sentences and such. Only it feels like a lot of that dialogue is there to show how Amos has studied the films of the period without digging too deep into the substance of them. It brings to mind Trelane, the Squire of Gothos, from Star Trek, as he recreates the forms and designs of Ye Olde Earth without knowing anything more about it (the fireplace has no heat, for instance).

While it's a pretty easy read, much of the book is spent on things that, to me, seem pretty pointless to the case at hand. And that case — the retrieval of a precious religious artifact — is given criminally short shrift. The main plot of the book almost doesn't even really exist except as a McGuffin to start their travels. The resolution of the case is extremely brief, happens pretty much off-stage, as it were, and isn't even accomplished by either of the two main characters.

So, too, is the villain of the piece given negligible time and attention. This Veiled One of which they speak in dreaded tones is nothing more than a wraith who appears and disappears within a few pages.

I have to say I was mostly disappointed after reading this one, although I actually like the characters of Petrie and Pettigrew, on the whole. I could have done without all the name-dropping of other characters such as Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, T.E. Lawrence, and the like. I would have preferred more time spent on the case they were investigating rather than the reminiscing that dominates the narrative.

This is one of those books I could recommend, ish, but I won't not recommend it. If you're looking for stuff in the style of the Holmes stories, this is in that wheelhouse. Your mileage may vary on how much you enjoy reading a travelogue memoir over a thrilling mystery.

The Chosen One's Assistant by Kimber Grey

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Before I even get started reviewing Kimber Grey's *The Chosen One's Assistant: Never Meet Your Heroes*, I would like to point out that, not only was it based on Mikey Mason's (Not Quite) *The Chosen One*. His music is epic and I highly recommend listening to it either on Spotify or Bandcamp. I loved the track the first time I heard it and I love it still.

The Chosen One's Assistant is every bit as good as the song except better. There is a lot here and that makes it more fun. As opposed to five minutes of music we get over three hundred pages of story. And it's a lot more of a developed story in the book. There's just more time for it.

And time is something that Tiberius (that's our main character) and *The Chosen One* (Who has no name. He's just *The Chosen One*.) don't have as something seems to have gone wrong and is causing the appearance of vampire stoats in a few days away and we're not sure where they're coming from but this can't be good and we need to put a stop to this...

And Tiberius, who has only been Tiberius for a short while (his gave up his old name when he signed on to be the *Chosen One's Assistant*. Now he is Tiberius like all of the other assistants before him and all of the ones who will come after.) and he's still learning. And listen, there's a lot to this whole Tiberius thing. He's got to handle all of the chores and all of the healing, meet with people, pray a lot...

And there's no training period. He just has to learn everything all at once. With no real help, since the *Chosen One* is rather self centered and apparently not overly fond of breaking in a new Tiberius every two years. There is a bit of hostility there.

It's awesome though, because it makes sense. There is a bit of drill sergeant to *The Chosen One* who doesn't always have time to screw around explaining things. He's a man of action. He kills things for a living. He makes good money doing it, as does Tiberius, but there is a lot to it.

Tiberius has a lot to do outside of cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc. He's the one that's in charge of anything academic. He has to research the route to travel, research the threat once they get there, etc. He also has to meet with the townspeople to coordinate the big party when they get there and to figure out where to stay and whatever else. Tiberius works harder than I do and that's saying something. I respect this character.

I respect the *Chosen One* too because, although he can be a bit arrogant at times, he is a true hero and he cares. He doesn't just face down threats for the glory or the loot. He does it to protect the people he serves. He does it because he is indeed the *Chosen One* and it is his duty.

He's also a goofball. There is some serious humor in this book and it comes from the *Chosen One* more or less wimping out. This is where the book is the most like the song, which was a comedy tune about how badly life sucked for the *Chosen One's Assistant* (he's not referred to as Tiberius in the song.) There's nothing here that you would have to read the book to get per se, but if you've listened to the song a few times (like I told you to earlier) then it goes from hilariously funny to "Oops, I think I dislocated a rib laughing at that one. Bonus points if you listen to the song after you read the book and realize all the stuff you missed the first time and start laughing all over again.

The *Chosen One* is also a man of faith. Now, it's not a real world religion. Grey created a fantasy pan-

theon which she has done a fairly decent job of fleshing out and assigning roles to. There aren't a whole lot of interactions directly with gods, but I like what I see so far. I wouldn't mind seeing more about both the gods and their servants, but there are more books coming, so I guess I'll have to wait.

But it's the actual exploration of faith in the book that has me hooked. Pretty much every fantasy universe has its pantheon. Most even have clerics or paladins. Very few (The Chosen One's Assistant and R.A. Salvatore's The Cleric Quintet are all that come to mind in High Fantasy. Declan Finn's St Tommy NYPD series is an urban fantasy that shows faith as well but that's about all that I've got in the world of Science Fiction and Fantasy literature.) that actually show acts of faith. Not just praying, but believing and trusting in the god you serve to see you through whatever it is that you're going through. There is strength in faith in the real world and for the Chosen One. Tiberius is working on his. I love the Chosen One's belief and his act of sharing it with others. That's not to say that this is a preachy book. It merely shows the champion and his faith and how he shares it with others to encourage them. Major Kira would be proud.

There are some really awesome action sequences in the book, too. Tiberius isn't really up to snuff with all of this hand to hand combat stuff, but he's got balls. Big brass ones. I don't think I'd want to go into combat armed with the level of knowledge Tiberius has. I mean, it's good to have a dagger but it's better if you know how to use it properly. The Chosen One is, of course, a badass. Except when he's not. Nice foot guy. But, for the most part, the Chosen One can deliver a beatdown like few others.

Grey's worldbuilding is first rate as well. She's got a good grasp of what is needed to make a fantasy town work and how trails worked in the Medieval world. She throws in just enough gut wrenching awful to make the totally awesome work even better and I like that about her. This is the first of her books that I've read, but it won't be the last.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Cramped Toes

Conscript by Scott Bartlett
Review by JR Handley
upstreamreviews.substack.com

Hey Space Cadets, it's time for another epic JR Handley book review! This is a book by one of my favorite wordsmiths. The author, Scott Bartlett, brings his own unique take on the world. He grew up in eastern Canada, where he had to wrestle moose en route to his school at the top of Mount Doom. Wait, what is the plural of moose?

Anyway, according to his bio, he's had a myriad of jobs that flavor the stories he writes and the worlds he builds. He worked as a salmon hatchery technician, grocery clerk, youth care worker, ghostwriter, research assistant, pita maker, and freelance editor. His vast array of jobs and the experiences they represent give him a depth to his writing that makes his works pop.

This is a book that I initially found when I won a contest for a free audiobook from the author, Scott Bartlett. He routinely gives away these freebies to his fans, he is the kind of person who truly appreciates the readers who make his writing a viable career for him. I know a lot of authors say that, but Scott is someone who puts action behind his words. I've always liked that about him and it's why I happily manage his fan club on Facebook.

I'm glad that I won that contest, because I was hooked from page one, and the author kept my attention throughout my reading journey! The entire premise was a coming-of-age story that started with the "go

to war or go to jail” Faustian bargain. This one hit close to home because I served with men who got that same offer, though not as blunt since the enlistment oath. They were good men who made dumb mistakes as kids. Of course, when I knew them, they were on their third hitch, so they were well past that offer. Still, it is a viscerally real premise.

The Story

Born into generational poverty, one man decides to make a bold play for financial independence. Thievery and skullduggery were involved, but you do what you must in this cold universe. Except he wasn't that lucky, and it didn't work out. He was arrested on his first attempt at crime and faced a choice: go to jail or enlist in the Marines. Naturally, he chose the Marines. Conscripted into the Global Equity Accord's military-industrial complex, this book follows Po from civilian life to conscripted recruit. He battles through this transition, culminating in a fight for his life against an alien scourge that dares to intrude upon his boot camp shenanigans.

I've mentioned this in other sections of this review, so I won't belabor this point. Instead, I'll focus on the writing of *Conscript* by Scott Bartlett. I can't comment on the grammar, since I experienced this story in an audio-only format. I can, however, speak to the prose of this epic adventure. Scott Bartlett crafts this tale with his usual expert wordsmithing. His descriptions are evocative, allowing me to vividly picture every scene with razor-sharp clarity as I listened to Mark Boyett narrate the audiobook. Bartlett demonstrates a firm command of the English language, bringing the story to life. I felt as though I was right beside Po, experiencing his life in uniform.

Another strength of *Conscript* was how the story progresses. The pacing is expertly handled, moving seamlessly from personal interactions to crime, conscription, training, and combat. Each event flows smoothly into the next, with well-timed comedic moments to ease the transitions. The story narrative gave me room to breathe, amidst the chaos of a galaxy at war.

Finally, it's worth highlighting Scott Bartlett's authorial voice as he gifted us this fun novel. His prose strikes me as a workmanlike blend of Tom Clancy's precision and Shakespearean wordsmithing. He merges literary depth with adventure fiction, elevating both the story and the genre through the quality of his narrative. Yeah, I'm pimping this book hard, but I lost sleep listening to this because I was hooked from the first word. I was left with a cliffhanger, so I can't wait for the next audiobook to launch! Write faster, Scott, write faster!

The Characters

This is a military science fiction story about one man and the war he waged for survival. Obviously, he's not waging that war alone, so there were a lot of characters in his military unit. Those men cycled in and out, through transfers and attrition. Because the focus was on Po Abbato, we didn't get to know any of these other Marines well enough to consider them as anything more than well-developed tertiary characters. With that said, I think it's important to focus on the main character, Po.

So, who is Po? He's a person born into generational poverty, in a world where the debt passes on from parent to child. He was born with his grandfather's, father's and mother's debt—all of it passed on to him. He rebelled against that reality; he wanted a better life for him and his younger siblings. He wanted a life away from the indentured servitude that offered no possibility of future success. So, he made a calculated decision to try extralegal activities. Yes, I'm talking about piracy or theft. He tried that route to get ahead, but it didn't work out. He got caught on his first attempted criminal activity and ended up being given the age-old choice. Go to war or go to jail... and he chose the (Global Equity Accord) GEA

Now, let's talk about how the world was shared with us. There was some frontloading of world building, but not in a way that took us out of the story. Instead, we were exposed to this world through the main character's eyes, so we learned what he saw, and thought was important enough to pay attention too. The author hit the Goldilocks Zone for what he shared with us and when. It wasn't too much, and we never without the information needed to understand the story environment.

Politics

This novel is a military action-adventure story, so there are no politics in the traditional sense. However, to quote the legendary Clausewitz, "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means." Do with that what you will! To be fair, I found the religiosity more in your face than anything political. Not that that was overdone, just that it was more there than politics. And those religious musings fit the story, so even this happy heathen didn't mind. The politicians and big corporations are corrupt, but he didn't dwell on it. This was not a "message" book; it was just the world where the adventure happened.

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 15. This story had wartime violence, so there were characters who died. And there was violence in this book, both in the training montage and in the combat scenes. It wasn't overly gory by my standards, but your mileage may vary. Finally, this novel has very Catholic themes and direct commentary throughout. I thought it fit the characters and his evolution and maturation process. If this bugs you, rest assured that it wasn't so bad you'd have to skip this book. And if you don't mind that, it's even better, because this was an awesome adventure and well worth your time.

Narration

The audiobook was expertly done, and the accents were consistent. The narrator, Mark Boyett, did a fantastic job reading this story to me! I'd definitely recommend this vocal guru for any audiobook lover! Even with the price increases in modernity, I'd still recommend Mark to my auditory fanatics! He didn't bore you, or make you zone out because of his monotone. His performance didn't feel robotic like a machine was reading the novel to me. You'll often see that from me because it'll drag me out of a book so fast that I can't listen to it anymore. With Mark Boyett piped straight into my earbuds, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. Only he made kind of cool voices, with believable accents that didn't yank you out of the story.

Who is it for?

Are you a fan of military science fiction with a side of space opera? Did you like the Frontlines Series by Marko Kloos? What about The Forever War by Joe Haldeman? This book is for anyone who loves the realism of the genre, the no-holds-barred look through the fog of war into the soul of everyman.

Why buy it.

This is the story of the every-man soldier, well Marine. He's an underdog warrior who overcomes his lack of training to play an important role in a war nobody was ready for. The world where the story happened was worth the price of entry by itself. If you love a thrill ride through a worst-case political scenario with a barely legal warrior at the helm, this is the novel for you!

Marines.

When he started this novel, he was a brash youth whose immaturity got him in over his head as he tried to shepherd his siblings into a better life. He's an idealistic youth who pines for a better future, but he's also a solid rock at home for his younger siblings. His sister is sick and needs a lot of care, which was the motivating factor for his criminality in the first place. He also wants to shield his younger brother from his abusive father and older brother. Carrying that amount of emotional weight isn't something a weak man could handle, so despite whatever character flaws he has, there's iron in his core.

I really liked him as a character; he was well-written. I thought he reacted appropriately to the situations he was exposed to. While I'm reviewing book one, I've read all of the published novels in this series. Later in the series, he sometimes seems a little too clueless, a little too naïve. But he lived an isolated life on a small mining outpost. Also, different people mature on different timelines. It never felt like the character arc crossed the line where Po became too stupid to live.

The first book is Po's coming-of-age story, he's a man coming to grips with the harsh reality of military life. He struggles with what these changes mean for his life, and he doesn't adapt as easily as some of his other training Marine. I thought Scott Bartlett did an excellent job showing this military training. When he let us see it through Po's eyes, it let those moments really hit home. Then, after the initial combat operation, Bartlett did an excellent job of showing the shock of his first battle. Those first moments when they're attacked were poetry in motion.

The World

Now, let's dive deeper into the world where this story takes place. My initial reaction was that the world was too bleak. I'm not a fan of grimdark books, but I'm a super fan of Scott Bartlett, so I kept with it, and I was glad that I did. In the world of *Conscript* was a bleak and unforgiving place. It is defined by deep class divides, vividly illustrated through the perspective of Po Abbato, a young man born into the indentured servant class on one of the mining colonies. This bottom-up view highlights the socio-economic disparities that shape the lives of the underprivileged in a society controlled by powerful mega-corporations.

More than the socio-economic factors, this was a setting that was heavily militarized, with the Global Equity Accord (GAE) wielding its Marines as an iron fist to enforce corporate rule and suppress dissent across the colonized solar system. The universe isn't just controlled by these mega-corporations; the Earth governments play a hand at control as well. They enforce their rule through the iron fist of the Global Equity Accord (GAE) Marines. These forces also serve as the first line of defense against an alien threat, which looms as a constant danger to humanity's foothold in space.

The world is rich with advanced technology, a hallmark of the military science fiction genre. This includes powered armor, spaceships, cybernetic enhancements, and other sophisticated tools.

Standout technologies include the compact Gauss rifle, which was personalized and printed on demand. They used a smart system that filmed the round until it hit the target, allowing Marines to review their shots via video for continual improvement and command oversight. However, the novel's strength is that technology alone isn't enough to seize the day. In the chaos of battle, Marines often face situations where these high-tech tools are unavailable, forcing them to rely on quick thinking and adaptability to survive.

Cross Over by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Does it count as fan fiction if the actual author writes it? That's the question that kept entering my mind as I was reading Declan Finn's *Cross Over* (Honeymoon from Hell Book 4). Don't get me wrong, this is quality writing. It's probably the best written thing I've read by Finn and I've been following this dude for quite awhile now. But, like, I can't help but think that somewhere out there, Finn was sitting at home one night geeking out over his own work and just thought to himself, "Wouldn't it be SOOO COOOOOL if there was a story that Marco and Amanda (Honeymoon from Hell/Love at First Bite Series), Tommy Nolan (St. Tommy NYPD) and Sean AP Ryan (Convention Killings) in it and they were in Rome getting trained by Vatican Ninjas?" and then sat down and started tapping away on his keyboard while giggle like a thirteen year old girl writing a My Little Pony story on Tumblr.

That's not a criticism though. If anything, the joy that Finn felt writing *Cross Over* translates into enjoyment for the reader. Probably the first word that comes to mind when speaking about this book is "fun". There is so much going on that you can't possibly get bored. Of course, Finn has beef with the country of Italy and manages to tear apart some more of the countryside, but that's awesome too. I guess my biggest complaint about *Cross Over* is that there's so much going on that I didn't want to stop reading it. As a matter of fact I'm going to a convention in September and Finn is going to be there. After I stick my tongue out at him (see my review of *Blue Saint*) I'm going to look him straight in the face and ask, "HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO FIND TWO MINUTES TO PEE WITH SO MUCH GOING ON IN THIS BOOK?" Seriously, my bladder will never forgive Finn for this one.

It's weird though, too. *Cross Over* is the fourth book in the Honeymoon from Hell series but I honestly think it shouldn't be. Granted it features Marco and Amanda from the series, but their honeymoon is over. Most of the people that accompanied them are no longer present. There are characters from other series present though. In a lot of ways, *Cross Over* feels like it should be Book One in the Vatican Ninja Training series instead of a continuation of the old one though. That much having been said, this is a good thing.

Pretty much every time I review a sequel to pretty much anything I recommend not reading the sequel until you've read what comes before. I'm going to break that habit here. *Cross Over* is the start of a new story. I've never read a book by Finn that I wouldn't recommend but you don't have to read the other stuff first to understand the story here. You could run off to Amazon, pick up a copy and follow along just fine. I'm not going to pretend that I didn't enjoy the book more because I knew a ton of the characters from previous works but hand to hand combat and zombies and absolute and total destruction are fun regardless of whether you know about Marco's history with the gangs of New York or not.

The action sequences in *Cross Over* are over the top and amazing. No one can trash a place quite like Declan Finn can. Whether it's Marco with his knives, Tommy with his charms, Ryan with his guy or Amanda with her vampire abilities the important characters in any Finn novel always know how to use their abilities to cause the maximum amount of carnage. And, in the spirit of all superhero stories everywhere (and Finn's protagonists uniformly have a bit of superhero feel to them) our protagonists don't give up and keep pushing forward toward victory even when victory seems impossible. It's the type of indomitable relentlessness that I really respect in a main character.

It's nice to see a group of characters with a true moral center in a modern novel. *Cross Over* is the story of heroes fighting for what's right. There are no morally gray anti-heroes here. Finn's characters are

unabashedly Catholic and that belief in God informs a lot of what happens in Cross Over. They're not training with the Vatican Ninjas just because the Vatican Ninjas are a bunch of badassess (they are) but because they're training with representatives of the Catholic Church. This makes sense for all of them and especially for St. Tommy. That much having been said, if you're the bigoted type and are offended by Catholic imagery this is not the book for you. Of course, my ex-wife and both of my daughters are confirmed Catholics so that doesn't bother me, but to each his own I guess. And yes, there is actually praying the book, although no depictions of Mass are included that I remember.

Catholic weaponry does make its appearance though and that's always been a fun part of any St. Tommy novel. Packets of holy salt, Super Soakers full of holy water, etc. do seem to make sense as weapons against the literal minions of Satan and it's okay if I get a little chuckle when they're used. Who thinks to load holy water into a squirt gun and shoot it at a demon? Good time guys. Good times.

I'd say that I'm waiting impatiently for the second and final book in the Vatican Ninja Training series (that's my story and I'm stickin' to it, even if Finn spells it Honeymoon from Hell and thinks it's the fourth book. I dunno what he did to his autocorrupt to break it to that extent. I'm not sure I want to.) but the bottom line is that I already have it. I purchased the ebook awhile back and I'll be reviewing it soon. I'm looking forward to it. I'm sure you are too. Probably. I mean, you're still here, right?

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Silver Blades

The Downloaded by Robert J. Sawyer Review by Samuel Lubell

The Downloaded by Canadian author Robert J. Sawyer is a very short novel, at just 190 pages. But these 190 pages pack more ideas than many novels twice its length.

The book begins with Dr. Jurgen Haas being interviewed by an unknown person, describing how he was brought out of his virtual reality environment by the Captain of their expedition to Proxima Centauri. The crew was supposed to wake up from cryonic suspension in 500 years when their vessel arrived, with their minds conscious of only a few years passing in virtual reality. Instead, they wake up in a 2548 to discover that they never left Earth, which is now in ruins.

The would-be astronauts are not the only ones to be revived. The Quantum Cryonics Institute also houses convicted criminals who were supposed to complete their sentence in a sped-up virtual reality. One of these former criminals immediately tries to rape a Mennonite girl; from the religious group that seems to be the only surviving humans (because they know how to survive without technology).

So, the book has conflict between the astronauts and the criminals, the mystery of what happened to Earth (and the first answer they believe is not the real story), a murder mystery as the coffin of their chief robot expert had been vandalized (making his revival impossible), the threat of an asteroid that one of the scientists has discovered will hit the Earth in 2555, trans romance, robot rights, and the eventually revelation of the person who has been conducting the interviews that comprise the book. Most authors would spread all these plot ideas into a trilogy, not cram them into less than 200 pages of a single book. But Sawyer makes it all work.

Despite this packed plot, Sawyer doesn't shortchange his characters. He gives a full background to his three main characters – the doctor, the Captain, and the former criminal who becomes the mayor - as well as developing a few more characters. Even the robots have some characterization.

Inevitably, some of this feels rushed and some readers may think the frantic pacing does not allow the story room to breathe. Still, I think it is better to avoid the bloat that plagues many doorstoppers and provide readers with an interesting story that has no time to grow boring.

It is worth noting that, even though Sawyer is one of the big names in science fiction, with 25 novels to his credits along with a Hugo, a Nebula, and multiple Canadian Aurora Awards, he chose to publish this book through Shadowpaw Press, a small new Canadian publisher. (The book was originally published as an audiobook-only Audible Exclusive.)

I recommend this book for anyone who still sees science fiction as the literature of ideas.

Elak of Atlantis by Henry Kuttner
Review by Cedar Sanderson
CedarWrites.com

Sword and Sorcery at its finest

Classic stories of blood and thunder, the very essence of sword and sorcery, and if you enjoy Robert Howard's Conan, you might even like these better.

This edition of Elak of Atlantis is the four short works written by Henry Kuttner, with meticulous formatting and a wonderful introduction by D. Jason Fleming. Not all introductions are worth reading (and some introduce major spoilers, I'm looking at you, British Crime Library), but this one delves into interesting territory and sets up the book for the aficionado.

Elak is a former prince of Atlantis, wandering in exile with a drunken sot of a fighter as a sidekick. A Druid priest, Dalan, seems to turn up with annoying (for Elak) regularity and trouble is always in his wake. Unless he's there to fish Elak out of a sticky situation. There are strange religions, creatures never meant to see the light of day, mad wizards, and cutting a bloody path through it all is Elak. While there are mystical planes described in beautiful detail, the stories are never confusing or hard to follow. These are popcorn stories, enjoyable to spend an hour or two stepping into the theater of the mind, far from the humdrum daily routine.

As a writer, reading these in succession will show you the mechanics of how it's done. There are repetitions, not of scenes, but of concepts like self-sacrifice and honor, played out in most of the stories. The women may not be repeating characters, but they are strong, sweet, and noble. The sidekick Lycaon will get drunk, save Elak's hide, and the battle will be won.

Seriously, this is a book worth reading and studying. Go! Enjoy!

Exigency by Michael Siemsen
Review by JR Handley
upstreamreviews.substack.com

I love the idea of exploring other planets and meeting alien species. I have a bit of Captain Kirk in me, because I want to boldly go where nobody else has gone. Of course, I've no desire to impregnate aliens, but the exploration sounds fun!

One thing that helped the author, Michael Siemsen, tell such a compelling story of wilderness survival on an alien planet was that he spent time as a tanker. I played in the dirt, lived in the field and generally did more with less while serving in the combat arms. He drove tanks, armored personnel carriers and bridge layers while doing the good work of Uncle Sam. I can't help but think that this experience helped him understand what life looked like outside of suburbia.

The Story

This novel tells the story of several scientists, who travel light years on a one-way trip to an Earth-like planet. Their mission was to study the two species of intelligent lifeforms on the surface from their orbital station. One of the species was an isolated people embarking on civilization and building their world's first city. The other species was a brutal race of massive predators, spreading across the dominant landmass. The scientists believe this species is destined to breed and eat their way to extinction within a few centuries. After almost a decade of observation, disaster struck the orbiting station and only two crew members ejected successfully. Drifting down through a dark alien sky, the pair realizes their escape pod launched not toward the safety of the city, but to the other side of the planet. They ultimately touch down deep inside a land no human could possibly survive.

That was the story, now let's talk about the prose. The author is extremely skilled at crafting the pretty words. I thought this was one of Michael Siemsen's strong points as an author. It was a joy to read his words, even without the compelling story behind them. The story wasn't non-stop action, but I found I didn't care because I was hooked on the story and the big ideas within it.

The author also got the descriptions right. They were spot on, adding to the desperate vibe that the unwitting and unintentional colonists endured. I'd love to go into more details, but I strive for spoiler free reviews. Seriously, if this is ever made into a movie the script writers won't have to worry about imagining things because Michael Siemsen gave them what they needed!

One of my main issues, aside from the characters, was the use of alien languages in the story. I get it, you want to show your world building and how things are different, but if you invent translation programs in your world, we don't need to be bogged down with the language. Move on, tell the story already!

The story was disjointed at times, though I can't tell you how without ruining the plot. It was high-octane on the drama, an even mix of internal angst and outside forces. Though, if strange aliens wanted to eat you, you'd be pretty angst ridden as well. I can't fault that artistic choice here, it fit the circumstances. While I did think it was disjointed, the novel was easy enough to follow, so that might just be a personal preference on my part. And for all its faults, which might not be flaws for some people, the story kept me riveted. I couldn't put it down, even as I wanted to throw Minnie off a cliff! I read this in just under two days, which is pretty quick for me. Again, other than the character development, this was a solid plot that was well written.

The Characters

There were many secondary characters, but I'll limit my review to the two main ones. The characters were exactly what I would expect from a group of scientists, but that meant they weren't necessarily as likeable or personable. The author does get credit for their believability, but much of this is to be expected from this sub-genre of science fiction. Overall, character development was one of the weak spots in this novel.

Minerva (Minnie): She was, hands down, the main point of view character and John was her supporting cast. She has been diagnosis with HSPD, some new psychotic condition that forces her to remain on medicine to maintain her sanity. Why would you send someone like this into space? I don't know, because the author never told us. She was whiny, annoying and I didn't really like her, but I didn't want her to die either. She was well rounded, not very likeable, and shouldn't have been anywhere near a space exploration mission. She was believable, as a character, but I kept yelling "Why isn't she back on Earth?"

John: This character was very thought out, although he came off as a bit too perfect for my tastes. The usual "Mr. Awesome," who sails through life until Thing X in the story requires divergence from his life's trajectory. He was strong at times when many would have broken down, and I didn't feel like we had enough back story to justify his actions. Overall, it wouldn't have bothered me if he got struck by lightning and tied.

The World

Creating this world was an area where the author excelled! The world was vivid, I could imagine all of it. Seriously, this is one novel that I want to see it on the big screen. The world was fleshed out, and completely believable given the circumstances everyone endures. I could envision myself fighting the Hynka and dealing with the more advanced Threck alien species. The strange colors and toxic environment would be fun to visit, like an alien safari! But obviously, only if we were well stocked and had food and water for the entire trip!

Politics

This wasn't a political novel, nothing to see here, move along!

Content Warning

There were discussions of mental illness in this novel. We also saw violence against alien species on the written page. As a result of all of that, the characters experience psychological distress during the course of the novel. This book is aimed at mature readers comfortable with darker themes.

Who is it for?

The story focuses on a crew stranded on an alien planet, facing survival challenges and complex inter-species dynamics. It's perfect for readers who enjoy high-stakes adventures and themes of adaptation and endurance in a hard sci-fi environment.

Why buy it.

The book offers plausible technology and vivid world-building, reminiscent of The Martian or Heinlein's works, appealing to those who crave intellectually stimulating sci-fi. It's a gripping tale about a crew stranded on an alien planet, forced to endure the survival challenge of a lifetime. It also offers complex human-alien interactions, for readers who love high-stakes adventures.

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out! You won't regret it! Well, unless it keeps you up all night and you're late to work... and then your boss fires you, because you became a book addict and a rabid Michael Siemsen fan. Okay, the fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT leave you starv-

ing. Happy thoughts, it COULD be one heck of a weight loss plan! Be warned but enjoy the high! Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? Once you buy and read the book, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

Fae'd to Black by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

So, like when I open a Declan Finn book (and I've read quite a few now) my thought while downloading it is usually, "THIS IS GONNA BE FUN!" And, in my defense, I'm pretty much always right. I mean, that's basically how it always works in the rest of my life so it's never a SURPRISE that I'm right, but ya know, I'm right. Again. As usual.

Or sumfin'

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But when I opened Declan Finn's latest, Fae'd to Black, it was more along the lines of "Okay, so far we've had zombies at a wedding, occult arms dealers, demons, vampires on both sides of the fight, the stars of not one, but two, of Finn's other series including one that was killed till he died to death for the most part, a couple of Tolkien-esque elves (only you're not supposed to call them elves) and at least one wendigo that was relieved of its responsibility to breathe. What in the world is this guy gonna throw at me in this one to top all of that?" And it was a valid question. What was Finn going to bring to the table to top all of that off?

And guess what?

I'M NOT TELLING YOU! I DON'T DO SPOILERS!!

But I will tell you this much: Finn definitely brought the heat in this one. There is plenty of awesomeness and excitement in Fae'd to Black to satisfy anyone except the lovers of fine lich-rich-yooah and that's cool because the Literati don't read my blog anyway. But seriously if you prefer upbeat, hopeful stories where things happen that have heroes and heroines that you can admire having the times of their lives doing the right thing then this book is for you.

If, on the other hand, you're looking for a bunch of confusing crap that leaves you wailing the snail snot out of your own forehead trying to figure out what that Middle English term means, I will redirect you to your local high school Lich-rich-yooah department.

Declan's characters are, as always, people I feel like I could get along with. Marco Catalano is a bit on the crazy side, but I'm okay with that. He may take some things too much to heart, but that's not only believable it takes a bit of his edge off and makes him even more likable. His wife Amanda is a young vampire who has managed to remain good by eating donated blood and praying. Galadren has a bit of a memory problem and thinks he's in a movie, but there are times when I can relate. Dalf isn't completely trustworthy but he's not exactly boring either and sometimes confusion is fun.

Share

Now don't get me wrong. I'm a superhero mark. I've spent decades reading and/or watching movies where entire cities, and even sometimes entire planets, get trashed. I've been with Honor Harrington as she trashes entire fleets while simultaneously losing many of her own ships. I've cheered as multiple Death Stars have exploded. And I watched The Walking Dead and read David Guenther's Infected World series because I enjoyed watching the world burn. I'm not hating on Speculative Fiction or its habit of trashing everything in sight when the mood strikes.

Still and all, I'm the guy who went and saw The Minecraft Movie with his kids and, having never played Minecraft, got excited about the crafting table (or whatever it's called. I forgot to ask that part.) I was all hopped up on seeing a character make something to get out of a jam, or get someone else out of a jam or...

Did someone say jam? It's almost lunchtime and I think I've got some bread here somewhere...

Uhh...

Never mind.

So when I picked up Forge Master and later the sequel, Reforged (Tower Book 2), I was in for a treat. The main character, Thorn, really does craft a lot of stuff. He's a Titan and, with Tower being a LitRPG series, he advances by crafting things. That's a Titan trait. He even joins a couple of different trade guilds and sets up himself up a business making some things and fixing others.

And it's realistic if you're a gamer too. Those of us who craft in Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games know all too well the challenges of trying to get the materials you need to make the stuff to make the money. This is an extremely common problem that can only be solved by gathering the stuff yourself (taking up a buttload of time) or shelling out the majority of what you made on your last doo-hickey to get the money to make your next thingamabob. It's a never ending cycle of lost time vs lost money. Thorn gets that.

And if you're into WoW....

My main is a Warlock who is also a Miner/Skinner
My Monk is also an Alchemist/Herbalist
and my Paladin is a Tailor/Enchanter

I have a way to gather literally every freaking material in the game and still end up paying for my crap half the time.

Anyway...

That's not to say that Forge Master and Reforged are cozy fantasies where the main character spends all of his time building a business in peace and quiet. This is a good thing because, with apologies to people like Nathan Lowell and Travis Baldree who actually do write some truly awesome books, I like a good slam bang slugfest every once in awhile. And the combat in these two books is not just entertaining. It's part of what is really the central character arc of the series so far. (It's an eight book series I believe. Don't ask me what the overall arc is yet. I'm only two books in.)

Forgemaster is the first book in the Tower Series but the Tower Series is a follow on series. The story

Seriously, I've reached the point with these characters where it's less about reading the story and more about seeing how my friends are doing. That's a high hurdle for an author/series to clear but it's happened here and that's awesome. I'm always waiting for the next book the same way I'd be waiting if I knew that a loved one was going to walk through the front door, or be waiting at the local pub for drinks and a Lions game. Or sumfin'. You get the idea. I'm not sure if that's a Jimbo thing or if it's a common thing but it's something I learned about growing up as a nerd with friends named Kirk, Spock and McCoy. (And yes, in my headcannon at least, McCoy is a direct descendant of Yours Truly. Fight me.)

But speaking of characters and Fae'd to Black, I have to give what I've come to think of as the Declan Disclaimer: Finn is a devout Catholic. I respect that about him. His characters also tend to be Catholic and have been known to do things like praying, attending Mass and getting married in churches. I enjoy that about Finn's work but I understand that some people might find the idea of Christianity offensive. Your life, your choice but I stand with Finn and every other Christ worshipper.

And it's not like Fae'd to Black is just about going to church either. There is action sequence upon action sequence to keep things interesting. I don't think it's too much of a spoiler to reveal that there's a big fight at the end, because that's actually a trope by now. Let me tell you something about this fight though: It was epic. There were some bangs, a couple of booms and at least one action that would have been extremely painful, but it was a lot of fun. Actually, probably the thing that I liked least about this book is the fact that the last fight doesn't exist on film. For the record though, if someone wants to toss a few million at Finn for the movie rights, I'll buy a ticket to every movie in the series and I'll bring friends. Promise.

And speaking of friends for the third time, a lot of Fae'd to Black, and a lot of Finn's other work for that matter, centers around friendship. With St. Tommy it's his partner Alex, with Marco and Amanda it's their whole crew (although some of that crosses over with family). Even Marco, who wants to play the role of the psycho-killer who doesn't care about anyone except his wife gets hit in the feels every so often. Seeing the way that Marco reacted to one particular situation in the book illustrates this perfectly but you'll have to read the book to find out which one.

And, of course, the other disclaimer: Fae'd to Black is the last book in a five book series that follows a four book series. It was an awesome experience, but it's not the right place to start. I highly recommend starting at the first book in the series, The Neck Romancer or, better yet, with Honor at Stake the first book in the original series. It'll be much easier to follow what's going on if you know the background story and they're all good books.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Nuclear Powered Wards

Forgemaster and Reforged by Seth Ring

Book Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Sometimes it takes awhile to get around to writing a good book. So, like say your name is Jimbo. Let's say you've got Kindle Unlimited and you downloaded a book named Forge Master by a guy named Seth Ring. It really looked good and the description said it was LitRPG. Not only that, but having a title like Forgemaster implied a focus on crafting and I'm the type of gaming nerd that maxes out every single profession in World of Warcraft for every expansion that I play. I love crafting in game and I was really looking forward to a game where the hero makes things instead of just tearing them apart.

actually started with the Titan Series also by Seth Ring. I actually had the first book of the Titan Series checked out with Kindle Unlimited and returned it unread, but that's neither here nor there. The point is that, at least from what I can tell, Thorn was a physical badass in the first series: Big, Strong, Tough, etc. Then (apparently at the end of the first series) he Transcends to a tougher environment where he's basically chump change physically. This causes him to change his entire fighting style. In Dungeons & Dragons terms, he dual classes from Fighter into Wizard, except that there are no classes and it has more to do with which stats he increases as time goes on and which skills he works hardest to improve.

And it's not like Thorn is alone. He has Hati, a massive wolf that sounds familiar for a very obvious reason, Eve, the AI mounted in his body somewhere, Akira, who I picture as a Kitsune and the occasional person who he teams up with along the way. I don't necessarily know if I'd trust all of them, but that might just be my paranoia talking. Too much caffeine twists the brain.

As much as I enjoyed both Forge Master and Reforged, I do have one major concern with them. There are an absolute ton of callbacks to the first series. On one hand, that's good marketing. I'm totally sold on the fact that I need to read the Titan Series. On the other hand though, it's kind of a bummer. There were times when I'd be reading along and then get knocked out of the story because I missed a reference somewhere. There is one rather important character that shows up with basically no introduction. I was left trying to figure out who this was, why they were here, and how they related to Thorn all at once. It was a weird experience.

I'm not going to give up the Tower Series totally, but I think I am going to shelve it for a bit and go back and read the Titan Series before continuing on. I just feel like I'm missing too much this way. That much having been said, Forge Master and Reforged are two very good books and they're worth your time if you've read the first series or don't mind the confusion.

Free the Darkness by Kel Kade

Review by J. R. Handley

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well! I have another review for you of a new book, instead of me cleaning up recommendations previously shared on my website. I found this book when my friend Garret gave me this book as a gift. He wanted to start a book club with a friend of his and I needed to read this novel to join the cool kids. I was originally going to do this as a favor, but I ended up getting hooked on this literary crack.

Seriously, I was supposed to read book one and just write this review. Somehow, I ended up on book three and realized that I hadn't taken notes. It was a slow start, but once it starts, it hits hard and fast. I'm talking emotions and all of the feels as this man, Rezkin, finds himself. In doing so, he sets upon a path to save the kingdom of Ashai, his home.

I've never read her books, but Kel Kade is a fan favorite of some of my friends. She writes epic fantasy novels and is sometimes a college professor doing smart people things. While I normally read science fiction, I am not anti-fantasy, so I gave it a shot. First, I loved the gritty and awesome artwork on the covers. It was too cool not to pick up this book.

What is this book about? It's a fantasy novel about a young man's coming-of-age story, but cooler... because assassin super soldier. We learn about his harsh Spartan upbringing. It was Spartan in the truest sense of the word, with the agōgē levels of hardcore, multiplied by a factor of an undisclosed multiples

of infinity. This epic fantasy adventure has plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat. So, grab your coffee and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

The Story

This is one heck of an adventure about a young man who was raised and trained in seclusion at a secret fortress on the edge of the northern wilds in the Kingdom of Ashai. That young warrior was named Rezkin, an orphan raised by weapon masters. When we open the novel, he gets into a fight with his trainers, and it forces him to leave his home. He is thus thrust into the outworld, which was any region beyond the confines of the castle that was his world.

The main character, Reznik, now must contend with the real world with no understanding of the reason he was trained from infancy to become a lethal weapon. He takes a virtual armory with him when he leaves, as he chases the lone survivor from the slaughter that disrupted his life. He hunts Striker Farson, the only person who could tell him of his original mission and who had pulled his puppet strings.

With nothing else to guide him, Rezkin adheres to the rules created to train him. He follows his last order from his master, Master Jaiardun, because it was all he knew and all that he had to work with. Along the way, he collects friends who he honors and respects. His new party of traveling companions added to the fantastic feel that we expect from this genre post-Tolkien.

As if pursuing an elite warrior across a kingdom wasn't enough, he's chasing a woman he wants to court. Well, he thinks the powers that be who selected his friends wants him to court her? It gets all jumbled up in Reznik's mind, but in a fun way. The only problem is that her uncle and guardian doesn't approve of this match. His proposal for an official courting and engagement is rejected by General Markum, but he hasn't given up yet. There is a romantic element, but this is not a romance novel. And to muck up the waters, this all happens against the backdrop of a kingdom in turmoil. There is a brewing rebellion as civil war is on the horizon.

Now that we've sold you on the novel's premise let's dive in deeper. First, the prose from Kel Kade was conversationally poetic, made even more incredible when you listen to Nick Podehl of Podium Audio narrate the story. I listened to some sections several times to hear the amusing female accents by Nick. His smooth dulcet tones, as he reads the story, were relaxing. I think I could listen to this cat read the phone book. Wait, do kids know what that is? Like, books before the internet?

I could keep going about the quality of these prose, but let's move on to the other aspects of this story. This storyteller comes off as a seasoned professional, but this was her first novel. She knew how to expertly pace the story so that it flowed efficiently from one plot point to another. The story kept my attention, once I got over the slow burn start of this novel. Even cooler, it gave me room to breathe and process the various parts of this epic adventure. Kel did that with witty one liners, which were sometimes at the expense of the main character. This novel felt like it was setting up book two to kick the action up a notch, and I'm here for it. In fact, I'm already on book three and I can't wait for more!

Another aspect of this story that is worth evaluating is the audiobook quality. It was published by Podium Entertainment, formerly Podium Publishing. This is a class act company and puts out quality audiobooks. In an effort for transparency, they have published my Sleeping Legion Series. That said, I went with them BECAUSE they made amazing audiobooks. They hit the ball out of the park, telling me a story that I couldn't put down and kept me going when I should've been doing other things.

Speaking of audio, the most important part of the production is the narrator and Nick Podehl. He read

an amazing story and brought his world alive for me as I went on my daily walks. I could ignore the cold and the wind, because I was hooked on this epic fantasy world. He nailed the various character accents, keeping my ears engaged from start to finish. I predict this series will be one that stands the test of time, and I don't say that lightly.

But don't take my word for it, read it yourself and share your thoughts!

The Characters

This novel follows one main character, the mysterious man named Rezkin. We see his growth arch from infancy to adulthood pretty quickly as we watch him go through his in-world agōgē. When the story really gets going, he is a 19-year-old young man who trained to become the ultimate weapon. Like anybody who has done combative sports or military training knows, in a fight it is the person and not the tool that's the real weapon and Rezkin knows and lives this truth. More importantly, he lives by his rules for life, a list that was longer than any normal person could manage. He was forged through training and the crucible of pain to become that, to become the ultimate warrior.

However, while this sounds like the character might be overpowered, he has limitations put on him by the author. She got creative, his limitations were his lack of normality and socialization. He was raised in such a way that he didn't recognize what everyone else would see as customary human bonding methods. He didn't recognize friendship, and he couldn't understand his own emotions. He was the quintessential robotic warrior. This lack of understanding constantly gets in his way. He doesn't know what to make of the civilians he interacts with and that often leads to a chuckle from the readers.

What I liked the most about this character was that he wasn't a raft, floating along the waters of life in this book. Instead, Reznik was both affected by and affected the world around him. This symbiotic interaction added to the superb world-building that made Ashia a fun world to experience. It showed the reader his role in the world and added together to create a three-dimensional experience.

Reznik, the main character, will make you chuckle at his initial inability to fathom what people raised outside of his weird fortress think. At first, he may make you want to shake him for his stupidity for missing the obvious while intellectually you know he just has no frame for reference. As he misses what was so obviously right in front of him, you see his innate goodness. He truly cares about people, even if he doesn't quite understand those emotions. He was written as a medieval John Wick meets Jason Bourne with a dash of Alex Rider. Maybe throw in shades of James Bond, except, he's too humble to consider himself as important as 007.

The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Kel Kade, in the tradition of Tolkien and The Terry's (Goodkind, Pratchett and Brooks). She knew how to tell a compelling story, one set in a beautiful world that she created. Everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. I could almost smell the farming funk from Rezkin's jaunt through rural Ashia. Unlike some authors, she didn't info dump her world-building up front. Instead, she fed it to us in drips and drabs. Seriously, Kel was the perfect drug dealer, and I ended up dropping funds to buy the next four books in this series. I was left wanting more, all we can ask for in our literary crack. I know that drug metaphor sounds toxic, but trust me, this story was anything but. It was an exciting thrill ride from start to finish. What's not to like about their already expansive world? This novel was definitely a Tolkien-Esq Master Class in creating fictional universes.

Politics

This novel was apolitical in the sense that it didn't deal with any real-world politics. However, we did see some imperial struggles from the political parties in this world. It was a background struggle in this novel, though there were not so subtle hints of more to come in future books. We know that a military detail called the Strikers trained Rezkin via inhumane methods so he could be forged into a weapon. From the political side of these events, we see the characters, and more broadly the plot, grappling with the idea of state sponsored killing. We get to consider whether or not it is justified, as each character is forced to confront the reality of Rezkin's past.

The kingdom of Ashai, where the story takes place, is a medieval second world fantasy setting. This proto-Europe backdrop is par for the course of a modern fantasy novel. In addition to the world that's trying to kill them, the main characters must fight the existential evil of greed, the pursuit of power, and an unthinking quest for answers about one's very genetic identity. Predictably, it ends badly for everyone involved. Like in the real world, there are no real winners in war. You've probably heard that before; it's a tale as old as time.

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone mature enough to watch R rated movies. Free the Darkness had cursing, fighting and death. We see the brutality of medieval combat and discover horrors upon horrors in this dark empire that rule the Kingdom of Ashai. To be clear, this all happened on screen, which feels worth mentioning. There was on screen torture, followed by gritty combat, but there was no sex. Just the hint that it happened and sexual innuendos to keep you on your toes. I know these can be issues for some of our more sensitive readers, so caveat emptor and all that jazz. The fighting didn't feel overly gory, but it was there. And full disclosure, my scales are skewed by my time in the infantry so your mileage may vary!

Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoyed reading epic fantasy stories about dismantling evil empires. It has it all; the spreading of rebellion, mages and cool magic, weapons and cool fae and demons! This novel, by Kel Kade, has an interesting mix of the conversational prose of Terry Goodkind with a Tolkien-esq grandiosity. Seriously, this series is gonna be a story for the ages, so give it a read!

Why buy it.

Why wouldn't you buy this book? Seriously, who doesn't love a story of a self-made man? In this case, the main character was raised harshly and becomes the most skilled fighter in the world. He thrives, despite the harshness of his youth and achieves greatness. Plus, he does it with pizzazz that he's blissfully unaware of. Reznik, the main character, is the ultimate power fantasy that all of us want to attain. But what's the old saying, 'everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.' That applies to the feats that Reznik achieved; we want his power, but not the hours of work to get there. I like donuts and lattes too much for that level of bad assery. What else can I say? If you love a thrill ride through a second world medieval setting that would make Genghis Kahn proud, this is the novel for you!

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? If this tale doesn't make you a superfan of Kel Kade and her King's Dark Tidings Series, then you didn't read the same book I did! Once you buy and read this series, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

Freedom Express by Terry Mixon

Review by JR Handley

upstreamreviews.substack.com

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

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

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

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

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

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

The basic premise of this series centers around the main characters' quest to take humanity to the stars. Now, in this sequel novel those characters are on their little jaunt through the solar system, visiting Mars and dead asteroids and everything in between. I loved seeing the main character, Harry Rogers, becoming an unconventional spaceship captain. No naval experience, just a trigger puller of the snake eating variety turned into humanity's first interstellar ship's captain. I loved seeing an Army boy made good in the space navy. Space Force Guardians, eat your heart out!

If the first book was getting the private space program off the ground, this sequel was about pushing the

ship to the limits while shenanigans carried out across the earth they left behind. That all happened against the backdrop of political gamesmanship and political intrigue. It was fun to see both sides of the story, though it sometimes felt like Terry jumped away from the scenes right as it got interesting. I am sure that's just the drug pushing nature of my crack dealer... I mean favorite author. Well, same same, but you know what I mean. Whatever, I loved this book too, so read the rest of this review and then read the book!

The Story

The main characters have outgrown their simple exploratory mission, with goals at galactic mining. During this book, Harry Rogers makes it onto the first manned mission to Mars. He becomes the first one to step onto the Red Planet and has inspirational words, but he wasn't quite up to Neil Armstrong, but he did good for a snake eater. But he has other firsts, as he leaves the solar system, visits alien planets and explores alien spaceships.

While he chased the alien secrets, Jessica Cook chased the miracles of alien technology with all of her nerdy friends. She uncovers tech so advanced that it might as well be magic. But she's an egghead herself and figures it out, at least enough that she can use the technology. She can drive the car without understanding the combustion engine, after all. Bad analogy, since a space engineer probably does understand that engine, but you're picking up what I'm putting down, I'm sure.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. While Harry and Jessica do their thing, Clayton's back on earth. He has to protect his assets from American seizure. Piracy via the nation state, but that might be quibbling. Anyway, he's running around the globe to make things happen. He'd bought a country, which the UN recognizes, giving him diplomatic immunity from America. He does that to resist the tyranny of the American political corruption system. Through him, we continue to see how dystopian the political system really is in this world. We see just how far the mighty US empire has fallen. His subplot storyline gives this novel a little bit of a political thriller vibe, something on par with Clive Cussler or Tom Clancy and I enjoyed it.

But they're not the only players in the game. Their estranged family, in the form of Nathan and Kathleen Bennett, are also gallivanting around the globe. They're trying to outmaneuver Humanity Unlimited and its CEO Clayton Rogers. They do everything to make it happen, from rape and murder, to the wanton slaughter of people unfortunate enough to get in their way. In this case, they killed terrorists to cover up their crimes. I suppose they inadvertently did something good? However, in their quest for their own mission they're stumbling into things they don't understand. Actions that could potentially destroy humanity. It's not hyperbolic; they could potentially invite the alien menace back to earth. That scourge would wipe them out once and for all, so keeping them away is the goal.

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

In Freedom Express, Terry did a great job pacing this book. He balanced the explanation of this future world with the need to move a story along. And boy howdy, this story was a rip-roaring good time. Like I said, this political thriller was a romp through the dystopian future. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery, the equipment or space being. I filled in a lot of the details myself, but Terry gave me the scaffolding to make it work. Everything felt tangible and I enjoyed

the setting, the prose and the people.

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

The Characters

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

Harry Rogers: He is the son of Clayton Rogers and Kathleen Bennett and the brother of Nathan Bennett. He's a former super-secret squirrel, an ex-Green Beret who works for his security company, Liberty SOG. That is, until he gets brought into an ownership stake of Humanity Unlimited. During this novel, he serves as an American Army veteran version of James Bond turned Indiana Jones. He travels the galaxy, doing the explorer thing as he tries to learn what he can. Once he's aware of the alien threat, he's on a crusade to protect humanity by finding technological solutions to humanity's lack.

While he joined to protect Jessica, they split up doing separate sub-missions in this book. He's the voice of the worldly man, the foil to Jessica's more innocent personality, though she's less so now. More than that, he's a fully fleshed out character outside of his counterbalancing the academic character. He's shown to be an idealist, who dislikes his dad because of his cutthroat business practices. Except, his idealism is tempered by his willingness to spill blood to protect those he deems worthy. During the course of this novel, he takes on the role of commanding officer of the Liberty Station spaceship and leads the ex-military forces providing security. He seems to grow into his role as a leader of egg-heads, vastly different than leading Spec Ops troops across the globe. In the next two novels I expect that we'll see him continuing to grow into his role within the Humanity Unlimited Corporation. He's already outgrown command of Liberty Station, but big things are in store for him!

Jessica Cook: She's an employee of Rainforest LLC, working for their space company. She's a space engineer and designed the Liberty Station conversion and revitalization. She served as the Chief Engineer and was written as an extremely competent woman in her chosen field. She isn't a Mary Sue; she has things that she isn't good at. But where she's good, she's very good. During the course of this novel, we see her skills in space and in space walking. She's becoming more visibly awesome in this novel, as she grows and improves. What else will she get better at? She forces herself to handle high stress situations where life and death are on the line as she explores the solar system. She encounters aliens and their descendants. She does so without panicking or whining, Jess just grits her teeth and drives on. Her technical and leadership skills improve, as she becomes the executive officer for Liberty Station and leads portions of the exploration. I like that we see her becoming even more well-rounded, a true Renaissance man. Well, Renaissance Woman? She's written in the way you want a female heroine to be portrayed; she's competent, not a man with tits.

Clayton Rogers: He is the ex-husband of Kathleen Bennett and the father of Harry and Nathan. He

owns and runs Rainforest LLC, an international company who seems to have their fingers in every pie. Part of his business used to be his ex-wife's family business that he seized in a hostile takeover. During this novel, he takes a more active role. He is no longer a means to the end, instead he's becoming a political player in this global quest for space superiority. Aside from his familial roles, he is there to allow Harry and Jessica do the things and fund the fun. He's an idealist who invested heavily in his dream of a post-Terran humanity. We hear from him and Harry that he's done bad things, but I'm unconvinced. I think he's more of the grandfatherly Mister Rogers type by what we've seen so far. He still reads as a likeable fella, but only time will tell. So far, he's a politician and he does a lot of good for the Humanity Unlimited corporation.

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

Kathleen Bennett: She is the ex-wife of Clayton Rogers and the mother of Harry and Nathan. She owns and runs BenCorp, an international company who seems to have their fingers in every pie. She's got a lot in common with her ex, but she's a psychotic and evil version of him. She's the bad guy in this series, the puppet master who doesn't bother hiding it. Except, she works through proxy todies who do the dirty work so she can keep her hands clean. We see more of her in this book, as the current situation forced her to get her hands dirty. She couldn't work through her youngest son, Nathan. I hope she plays a larger and more evil role in the next novel! We need to see her get her comeuppance.

Josh Queen: He's the Secretary of State for the United States of American in the not-too-distant future. He's a bipartisan asshole, who represent the kind of person that both parties hate. If you take the political party affiliation away from name, absent that loyalty, people will want to punch him. He's a schemer, trying to angle up towards the vice presidency. He appears to care more about his own political ascent than he does his country. He comes off as someone who loves the sound of his own voice and leads his ego, rather than any deep abiding love for God and country. He laments the loss of America's standing in this future world but becomes part of the problem. Overall, he's a bit player in this novel, but I suspect he'll be a bigger deal in the future books.

The World

Freedom Express is the second book in the Humanity Unlimited Series, and I absolutely loved it. The world was flushed out, and everything was explained in a way that made sense. The universe was consistent, with just enough of the mundane facets of life thrown in that it all felt grounded in this reality. It helps that half of the novel was set on Earth as we know it, sorta. I mean, a future version of Earth. But the other half is set in space and that's where you see Terry's space opera chops on full display.

Everything in this world made sense and sucked me deeper into the story. Some of the details seemed inconsequential, but those hooks just make me think that the larger mystery would continue to grow and expand. I hope the payoff is worth it, but Terry has skills so I am positive that it will. I really loved reading the scenes of everyone learning to maneuver in a zero-g environment. That was amusing to

read, and that minor detail at the end of book one and early into book two paid off in the final showdown between Nathan and Harry on the gravity free Liberty Station at the end of this novel.

During those scenes, Terry showed his understanding of the science of space as he wove those details into the plot. If he lied, if he faked it, he did it so well that I bought in. Keep in mind that I barely made it out of Betty Crocker Calculus and for a science fiction nut, I am not very scientifically inclined. I can read a white paper, but I only understand things conceptually and in broad strokes. Terry built upon the legwork of the previous novel, but in these scenes, he added enough new details to make the setting pop. He fed us those details in a way that didn't feel like an info dump. There was never anything he described that I couldn't envision, or that felt like it wasn't "real."

Another aspect that I enjoyed about this world was how he showed the political aspect of this sci-fi thriller. There were enough similarities to modernity that I understood it. The world felt like home, but one viewed through the funhouse mirror. He kept the timeline far enough out that the readers political allegiances to modern parties didn't stop them from enjoying Freedom Express. In fact, I don't remember Terry mentioning a single political party. It was just one corrupt politician after another. There were generic liberals versus conservative, but those terms can and do shift over time. So, any inference to the D vs R would be internalized from the readers perspective. Instead of writing a story lauding one party over the other, Terry highlighted a corrupt system in a time when the American empire has fallen. She's no longer a superpower and struggling to reassert her dominance. That made for some interesting reading and left me wanting more.

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

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

Politics

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

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 16. This is most certainly not a children's

book; the amount of violence and implied rape marks this one for mature audiences only. None of that happened on screen, but it was certainly implied that it was going to happen after the scene faded to black. There was also a fair amount of gun play, as the bad guys did bad things, and the good guys made them pay with their lives. It definitely felt like something that felt worth mentioning. I know that this can be a sensitive issue for some families. It wasn't overly gory by my standards, but your mileage may vary.

Narration

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

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

Who is it for?

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

Why buy it?

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

Holding the Line by Roy M. Griffis
Review by Michael Gallagher
upstreamreviews.substack.com

The Indiesphere's most versatile author breaks the mold again.

I've written about quite a lot of Roy Griffis' work here on upstream in the past. He's a fascinating char-

acter whose body of work proves he can write anything, from sweeping historical fiction to the most original horror comedy you'll ever read. It seems the former Coast Guard rescue swimmer had been feeling some combination of inspired and nostalgic, because the first book in his latest *The Long Watch* series, *Holding the Line* serves up a New Adult adventure that's original, heartfelt and thrilling.

The Story

Danny Miller is a legacy admit to the Territorial Military Institute in one of the remotest parts of the Wyoming badlands. His dad's got an office there; the door reads "janitor". His old man keeps the grounds, on the odd occasion he's sober enough to, and the two share a living space in the basement. His mom died when he was too young to remember her. Danny's been a part of the place longer than most who graduate it, but this year he turns 18 and qualifies to attend as a plebe, the inspirational title you receive before you've earned the honor to be called a cadet.

Despite his plan to become "Plebe Wallpaper" and keep as low a profile as possible until graduation, his first day as an actual student sees him orienting a fresh load of trust fund admits who are only there because their parents are threatening to cut them off if they don't straighten out. He winds up eventually fighting one and falling in love with another, and generally has his hands full just trying to stay out of trouble with his keen-eyed Major, and if that were that, it would still make for an interesting and well-written if standard coming-of-age story with a unique setting and perspective.

But this is Roy Griffis. Ain't nothin' about Roy "standard."

No sooner is Danny getting settled into academy life when strange things begin happening around him. Scratching sounds from behind walls. Figures staring back at him in the darkness during his night watch rounds. Bathroom mirrors exploding when he goes near them. Apparitions standing out on the plains beyond the school. And unimaginable primordial horrors that stalk the woods at night, waiting to reclaim what was once theirs. Because it turns out the training that goes on at Territorial—unbeknownst to its cadets—isn't merely preparing them for conventional warfighting—the soldiers within and without its walls are about to enter a battle against an ancient enemy that lurks in places unseen.

The Characters

While there are quite a few well-realized individuals throughout the story, the majority of the action rests on three central figures. In our protagonist, Danny Miller, Griffis has constructed a more complex personality than one might be lead to initially think. Having grown up around military culture, he's very much aware of the ethos and values that are drilled into the institute's hopefuls. While he has a somewhat easier (albeit at times fumbling) time adjusting to life in the barracks, we're still taken through his struggles through P.T., making friends, getting into fights with the rich kids and falling in love. Which brings me neatly along to . . .

Tatiana, one of said rich kids. Shy, demure, and beautiful despite the obvious eating disorder ravaging her when she arrives. Danny does his best to not get too close to her, but fate has a strange way of repeatedly putting them together. She probably has the most dramatic arc of all the main characters, going from almost leaving soon after she arrives (even at the expense of her hedge fund) to standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield with her brothers and sisters in arms by the book's climax. Between those two points however, their budding relationship is allowed to unfold at a natural pace, allowing their two personalities to grow and play off one another as their feelings gradually deepen, and she is drawn into the supernatural strangeness that pops up around the school.

Cadet Corps commander Major Bonney is the guy running things. He brings a quiet brand of no-nonsense discipline to his sizeable task of whipping the plebes into shape. While impartial to Danny, he has naturally developed a mentor relationship with him from his time being around the Citadel. The two have a shared love of the history of the place, and he sees potential in his young charge that even he isn't aware he possesses, and has a much deeper spiritual and mystical connection to the land and its past than he initially lets on. The two play off each other well, and it's difficult not to be drawn to him as a stabilizing force in the lives of many of the young cadets.

The World

Almost all of the novel takes place within the confines of the citadel. Though the scope of the book is small, it is incredibly rich. Griffis has clearly done his homework, and describes the deepest interiors of the hundred fifty year old fort in vivid detail, from the verdigris coating ancient sabers stowed away in a long forgotten storage area to the grit on the cold damp stones in its lowest levels. Griffis' choice to make Danny a history buff about the place wound up giving his MC a chance to exposit on the past and local fables surrounding the area while comedically boring Tatiana on their first ever date.

The two scenes that take place outside of its walls are fraught with danger; one a nighttime search for a plebe who made the ill-fated decision to go AWOL, the other near the last quarter of the book where a friendly school bike ride winds up becoming a viscous fight for life while the plebes are at their most exposed and vulnerable. I really can't say too much without spoiling things, but it's a masterpiece of a tension-filled setup.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

The supernatural elements in the book are fantastical, as is the violence. People do die and get injured, but I don't even recall reading much bloodshed. Despite it taking place in a military setting, there's no cursing, with Danny even having the humorous habit of swapping out the f bomb with "foxtrot".

Who is it for?

This is Griffis' first venture into the somewhat new "New Adult" genre, fiction considered as a bridge between YA and full-blown adult reading. Aimed at people new to adulthood who are largely still figuring independent life out and dealing with all that comes with that, I'd say Griffis certainly hit the mark in terms of characters and themes. All of the plebes, rich, poor and otherwise are literally struggling to make it through the academy and come out the other side of it as stronger and better people while making a few close-knit friends along the way. Who can't relate to that?

While it's aimed at a somewhat older audience than YA, I didn't see anything that would be objectionable to a YA aged reader. Danny and Tatiana's budding romance is kept mostly friendly and on the sweeter side, and even the single appearance of Danny's alcoholic father winds up being heartfelt and wholesome. While it would find a home on the shelf of a fan of any of several genres, it would make an especially excellent adventure read for young teen boys.

Why buy it?

This is a solid adventure written with Griffis' trademark humor and brisk pacing, along with a delightful romance woven into it that would please fans of both genres. There's nothing the man can't write. Griffis' storytelling is a guaranteed good time.

Hunter Generations by Alma Boykin
Review by Cedar Sanderson
CedarWrites.com

Hunter Generations is the ninth in the Familiar Generation series, which is a spinoff of the Familiar Tales (22 books!). I would say that if you start with the Familiar Generation books, you can deduce without having to read all the way from the beginning, but if you haven't encountered Alma Boykin's Familiar stories before, you are in for a treat. If you're like me, and enjoy a good binge when you're in the mood, these books will be a perfect indulgence. Wonderfully developed characters, an intricate magical system, and snarky talking animals. What's not to love?

I always look forward to reading the new releases, but will also go back and re-read when I need a comfort read. With interconnected characters, I can delight in seeing an old friend in a new book, even if it's a short visit. Hunter Generations follows the story of Jude Tanuit, his new family, and further developments in the magic and mundane county he lives in and patrols as a magical deputy. It also follows him as he begins to train more in his special skills, which is amusing as he had so far to grow from the first book he appeared in (The Lone Hunter) and now he's mature and stable. These books are warm and feel like falling into a hug, never linger too long, and leave you anticipating the next meeting for another hug.

The Icarus Coda by Timothy Zahn
Review by Caroline Furlong
upstreamreviews.substack.com

The conclusion to the Spiral's biggest mystery – and a race against time!

Going on the run and bounty hunting are two very different disciplines, so combining them is not always a good idea. However, Gregory Roarke and Selene do not have the luxury of keeping the two separate right now. Not with EarthGuard Field General Josiah Leland Kinneman hunting them down. Worse, he is only half the problem – the other half are the Ammei, servants of the "Gold Ones" or Icaris.

The Ammei want to return to their former "glory" as overseers by taking control of the whole Spiral. Not all the Ammei are onboard with this idea, but enough of them are that they still pose a threat if their leaders gain what they desire. Gregory and Selene have been studying the species in an effort to try and learn how they might stop them, which is not an easy thing to do when they are wanted by the Ammei living on Nexus Six....

So when a familiar scent turns up on Mycene, their mission becomes interesting. And not in a good way!

The Story

After they are almost busted on Mycene when they run into Gregory's father, Sir Nicholas Roarke,

Gregory and Selene manage to meet up with him in a safer location so they can share some intel. It is not especially enlightening – mostly, they confirm who is who, what is what, and which Ammei are siding with whom. Then Sir Nicholas reveals that Kinneman, the humano-centrist leader of the Alien Portal Agency (formerly the Icarus Group), has decided to cross species lines to work with First of Three. First of Three is the leader of the Ammei enclave on Nexus Six, and he kind of wants Gregory dead.

It gets better – or worse, depending on the perspective. Both Gregory and Selene have had bounties put out on them. According to Sir Nicholas, the bounties stipulate they need to be alive. Gregory points out that this might mean whoever posted the bounties just wants to kill him in person. Selene's too valuable to kill right now, but Gregory is not.

Sir Nicholas says that neither First of Three nor Kinneman have the resources to post such large bounties, leaving Gregory to wonder who else would have slapped a price tag on their lives. They have no shortage of enemies. Could be any one of those old foes have decided to collect now that the government is searching for the duo.

Things get more difficult when an old friend wounded in *The Icarus Job* turns up. Mindi has healed nicely from nearly being shot dead, and now she works for the bounty hunting guild, meaning she saw the fake tip that Gregory put on the board to keep bounty hunters off his and Selene's scent. She wants answers so bad she does not much care why two Pathh were ready to take her down. Not until Gregory explains Pathh Purge laws, which he learned too much about in *The Icarus Changeling*.

The biggest complication, though, comes when an alien named Bubloo tumbles into their lives. Confused, possibly insane, Bubloo becomes more than a curiosity when Selene smells drugs and Ammei on him. That by itself would be cause for interest, but when Bubloo's sense of smell rivals Selene's, the two are led to some very dark suspicions indeed. Now they need to stay ahead of their pursuers, keep Mindi safe, find the portals, stop the Ammei, avoid the Pathh, and not lose the crazy alien whom the Ammei may have chosen to replace Selene. No pressure, right?

The Characters

Selene and Gregory have shown throughout the series that they will go to bat for one another even with the odds stacked against them. And boy, are the odds in this book some of the worst they have ever dealt with, as every enemy they have made makes a grab for them or tries to go for their throats. Just staying together is a struggle as new wrinkles are added to the plans each time the two turn around.

It becomes even more complicated when Selene discovers there might be a way to send her people home. Can Gregory live in a Spiral without his partner? More importantly, can he keep them both alive long enough that she can make her own choice about her future?

The World

The world truly comes together in *The Icarus Coda* as everything which Gregory and Selene have put together about the Icari coalesces into a fascinating, terrible whole. At the same time, allies and laws which were hinted at or discussed previously come back into play for the grand finale, as Zahn weaves the seemingly harmless or unimportant parts of the universe from prior books into a bigger picture. Where other writers would leave these them aside or forget them entirely, Zahn makes sure that every small piece of information brought to a reader's attention before counts now.

Plenty of new material is offered for readers to enjoy as well. Not only are new locations shown, but Ammei politics drive almost as much of the book as the Patth's unexpected reappearance in the story. Zahn keeps readers intrigued and eager for more until the very last page is turned in this, the final book in the Icarus saga.

Politics

Zip. Zero. Nada. All the politics are directly tied to the book's world.

Content Warning

Discussions of drugging, death, murder, and assassination all take place. No one dies "onscreen" this time but not for lack of trying, and several mooks are taken out "offscreen." Human (alien) experimentation is also brought up, but none of these matters are dwelt on in detail, making this a very PG-13 read.

Who is it for?

Zahn fans will not be disappointed by this finale for the Icarus Saga. If they have followed the series thus far, then the closing book will satisfy them. Should they just be getting into the series, then Coda should assure them it is worth their time. Those who like political thrillers will love this novel, as will action adventure readers who want something meaty but not too overwhelming to invest in. Sci-fi fans will have fun following the twists and turns leading to the conclusion without feeling cheated in the slightest. Anyone looking for a story that investigates ancient civilizations should – as with the prior Icarus books in the series – pick up Coda to round out their collection. Since the novel does leaves room for more adventures in the Icarus universe, fans of the series should definitely get it, as more might be forthcoming in the future!

Why buy it?

The book is fun and it ties up the loose ends from the prior novels in one neat, clean package. If you love the Icarus series, then you will want this finale, as it is one of Zahn's most satisfying to date. Why not buy it and confirm this for yourself?

The Icarus Needle by Timothy Zahn

Review by Caroline Furlong

upstreamreviews.substack.com

When someone is hiding a needle, you do not need to worry simply about finding it – you need to avoid being jabbed with it!

Last time we saw Gregory Roarke and Selene, they were leaving Alainn and all its "nowhere" mysteries behind, presumably for their next portal hunt. But Needle finds the two have been summoned to the Icarus Group's headquarters, with their trustworthy ship, the Ruth, left on the planet Xathru. This is known as Not Good, because when the boss has you hauled in, it means he wants to dress you down.

That is what is going on now. Gregory arrives to learn he is no longer working for the Icarus Group. Instead, he is working for the Alien Portal Agency, and the name change comes courtesy of EarthGuard Field General Josiah Leland Kinneman. Kinneman is the new head of said agency; Admiral Graym-

Barker is no longer in command of the Icarus Group – er, the Alien Portal Agency. Kinneman has talked the powers that be into giving him command of the project, and he wants to do some restructuring of his new Agency.

He intends to make charging Gregory with treason part of that restructuring gambit.

The Story

Gregory is in trouble and he knows it. Any time a government outfit gets renamed to something like “agency,” it means the people who actually know what they are doing are being shunted aside in favor of those who like power. Kinneman’s attitude and the sudden lack of aliens who were originally partners of the Icarus Group signal which category the general falls into all too well. Where Graym-Barker had other species in the loop, helping to hunt down the portals, Kinneman only wants EarthGuard military personnel – all human – on the case.

One of the few exceptions to that unspoken mandate is Selene, due to her ability to identify the portals’ scent. Kinneman is sure they can do without Gregory and just take Roarke’s Kadolian friend for themselves. In fact, he is so sure that he intends to split the duo up.

But first he wants them to send a bioprobe into the atmosphere of the planet that the Alpha portal orbits. The Alpha portal is the one which the Icarus Group found floating in geo-synchronous orbit above a planet, and Kinneman hopes the bioprobe will help them locate more portals on-world. After a little training, Gregory and Selene send the bioprobe down...

...Only for Selene to spot an enormous light on the planet’s surface. A little quick thinking on hers and Gregory’s part makes it easy for the rest of their team to see it, too. There are natives on-world.

Kinneman wants to send in EarthGuard troops through Alpha. This will effectively trap the EarthGuard soldiers on the planet for decades in a suicide mission, and since he wants to send Selene with them, Gregory is not sold on the idea at all. If figuring out how to save the troops and Selene was not enough of a problem in itself, Gregory also has to contend with the man smoothing over Kinneman’s transition into the leadership position of the renamed Icarus Group.

The person helping Kinneman would be none other than Nicholas Roarke, Gregory’s father, and his presence makes everything more complicated. How can the son outwit the father who taught him everything he knows? Especially since Gregory and his father do not see eye-to-eye?

The Characters

Gregory and Selene are both in deep trouble this time. While she is more composed than in the previous novel, Selene soon discovers everyone wants a piece of her, one way or another. The only person she can trust – because he wants all of her rather than part of her – is Gregory. Becoming the object of everyone else’s desire means she will risk death rather than be parted from him.

If readers thought Gregory was desperate in any of the prior books, they have not seen him desperate yet. Bad enough that Kinneman wants him hung; the man is threatening his partner. He is also putting lives in danger unnecessarily, and for all his bluff and bluster, Gregory will not stand for that anymore than Selene will. But making sure they can actually save lives is the trick.

Kinneman himself would do Marvel’s Thunderbolt Ross proud. The man is anti-alien, ultimately anti-

human, and so absorbed in his own navel that he keeps it spotless. While Nicholas Roarke likes Kinneman no better than his son does, he has been paid to help the man, not his own flesh and blood. Straddling that line takes a lot of work – most of which cannot be seen if he wants to keep his own freedom....

The World

Once again, Zahn expands the world by narrowing it down. The planet which Alpha orbits has the remnants of an Icarian city on it, and Zahn brings to life both its decrepit state and the fallen status of the alien race that calls it home. He also dials up the politics as the various races in the book clash; between Kinneman's humano-centrism and the megalomania of the Ammei, it is all the heroes can do to keep breathing. Let alone figure out the biggest puzzle posed by the Ammei: If the Icarians are in fact gone, then what are the Ammei doing living in a ruined city built by that vanished species? And what is this "glory" that they seek to re-establish at any cost?

Politics

None. All the politics are in-world politics and have nothing to do with present day issues.

Content Warning

Several soldiers are essentially slaughtered, human (or rather, alien) experimentation is broached, and Kinneman needs a warning label all his own. If a reader hated Thunderbolt Ross, they will find Kinneman equally despicable. Skip his lines if your blood pressure starts rising, as he is not worth an apopleptic fit. Unfortunately, he does not receive his comeuppance in this novel.

Who is it for?

Zahn fans will love this book, as it has some of the twistiest plotting in the series to date, along with some of his best characterization. Lost civilization readers will enjoy trying to figure out where the Ammei fit into the pattern of ancient Icarian civilization, and anyone who wants to watch a culture clash of epic proportions will find this welcome reading. Military Sci-Fi aficionados will also enjoy it, since Zahn brings internal military politics into conflict with boots-on-the-ground knowledge and shows just what happens when the former wins that battle but the latter refuses to give up the fight. Those who want to see disparate people working together against the odds will also wish to pick up *The Icarus Needle* at their earliest convenience, as the story more than delivers on this point.

Why buy it?

It is a fast-paced, well-executed space opera thriller from the hands of a master. With an abundance of twists and turns to add to the action, as well as the character development, *The Icarus Needle* delivers all the red-blooded excitement a reader could want. Why not kick back with a copy on the beach and enjoy?

Iron Chamber of Memory by John C. Wright
Review by Declan Finn
declanfinn.com

A wild ride.

F. Paul Wilson's novel *The Keep* had impressed me growing up because it was a novel that had started out as *Dracula* and ended with *Lord of the Rings*.

John C Wright has managed an even greater trick with his novel *Iron Chamber of Memory*.

In this case, what started out as a romantic comedy, Nora Roberts style, and then, Jeffery Deaver-like, ended in an epic battle on the scale of Mary Stewart and her books of King Arthur and Merlin.

Let's call it a fantasy romance, of sorts. Where's the soundtrack for *Excalibur*! I need *O Fortuna* to accompany the knights charging out of the mists!

Trust me, when I say it was epic, I mean EPIC.

The story

The small island of Sark in the English Channel is the last feudal government in Europe. By law, no motor vehicles run on the road, and no lights burn at night. Only the lord of the island may keep hounds.

Enter our hero, Hal Landfall, penniless graduate student (yes, that's redundant). He's looking for his friend Manfred Hathaway, who now owns the house and the island. What he finds is Manfred's fiancée Laurel. They discover one room in the house, where those who enter remember their true self. When Hal and Laurel step in, they remember a terrible truth they must forget again when they step outside.

I wish I could go more into this story without given things away.

This book has haunted Wright (Haunted? Good enough) for over a decade.

The island it takes place on is real, even though it sounds like a fantasy construction, for it is a fantastic place.

I read it on a Kindle, so I can't give you page numbers. But the first 25% is a romantic farce. Like *Bringing Up Baby*, only it's funny. Then the next 25% is an epic romance. The third quarter transitions nicely into the last 25%, in which the fecal matter hits the air impeller, and we are in for one hell of a ride.

So we have some of your epic fantasy, we have some RomCom, and we have a face off with the forces of Hell.

And in all of those elements of epicness and mythology clashing, good against evil, we have a bit like this.

"I am the son of The Grail Knight. My father showed me the cup when I was a boy, still with heaven's

innocence in me, so that the shining rays were visible to me: and in the Blood of the Grail he anointed me."

"And after..."

"We moved to New York, and he opened a used bookstore."

The unexpectedness of that line was ... well, I was glad I didn't wake the neighbors.

Or:

"Are you suffering from cutlery dysfunction?"

It's times like those where I'm wondering if I'm in Mary Stewart or in a Peter David novel. Either way, it works.

This is what, in my family, is called a "Novel novel." There is more in common with Victor Hugo than James Patterson. It's a book where I spent a lot of time admiring the crafting of story, and the crafting of words and phrasing. I'm usually not the sort of person to note that sort of thing.

So, you want your humor? Check. Want your fantasy, triple checked. Want romance? Double checked in two different meanings of the word. Also, if you want a plot twist that makes Jeffery Deaver look like amateur hour? Quadruple checked (yes, really, four, I counted. Maybe 6).

The characters

Everything and everyone is drawn in inventive ways. There are no data dumps, The best way I can describe it is how well Babylon 5 did characterization, because no one here is anything like what they appear to be. This makes it hard to go into a deep dive of the characters, because that would involve spoilers all over the place.

The world

It's John C Wright. This man makes five fully fleshed out worlds before breakfast. Then he throws out four of them because they're merely better than what's on the NY Times bestseller list.

I hope I'm exaggerating.

Wright is obviously in a level all of his own, wherein he brings together so many myths and legends, there were moments I paused and went "How did I not see this?" His dissertation director at Oxford is a Dr. Vodonoy. You will be amused by a Mister Drake in this novel. He doesn't actually have any lines of dialogue, but trust me, when Wright reveals the joke, you'll enjoy it.

The politics

If battling the forces of Hell, chivalry and virtue are political, then those are the politics of the book.

Content warning

This is at least PG-13. There are sexual situations, but at 13, I just skimmed over them. Granted, if your

kid is smart enough to read this book, your kid is probably mature enough to handle how mild the sexual bits are.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who misses a sense of the fantastic in their fantasy, and who wants to make Arthuriana great again. If you enjoyed Mary Stewart and Stephen R Lawhead, or even Murphy and Cochran's *The Forever King*, you should be reading this.

I feel like I just made three references that no one is going to get. But I can hope.

Why read it?

Read this because this is epic fantasy that battles all the forces of Hell, and still contains a sense of wonder.

The Lightning War: Rising Storm by Miles Phoenix

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It's not often I get to read a story that reminds me of two of my favorite Science Fiction series of all time. That made picking up Miles Phoenix's *The Lightning War: Rising Storm* a real treat. Phoenix has successfully blended the strong female warship captain (reminiscent of both the Honor Harrington and Alexis Carew series) with a setting based on real world countries IIIIIIIIIINNN SPAAAAAACE that gives it a feel similar to Piers Anthony's *Bio of a Space Tyrant*, but with a more up to date political setup. *BOAST* was written thirty plus years ago, after all.

Rising Storm postulates a galaxy controlled by humanity where planets, systems and clusters are controlled by governments descended from Earthbound ancestors. Accordingly Pilonia Prime, home of the destroyer *Byskawica* and her Commanding Officer, Commander Maria Roszak, is basically space Poland. Their allies are the Anglo-Saxon Coalition (ASC) roughly equivalent to the modern Anglosphere but which appeared to me as having a strong American flavor and the Neo-Russian Empire whose origin should be fairly obvious to anyone bothering to pay attention. The three groups together comprise an entity known as the Pact.

Each government/people brings something to the table to complement the others: The ASC has a high degree of coordination. They can put out an impressive amount of firepower, but their real strength is in working together. The New Russians are hard chargers who like to solve tactical problems with sheer firepower. And the people of Polonia Prime have a captured alien technology (although they're not sure who the aliens were/are or where they came from) named "bubble drive" that basically equates to *Star Trek's* transporter technology, only it transports the ship instead of individual crew members.

What comes from an alliance of groups with tactical philosophies this different can't truly be called "synergy" but it works. The three groups work together against their enemies who are, themselves, working to improve their technology and achieve dominance over known space. They're not playing games.

In an eerie parallel to things I've been watching on the news lately, the name of the enemy faction is The Caliphate. They're looking to push into the space controlled by the Pact by force. They Caliphate

is seeking their own bubble drive technology and they're building bigger ships. I like this angle because it mirrors what has happened in the real world many times. It's not just believable, it's authentic.

Seriously, most of military and political history can be summed up with the following sentences. "First develop the military ambitions. Then develop the technology to win." That was as true when Ancient Egyptian became the first empire to use copper weapons, at least in their region, as it was when the US invented the B2 Bomber. It works in the story because it has worked in real life.

Of course *Rising Storm* is a work of Military Science Fiction and so it must have battle scenes. And believe me, it does. They're crazy and fun. You really get the feeling that things are going off the rails and that only the quick thinking of Commander Roszak and her crew can save the day. And, seeing as they're the ones with the fancy bubble drive technology they do often plug a gap at a crucial time. That's not to say that the other parts of the Pact don't help. They help a lot. It does often seem that the Byskawica and her crew end up performing the action that ultimately pushes things the way the Pact wants them to go. Fans of both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* should be familiar with this phenomenon. Honestly, so should fans of anything that's well written and isn't *WoW's Wrath of the Lich King*.

SIGH

Tyrrion FREAKING Fordring. I like that guy when he's not ruining the ending of an entire expansion pack.

Anyway...

There's enough political content in *Rising Storm* to rival any Michael Stackpole novel, only it's conducted at the military level. Commander Roszak has to work with military leadership from both the ASC and the Neo-Russian Empire. Having tactical doctrine that doesn't match complicates things, but that's not all there is to it. Neither the ASC or the NRE has bubble drive technology. Both want it. Ending up in neutral space to conduct a partisan investigation leads to all kinds of fun. This is the type of political maneuvering that gets lost in a lot of other books because all of the negotiations take place between people in high places and not the people on the ground doing the fighting. Things make a lot of sense this way and it feels more realistic than a lot of what I'm used to.

I find myself wondering where the aliens are. It's entirely possible that they're in later books in the series but as of right now, the aliens that invented the bubble drive appear in basically only in the form of one derelict ship. The description of the ship reads really well, and it's enough to get me interested in who these ETs are and where they came from. As of right now though, they're basically just a piece of floating salvage. I hope Phoenix fixes that in later volumes.

I also wonder about the Caliphate itself. *Rising Storm* is the first book in the series and there is still a lot of worldbuilding left to be done, but as of this moment they're a bit of a cardboard cutout of a villain. They do villainous stuff like attacking our heroes and smashing things, but I'm wondering what their motivations are. I want to know what makes them tick. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens along those lines in the future.

And I guess that's the review in a nutshell. I'm looking forward to reading more. I already have a copy of the next three books in the series and the first book in a spinoff series. I'll be reviewing more of Phoenix's work here in the future. You have been warned.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Mysterious Aliens

Queen of the Unwanted by Jenna Glass

Review by Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

“So that’s it, then?” Tynthanal said after a long and resentful silence. “You’d force me to abandon the woman I love to save Ellinsoltah the trouble of having to deal with a rival claimant to her throne?”

“You make it sound like some triviality,” she retorted. “A man’s life hangs in the balance, although I hope you know I would put your happiness above the life of some man I’ve never met. But don’t you see that the issue would never have come up if Ellinsoltah had a firm hold on her throne? We owe our very existence to her willingness to protect us from Aaltah. If you marry Kailee, we will be assured of Rhozinolm’s support even if Ellinsoltah is dethroned.”

“Then offer Corlin in my stead!” Tynthanal snapped. “If this marriage of state is so important, it shouldn’t matter that he’s younger than his potential bride!”

Alys growled in frustration. She understood her brother’s distress, and she wished there were another way out, but she was in no mood to deal with a temper tantrum. “Stop being a child!” she snapped back. “As you well know, he cannot enter into a legal marriage agreement for another three years. I would not want to trust the lives of everyone in this principality on a nonbinding verbal agreement, would you? Even Delnamal did his duty and married Shelvon when he loved another. Are you telling me you cannot measure up to him, of all people?”

She had the satisfaction of seeing her verbal barb hit its mark as Tynthanal flinched at the comparison. He had to see the truth in her words, and yet he refused to accept them. “So you’re basically telling me I have to take your damn potions or else!” There was a hint of panic hiding behind the anger that flashed in his eyes.

Alys wondered how many young women had worn that particular expression over the long history of Seven Wells, how many had screamed and cried and begged to be released from unwanted marriages only to have their wishes ignored. Why should her brother be any different? And why did he have to make an already difficult situation even harder? “Yes,” she bit out. “That’s it exactly.”

“Fine!” he snarled, pushing back his chair and standing up. “I’ll take the ‘or else.’?”

.....Quote from Queen of the Unwanted.

It is a sad truth, as politicians as diverse as Barrack Obama and Donald Trump discovered, that it is easy to win office, but harder to bring about lasting change. The new officeholder rapidly discovers that the devil is in the details, that there were reasons beyond stupidity, incompetence and malice why the previous officeholder failed to have any long-term effects on the world. It is easy to promise a new heaven and a new earth, but harder – far harder – to actually keep those promises.

In the previous book, *The Women’s War*, a triad of unwanted women from the Abby of the Unwanted cast a spell that opened up whole new vistas of magic to women, from a subtle spell that prevented unwanted conception to nastier spells targeted that could be targeted on rapists, murderers and betrayers. The remaining women from the Abbey were sent to the edge of the desert into an exile that was intended as a de facto death sentence, but they discovered – there – a new well of magic they could use to secure their independence from the kingdom and declare themselves an independent state. The world, however, is still reeling under the effects of the Blessing (or the Curse, depending on whom you ask)

and powerful forces are gathering to destroy Women's Well once and for all.

Jenna Glass has taken a gamble in this book and centred a large part of the text on two new characters, Abbess Mairah, a cold and calculating young woman and Norah, an older woman, from a different kingdom. Mairah, the first and only woman to enter the Abby willingly (as the inevitable consequence of a revenge scheme), is perhaps the most powerful woman outside Women's Well, under strict orders from her monarch to find a way to reverse the Blessing/Curse or else; Norah, who took an immediate dislike to Mairah before the world changed, intends to ensure the Blessing remains firmly in place. The relationship between the two women is poisonous right from the start, triggering off a chain of events that lead directly to disaster as they eventually wind up at Women's Well. In a sense, toxic masculinity has given way to toxic femininity and both women play a major role in damaging their own cause.

The characters introduced in the first book, therefore, have less development than I had expected, as they grapple with the new world order. Queen Ellinsoltah struggles to establish herself as the ruler of her kingdom, even after she proved she could kill as effectively as any man; she discovers, just as the historical Queen Elizabeth did, that men on her council would work to circumvent her orders. Delnamal struggles to stabilise his kingdom and resume the attack on Woman's Well; Alysoon, now the ruler of Women's Well, finds herself grappling with the same issues that confronted her father and reluctantly forced to admit, for better or worse, that he had reason. Queen of the Unwanted is very much a middle book in a trilogy and it shows.

Alysoon, in fact, comes across as a hypocrite. Having spent her early life battling for a marriage that actually suited her, then a sizable chunk of the last book trying to prevent her daughter being wedded off to an unsuitable man, Alysoon finds herself forced to offer her brother's hand in marriage to Queen Ellinsoltah's niece. He doesn't take it very calmly, as you can see above, and Alysoon doesn't take that very calmly ... which is the exact same problem her father had, when the time came to arrange marriages for himself and his children. To be fair, Alysoon recognises her brother has reason to be unhappy – and it works out better than anyone has any right to expect – but her father had the same realization too.

Delnamal, meanwhile, continues his slow fall into madness, even though he's got most of what he wanted (in particular, a heir from the woman he loved before he was forced into a loveless marriage). It rapidly becomes clear he isn't cut out for fatherhood, unable to offer any love to the baby or his adopted older son. His kingdom's instability, made worse by his poor decisions, make it harder for him to do anything, so he grasps at the straw Mairah offers when they cross paths towards the end of the book. The result is a disaster that sets up the conflict for the final book. (It is worth repeating that much of the monarchy described in this series is simply allohistorical.)

There's less to say about how the plot develops overall. The new magics are explored and developed, allowing more research to be carried out. There are some positive interactions as well as a negative ones, some characters prove themselves to be better than they seem; others, unable or unwilling to give up old grudges or even simply walk away, play a role as events move rapidly towards disaster. In the end, most of the characters are deeply flawed, because of their society, and their flaws – all too often – overshadow their virtues. It is odd, in my view, that there are few characters who are not nobility and the ones who are briefly mentioned do not get a chance to shine, at least on the page.

Overall, Queen of the Unwanted is a good read, if suffering under the weight of being a middle book. It allows everyone to take a breath, before events start picking up speed again; it digs into some, if not all, of the logical consequences of the Blessing/Curse and how clashing personalities can cause disasters none of them intended. I give it four out of five.

Rebel Heart by Graham Bradley

Review by Caroline Furlong

upstreamreviews.substack.com

What if Harry Potter wasn't the Chosen One, didn't have magic, lived in America, and had access to guns? Two hundred years ago, George Washington led an army of Technomancers against the Royal British Mages. It was spells and curses versus technology in 1776. The War for Independence began in the British colonies and was so close to victory....

But in-fighting and power plays allowed the British to crush it. The War for Independence failed and Washington was executed via Draconis Trifecta. The other rebels, down to the children, were executed in other ways. Ever since, the magic-less "duffers" have lived under the heel of the powerful mages who come from Britain to ensure the common folk know their place. These duffers include one Calvin Adler, a budding young engineer sick of being looked down on and mistreated. But what can a fifteen-year-old Merykan with no magic do against the mages of Great Britain?

The Story

Son of a pair of wool merchants, Calvin Adler straightens up after doing backbreaking work scrubbing sheared wool with his parents. A year ago, Calvin built a machine to halve this work, save his back, and make everything go faster for him and his family. No more working in the burning sun, no more sore back....

Then the mages found his machine and hexed it. Not only did it come apart, he couldn't put it back together again no matter how hard he tried. Machines are forbidden, by order of the Crown, so the mages made certain he couldn't rebuild it.

As he pauses in his work, Calvin is in time to see local mage trouble headed his and the neighbors' way. Winston Fitznottingham and Hammond Birtwistle – otherwise known as Fitz and Birty – are drunk and on the prowl for someone to abuse. Trailing in their wake, as he has nothing better to do in the Merykan colony city of Baltimore, is Godfrey Norrington. Banished to the Merykan Colonies for making his bureaucrat father look bad, he lacks entertainment, so Godfrey is following his superiors around in the hope of breaking up a dull afternoon.

Fitz and Birty shake down the Adlers' neighbors, the Tanners, for their usual protection money. Infuriated at their behavior and the fact that no one will stand up to them, Calvin manages to maneuver into position to humiliate the two mages and save the Tanners. This has the unintended consequence of Birty and Fitz snatching his parents' savings straight from their house, leaving them at risk of losing their sheep franchise and thus their home. The Adlers blame Calvin for this turn of events, not the mages who stole the money, because Calvin is the safer target.

Unable to understand why his parents do not stand up for themselves and others, Calvin is nonetheless startled when three strangers sneak into his room late that night. Identifying themselves as Technomancers, they offer to take him into their army, returning the gold Fitz and Birty stole from his family earlier. Torn between following his dream of resisting the mages and loyalty to his parents, Calvin finally steals away with the Technomancers, heading to their recruitment center at Mount Vernon. But when he meets the man in charge, Commodore McCracken, and falls for the lovely Amelia McCracken, Calvin starts to wonder if he traded one tyranny for another....

The Characters

Calvin is a bit naive, definitely bullheaded, and he has a temper. Nevertheless, he is a good-hearted young man who truly does want to make Meryka a better place for everyone. The mages' constant humiliation of his parents and neighbors raises his ire, as it offends his sense of justice. While he tends to rush into things without thinking matters through, it is less because he is stupid and more because he cares too much to stop and consider all his options.

Godfrey Norrington is a stuck up snob, a bully, and a dangerous narcissist. Despite being Calvin's age, Godfrey has the discipline, strategical mind, and self-possession to get most of what he wants. His biggest flaw is that he has such an inflated opinion of himself that he believes he is smarter than he actually is. It makes him the perfect foil to Calvin and his hot-blooded righteousness.

Amelia McCracken, Calvin's love interest, is a nice girl feeling stifled. Raised in Mount Vernon by her father, she wants to join the Technomancers as her mother did, but Commodore McCracken won't hear of his daughter leaving. Nor will he abide by her interest in a certain new recruit from Baltimore, either. Whatever she wants, Amelia knows, must bow before her father's will...whether she likes it or not.

The World

This is a world where the American colonies not only never became the United States of America, but there was no technological progress made at all. Since mages are susceptible to firearms and "mimics" – animal mecha designed to compete against the magical creatures many mages ride – all technology is forbidden. Readers get a hint of how deep the magic in this world goes as Godfrey seeks spells to counteract the Technomancers whom he faces, while Calvin dodges magical arrows from Amerindian tribes and mentions the magic practiced in other nations. It makes the world of Rebel Heart a real treat to explore, as Bradley acknowledges that not only are guns great equalizers, there is more than one kind of magic for the heroes to fight!

Politics

It is 1776 in 1984. Literally. The politics are those of the American War for Independence. If that bothers you, this book may not be one you wish to read.

Content Warning

There is bullying, drunkenness, beatings, imprisonment in a brig, mentions of death via curse, a brief description of Godfrey chasing a girl around his father's office, and a kiss between Calvin and Amelia. The book is definitely Young Adult rated, though mature middle graders could probably read it as well.

Who is it for?

Young adults looking for red-blooded adventure will like this book. Fans of 1980s action movies, such as the original Red Dawn, will have a great deal of fun as they recognize where Bradley's inspiration came from. Readers who enjoy alternate history will also like it, and if any Harry Potter fans have ever wondered what a wizard would do when faced with a gun, they will find an apt answer within this book. Urban Fantasy readers will enjoy seeing a frontier setting full of magic and budding technology where the two struggle against one another, as magic seeks to crush machine. Anyone who wants to encourage teens to dig further into history will find this novel does just that, and those who wish to inspire a love of folklore will discover it is useful for whetting young readers' appetites on the subject.

Why buy it?

It is a grand “What if?” adventure that will appeal to anyone who wants to see how British mages would stack up against Americans with guns. Furthermore, it is perfect reading for Independence Day. Why not pick it up and enjoy it now?

She Who Knows by Nnedi Okorafor Review by Samuel Lubell

She Who Knows is a novella prequel to her popular Afrofuturist novel, *Who Fears Death* (2010). *She Who Knows* begins the story of Najeeba, the mother of Onyesonwu, the main character of *Who Fears Death*. This is essentially Najeeba’s origin story, showing her childhood and her initial discoveries about her special abilities.

The story takes place in a future post-disaster Africa where remnants of science coexist with magic. Najeeba is part of the Osu-nu (untouchable) tribe among the Okeke people. Only the Osu-nu know the secret location of the salt lake; and they make their living by traveling the salt roads, collecting the salt, and selling it at the market.

Najeeba’s name means “She who knows.” At age 13, Najeeba, the first person narrator, feels the annual call to travel to the Salt Roads, which only males are supposed to hear. While her parents take this in stride, others in the village, including her best friend and her boyfriend, insist that “Girls and women don’t go on the salt roads.” Even her brothers say she should stay at home instead. And in the market, she has to hide that she is a girl. However, by the middle of the book, Najeeba has set a trend and a third of the girls in the village join their fathers on their trips to the salt lake.

On Najeeba’s first trip, she encounters a witch (tornado) that lifts her up 20 feet into the sky. Afterward she is able to send her spirit traveling outside her body and be super-persuasive at bargaining when selling salt in the market. By the end of the book, she has other powers as well, becoming almost the equivalent of a comic book hero.

Najeeba is an interesting character with a unique voice that captures the wonder of learning what she can do with a slight edge of nervousness.

Fans of *Who Fears Death* will welcome this prequel. Other readers may want to wait to see how the other two volumes of this trilogy turn out. *She Who Knows* is mostly setup—how she grew up with her powers. It remains to be seen if the other two books reward this beginning. The second book, *One Way Witch*, was published in April 2025.

I did have a slight problem with how *She Who Knows* fits with *Who Fears Death*. By the end of this book, Najeeba is much more powerful than the Najeeba at the start of *Who Fears Death*, even though this book (except the very last couple of pages) is set earlier.

Splinter Effect by Andrew Ludington

Review by Jason Hunt

upstreamreviews.substack.com

Splinter Effect Digs In with Spirit

What if Indiana Jones was a time traveler?

The very short, shorter-than-Reader's Digest version of this: Indiana Jones as a time traveler.

Andrew Ludington delivers a combination that in retrospect is a no-brainer, and may have been done before, but this one knocks it out of the park: archeology and time travel. The concept of "chrono archeologists" is deceptively simple: people trained in history travel back in time to recover ancient artifacts just moments before they're lost to history. Think Indiana Jones grabbing the Ark of the Covenant at Tanis, and you're close.

Using technology that exists without technobabble explanations, Ward and his ilk jump back to a fixed location and they have a set amount of time to make it back to the "decay point" to get back to the present. Nothing from the past can go forward in the jump, so artifacts have to be buried so that they can be retrieved when the chrono archeologist returns.

Dr. Robert "Rabbit" Ward is our protagonist, a chrono archeologist working for the Smithsonian. He and others like him are sponsored by various organizations or private donors to mount expeditions to various events in the past, and there are times when Ward finds himself in competition with others for the same artifact. And sometimes things go horribly, horribly wrong — which happened twenty years ago when Ward lost a Jewish artifact — the menorah of Jerusalem's Second Temple — as well as his mentee, Aaron, in Rome 455 CE.

Legally restricted from going back and trying again, Ward has spent the last twenty years agonizing over that disaster. Now Ward has another chance to recover the menorah, as new evidence suggests that it turns up in Constantinople 535 CE. And while he has a chance at some payback, he has to assemble the funds for the trip himself, and that involves re-opening some old wounds. Nevertheless, Ward's able to put together what he needs to make the trip, and he's determined to succeed this time.

Naturally, things get complicated.

This time, Ward has competition from a mysterious woman who's plagued him before on other expeditions, returning to the present only to steal an artifact from him before he can retrieve it himself. Add to that the fact that the Jewish population of Constantinople is on the verge of violent revolution (when historically, they shouldn't be...) and the locals seem to know Ward doesn't belong, and the complications start to pile up pretty quickly, threatening Ward's mission to retrieve the menorah and make it to his decay point or else be stuck in the past forever.

This is Andrew Ludington's first novel, but you wouldn't know it. His plot is tight at just the right pace to keep the reader interested and turning the pages to see how things continue to escalate and complicate Rabbit's mission in Constantinople.

But I want to start first with his version of time travel. The mechanics of it are glossed over. Ward gets in the machine, and then he's in the past. Ludington mentions the technology, but doesn't get bogged

down in the details with pages of exposition about the physics of it. There's just enough detail to put the process into the story. It's just taken for granted that time travel exists and it works and the people involved know how to do it and you don't need all the details in the universe to accept it. The narrative is compelling enough that you get full immersion almost from the first page.

I also like this "decay point" concept, where the time traveler has to return to his arrival point by a certain time to be pulled back to the present. Miss it, and you're stranded. It adds another layer to the stakes without a lot of extra exposition along the way.

The economy of words helps also to keep the pace of the story consistent. Ludington has details in his descriptions when he needs them, but he's not so much in love with his own writing that he lingers on every single descriptive term available in the dictionary. And the amount of detail on the page allows me to believe that Ludington's done his homework when it comes to ancient Greek lore, what Constantinople (not Istanbul) would have been like in the year 535. It's just enough for me to get a clear picture of what it could have been like to be there, and not too much that it knocks me out of following Rabbit through the adventure as things get worse for him while time is running out for him to succeed.

And while the press material invokes Outland for comparisons, there's not a lot of romantic elements here. Yes, there's the mysterious "Helen" who reluctantly partners with Rabbit purely out of self-preservation, but Ludington rightly avoids a deep dive into the "enemies to lovers" cliché, instead giving the relationship — adversarial at first — time to breathe and follow a natural course determined by circumstances and not the Hand Of The Writer. So when we get to the end of the book, we're further along, but they're not falling all over each other as they whisper sweet nothings.

This book fits right in with adventure stories like Raiders of the Lost Ark or The Librarian, and I could see a studio picking it up for adaptation. Rabbit is cut from the same cloth as your typical heroic adventure figure, and he has flaws enough to offset the fantastical nature of his work. He's not the dashing hero, nor is he a clone of Han Solo, Indiana Jones, or Frank Buck. And that's refreshing in this age of so many copycats mining the copycats mining the copycats of that thing we all grew up watching.

Definitely recommending this one and the sequel that comes out next year.

The Standard-Bearer's Oath by Daniel Zeidler

Review by Caroline Furlong

upstreamreviews.substack.com

When Ilse vra Celeres takes an oath, she does not intend to break it. Not even to follow the king's final command!

Meetings that take place in dark ruins either mean enemies are coming to kill each other, co-conspirators are up to no good, or rebels are trying to avoid detection. Varyk D'terris, the young king of conquered Sarbotel and leader of the resistance within the capitol, is not up to anything nefarious. But he is conspiring with General Acrisius, the leader of what remains of the rebel Sarbotel Royal Army in the Sarbian countryside, to do something rather drastic.

Sarbotel was conquered by a mysterious Tyrant using Dii magic fourteen years ago. The Dii are an alien race akin to demons and their powers put humanity's to shame. Mankind's allies, the Guardians, have long been absent from the world of Seuthes: this world is home to the kingdom of Delraak, the Plarian Empire, and the now-oppressed kingdom of Sarbotel.

But Varyk has learned that one of his rebels – the princess of Delraak, who has been fighting with the Sarbotel City resistance most of her life – has caught the eye of the Tyrant. Ilse vra Celeres has been in the city since she was five, but Varyk made a promise to her mother to keep her safe. With the Tyrant eyeing her, the only way to do that is to send Ilse away. But the young princess isn't going to take that lying down....

The Story

Anyone who believed that Ilse would be content to go back home to Delraak soon learns the young woman has very different ideas. She has lived among and fought alongside the Sarbians for fourteen years since the Emperor of Delraak has refused to send aid to Sarbotel. It is thought that he has refused to send aid because he believes his daughter died with her mother when the city fell, but his decision greatly upset the Delraakai who were in the captured municipality – including Ilse.

Thus, Ilse gave her word that she would return to help liberate the Sarbian capitol and she meant it. Instead of having a pampered princess on their hands or a lady who wants to go home, the Sarbian resistance soon finds they have a young telepath who has made up her mind.

However, Ilse is not stupid, nor so stubborn that she will not see reason. Varyk entrusted her with the method for activating a device that should stop the Tyrant. It is just a matter of getting back into the city, sneaking past said Tyrant and his guards, and activating it in time to kill the man. Such a plan will take considerable work to pull off, but Ilse is determined to accomplish it.

When one of the fabled Guardians – Heldron – returns out of seeming nowhere, things become even more complicated. Because the Tyrant is not the only one interested in Ilse vra Celeres, and neither are the Delraakai. The Dii like playing games and Ilse is such a very interesting piece on this board....

The Characters

Ilse is a Joan of Arc-type character. She is stubborn, resourceful, a good leader, and bold, but rather naive when it comes to the world around her. Having been raised in a city at war it is not hard to see why she would be somewhat ignorant of the wider world even as she remained determined enough to get her way most of the time. That does not make her perfect, however, as she can and does make mistakes.

Of particular note is that Ilse's combat prowess is not a main issue in the story. Several characters need to remind her that while her heart is in the right place, she does not have the experience to go up against certain enemies no matter her skills. The fact that Ilse listens to this advice even when it annoys her makes her stand out from among many modern-day heroines.

General Acrisius comes across as a tired man trying hard to make sure his resistance does not fall apart. Balancing politics with the needs of his nation almost tears him in two and he is not happy about everything he needs (or believes he needs) to do to keep the Royal Army able to fight. Heldron, a Guardian who has returned to Seuthes, strikes a similar balance (albeit with a sense of humor that still rises to the surface easily) as he tries to protect the Seuthians and figure out how his people could have been infiltrated by the Dii. The two play off one another well and make good mentor figures within the story.

The World

Seuthes is a complex world, and the rest of the galaxy is implied to be just as interesting. The Guardians and the Dii have magic-empowered technology, allowing them to travel “thru-space” between

worlds. But Seuthes itself has been reduced to a Medieval level of magical science and technology for quite some time; although remnants of the Guardians' original tech can still be discovered, using them isn't possible for most Seuthians. Both the Dii and the Guardians are different from humans but where the Dii are alien, the Guardians are long-lived and very powerful humans. With the war between these two races at a stalemate, the Guardians desperately need to refill their ranks...something Seuthes might be able to help them with, if they aren't destroyed first!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

There is a lot of head-hopping or, more accurately, head-flowing in this novel as the point-of-view shifts from character to character even within the space of a few paragraphs. If that is something a reader dislikes then this book is not going to appeal to them, but for others, getting the hang of the rhythm makes it an easy read. There are a few messy deaths and kills in the book but none are dwelt on or described in a graphic manner. Restless dead and not-so-dead possessed soldiers also appear as, while the Dii are comparable to demons, they are not explicitly demonic and may take control of people with their magic.

Who is it for?

Sarbotel Rising will appeal to the middle grade and YA audience, so anyone looking for a gift will want to take notes. The story is smooth and the wonder of it is sure to capture younger readers' imagination very quickly. Older readers who want a fun story in a fantasy/sci-fi world with high (but not astronomical) stakes and engaging characters are also sure to like this novel. Fans of psionicist characters who want more tales with cultures built around telepathy will particularly like Ilse and the Delraakai, as they all have telepathic powers and use them regularly in ways that would make Andre Norton proud. Readers who want to sink their teeth into a tale where magic and technology are all but indistinguishable will also love the book, as space travel and spells blend together beautifully in this setting. For those who want some tasteful zombie action that the kids can read too, this novel has what they seek, with absolutely no chance of nightmares!

Why buy it?

It's a good book and a relaxing read in a well-thought out world – and it's child-friendly, too! Those are rarer than hen's teeth these days. Why let such a gem escape when you can grab it now?

The Tale of Alain by Edward Ormondroyd

Review by Caroline Furlong

upstreamreviews.substack.com

This is a classic children's fairy tale that needs to be remembered!

Published in 1960 (second printing – according my copy and Amazon, anyway) by Follet Publishing Company, The Tale of Alain was written by Edward Ormondroyd. Mr. Ormondroyd served in WWII will be 100 years old October 8th. This book of his was illustrated by Robert Frankenberg.

Edward Ormondroyd served in the Pacific Theater in World War II, specifically at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. This explains why Alain brushes over the larger battles in the story in favor of the smaller ones. Anyone who had been to Iwo Jima and Okinawa had seen more than enough large-scale battles to last a lifetime.

So far as I can find, *The Tale of Alain* has had no further printings past the second one. This is a shame, as shall hopefully be demonstrated with the following review. If anyone knows of or can find a way to get it reprinted by Follet Publishing Company with the original illustrations, please do. Such a gem does not deserve to be lost!

The Story

The Tale of Alain is a chapter book. It begins on a parapet where Alain, the protagonist of the story, is practically clinging to the wall in terror while his older brother Fenn leans out to look at the town next to the castle. Where Alain is smaller and weaker, Fenn is taller, broader, and stronger. But Fenn was also born with a twisted face that makes him look frightening, particularly when he decides to leer.

Not that Fenn lets certain people know he has a leer. You see, Fenn is a very good actor. He has learned all kinds of ways to hurt Alain in such ways that the scars will not be easily detected, and it has left his younger brother in mortal terror of him. Alain is not the only one: the servants have been hurt by Fenn, too. But they cannot resist him and his “merry tunes,” as he calls his abuse, so they act as though the prince and heir apparent was merely teasing them. Any rat or mouse who wanders into Fenn’s traps is made to “dance” to his “merry tunes” until it dies. Unfortunate spiders and flies have wings and legs torn off until they die. At least the cats and most of the dogs have the option to run and hide – Fenn leaves the hunting dogs be, for the same reason he leaves the soldiers be.

He has plans for those dogs and soldiers – many, many plans. Plans for war and conquest, as Alain knows all too well. But he has been so abused that standing up to his brother on his own behalf is practically impossible. Stand up to him on another’s behalf? He can’t!

Then the old king, Fenn and Alain’s father, dies. Fenn feigns distress but is really quite pleased while Alain’s terror leaves him in shock. He is thus completely unprepared when Fenn declares him a traitor and prepares to have him thrown in the dungeon, where he will dance to his brother’s “merry tunes” until he dies.

Compared to fear of Fenn, fear of death is nothing. Alain overcomes his terror of heights in a single instant and jumps from a high window in the castle. He lands in the moat, barely escaping into the town with his life. Lost amid the crowd, he is collared by a gruff ruffian named Hook, who calls him “Tom.” Hook makes Alain change his clothes, then leads him out of town with a heavy bundle over one shoulder.

As they walk through the countryside, Alain slowly comes to life and learns what it means to be a man. But when he must confront his greatest fear, will his newfound strength be enough? Or will he fail at this, his last and most crucial test?

The Characters

Alain is a very, very abused boy who has to grow a LOT during the course of the story. Ormondroyd does not keep readers waiting or regale them with every little bit of whining, though, so none need to worry that the book will drag them through pages of moaning. Alain learns quickly, if a little roughly,

and grows to be quite a man by the time the finale arrives.

Hook is a gruff man with a heart of gold. It is difficult to discuss him without giving away spoilers, but the man is more than he seems and has more power than he lets on – for good reason. Fenn is a terrifying villain who, although he does not receive the traditional “just desserts” of most fairy tale villains, is soundly beaten by the end. The book is a story of redemption and there is hope for even the most miserable creature in the entire narrative by the time a reader reaches the final page.

The World

The world is a barely sketched Medieval setting with a vaguely English flavor. It could be set anywhere in Europe, and the name of the kingdom as well as the king is never given. This enhances the fairy tale setting and makes it easier to read, as one never needs to bother about the specific time in which the tale is set.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Fenn is extremely abusive. There are brief descriptions of him sticking Alain with hot pins, practicing his sword work on him so the cuts don't show, as well as mention of Fenn tearing the legs off spiders and the wings off flies. His verbal abuse of and threats to his brother are quite explicit. Fenn calls Alain both “Stupid” and “Sniveler” several times in the narration, showing his contempt for his younger brother. Compared to the battles, which are hardly seen, Fenn is perhaps the one item in the book that requires a Content Warning.

Who is it for?

The young and the young at heart – that is, anyone who likes fairy tales – will find *The Tale of Alain* has immense appeal. Boys in particular will enjoy it, as it follows Alain from his abusive childhood into his sturdy adulthood. Ormondroyd's fans will like the book as well, and anyone looking for a gift will discover that *The Tale of Alain* will satisfy a reader of any age. Those who purchase and preserve classics would also do well to pick up this book since it is, to the best of my knowledge, not available in reprints.

Why buy it?

It is a good coming-of-age tale written by a World War II veteran from the Pacific Theater. The story is solid, fun, and edifying on more than one level. What more could one ask of a classic children's tale?

When the Moon Hits Your Eye by John Scalzi Review by Samuel Lubell

If you told a science fiction fan that you had just read a novel about the moon turning into cheese, and they had not previously heard of *When the Moon Hits Your Eye*, there is a good chance they would ask, “Is that by John Scalzi?” This is not to say that John Scalzi is the only one who would think of writing such a book, but he is probably the only person who would then proceed to write it and have it turn out to be a good book. Scalzi is a brilliant entertainer who always produces a highly readable and enjoyable book, even when the premise is outright ridiculous.

When the Moon Hits Your Eye is an odd book whose oddities go beyond the premise. It is written with each chapter being a day in the lunar cycle, (with a few chapters at the end set later and then much later). Unlike a traditional novel that follows one or a few characters through the novel’s events, here each chapter has different characters (with a very few characters repeating). Not all the chapters are traditional narratives either. There is no real plot (except for a few chapters on a billionaire’s attempt to hijack a space mission so he could go to the moon himself). And most of the “action” has characters reacting to the moon turning to cheese. The majority of the novel is comic, ranging from slapstick to satire, although it grows very serious near the end.

The book never names the type of cheese the moon becomes (although NASA refuses to call it cheese, preferring the term “organic matrix”). At a talk at the Gaithersburg Book Festival, Scalzi refused to name the specific type of cheese, although he did say this was the question he was most asked. The book also never reveals how (or why) the moon turns into cheese.

The book begins with a preface written in the style of a kids’ fun facts article, “HEY KIDS! Let’s learn about the moon.” Day One has the director of the Armstrong Air and Space Museum learning that the museum’s moon rock had somehow been stolen and replaced by cheese. A Reddit thread has comments from people who saw an exceptionally bright moon. Day Two is set in The White House Situation Room with the Chief of Staff being briefed on the moon changing to cheese. At first the scientists think it is joke, but as they check more and evidence they conclude, “It’s not possible... It’s also our best guess at the moment.”

Other chapters show the point of view of astronauts preparing for a now-cancelled moon mission, a somewhat shady corporate figure who runs the aerospace company that is building the lunar lander for a now-cancelled trip to the moon, a popular science author whose newest book has a chapter about the fables of the moon being made out of green cheese, wealthy heirs who want to be the first to taste moon cheese, etc. Other chapters give the perspective of high school nerds, patrons of a small town diner, church members in Iowa, and a romantic couple who work in rival cheese shops. Another chapter shows the effect on Hollywood with tons of moon and cheese puns used in movie and TV pitches.

Fans of John Scalzi have most likely already read and enjoyed *When the Moon*. However, I want to assure people who have been reluctant to get the book due to its silly premise and non-traditional structure that the book is highly entertaining. Yes, the book is silly in spots, with lots of humor and satire on governments and science, but it is also serious. *When the Moon* shows how people remain people even when the universe no longer works the way we think it should, even when life on Earth is threatened, even when we lose faith in everything we have been taught. The humanity of the novel’s characters keeps the book from dissolving in its own absurdity and provides a reason for reading the book separate from its humor and high entertainment level. This is also a book you can give to non-science fiction readers as it does not rely on the usual science fiction tropes and expectations, nor does it go into depth

on the science involved.

The Words of the Night by C. Chancy
Review by Caroline Furlong
upstreamreviews.substack.com

What happens when you fall into another world that's a lot like the past...but magic and monsters are real?

Our hero begins the story grumbling. Jason Finn and academia had a disagreement, and Jason lost the argument. He got "early retirement" and not much else beyond the "black dog" of despair gnawing at him.

But Jason didn't get to the age of fifty-eight without a whole lot of spite. The black dog wants him so much? Fine. It can follow him to South Korea, where he will teach English and practice his archery. See how the black dog likes (or doesn't) being in a new land where Jason is too distracted to listen to it.

Fate has other ideas, however. On flight JL93 from Haneda to Seoul, Jason notices a young redheaded girl seated between her parents who seems more than the usual teenage unhappy with the world. Just as he decides to try to talk to the redhead's family, there is a flash of light, a boom – And a large, black claw shredding through the plane.

The Story

Jason wakes in seawater, feverish and scratched up bad. The scratches leak pus and have scaled over. The young redhead, Mary Hart, is also trapped in this capsized junk and has at least one such scratch but Jason has more. When another prisoner with scales and black eyes attacks them, Jason scratches him and bites his ear off.

Bad move, as he learns later. This curse has a hunger attached to it; eat flesh, human flesh, and it grows stronger. Which seems to be what their Oriental mer-captors want, since they kill one of the weaker prisoners and let the others devour the corpse. Over the course of several days, Jason fends off the other captives to acquire the water that both he and Mary need to survive. The two work on a warning and a cry for help scratched into a wooden board, but Jason slowly loses the ability to speak as the curse takes deeper root. Fighting to keep Mary safe means he must fight the other prisoners...which means he ends up eating parts of them, and of the "morsels" which their captors throw in to stir up the rest. Jason's only dwindling hope is that if help comes, he wants it to let him die as a man.

Help does come, but in a most unexpected guise. Explosives punch holes in the sunken ship's hull, allowing archers and riflemen to fire in at the curse-maddened prisoners and captors. Then a vampire and a Heavenly cultivator enter and make mincemeat of the mer-pirates.

Desperate, Jason hands Mary over to the vampire, Night Magistrate Lee Cheong. Lee is a Korean from Ansiseong living in the kingdom of Daehan, not Joseon, as that kingdom does not exist in this world. This Korea's history took a different turn, one that required Lee to become a vampire and leader of Daehan's Demon-Callers – men and women who work magic and/or escaped maddening curses themselves. They hunt monsters, like these mermen, and work to track down curses similar to the shark-curse that has Jason in its grasp.

The Demon-Callers also kill monsters or those infected with a deadly curse. Unless there is enough human mind left that they might be able to save them.

Lee Cheong believes there is enough of Jason left to save – and to help them put an end to the shark-curse for good. He and his Callers pull out all the stops, but how can they beat a curse that they do not recognize? One that spreads by scratch and which can affect anyone near any waterway the infected can travel through? This world is looking at the worst zombie outbreak ever unless Jason and Mary can help their rescuers figure out where this curse came from so they may put a stake through its heart. Then perhaps they can afford to worry about the Western dragon that somehow ended up in 1618 Daehan.

And after that, they might have enough time to figure out how to return home.

The Characters

Jason is a man with a past – a nasty past that left him with complex Post-Traumatic Stress. His refusal to turn out like the monsters who raised him gives him an edge against the shark-curse but it also makes him uniquely vulnerable to it psychologically. When he receives an offer of help to face it down, he takes it.

Lee Cheong is certain that he is a monster, yet the heart of a paladin beats in this young vampire's chest, making his leadership of the Demon-Callers that much more complicated. Still trying to find his footing in a world on the brink of war, he has to do a lot more recalculating when two strangers from another world drop into his lap. Aside from the effort needed to make them appear “normal,” the two have ideas. Not only can Lee not trammel their ideas...he may not want to, once he learns more about them.

The rest of the characters jump off the page as well. From needle-happy veterinarian-turned-medic Jue Chin-sun to Chae, the Chinese Heavenly cultivator who dances on propriety; from ex-bandit sniper and rogue Kwan Ha-neul to fierce, frightened young Mary Hart, the cast is one that will endear itself to readers looking for found family done right. Those are just the heroes – the villains also are realistic enough that seeing them receive their just reward is very, very satisfying. Nothing quite beats watching the bad guy go down, and many of the villains drop in this Alt-History novel.

The World

This is 1618 Korea in a world affected by magic, so nothing is as it was in our world. Daehan exists where Joseon did, but it covers far more territory. Japan is under the Oda Shogunate, and the Ming Dynasty is eyeing making Daehan a vassal state. At the same time Nurhaci, Khan of the Jurchens, wants to take a serious bite out of the Middle Kingdom. Then there is the shark-curse that seems to have come out of nowhere, but which would have J.R.R. Tolkien cheering once he got to a certain chapter in the story....

Politics

If the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, et al, are political, then expect to run into them during the course of the story. Recognizing that slavery exists and will not disappear with the wave of a hand is also discussed in this novel. If either of these things makes you react like a vampire dodging holy water, this is not a book for you.

Content Warning

Cannibalism, rape, murder, foot-binding, and other unpleasantness is sketched but not dwelt on over-much. Psychological torture is on display a little longer and the horror of a curse that eats a victim from the mind and heart out is also discussed in some detail, though not on a level anyone who enjoys Andre Norton cannot handle. There is some sparse use of coarse language, too, but only when the heroes are truly terrified and simply blurt it out.

Who is it for?

Alt-History lovers will devour this book, as will folklorists, since Chancy draws from both. Anyone interested in learning more about Korea will be able to make use of the index in the back, allowing readers to hunt down the sources the author used for research at their leisure. Those who like unconventional vampiric heroes will definitely want this story, as will cultivation or xianxia fans. Andre Norton and J.R.R. Tolkien readers will find a fellow-traveler in Chancy and love everything she does with magic, monsters, and power. K-drama viewers will find more goodies in this novel than they know what to do with, and fans of Chancy's work will want more as soon as they turn the final page. Isekai and portal fantasy lovers will definitely enjoy the novel, as it has an old-school portal fantasy flavor with a lovely layer of isekai fun on top. Epic fantasy readers will be eager to read the next book once they finish this one.

Why buy it?

This is a portal fantasy that makes Andre Norton proud, and it has a grasp of mythology and fairy stories that must have J.R.R. Tolkien grinning from heaven. If you do not at least read the book on KU, you will be missing out. Try it today and see for yourself!

The Words of the Night is eligible for the Dragon Awards' Alt-History slot. If you have not yet voted in the Dragons, then consider this portal fantasy for Alt-History. It fits the category like a glove and can certainly hold its own against the other contestants!

Zombie Lieutenant by David Guenther

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

This year, I'll be reviewing four books in four days all of which were written by veterans. It's an awesome chance to highlight some of the people who have put their asses on the line to keep mine and read some military science fiction and/or fantasy in the process. And I love our veterans. So this a totes legit thing, right?

David Guenther's *Zombie Lieutenant* is a flat out good time. It's set right after the *Zombie Apocalypse* while the survivors are just starting to attempt to pick up the pieces of a shattered world. Things look bleak, but there's hope for a better tomorrow. Contrast that with a work like *The Walking Dead*, which I love but where everything continuously gets worse for the first what, like seven or eight seasons? Guenther's story is one of determined people doing what they have to do to make things work. It's not always easy. It's frequently ugly. They do it anyway, because it's necessary.

Guenther's characters are hardcore. Don't get me wrong. They're not psycho gung-ho crazy types who charge straight in when caution is warranted. Their intelligent human beings. They're just not the type to give up and go to ground. Think about it. If eighty-five percent of the world were either dead or had been reduced to mindless zombies, how easy would it be to give up? How hard would it be to try to gather yourself and any survivors and try to make things better in the apocalypse? How easy would it be to turn to murder and predation of your fellow human beings when there was no one around to stop you? The main characters of *Zombie Lieutenant* make the right choice when it would be way too easy to make the wrong one.

That's not to say that there isn't an opposing element of individuals who don't do the right thing. They're all over the place. They do what they're going to do and they don't apologize for it. Many of them end up paying the price for their sins. I enjoyed seeing that. Justice in the *Zombie Apocalypse* is swift and sure even if it's not in strict keeping with the US Constitution. Although, to be fair, often-times it's justice delivered in the form of self defense.

That's not to say that Guenther's society is overly organized for being in the mess they're in. They're a bit on the ragtag side, but they're working toward putting something workable together. They have their squabbles and the occasional internal power struggle, but they pull together for the most part and get things done that they wouldn't ordinarily have been able to. This is the kind of story I love to read: The story of a small group of people making things work because it makes sense for them as individuals.

Probably my favorite character in *Zombie Lieutenant* is a young man named Caleb White. Caleb is basically a zombie, but he has a functioning brain. He heals super fast, can sense other zombies, not get attacked by them and so on. But he can think. White is promoted to lieutenant for his work in the first book, *Zombie Airman*. I'm guessing that title, and the fact that White is a member of the Air Force and not one of the other branches of the military is because of Guenther's history as a member of the USAF but I can't prove it. Probably. I mean, I could ask and then I'd know for sure, but Guenther needs to spend his time writing and not answering stupid questions from goofball book reviewers.

True story, bro.

And for the record, I said that. He didn't.

At any rate...

There seems to be a lot of logistics in *Zombie Lieutenant: Infected World Book 2* given the fact that it was written by an NCO who fixed aircraft and not a line officer and that absolutely none of the stuff that gets procured has nothing to do with fixing aircraft. That much having been said, it all makes sense and that's awesome. Listen, I loved watching *Commando* as a kid too, but there's a lot more to both warfare and building a society than you can accomplish looking through the sights of a weapon. Guenther gets that. I'm guessing that his acumen for this type of thing comes more from his experience in actual operations than training but it freaking works and I'm happy to just cruise along content with that knowledge. Experience is a better teacher than a book anyway.

You all just gasped. You'll be okay.

And it's amazing how in depth Guenther gets with this kind of stuff. It's not just military supplies that Guenther concerns himself with. We do see the characters gathering the "Three Bs" as they were once

call (Bean, Bandages and Bullets) but there's more to it than that. Everything from housing to construction equipment to long term thought about things like housing and farming are included. Guenther is a guy who has given serious thought not just what is needed to fight a battle (which is complicated enough) but about what would be needed to build a society which is similar but like eight hundred trillion times more complicated.

Guenther's action sequences (and it wouldn't be the Zombie Apocalypse without some gunfire and explosions, right?) are awesome. You never know when a fight is going to break out or how it is going to go but a lot of that logistics goes to keeping guns loaded. This is a good thing. It's a weird thing for me. I wish all the members of the US Armed Forces a safe career spent training for things that they never have to engage in so that they can make it home and enjoy long lives basking in the thankfulness of the people whose lives and livelihoods they have protected. But, let's face it, those are the real, live people that serve in the military in the real world. Service members in novels who don't actually exist are different: They need to fight for their lives on a regular basis. In *Zombie Lieutenant* they do and it's glorious.

And yes, I know that's it's important to many service members to get to do what they practice for real. I'd imagine it's a lot less important to their mothers and their spouses though and, put bluntly, they have to be alive to regret the fact that they never saw combat. The fact that the servicemembers go despite the risks is what makes them so amazing. And trust me folks, they don't call it the butchers bill for nothing.

This is the part where I talk about how I can't wait to buy the next one. The joke's on you. I BOUGHT THE OMNIBUS. I ALREADY OWN THE NEXT ONE. HA! And yes, I'll be reading and reviewing it soon. You can look forward to it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Looted Sodas

Prose Bono

Make it Sizzle by Cedar Sanderson
CedarWrites.com

Sales is all about adding the sizzle. That's not going to change, and ten years later this is still a list of things that you, my dear author, need to be doing and doing well.

My job as a publisher is to make your mouth water over that book even before you've opened the cover. As a writer, it's my job to make it taste as good as it looks.[/caption]

There was an advertising saying somewhen, I don't recall where I first heard it, that you aren't selling the steak, you're selling the sizzle. Needless to say, making books smoke and sizzle isn't the way to sell them, but adding some polish is.

To return to the metaphor I started exploring last week, of books being marketed not in a monolithic marketplace, but in a bazaar, a fair full of fantastic wares full of shoppers who are on visual overload - how do you make your book stand out? One of the first things I can tell you is that it's not all about the

writing.

Don't get me wrong: I am NOT saying the story doesn't matter. It does. It's vital. If that steak comes out of the kitchen sizzling merrily and smelling great, the reader's eater's mouth starts to water. But the plate is plunked in front of him by a surly server who grunts something about gender inequality and then disappears for the rest of the meal (or worse, hovers and critiques the eater's taste in food, apparent privilege, neo-nazism, and so on). On the plate is a paper-thin cut of meat, cooked until it's grey all over, maybe a hunk of charcoal on one corner, and it tastes like cardboard. You can bet that eater isn't coming back unless there are no other choices.

Fortunately for readers, there are other choices. There are books that have been edited with care, wrapped into professional-looking covers, with proper layout and design throughout. It's the equivalent of walking through that marketplace and being offered a really great taco from a street vendor. It smells wonderful, it tastes great, and you don't have to pay for the expensive meal with the disgusting steak.

Don't like tacos? Or steaks? You have choices as a reader in the new marketplace. As a writer, you've got the readers headed toward you hungry and looking. What are you going to do?

- Either learn how to be, or hire, a professional cover artist. No, wait, let me explain. You don't want an artist (well, you do, but I digress) you want a designer. Beautiful design will make up for lacking art.
- Have your book edited. Structural edits if needed, proof edits for sure, and as I mentioned last week, you can either hire someone, or you can barter for services. The book might look beautiful but if it leaves the reader with mental indigestion they won't be coming back.
- Learn how to make keywords work for you. Readers don't just browse the marketplace, they search out what they want. If your wares are with, say, the taco vendors when the readers are looking at silk scarves, you'll be left wondering why your sales are so dismal.
- Spend time on crafting your blurb, or find someone to hire/help you with that. The MGC commenting community has been helpful to folks with this in the past, so today if you have a blurb, put it in the comments for critique.
- Don't make your book look too different. Readers use certain cues, often unconsciously, to assess the worth of the product in front of them. Take the time to look at the top sellers in your specific sub-genre and break apart the components which are similar, dissimilar, and then look at your book to see how you can both signal "this is a zombie romance" and still look new, different, and you.
- Don't offer just one thing. Yes, I know everyone has to start somewhere. But be ready to keep writing once you put that first book out there, and be prepared to not sell much until you have enough to make your booth look interesting to readers who prefer to know there's more where that came from.
- As a corollary to that last, make your series look coherent. Covers should have a common design thread (typography and similar art styles are good ways to accomplish this). Somewhere on the book, indicate that it is part of a series. Somewhere on the sales page, let the reader know which book in the series it is - most readers hate to pick up book three and feel totally lost in the story. Amazon has gotten very good at pulling series together and offering them as a bundle, but you must make it clear in your set-up or this won't happen.
- Do some active marketing. It need not be time-consuming or expensive. There are many different options from blogging to buying slots on promotional mailing lists, and we have talked about them here at MGC a few times!

Once you are up and running in that virtual marketplace, other options become available. You can ask your regular customers what they'd like to see you offer. I did that earlier this week on my blog, asking if there was interest in an omnibus version of my completed *Pixie for Hire Trilogy*. You can offer

wares directly from your website for more personal touches, as I've started to do with signed books and original art. Now, I've gotten some interesting suggestions, like the requests for coffee mugs and t-shirts with my artwork on them. And I have thoughts on what may be marketplace mistakes (a coloring book?). But you don't know what will work until you try.

You can also talk to your fellow vendors. Sure, just like in a real fair environment, some of them will be paranoid and suspicious and assume you're trying to steal customers from them. Others will be gracious and helpful, and you'll find yourself doing what I used to do: "Oh, yes, it is a beautiful scarf, isn't it? And so warm! You'll find them at the book an aisle over and four booths down. Enjoy!" Only now I acquire, read, and review books I think my readers will like. I know I can't possibly write fast enough to keep even the slowest of my fans amused all the time. So I make sure they are happy by sending them to other authors too. I'm also doing this quirky thing called Eat This While you Read That, where I highlight an author's food suggestion along with a book to read while the meal is prepared/eaten. It's been fun!

Publishing's Bellwether by Cedar Sanderson CedarWrites.com

This article was originally published at the Mad Genius Club on September 22, 2015. It's been almost a decade, and this is still true. Probably always will be. Thing is, at this point the gatekeepers are still standing at the gates, oblivious to the fact the fences are down, have been for years, and the herds just flow around them and direct to the reading market. We've won, we really have. Indie Authors, you did it!

Welcome to the farm, today, where I'm leaning on my oak crook and feeling the gentle breeze in my hair and watching the lambs cavort. I'm also keeping a weather-eye on the sky, and listening to the animals as they move from place to place. Amanda's dealing with real life, and I'm lost in a memory...

A bellwether, in shepherding terms, is the leader of the flock. It would either be a sheep or a goat, depending on the sort of herd (and some weight given to the native intelligence of the animal individually) and it wore a bell on a collar. The bellwether was the critter always out in front, and the rest of the herd would slowly drift in his wake, nibbling and straying, but driven by their instincts to stay with the bell, with the herd. The shepherd (or goatherd. Anyone read Heidi, rather than watching the saccharine movie? Did you know there are sequels?) would follow along after the bell, keeping an eye out for strays or lambs that didn't know enough to follow the bellwether.

In business terms, the bellwether is the indicator of a trend. In publishing, it currently seems to be ebooks. I posted Dorothy Grant's post about the implications of the recent Author Earnings report on my facebook timeline, and got a comment: "her article is not correct in its specifics. The graphs are about Kindle ebook sales, not books in general." My immediate answer, which then led to this post, was 'That's because there is NO way to get accurate data on books in general, so the bellwether is ebooks, which are trackable.'

See, here's the thing. Print books are, in theory, externally trackable through the Nielsen BookScan data, which is notoriously unreliable. In theory, publishers ought to know what their sales numbers are, but there are two problems with that data. First, they aren't going to release proprietary and sensitive information to the public. Secondly, publishers themselves often rely on BookScan, and as Dorie Clark writing for the Harvard Business Review put it "Shockingly" slow and outmoded: "Publishing through

a traditional house? Most of us get weekly Nielsen BookScan reports—courtesy of Amazon—and sales figures every six months from our publisher.” Studies compiling data from both BookScan and the Association of American Publishers have ‘holes’ in their data. “The AAP and Nielsen data, while providing useful information that can point to important trends, does have some holes. As mentioned, AAP data doesn’t cover the entire industry, while Nielsen BookScan data doesn’t cover e-books. And lack of reliable e-book data is the most important omission.”

And here is where the most recent Author Earnings Report comes in. “Here at AE, over the last seven quarters we have steadily built up a comprehensive database of quarterly cross-sectional snapshots of the Kindle store, each of which captures between 45% and 60% of Amazon’s daily ebook sales. And while Amazon’s Kindle store alone doesn’t comprise the entire US ebook market, it does account for 67% of all traditionally-published ebook sales...”

While that might not seem enough, as the report points out, it is better than the claims being made on less data by PubTrack.

“The confusion is worsened by Nielsen’s misleading claims about their new PubTrack data products, which sell statistics about the US ebook market. PubTrack collects ebook unit-sales data from “a panel of over thirty US publishers,” according to Nielsen, who then sells that data back to the publishing industry at large. The fact that those Nielsen ebook sales numbers come from only 30 publishers, however, doesn’t stop Nielsen from claiming that their PubTrack numbers represent “85% of the nation’s eBook sales” and drawing broad and unsubstantiated conclusions from them.”

So if we go back to the bellwether metaphor, and the shepherd trying to keep track of his flock, we suddenly see that print data is like a sheep wrapped up in an invisibility cloak, trying to avoid his annual haircut.

Shrek the sheep, who hid to avoid being fleeced... Problem is that a sheep unsheared will perish.

I ran across an article very recently, and as I was assembling the material for this post about sheep, goats, and books, I knew I had to include the concept of scapegoats. In the publishing industry, the scapegoats are the books and authors that pay for other books and authors to be published. Oh, they aren’t given any choice, not any more than the goat which was symbolically bound with the sins of the people, and then sent into the wilderness to die alone.

Instead, the popular, best-selling books, are bound with the production and promotion costs of the prestigious and award winning books. “Washington Post critic Ron Charles reviews the kinds of books that get nominated for literary awards. These are not the blockbusters, the books written by the likes of Stephen King and Nora Roberts that make millions. Charles knows that. Even so, he was dismayed when he saw a story about the sales figures for the novels long-listed for the Man Booker. The list included *The Green Road* by Irish author Anne Enright, who’s won the award before. “When I saw that Anne Enright — [who] I think of as giant in literary fiction, beloved around the world — could only sell 9,000 copies in the U.K. I was shocked, that’s really low,” he says.”

The numbers for the potential Man Booker Prize winners? Tyler’s book has sold 20,102 copies in total across all editions through Nielsen BookScan. As well as being the biggest selling book of the Man Booker Dozen, it is also the book which has seen the most copies sold since the longlist was announced in July – selling 7,680 copies since then. Most of this is down to the release of the paperback last week, which sold 7,115 copies.

Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (Jonathan Cape) has sold 2,355 extra copies since being longlisted, for a total of 8,938.

Hanya Yanigahara's *A Little Life* (Picador), which was published three weeks after the longlist announcement, has sold a strong 7,542 copies since 13th August. Yanigahara's book is currently the favourite to win the prize at William Hill, with odds of 2/1 at William Hill, while Paddy Power is offering odds of 9/5.

A Brief History of Seven Killings by Marlon James (Oneworld Publications) has sold 6,694 copies across all editions in total, more than double (3,471 extra) what it had sold before the announcement.

Andrew O'Hagan's *The Illuminations* (Faber & Faber), has sold 457 copies since the longlist was announced, for a total of 3,273 copies.

Lila by Marilynne Robinson (Virago) has also sold strongly with 12,184 copies total for the hardback, but only 625 copies are from after it was included on the longlist.

Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (Jonathan Cape) has sold an additional 589 copies, going from 922 before the announcement to 1,511.

The Year of the Runaways by Sunjeev Sahota (Picador) had sold 413 copies before the announcement and is now on 1,302, an increase of 889 copies and Anna Smail's *The Chimes* (Sceptre) has risen almost as much - from 411 to 1,008."

So the books that pay off for the publisher obviously subsidize the books that are published solely on 'literary merit' and the scapegoat trots off blithely into the desert to take his chances with the fickle public. With the rise of Indie Publishing, the scapegoat is no longer a necessary thing. No one can force an independent to bear the burdens of his less fortunate fellow authors, who write for awards rather than to sell books and make money.

The flock is hearing that bell jingle, and they are changing their path to follow him toward the good green pastures. "It's a world where authors with plenty of Big 5 sales experience choose to say, 'You know what, I'm not playing this game any more.' Where authors make a positive choice to walk away from the terms offered by good, regular publishers. This new era of publishing is one where authors have a meaningful choice."

I spent a couple of years as an apprentice shepherdess when I was a teenager. I grew up with a small flock of goats, and I can assure you that not all sheep are dumb, the flock instinct much-mocked is a vital survival tool for them. Goats, kept with sheep, quickly become the trouble-makers, the leaders of the flock, which is why one is usually the bellwether. The goats, in the publishing world, are the early-adopter Indie authors, getting through the fences any way they can to reach the less-worn down grass. The goats know where the noms are, and the sheep will follow them around the gatekeepers. In publishing, we follow that bell to the market.

And finally, don't stop listening for the bellwether. Today, it's ebooks and Amazon. But take your attention off the market indicators, and you might lose track of the flock and get too far from the market, getting lost in the process. Amazon might not always provide the greenest pasture, so pay attention to the industry blogs, keep up with the data, and don't be afraid to move closer to the leading edge. Maybe you can be the bellwether for a while.

The Slow Dark Eclipse of the Soul

by Cedar Sanderson

CedarWrites.com

There is still much resistance to the idea of reading classics, because the perception of them is damaged by the books forced on kids and young adults in schools. Classic books are not what school requires, they are books so good they stand the tests of time and are beloved now more than ever, like Lord of the Rings, Sherlock Holmes, and Treasure Island among many others.

It's been a discouraging week, overall. First there was the article about SF writers coming into the genre without reading the classics of the genre. Then, when I started working on a list of classics available free (or very cheap) online to suggest to potential readers, I got a comment to the effect of 'classics suck, they should die in a fire, and why should anyone read them?'

In the aftermath of that, which left me wondering why I was trying to make this list... I don't make the lists to force anyone to read anything. I can't - who am I? I'm not the teacher, or the... anything. I'm just someone who likes to create these lists of recommendations with input from others, and then they generate even more suggestions in the comments. I make lists to be beginnings, not endings. The hope is that someone will see a title they had never read, or had forgotten, and that strikes mental sparks in folks who have favorites they want to share, and so on. It's about building up the genre, not tearing it down. I'd never say 'you must read these books, and only these books, all others are anathema.'

As I was saying, I was still mentally mulling the whole 'classics suck!' thing over in my head, when a minor controversy erupted over writing book reviews. When, if ever, is it ok to be critical in a review? Should we put ourselves in a position where we say 'well, that author is on my side, ergo I must never say a bad word about his work?' Well, no, I don't think so. Nor do I think that the occasional critical review is a bad thing - as long as the review is analyzing the work, not the author, and leavened with the good along with the bad. That's how I do it. But it's discouraging to be told that we can't present a critical view of a work, simply because of who the author is.

There are times you just have to carry on, even when it feels like the light has gone from the day and it's unseasonably dark and cold. To remember that with every generation there is a rebirth of wonder, and a rediscovery of what came before. Classic reads, in the original sense of the word, weren't the unpalatable stories that get forced on the unwilling, but the tales that resonated through the years with readers of all ages, sexes, and persuasions. Classics were the books that endured, and attracted new readers long after their authors were dead and gone. A book can be immortal, living on in reader's imaginations as they keep the world alive - like Tolkein's works, or Edgar Rice Burroughs, or Heinlein's - I could literally make a list as long as my arm. But I won't. I'll let you, my readers, offer options to the new arrivals on the scene.

And for me, I'll keep remembering that not everyone loves to read. Some have had sour experiences, and now they flinch when presented with a book. It's a classic case of conditioning. Pavlov's dogs salivated when their bell was rung, anticipating tasty treats. Some people have learned that certain cues in books will result in... bad things. Having been forced to read message fiction, they start reacting to any fiction that contains those 'bells' the same way. Strong female character who is oppressed by the patriarchy? Yip! There's another reader running with tail tucked in fear. The writer may not even be writing message fiction, but the bell cannot be unring.

The writer would be wrong, in the above example, to blame the reader for running. As a writer, we must be aware of how our readers will react to certain things. Kill a puppy in your story? Prepare to get hate mail. Don't even think about harming a kitten (I did, once. It was totally part of the story, but when my daughter came to me in tears, I hastily re-wrote that part to make sure they survived and then all was well). Protection of the young and innocent is a visceral response for most readers, and if you violate that once you might never be forgiven. I have an author I used to enjoy who I won't ever read again because of that. I know it's irrational, but I just don't want to poke an open wound and rub salt in it for no good reason other than to 'see if this book is ok' because there are other books, by other authors I trust.

Which is what I had to remember when I was writing the title. I might be tired, discouraged, and feeling like my little voice piping in the wilderness doesn't matter, that at best, I'm a mascot. But this isn't, as I was tempted to write, the long dark twilight of the soul. It is merely an eclipse, and there will be light again soon. There are always good stories to read and enjoy. If you find that an author is making you flinch, no-one is forcing you to read their books. And best of all, there is a whole ocean of reading material available at our fingertips on the internet, most of it for very little or no cash expenditure so even the poorest of beginning writers can read what came before, and get a glimpse into what made this genre truly amazing from the beginning. Read more, and the more light you'll shed on your brain. Read enough, and that conditioning to start running when certain words like 'classic' are spoken can be broken and remolded into a new appreciation of good stories that transport you from the cold into the warmth of other worlds.

Uncorking the Genie by Cedar Sanderson CedarWrites.com

I still need to rub the lamp ink bottle from time to time and remind myself of what I know works, after all these years.

We're all familiar with writer's block, even those of us who aren't writers. What, you never dreaded a school paper just because you didn't know what to say? At least with a research paper, or a book report, there's a kernel of... something there. With fiction it's both easier and harder. Easier because, as you rightly point out, we're just making it all up. Harder because fiction, unlike real life, must make a modicum of sense and follow a narrative path (even if said path doubles back on itself a few times. But woe betide the writer who loses his Reader in the deep dark woods far from home. The Reader may close up the book in fright, having lost the path entirely, and worse, they may never choose you, Author, as their guide again).

With all this in mind, is it any wonder we have times where we stare at the blank screen/paper and wonder just where our fickle muse got off to? Surely that mental genie is having more fun than we are, stuck here staring at the incessant blinking cursor. For me, being a professional means I need to have a measurable, predictable output when I sit down to write. But it's not always possible. Sometimes to pull that cork, I have to build up a head of steam and pop it out by pressure, first. Like yesterday. We drove for about six hours, down into Kentucky and back, and spent about six hours visiting while we were down there. Tiring day, but as my Evil Muse pointed out, the next time I complain about being blocked, he's going to pick up the car keys and herd me to it for a long drive to nowhere. We talk, in the car, and often enough we talk about writing. Sometimes he'll give me the idea that crystallizes everything that has been floating nebulously around in my head and boom... it all comes out of solution into a beautiful

structure.

For those times that hours in the car are just not practical, other solutions I have found include standing in the shower (there's something about being places where you CANNOT write, and suddenly you need to write), doing dishes, walking the dog... Others have reported good results from similar activities.

However, for consistent daily results, keep in mind that writing is mental exercise. Just like building muscle and burning fat, you can't just sit down one day, put in a huge burst of effort, and expect that to do all the work and you don't have to go to the gym again this year. Small daily exercises will yield far more effective results in the long term. It feels uncomfortable and awkward at first, to make yourself write. You may doubt that what you are writing is worth keeping. I will be honest, in the long run you might not keep that work. But in the beginning, you aren't allowed to doubt it. Keep writing, and when you come to the end of the tale, then and only then may you go back and see what you have wrought.

I've seen far too many people get hung up there, on the rocks and shoals of doubt. With the beginning of a story, they suddenly doubt if it's right. Or they are uncomfortable with what they are writing. Readers may not know this, but writers are insecure, shallow creatures. This is why we crave and cling onto reviews, even long after our efforts on that particular book have ceased. However, if you the Author never finish that story, you'll never know whether you got it right, or not.

I rarely give writing advice. When I do, it consists of a few simple things, but they all center around this. Write. Just write. if your muse is being recalcitrant, you can either pop the cork out by thinking about the story until it comes to life in your head and you wind up dictating it all in a rush as it is told to you, or you can force the cork out slowly by writing a little every day. Like exercise, that's a slower process. But it will pay off in the long run, as you build up the mental muscles until when a sudden need says 'I need a story/blog post/paper in an hour.. Go!' you'll be able to do it almost effortlessly. And while a 10K word day will be a physical ache, after, it will also be a thrill like standing on top of a mountain looking down and remembering the day you could barely make it across a parking lot.