

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillipies, D.Sc., Editor
October 2025

Fiction

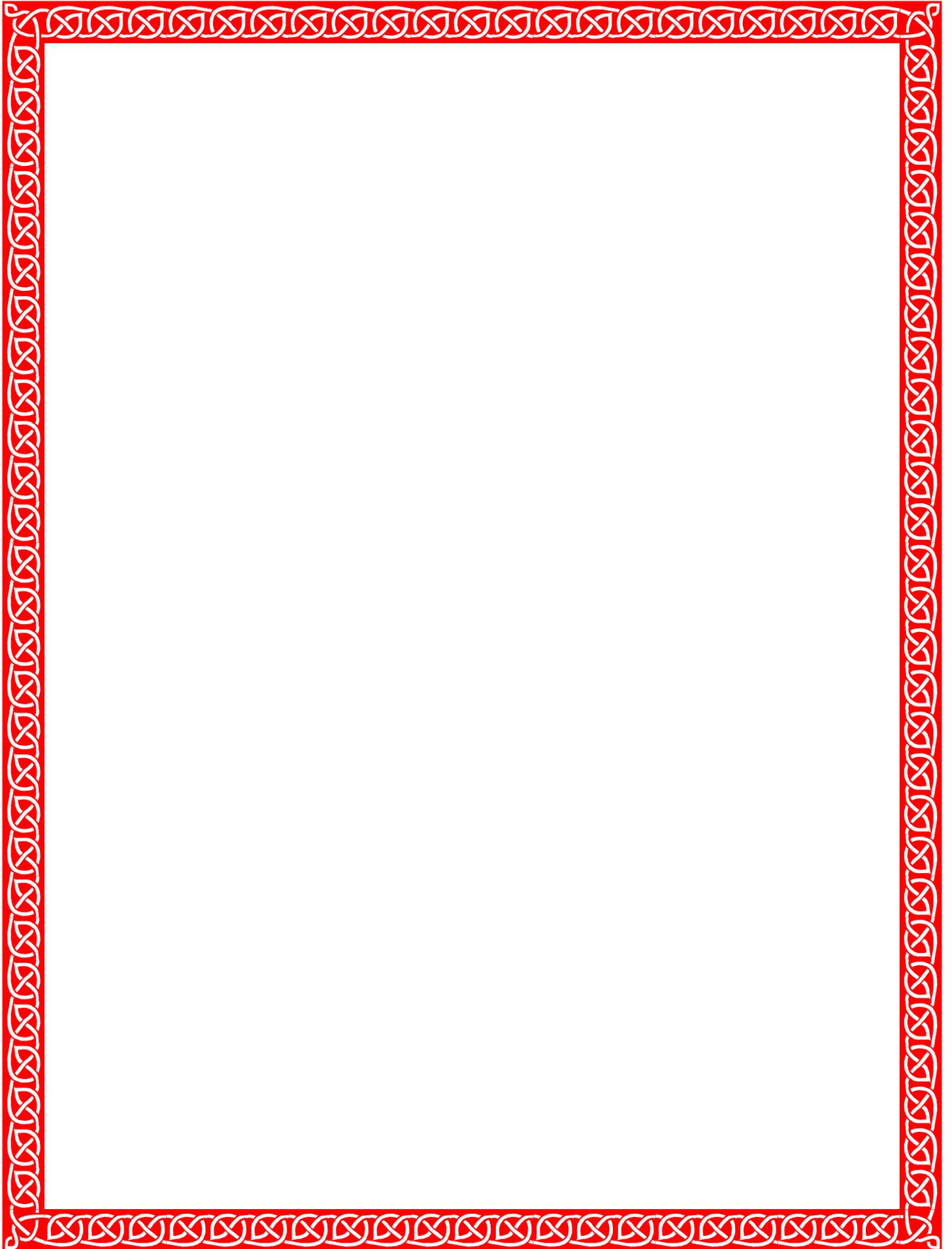
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For better or worse, we have advanced to bimonthly publication, to alternate with *Eldritch Science*. This issue of the Review is only three weeks late. Perhaps we will do better next time.

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A Long Time Until Now by Michael Z. Williamson

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A group of US soldiers in Afghanistan find their survival skills put to the test when they are unexpectedly transported back into prehistoric times. Once they recover from the shock, they start rebuilding civilization from the ground up with their limited resources and knowledge of technological development.

At the same time, they have to deal with the locals, other groups of accidental time travelers, and their own differing worldviews. In some ways it's no more dangerous or foreign than the world they left. In others, it's far more frightening and lonely.

The story

What starts as a normal day in A-Stan for a small US military transport turns into a two-year fight for survival in prehistoric Asia when they and their two vehicles are suddenly dropped in the paleolithic era. With limited supplies, they have to rely on their training and discipline. Mostly strangers at the start, they also have to learn to rely on each other. Fortunately (conveniently?) each member of the unit has some knowledge or skill that makes building a piece of civilization possible.

They soon find that they're not alone. First, they encounter the local paleolithic tribe, who welcome them as strangers with magic gifts from strange spirits. Later they have to deal with other bands of temporally displaced peoples, including a less-friendly tribe from the near future, and an arrogant group of Romans that keep doing what Romans do: conquer for Rome. The US soldiers do their best to keep the peace and not become too personally entangled, but they're only human. The primary focus is to survive, mentally and physically. Plagued by various health and mental conditions, they don't always make wise choices.

Hope comes with the arrival of a pair of visitors from a far, far distant future. These perfect specimens of human evolution seem friendly and helpful. Still, in an unprecedented situation it's only logical to question their motives. Can they be trusted? Can they really get everyone back home? And at what cost?

The characters

With ten main characters, I won't attempt to summarize all of them here. Author Michael Z. Williamson does an admirable job of giving everyone equal time and character development without falling into stereotypes. It's a diverse crew, with a wide range of ethnicities and religious beliefs. The most controversial character may be the militant feminist, and while her portrayal in that aspect may be flawed, she (like everyone else) is more than one note.

The world

Williamson did his homework. This is a world with almonds that are still poisonous, mammals that are now extinct, and the language barrier is significant but not insurmountable. It's a hard world where those who mean to survive must sometimes be cruel, sacrifice their convictions, or die. Yet it's balanced with moments of grace and beauty. It could have very easily been written as ugly place, and thankfully Williamson does not take the easy path.

The politics

Good fences make good neighbors. When all else fails, kill or be killed. The conversations about religion and feminism are far more involved than liberal/conservative ideology.

Content warning

Our soldier characters are only human, and even a devout Christian can't help but swear, have a couple of drinks, and maybe some porn saved to his phone. They're lonely people, who justify doing things they know are wrong, and feel shame. Everything here strives to be as realistic as possible given the premise, which means a fair amount of sex, language, and violence.

Who is it for?

A Long Time Until Now is for engineers who tolerate time travel stories. The involved descriptions of every construction project will be painfully tedious to readers who just want plot and adventure, which is how I would describe myself. However, I grew attached to the characters and the piece of civilization they built from practically nothing. It's not for fans of military fiction per-se, yet there's enough here to satisfy them as well.

Why read it?

Ultimately, it's a sci-fi survival story, with interesting characters in meticulously built world. It has all the qualities that make good fiction: humor, heartache, excitement, and hope.

All You Need Is Kill by Hiroshi Sakurazaka
Review by Graham Bradley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The source material for "Edge of Tomorrow" with Tom Cruise

Remember that Tom Cruise movie where he puts on a mech suit and fights aliens like it's a video game, respawning every time he dies? Well, Edge of Tomorrow/Live, Die, Repeat was based on ALL YOU NEED IS KILL, by Japanese sci-fi author Hiroshi Sakurazaka, and it's an awesome read.

The Story

In the near future, Earth gets invaded by aliens called "mimics" that start to terraform our planet to their specifications. Since humanity isn't physically compatible with them, this is bad! And it gets worse when we try to push back the tide with military force, because the mimics are basically unstoppable. No matter what tech or tactics we put into play, they always win when we face them in battle. The one thing that shows any promise is a new mecha technology ("jackets") that allows pilots to kill mimics up close.

Things escalate when the mimics set their sights on Japan, where key elements of the jackets are manufactured. A new human soldier named Keiji goes into his first battle with the mimics only to die, wake up the next day in the past, and return to battle yet again. Soon he realizes he is in a time loop that sends him back to a point 30 hours before the battle starts, and no matter what happens, he dies painfully every time. He can't end the loop, and he can't tell anyone what's going on or they'll think he's going crazy.

It all changes when he meets an American soldier named Rita, a legendary "jacket jockey" who has the

exact same affliction he does...and she knows how to use it...

The Characters

Keiji Keriya (pronounced "Kee-Jee Korea") is a new recruit with Japan's jacket force. As the story starts, he's an interesting mix of brave and nervous, living the soldier's life because it's all he has, not reveling in it but not wallowing in misery, just accepting the reality of his life. If something sucks, he'll voice his agreement. If something good comes along, he'll enjoy it. He's an everyman. Yet as the story progresses, we see him become a hardened, jaded veteran who's determined to win, but hates the brutal suffering he has to endure every single day. He's the rare character who lives life in an incredibly debased situation, but does not become debased himself, despite plenty of chances to do so.

On the other hand, Rita Vritaski is a fascinating enigma. In the chapter where we get her backstory, we learn that she's not actually Rita Vritaski at all; she's a girl who lived in the American heartland before mimics swarmed her farm and killed her whole family. The moment she was able to pass for 18, she stole the real Rita's identity and joined the military to fight back. Then she got pulled into a mimic time loop in battle, fought through it for a year, and became the deadliest soldier on Earth.

Both of these characters are flawed and yet heroic, relatable and yet aspirational, the kind of person that you know yourself to be in addition to the one you hope you are when things get real. They're a delight to read.

The World

Sakurazaka put a great deal of thought into the world at war with an alien race, including a chapter that explained why the mimics were invading us to begin with. Rather than brainless monsters bent on conquest, we get to see the decision that sent them to Earth and even realize that if humans had been in the mimics' position...we might have done the same thing. The setting on Earth feels military-accurate (coming from a guy who has only read military fiction, without actually serving.)

At the end of the day this is a book where soldiers in mechanized suits with giant axes are fighting violent aliens, and Sakurazaka takes the time to succinctly explain why that makes more sense than using guns. This is every insane piece of mecha anime art you've ever seen, with intelligent justification behind it. It's just so good.

The Politics

Virtually nonexistent. There is the above-mentioned reasoning behind the alien invasion, summed up in a few paragraphs, but other than that politics take a back seat.

Content Warning

The manga version is cleaner than the novel version as far as language goes (only one F-bomb in the comic, versus several in the print edition.) The manga and the novel have the same amount of visceral violence in them, it's just more brutal in the visual medium. And in both books, there is an implied bedroom scene, but you're not in-room for it. Only other warning I'd issue is that some of the female characters are drawn in a common modern manga style, so get ready for T&A in form-fitting clothes.

Who is it for?

Fans of military sci-fi, fans of mecha manga, or both. This is a quick-paced yet well-developed read; the manga is over 500 pages, yet I flew through it. The audiobook version of the novel is less than six hours.

Why read it?

It's not only fun, it's intelligent too. You get to see the process of developing weapons and tactics that work against the mimics, based on hundreds of try-fail cycles. And most of all, it's moving. Be warned dear reader, this book does NOT end the same way that the movie did. There's such an emotional gut punch in the finale that you won't see coming, one that gives this story a real cost, and gives its characters a real, incredibly hard lesson to learn. Check it out and get ready for a ride.

An Inconvenient Presidency: The Time-Traveling Misadventures of President Al Gore by Eric M. Hamilton

Review by Brian Heming

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A hilarious romp of a time travel story

An Inconvenient Presidency by Eric M. Hamilton is a hilarious romp: a time-loop story, a multiverse story, and a brilliant political satire, all rolled up into a no-holds-barred joy of a read.

I was amazed by how entertaining a political satire could be which takes aim at no party or ideology but simply celebrates the hilarious gaffes and mannerisms of many of America's famous figures, while telling an enjoyable story. Not to mention, we have the best and most plausible explanation for Al Gore's 2000 campaign I have ever read.

The Story

Al Gore, the first president to win every electoral college vote in generations, is given a mysterious device, allowing him to send his consciousness back in time. Soon, disaster strikes, and he is forced to use it. But all is not as it seems, and the device does more than he bargained for.

The Characters

Alternate history fiction always features a plethora of famous figures from our own timeline, reimagined. Al Gore, the titular character, is poignant, fun, and relatable. The figures you'll recognize from our timeline are seen in their full glory and good-naturedly mocked in ways which make it clear they're pretty much exactly the same people we remember. Of all the alternate history books I've read, this one takes the least liberties with the famous folk of our dimension and portrays them the most accurately. And it works. Boy does it work.

The World

The world is much like our own but constantly facing disasters worse than ours. The disasters range from quite realistic to completely off-the-wall, but we're never too far afield from our own reality--all the worlds we visit will feel as familiar to the reader as his own dimension, keeping readers immersed in the story.

Politics

None. Seriously. By being rich in mocking the foibles of various politicians and public figures, Hamilton manages to make us guffaw without bringing a smidgen of political opinion into the equation.

Content Warning

None.

Who is it for?

If you like time loops, alternate history, or relentless satire, you're in for a fun time. And if you think US politics is ridiculous (and who doesn't?) you ain't seen nothing yet.

Why buy it?

I couldn't stop grinning as I read this one. If you're up for a few hours of laughing, smiling, and having a good ol' sideways-in-time good time, this one's money well spent.

Behind the Veil by John Ringo and Lydia Sherrer

Review by Declan Finn

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Ringo and Sherrer Checkmate Ender's Game

When the augmented reality game Pokemon Go first came out, I mostly heard about it from its biggest fan: John Ringo SF Author.

Like every good author, Ringo took something from his life, and weaponized it for a novel.

Being a John Ringo novel, that means weaponizing it literally. From the first book, Into the Real, written with Lydia Sherrer, they took Pokemon Go and turned it into Ender's Game.

Because in Pokemon Go, the augmented reality monsters can't kill you.

The story

In book two, Through the Storm, gamer Lynn Raven led her team to victory in a multi-team boss battle. Now, it's time for the national TransDimensional Hunter championship, and they have to level up in a hurry to be up for the challenge.

As the story unfolds, Lynn finds some odd coincidences. The in-game monsters congregate around power terminals that often glitch ... but when her team wipes out the monsters, the problems are miraculously solved. Growing power outages threaten transportation around the world. The homeless who dwell near monster spawning grounds drop dead, seemingly out of nowhere.

But while gaming may be strenuous, it is relatively easy compared to dealing with the real life threats that come her way. Seemingly all at once, Lynn has to fend off deep fake videos, doxxing, and a stalker. Fighting augmented monsters is almost preferable—all they can do is kill her.

The truth may set her free ... hopefully, before it destroys her.

The entire TransDimensional Hunter series works on multiple levels, from Lynn's personal challenges in-game and in real life.

I have enjoyed this entire series to date. Aside from a brief, odd subplot in Through the Storm, I can't think of a single quibble I've had with the story. Each book builds very neatly and logically on the book before it. While book one and two were heavily character driven, book three is where the plot kicks

in—the nature of the threat is explained in more depth, as well as the consequences of failure.

This is the third review in which I compared this series to Ender's Game, but there is clearly a bit of overlap in the basic premise. And frankly, this is at minimum equal to Card's work, if not better. Is it fair to compare a series to a single novel? Probably not. But I didn't know there were rules for writing reviews.

I have seen some people complain that “this series doesn't feel like John Ringo wrote any of them.” I genuinely don't understand the complaint, since they feel enough like Ringo novels to me, and better than some.

The characters

Once again, Lynn Raven is an unusually likable teenager. The daughter of a widowed single mother, Lynn has long ago monetized her video game exploits, generating a steady income via microtransactions. She is smart, capable, and even her foibles are relatable. And like the last book, it is also fun watching Lynn's personal character develop. She seems to be fully growing into her final form.

Lynn's teammates are becoming more developed, each with an interesting character arc and background I don't remember from the first two books. The team is coming together, and as a team, they are less willing to put up with BS, from classmates, bullies, or school administrators. It's like the 17-year-olds are becoming adults. Imagine that.

Even her mother has an interesting development in this one.

We still have Hugo, the AI that comes with TransDimensional Hunter game... basically Jarvis from the MCU. It is an entertaining character, and clearly more than what it appears.

We spend more time with Lynn's handlers in video game technical support (who are SpecOps assigned to the game), as well as Mister Krator, the game designer himself, and his own machinations to save the world. Also, one member of tech support becomes more of a character than I would have guessed.

Even the human antagonists have developed. Funny enough, one becomes even more of a psychopath, and another starts becoming something resembling a human being. It's strange enough that this series has teenagers who can pass for human, never mind having a high school bully that's well-developed, or have a character arc.

Overall, I like the characters and their development. Any annoying qualities from the previous books have been burned away in the crucible of the games. We have a touch of a romance subplot or two, but neither one really gets in the way of the action.

The world

Book one was largely setting up the game, and two was developing both characters and the world. Book three is more where everything comes to a head. This one leans heavier on character, and the world-building involved leans heavily on the overall story, with elements that even the characters have yet to figure out.

The politics

No. If you want, you can find some politics in here. But no.

powers, mad dragons, alien hit squads, and a fiercely loyal stone-dog snapping at his heels. Now Dalton has to sneak out of hostile Consortium space to find the six pieces of a shattered Earth and restore humanity's place in the galaxy before aliens and demons run him to ground.
...and he never did get those noodles.

Big Trouble, Little Earth reads like an 1980s action movie, heavy on the action and heavier on the tempo—and with no breaks. Rather than hard science fiction, this is a chi fantasy in neon trappings and asteroids, a little piece of Chinatown in the cold heart of space.

The Characters

The characters are stock to the movie that inspired it. Wise-cracking trucker? Check. Best friend in the middle of shady underground shenanigans? Eccentric potion master, spunky reporter love interest, ancient abomination made flesh, treacherous city officials—they're all here. But stock does not mean Xerox copy, especially in the case of Dalton Thorne. Where Jack Burton was the sidekick in his friend's mystical adventure, Dalton Thorne is the main character of a centuries-spanning conspiracy, a blue collar chosen one with a splash of kung pao. Despite the sarcasm and the one liners, at no point did I mistake Dalton's for Kurt Russell's.

Basically, if you liked Big Trouble in Little China, you know what to expect from the characters. And if you aren't familiar with that film, think 80s action comedy characters played straight, and without the winking to the audience and ironic trappings that plague today's reboots and remakes.

The World

The universe drips with San Francisco Chinatown accents. This is not China, but a distorted expatriate reflection, like what was seen in Blade Runner. Mix up centuries worth of Telephone games with the history, and Tokyo, Chinatown, and New York all blend into a single melange. That said, there is a heavy leavening of Japanese folklore that can be disorienting to readers expecting the heavily anticipated Chinatown flavor. And with six pieces of Earth to find, one expects to see more cultures in the future.

But Chinatown meets Titan A. E. really does describe the setting. At least there's humor and hope to this one, as similar refugee Earth series like Earthrise have swung more the excesses of grimdark instead of action comedy.

Politics

Big Trouble, Little Earth is too busy being a sarcastic tromp through future alien slums to even wave at the concerns of the present.

Content Warning

Violence, mysticism, and a little obsessive romance. More Saturday morning cartoon than Five Deadly Venoms, though.

Who is it for?

This is for readers tired of the celebrity veteran war books that have flooded science fiction and who want their action with a little humor and a lot of sincerity. Also, for those readers who have picked up a taste for East Asian fantasy through anime and xianxia cultivation fantasies.

And, really, who doesn't want to see power armor do kung fu?

Content warning

On the one hand, no content warnings. None. Not really. No torture. No rape. No sex of any kind.

On the other hand, however... the stalker gets sexual in expression, but there is nothing graphic. There is a mention of a pornographic video.

There is of course, lots of monster killing.

But from what I've heard from the current YA market, this is pretty PG. I don't even remember much in the way of colorful language.

Who is it for?

This is for people who read Ender's Game and wished there could be more actual gaming, and for people who would like something they can enjoy, and then pass on to adults or teens alike.

It puts some great new spins on the YA genre and the tropes within.

Why read it?

Ringo and Sherrer have created a modern day Ender's Game using the technology of Pokemon Go. The characters are vivid and interesting, and the plot is strong enough to carry you along the entire way.

Big Trouble, Little Earth by J. N. Chaney and Jason Anspach

Review by The Pulp Archivist

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Of all the noodle bars in all the worlds in all the galaxy...

"When some wild-eyed, eight-foot-tall alien grabs your neck, taps the back of your favorite head up against the barroom wall, and he looks you crooked in the eye and he asks you if you paid your dues, you just stare that big sucker right back in the eye, and you remember what ol' Dalton Thorne always says at a time like that—"

"Have ya paid your dues, Dalton?"

"Yessir, the check is in the mail."

Okay, so it doesn't take much to whip out a mangled Big Trouble in Little China quote for a review, but J. N. Chaney and Jason Anspach wear the inspiration on their sleeves for this humorous chinoiserie space fantasy. Mix that good old Jack Burton in with some Titan A. E., shake it up in a Six Demon Bag, and spice it up with some Demon Slayer, and you get Big Trouble, Little Earth.

The Story

So, in a far future where the Earth is shattered, humanity is living in slums on other worlds, and human history is garbled in half-remembered third-hand tales, a space trucker, Dalton Thorne, walks into a noodle bar.

He never expected that a simple job for his friend would uncover ancient conspiracies, supernatural

The Borrowed World Series by Franklin Horton

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

The Borrowed World is a dangerous place to be. There's no power, no law, no order and definitely no place safe. It's a world where kids grow up too soon. It's also a story of survival of the fittest and depending on oneself instead of the government. The Borrowed World is full of people trying to survive any way they can.

The story

At the beginning of the first book (I've read the first seven I think) Jim, our hero, is on a business trip with friends when terrorists take out the US power grid using techniques commonly used by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have to find their way home and their car runs out of gas along the way because all of the gas stations have closed. Things get worse from there. Ultimately, Jim and friends build their own little community out in the country where they can farm and stay safe from the encroachment of bandits looking to take what isn't theirs. It works for a while and then the government shows up trying to reinstate law and order. Things go downhill once again.

The characters

The main character is a prepper named Jim Powell. He has been planning and gathering supplies against the day that the Shit Hits The Fan. He is the strong leader type. He sees what has to be done and does it. Jim has strong shades of Rick Grimes, only without the Colt Python.

Along the way we also meet Jim's family, his neighbors, his friends and his enemies. Everyone wants to survive. Some are willing to put the work in to do things the right way. Others would rather take what's not theirs.

There is also a lot of character growth in The Borrowed World. Jim doesn't want to be a leader but he has to be. Others gain strength and learn how to survive, having not had the skills when it all went down. Responsibilities are added and some kids are forced to act much older than their actual age.

The world

The first book of the Borrowed World series is The Borrowed World. It looks exactly like the US does right now. It rapidly devolves into a dog-eat-dog world of competing people just trying to keep enough in their bellies to see tomorrow. It is a post-apocalyptic world. It's a world where the return of the government after the apocalypse is a bad thing. The Borrowed World is a place that is friendly to none.

The politics

This is the weird part of the books. The first five or six aren't overtly political, but they're some of the most political books I've ever read. The Borrowed World is very similar to the story of the American West the way it was traditionally taught: Rugged individualists doing their best to survive in a world that doesn't want to cooperate. It's a world where the police turn their back on their duty, the state and federal governments collapse, and local government abuses its power to keep politicians alive. Money is worthless and help isn't coming, at least for the foreseeable future.

This is the story of a country where people take care of themselves. It is not the modern welfare state. Those that won't work don't make it. The Borrowed World is a story of self-sufficiency and struggle. It is, in short, the story of American Exceptionalism written in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Content warning

Graphic violence. Some rough language.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes reading about post-apocalyptic life and competent heroes. Anyone who likes a well-researched and well-written book. Anyone who likes a little action.

Why read it?

If you liked the early seasons of The Walking Dead but don't feel a need for actual zombies, you'll love The Borrowed World. This is a world that lives and breathes and a writer with a strong voice.

Bio of a Space Tyrant: Volume 1 Refugee by Piers Anthony. Review by Russ Lockwood After Action Report Newsletter

I realize I am way behind my time reading this series -- five books as far as I know. This first one sends young Hope Hubris and his Hispanic family on a desperate voyage with other refugees fleeing Callisto to a different and less caste system of Jupiter's moons. Alas, their defenseless "bubble" (spaceship) was attacked by armed pirates multiple times on the voyage with all the pirate plunderings of women and \ loot and outright murder until only Hope remained at the end -- only to be denied immigration status.

All this pirate activity became rather repetitious. Sure, sometimes they fought back and won, but the next pirate rinsed and repeated the plundering. An excursion to an outpost for asylum was turned away but secured some supplies. An interception by a Jupiter spaceship warned them from proceeding and then left without providing asylum or aid. In the end, Hope escaped into a lifeboat alone and motored on. Meh. It took me a long time to crack open Volume 2: Mercenary. The only reason I did was that Hope's dead fiancé was a courier for a criminal syndicate called Kife and Hope retrieved the item being carried. But what to do with something he has no idea about?

Bio of a Space Tyrant: Volume 2 Mercenary by Piers Anthony. Review by Russ Lockwood After Action Report Newsletter

Young Hope Hubris had little choice: Join the Jupiter Navy or be sent back to Callisto. He joined, and despite the prejudice against his Hispanic heritage, did well. He personally vowed to exterminate piracy and slowly built a team and a command to do so...then he did.

Here is a far more interesting and clever plot, complete with battles against pirate spaceships and Jupiter bureaucracy. And the Kife organization kept trying to bribe Hope to hand over the courier item from Volume 1 Refugee. When that didn't work, assassination attempts were tried.

The struggles against Navy bureaucracy and prejudice, the pirates, and Kife form a powerful trifecta of plot.

Enjoyed it.

Bio of a Space Tyrant: Volume 3 Politician by Piers Anthony.

Review by Russ Lockwood

After Action Report Newsletter

Well, this was a schizophrenic volume with chapters ping-ponging between being held in an interrogation cell and leaving the Navy to run for public office. Why this doesn't follow a chronological order is beyond me.

After creating an A-Team of advisors, the political machinations lead Hope to run for minor office and lose. That's often the story in real politics. Candidates with reform on their minds run for office and lose, but gain name recognition. Then they run again and often win.

Meanwhile, on a "national" level (assuming Jupiter's collection of colonies on moons equal states), a toxic do anything for power politician, named "Tocsin," begins to erode standards to keep himself in power -- even launching a political coup, complete with court rulings, after losing the election to Hope. Written in 1985.

But two can play the coup game and Hope's team engineers a gimmicky constitutional convention win. As he is a Naval hero who annihilated the pirates and various criminal gangs, the Navy backs him and enforces the constitutional convention vote to put Hope in power. So, I didn't like the chronological ping-ponging but appreciated the plot.

Ties go to the author.

Enjoyed it.

Conquest: The Chronicles of the Invaders

by John Connolly and Jennifer Ridyard.

Review by Russ Lockwood

After Action Report Newsletter

This \$1 bargain bin find follows the invasion of Earth by the Illyri, who cure all ills and bring peace to the planet in exchange for submission. Earthlings tend to have a dim view of subjugation and the revolts start relatively quickly as pacification efforts slaughter the rebellious. The story follows Syl, the teenage daughter of the new Illyri Military President of Earth, who sneaks out of Edinburgh Castle HQ and wanders among the natives with her friend Ani. Two human teenager brothers, both part of the Resistance, save them from a bomb, and so begins the forbidden fraternization.

Alas, the human terrorism brings in two other Illyri factions: the equivalent of the Gestapo and the Sisterhood. The power struggle between the military and the other two revolve around using humans for experiments of some sort. Meanwhile, the two brothers get captured, the two teenage Illyri free them with the help of a super-spy, and everyone goes on the run while trying to figure out why the Sisterhood wants human bodies.

The book starts out slow, but if you hang in there, you'll come around when the Scot Highlanders get involved. Some interesting ideas about pacifying a planet with technology and troops.

Ties got to the authors.

Enjoyed it

Deathbringer: The Spellword Saga by Blake Carpenter

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

If I've said it once, I'll say it again: I love a strong female protagonist. Whether it's Ellen Ripley, Honor Harrington or Kathryn Janeway, if there's a woman at the heart of the story that kicks ass, I want to read (watch?) the story. It's no different here. Inga Ivanova is such an amazingly badass female that I'm wondering if Blake Carpenter intentionally gave his main character of his novel Deathbringer: The Spellword Saga: Book One the same last name as the second Most Badass Woman in All of Science Fiction and Fantasy (as decided by me) intentionally. Inga Ivanova certainly does remind me of one Susan Ivanova in all of the important ways that I love in a female lead. If she's a little obsessed and maybe a bit bloody-minded, so be it; She has her reasons.

Seriously, Ivanova's Call to Action is particularly grisly, high stakes and jarring, but it's enough to make anyone want to get revenge. I mean, if your story started up with someone showing up at your town, slaughtering everyone there, and you only escaping because of some serious weirdness, you'd want to take the person who did it down, wouldn't you? I sure would...

Then again, I'm a McCoy and that thing is kind of genetic for me. Just ask a Hatfield.

Anyway...

Hopefully, it's not revealing too much to state that Deathbringer is not just the title of a book, it's also the name of a sword. The reason for the name will be painfully obvious to anyone reading the book, and if you still miss it, the name of the series is The Spellword Saga. I'm guessing that should make it obvious.

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The use of spellwords in the book/series (although I haven't read any of the other books yet. I'm honestly not sure if anymore have been released, though I'll be finding out soon.) was cool for me on a couple of different levels. One is just that spellwords are sentient, linked to a particular individual, and capable of awesome feats of magic. I mean, you would think that would be cool enough on its own, right? But no, I have to go and make it cooler.

Seriously. I can do you one better. Having played both Dungeons & Dragons and the Palladium Fantasy RPG, spellwords felt like the weapon you spent your entire career questing for. Whether you're referring to a rune weapon in the PFRPG or an artifact in D&D, you're talking about the real deal. These spellwords are on that level. You do not want to cross paths with an unfriendly spellword wielder, I promise you. What these things can do will amaze you.

But that brings up an interesting point. Inga's grandmother, who was the last one to wield the sword in battle, had something of a bad reputation. I'm wondering if these swords don't have a corrupting effect like a D&D artifact. I'm wondering how Carpenter is going to make Inga a sympathetic figure going forward if she slides too far down that path. This is going to be a delicate balancing act, for sure.

In a way, Deathbringer almost feels like reading a fantasy book by Stephen King or Dean Koontz. There is a lot of action here. There is plenty of excitement. There is also more than just a bit of horror. It's a good mix that definitely stays interesting for the entire story. If you're offended by blood and gore though, maybe you'd best stick with my boy Albus and his favorite knitting patterns. Deathbringer is

obviously intended for an audience that can handle the rough stuff. I loved that about it. Carpenter is not afraid to let us see the consequences of the violence in the books. And, if I was reminded of something terrible I read about as part of my degree well, it happened and it's believable.

The antagonist of the piece, Yenda Avard is a sick, twisted, evil, power-seeking wannabe-tyrant who makes Delores Umbridge look like the little old lady down the street who used to bake you cookies when you were a kid. She is a flat-out mass-murderer. I don't like this chick AT ALL. Of course, that makes her an ideal villain. Her motivations are crystal clear and unyielding. They make sense; they are personal profit and power. The only possible difference with various historical figures is that Avard doesn't pretend she's in it to help others the way the rest of them did.

This leads to a strong desire on the part of the reader to see said wench get precisely what is coming to her. At least I know I did. I love to hate an antagonist, and Avard fits the bill. This is almost an obsession with me. I love Anne McCaffrey's work in general but, having read the entire series up to Dragonflight, I never really liked her Dragonriders of Pern series because Thread is a boring enemy. I mean, I get the fact that the stories are about the riders themselves, but ugh...

I need something for the hero that has a brain and an attitude problem. Avard fits that bill. I hate that chick. At some point, you actually want Avard dead. Whether that happens or not is something I won't reveal, but if you get into the story at all (and I'm sure you will) you'll be rooting for all of the bad things to happen to this woman.

The world building here is superb. There's so much going on against the backdrop that Carpenter built that it's hard to focus on the world where it all takes place, but its wonderfully rendered. The kingdom is a matriarchy, but it is not a peaceful, calm matriarchy envisioned by many of the people who promote the idea of a matriarchy. There is scheming, feuding and outright conflict. Deathbringer reads like a realistic depiction of what would happen if the mean girls from your old high school ran things.

All in all, I loved Deathbringer and I can't wait to get the sequel once it gets here.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Massacred Villagers

The Female Man and We Who Are About To... by Joanna Russ Review by Heath Row The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

I didn't make it all the way through the Library of America collection of Joanna Russ's novels and stories before I returned it to the library, but I did read her 1975 novel, *The Female Man*, and the 1976 novella, *We Who Are About To...*

Both were terrific and served as an excellent introduction to the work of a writer with whom I was unfamiliar. Originally published as "A Frederik Pohl Selection" by Bantam, *The Female Man* is a slightly complicated but entertaining and thought-provoking novel that balances feminist critique and interdimensional travel to explore the different experiences of four women.

Each of the women featured in the novel have names that begin with the letter "J": Joanna, Jeannine, Janet, and Jael. Janet narrates the book in the first person, and Joanna might represent the author. Her world is similar to Earth in the 1970s while Janet comes from *Whileaway*, an all-female utopia (the men might have died in a plague) 1,000 years in the future. Jeannine lives in an alternate New York City of 1969 in which the Great Depression never ended, and World War II never occurred. And Jael's

world, Womanland, is a dystopia in which men and women have been engaged in a war for several decades, occasionally trading in children.

Janet arrives in Jeannine's world, initially presumed to be an alien. They travel to Joanna's world before going to Whileaway and eventually Jael's world. Along the way, various experiences of women are considered and discussed, as are heterosexual and lesbian relationships, alternative family structures, gender roles, sexuality, and other themes. The book is occasionally confusing because sections and chapters change narrators, points of view, times, and worlds. But on the whole, it's an astounding piece of literature. Funny, provocative, and highly recommended.

We Who Are About To..., the second piece in the collection, was serialized in the January and February 1976 issues of *Galaxy* before it was published in book form by Dell a year later. A highly entertaining novella, it turns the traditional approach to space colonization storytelling on its ear. In this story, the colonists don't just fail, they turn on each other. Their enemies aren't aliens, the natives of the world on which they crash—but themselves.

The story is also a feminist critique. The narrator defends herself against an intended rape after the stranded colonists begin to negotiate who will reproduce with whom in order to continue the human race. She doesn't believe that survival is possible, even if the stranded space travelers procreate, and the book challenges preconceived notions of colonization, gender roles, procreation, heroism, and leadership.

Once the threat of rape and apprehension has passed, the story continues, concentrating on the sole survivor's internal monologue, experiences, and starvation as she continues to maintain an audio diary. The drawn-out nature of the story becomes quite chilling. If everything Russ wrote is like these two selections, perhaps everything she wrote is worth reading.

Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits by Jason Pargin

Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

I think I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what I just read.

I knew from the back of the book that the story I was getting into was gonna be a mixture of futurism and today's slice of reality. You have a lot of people who want to be "influencers", the technology is available for the world to see everything that happens in real time, and there's a cat. Something is out to get Zoey Ashe and it's not going to be easy or pretty for her to escape.

At least that's what the back of the book says.

And as I've stated, I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what I read because yes it is all of the above; however, I was so not expecting what I got.

Zoey Ashe lives with her mother in a trailer park, works as a barista and has a very smelly cat named Stench Machine. On her way to work she receives a call from an anonymous caller informing her that she's being followed, her life is in danger, and the caller is taking over the car. (I did mention this was futuristic, right?) Anyway, she and her cat manage to escape (she had to go back for her cat, of course), end up in a dangerous high-speed pursuit, following all the instructions from the person on the other end of the line (think *The Matrix*). Once in the temporary clear, Zoey finds out that her absentee father was not quite the person she thought he was.

So the bounty hunters chasing Zoey simply log into Blink, see what everyone else sees and know exactly where she's hiding. However, Blink can also help out the team who are trying to protect her. They watch to get clues on who might be the mastermind trying to harm Zoey. It's a Big Brother world, but it's not the government watching; it's the public all watching each other, and not necessarily in a good way either (if there is a government; it hasn't really been addressed). Nobody thinks twice about this creepy surveillance state, which is how I see it.

This team trying to protect Zoey. Four guys and a gal, each brilliant in their own way. It's not till pretty far into the book that we find out their story and what ties they had with her father but we do find out how they're written into his will, between his companies, fortune, and her life. Their respect — almost love, even? — for Livingston means daughter Zoey gets loyalty and protection against the madman out to kill her. They dedicated their lives to her father when he was alive and have sworn their loyalty to her — for a price.

The interesting thing about the plot and the secret behind what the madman wants is the science behind it. Well, I wouldn't quite call it science because Pargin doesn't use science jargon. I guess you could describe it as the scientific explanation-jargon that we would make up as kids yet here it's real'. Literally, some of this stuff is what an eight-year-old would tell their friends and everyone would believe it to be truth. Over on Star Trek it's called "technobabble".

Maybe that's what I like so much about this book, is the simplicity of that. I did say that this was a simple tale. Keep Zoey and the cat alive. But I was able to turn my mind off and enjoy the child-like story telling with an adult twist. Sure, I had to think but really? Not so much. Maybe that's what kept me wanting to take the time out of my day to read this so much. I wanted to know just how much more Jason Pargin could stretch my mind with his imagination.

A lot. And he probably could have done more but then I have to wonder if it would have been too much.

I would recommend this for the adult who wants to experience the warping of the adult mind with innocent school recess imagination. It's fascinating. And I do look forward to the next book, Zoey Punches the Future in the Dick, but only after my mind stops reeling from this one.

Jacob by David Gerrold
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

As someone who was involved in a small way in the recent Hugo controversy, I have been looking for an opportunity to read something by the other side. I wanted to get a look at what they considered to be award worthy. Imagine my sense of surprise when I found out from an anonymous source that David "You Should Never Campaign for Awards" Gerrold had sent out a letter promoting his book Jacob.

"Awesome" I thought to myself, "I can finally get a look at what the other side considers to be award winning. Maybe I can learn a little more about how things are supposed to look." Yeah, I was sadly disappointed.

Honestly, if this is what good Science Fiction is, I'll just read drek. I've never been so bored in my life. Nothing happens in this story. It is a conversation that takes place over years between two men. There is no action. There is no hint that action is coming. The vampire in the series spends his time describing things that happened in his life before he was turned. I love a good story in flashback but that's not what this is. It is a conversation in written form. Some would call this artsy I'm sure, but I just call it boring.

Arthur Livingston was one of the richest men in the city of Tabula Ra\$ and through his many business endeavors owned much of the town. But Tabula Ra\$ is not like any city we know today; protection is privatized, the public police force is more of a joke, and everybody is out to make money while trying to become famous on the internet. Zoey finds out that her father has been killed and has left EVERYTHING to her. So of course, there's a contract out on Zoey because the rumor is she has the key to his extremely valuable vault.

Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits is the story of keeping herself alive, keeping her cat alive, finding out who killed Arthur Livingston and what is in this extremely valuable vault everyone wants.

This really is a simple tale about Zoey trying to stay alive. Any actions taken between the good guys and bad guys are really not that unexpected. I'm not saying you can easily tell what's gonna happen next but you do say "but of course" when it does. The obvious action is taken, but it's super elaborate because of how futuristic the technology is. But it's not necessarily a bad thing because if the story were any more complex the book would be too overwhelming. I say this due to Jason Pargin's intricate world building. He had to make a decision and compromise between location and plot. Honestly, I think being simplistic on the plot line was the better choice. By making Tabula Ra\$ a character along with Zoey, her cat, and her bodyguards, Pargin allows the reader's imagination to go insanely wild. Tabula Ra\$ is as much of the story as New York City was for Sex and the City. Pargin manages to magnificently build a city that Zoey is learning how to navigate and come to a respect because it drives as much as her fancy modified cars do.

I'm not going to say much more about the plot, but boy, there's a lot to say about this world. I could say the world he has set this in is a more technologically advanced society of what we live in now, but that's too conservative. I could use the phrase "he dared to go there" and say he thought big and bold with no filter on his imagination. But deep down inside I still feel I'm not doing it justice.

Take the movie Blade Runner, for instance. Electric holographic advertisements clutter the city's landscape. The AI that runs the advertisements talks to the pedestrians. Cars fly or have modifications. Now think of The Fifth Element. Futuristic cars and the population is separated by class. In Gattaca, your genes determine your life path. Here in this book, we have the same separation of the population, both financially and by profession, with enhancements made to the body. The separation comes if they opt to make the enhancements common knowledge.

Pargin has mashed this all together along with elements from our current year reality. Reminiscent of Taco Bell from Demolition Man, at the beginning of the book Zoey goes through a food distribution center that they call "the Wendy's drive-through" because that's what it used to be before her time. She tries to eat this chili type substance in the car; spilling it on herself, she wonders how people used to eat chili and drive at the same time. Just a generation ago you couldn't devote both hands to eating a bowl of fast-food chili while the car drove itself. Did people eat chili with a straw? Much of the world is run by AI whether it's cars driving themselves, the ever-changing decor in the house, or just the fact this world takes Alexa to a whole new (and almost scary) level. This is the stuff that we discuss on a regular basis, some with excitement and some with alarm: AI running the world; and the more money you have the more you control it — along with others not so fortunate, whether they know it or not.

Then Pargin layers in social media. Like the AI, future social media makes our version mere child's play. Wireless cameras are everywhere, allowing people to record events and conversations in secret. People have cameras on their phones, accessories on their outfits, you name it. And everything is broadcasting and recording in real time. The broadcasts are loaded to a platform the people call Blink. Thinks of it as if YouTube was a 24/7 reality TV channel. With everyone's feed being uploaded, privacy does not exist, especially if the feed is coming from tiny drones.

The best part about this book was the beginning of the prologue. It had me intrigued. It's told in first person from the part of the vampire and specifically mentions Twilight and The Vampire Chronicles. That's hardly surprising. Combine Bella's whining with Anne Rice's homoerotic touch with her vamps and you get Jacob. You just have to do it badly. And that is probably the most annoying part of the entire work.

I'm not a Twilight fan. I read about the first hundred-forty pages of the first book and gave it to my niece. She and her mother both enjoyed it. I saw the first three movies because my then-wife loved the series. Fortunately, I divorced her before I got dragged off to the last two. My attitude toward The Vampire Chronicles is completely and utterly different. I was introduced to them via the Interview with the Vampire. I didn't find out until I bought the VHS that was even a book that went with the movie even existed because Anne Rice's work isn't shelved with the SF/F stuff and I don't usually venture into any other part of the bookstore, but I loved it. I loved all of the books. And so, when somebody does this poor of an imitation of one of my favorite stories it pisses me off. Anne Rice's vampires did things. They went places. They partied in New Orleans and robbed ancient tombs of their inhabitants. They fought. They cried. They fought some more. They made up. The Talamasca showed up. One of them got turned. Etc.

Gerrold's vampires kind of do all of that but it happens offscreen and the details are left out. It's all talked about later in a "well, there was a war but I don't want to go through it all." type attitude. There's a bunch of emotional whining, a lot of "Oh, I want to be a vampire and they're all being mean to me by not turning me" and a lot of "Oh noes, the vampire just left. I may never see him again," but again, no action. Not all action has to be violence. There were a few sexual encounters described but for the most part only in vague terms. Honestly, if Gerrold was going to go into the sex he should have done it. Barring that, he could have left it at the bedroom door. Instead, he decided to half-ass things and it sucked.

Honestly though, the title that comes to mind while reading Jacob is not Interview with the Vampire and it's not Twilight, it's Axolotl Roadkill. For those that don't remember that was a story, written by Helene Hegemann which led to a controversy about plagiarism. She admits to having mixed two other stories together using a technique called "blending." Others said she committed plagiarism. Apparently, Hegemann won the argument because her book is still available on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites. Gerrold seems to have taken lessons from her because he used the same techniques. Granted, all Science Fiction and Fantasy stories are derivative in one form or another.

Jacob is a book with no internal consistency. I'm sorry, but a character can have a background as a male prostitute who got paid to have sex with other men or he can have sex afterward with a boy he is supposedly in love with and not know how things work, but he can't do both. Likewise, his lover can either be a clueless newbie who doesn't know how things work or he can be experienced with a string of former lovers. It doesn't work both ways. I'm not offended by sex whether straight, gay or some other kind. It doesn't bother me. Being treated like an idiot does. If an author expects me to suspend disbelief, plausibility is key. I simply cannot bring myself to believe that someone who got paid to have sex doesn't know how to have sex. A little bit of continuity editing may have gone a long way here.

Once upon a time, Leonard Nimoy refused to do Star Trek Generations because he added nothing to the plot and was there simply as some type of exclamation point. Nimoy talks about it in his memoir I am Spock. I wish he could have had a conversation with Gerrold before Gerrold wrote the majority of his prologue. After the aforementioned good part, he goes into his writers' group. He lovingly details a bunch of characters (including one transgender person who was doubtlessly thrown in simply for box checking or, if you prefer, "the purposes of inclusion.") who never appear again and have nothing to do with anything. It's a simple exercise in boredom and possibly revenge on people who were in a writing group with Dear Author at one point. It adds nothing to the story and should never have been included.

Then we're treated our lecture for the day: All writing must be not merely to entertain but to enlighten. That's a fascinating theory but one that falls apart in practice, especially since there is nothing enlightening about Jacob at all. That's alright though, because there's nothing entertaining about it either. Jacob is, put simply, a complete and utter waste of time. There is no reason to read it and my advice would be to save your time and money and spend it on something less painful. A root canal comes to mind.

Bottom Line: 0.25 out of 5 toothpicks (to hold your eyes open while you're reading this.)

The Light Runner by Ally Walker Review by Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

It begins innocuously enough; a murder, a high-profile political candidate, and a psychiatric hospital where everything swirls together in a perfect storm of mystery. What you might expect from a standard boilerplate murder mystery, right?

And then it starts to get a little weird.

When I first saw Ally Walker — yes, Ally Walker the actress — post about her very first novel, I was intrigued. I'd watched her on *Profiler* many moons ago, and she'd been a regular guest on *Longmire*. I've always admired her skill as an actress, so how would that translate to the written page with her as the creator? Doing my research, I see that she's done quite a bit more than just acting; the more I researched, the more I figure she's got the chops to spin a decent yarn. I was right, and it appears that she's done this all by herself without a ghost writer.

It starts with the murder of Dr. Hannah Haskell, researcher at Wellglad Pharmaceuticals and wife of Senate candidate Captain Oliver Haskell, decorated war hero. Haskell checks himself into Bainbridge, where he's put on suicide watch under the care of young psychiatrist Dr. Ella Kramer. Kramer feels out of her element with such a high profile patient, and it's after Haskell has a few interactions with other patients that she starts to get a feeling that something is... off.

Now, you'd think that's something like a psychological disorder or some kind of emotional imbalance — I mean, the guy's wife just got murdered — but it's something more than that. So when several conversations with patients and her aunt, who don't know each other, start to all spiral around the same sort of topic, it starts Ella thinking that maybe there's more to this than meets the eye. Only the direction those conversations go... well, that's where this becomes a science fiction story.

Meanwhile, the murder investigation continues with Detective Paul Moran looking into the evidence to hand while following his gut as well, and his gut is telling him that something's... off about Haskell, too. What could it be? What was Dr. Haskell working on when she was killed? Was it foul play? Or was it, indeed, murder?

And how does a rabbit fit into all of this?

The *Profiler* does a good job bobbing and weaving between two complementary threads as we head toward the last few chapters, where we get some ... let's call them interesting reveals that will likely lead into the next book (three are planned, currently). Walker's prose is well-crafted, even in those times where some heady complicated concepts start to percolate under the surface. The added layers of Ella's trauma, Sebastian's multiple personalities, and the way Moran's suspicions start to multiply, all appear to be going in one direction typical of the murder mystery thriller this sets up to be.

But...

But we're getting into spoilers, and I would like to save that for you to encounter on your own, because knowing ahead of time would ruin the reveal. It's one of those things where Walker has been leading up to it, and you'll "but of course" once you get there, but Walker also writes it in a way that has you wondering if Ella is just losing her mind or if this is actually where we're going. And of course, just when it starts to gel and you find out what "The Light Runner" means, it's time to close the book and wait for the sequel.

I will be watching for the sequel.

One thing I like about Walker's writing style is her ability to show instead of tell. Her prose takes the reader through a lot of mental mechanics — the psychology and mental health material — but does it in a way that still propels the plot forward. There are no "let me explain" interruptions; rather, the exposition comes through dialogue and character ruminations. As Ella and Doran go through the process of figuring out their respective mysteries, the text opens up for us to reach back into past experiences that inform present circumstances, and it's all organic to resolving the main threads of the story.

As those threads start to weave together toward a final resolution, the pace picks up. There's more urgency as the stakes get higher. And those stakes start to grow out of unexpected places, until you see how it all connects in the end. It's a neat package, with certain elements tied off in a bow at the close of the book, but others ready to lead into the sequel as you're left with one big question about where this all started, and just how much of it true, and how much is a mass delusion...

Pick this one up and say "hallo, rabbit."

The Mummy of Monte Cristo by J. Trevor Robinson

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Because, monsters.

Edmond Dantes had it all: a promising career, a loving father, and beautiful fiancée. Then, in a moment of petty jealousy, three bitter men conspire to ruin his life to advance their own fortunes. Of course, the problem with digging a pit is that you often fall into it yourself.

When Edmond comes back from the dead (literally and figuratively in this retelling), he's educated, wealthy, cunning, and has a chip on shoulder under those wrappings.

The story

Even if you haven't read the classic French novel (I haven't), you know the story. A wholesome young man is framed as a political dissident and sent to an island prison where he meets an erudite and wealthy prisoner. After escaping the prison, he uses a hidden treasure to fund his revenge. Of course, people and circumstances have changed while he was away, and he has to reconsider some of his plans.

The characters

This is a huge book, and without a spreadsheet I couldn't begin to go over everyone even if we had the time. But to mention three we must begin with Edmond Dantes, the young sailor wronged who returns not just as the Count of Monte Cristo, but as its mummy (and inventor of a tasty new sandwich). In a

dark fantasy like this, we don't need metaphor. He literally gives up his humanity to pursue revenge.

Mercedes is the woman taken from him, who unwittingly marries one of Edmond's rivals and has a son whom Edmond rescues. Fernand is the chief conspirator, who manages to steal Edmond's life and the woman he loves. He can also conjure fire.

The world

This is an alternate history, where Napoleon defeated a zombie outbreak, and all manner of supernatural horrors abound. The time period of the original novel remains, but the addition of magic and monsters forces some significant changes. Robinson does an admirable job of incorporating these new elements in a way that really feels organic. The werewolves, vampires, and lesser known ghoulies aren't just there for their own sake. Every new element serves to develop the story and flesh out the world.

The politics

France at this time was in upheaval, and Edmond is accused of conspiring to help Napoleon return to power. The politics, while present, are only there so much as to put the story in motion. From there, this is really about the characters and the moral consequences of their actions. Any political points that may have been present in the past take a backseat to pure revenge fantasy.

Content warning

Well, there are monsters. It could be argued that Edmond's transformation from man to mummy is a sort of body horror, yet it's handled tastefully. Robinson maintains the style and tone of the novel. Except for the monsters.

Who is it for?

It may seem geared toward the *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* crowd, but while that and its innumerable imitators were written as a silly cash-grab that worked, *The Mummy of Monte Cristo* is so much more. Robinson's rearrangement is written from the heart, with a deep respect for every source from which he draws. Anyone who loves classic literature and the darker side of folklore will find chocolate for their peanut butter.

Why read it?

One of the advantages of fantasy is that it allows us to consider the real things of life from an unrealistic perspective. So while monsters may seem like a heretical addition to a story that has already stood the test of time just fine on its own *thankyouverymuch*, they can also help us notice things that were always there, always true, and easily overlooked. Also, it's a good time. Because, monsters.

Roadmarks by Roger Zelazny

Review by Heath Row

The Stf Amateur efanzines.com

As my wife and I use the local libraries, I'm making it a practice to frequently check out books from the sf section every time we visit, in order to keep such books—and authors—in active circulation. So far, I've been pretty aggressive doing so, checking out a handful of titles every couple of weeks, and I might reach the point at which I'm unable to read everything I check out before it's due. For now, though, I'm doing my darndest. Even if I don't read or finish a book, checking it out serves a purpose.

This novel by Roger Zelazny is one heck of a book, and I'm glad I pulled it from the shelf. It's a very fun and interesting portrayal of time travel: time as a network of highways, with travelers able to go forward as well as back in time—sometimes with more than one incarnation of a character on the road at a given time. If a traveler changes what happens in a given timeline, that might create a new on-ramp to the highway, leading to the potential for new creatures or characters to also find their way to the road. At times, the book reminded me of Walter Jon Williams's *Hardwired* crossed with Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* series, only with a highway as the river—and without as many historical figures. (There are some, but they play a minimal role.)

The character Red Dorakeen is an effective protagonist (other Dorakeen books would have been welcome), and over the course of the story, he attracts a number of supporters and friends while trying to determine who's put a bounty on his head—and why. A former lover and fellow traveler who'd lost her zest for life comes into play, as does Dorakeen's son—not knowing who his father is.

There's a number of assassins, some more skilled than others—including an alien battle robot with suppressed memories that seeks a life of peace and quiet repose—and self-aware personal computers or artificial intelligence agents that can be plugged into vehicles. It's almost as though citizens band radio were embodied by *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer: A Propædeutic Enchiridion* from Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*. Those characters are named after Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The book also features a Tyrannosaurus, dragons, and what might be the dreams of dragons. Chapters are numbered in an innovative way, alternating “One” and “Two” to signify which timeline or group of characters is being focused on. In 2021, *Deadline* reported that George R.R. Martin and Kalinda Vazquez were developing a television adaptation for HBO Films, but those efforts seem to have stalled.

Roadmarks is an excellent book and a fine example of what might be considered science fantasy.

Shikari by Alma Boykin
Review by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

And yes, it is a series. Imagine that!

I'm pretty sure I've mentioned Alma Boykin's books here before. I'm a pretty big fan, and privileged to know her in person, so I can say that not only are her books good, she's a lovely human being. It's nice to say that about an author, I always think.

The other thing you should know if you aren't familiar with her work is that she is a scholar, and boy, does it show in her books. Right down to the occasional bibliography at the back of a novel. I love this, so, so much. Because the stories don't suffer for it. She doesn't put the world-building and research ahead of the plot and characters. It's just that extra touch that takes a fun read to a new level of 'I'm learning things' and sets up worlds which feel immersive and real.

Shikari is one of those. Set on a planet where humans showed up to colonize, with no good way of going back to where they had come from, only to discover to their great dismay that an alien species already lived there. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, humans and the kangaroo-like *Stare* learn to mesh their resources and get along. Most of the time. There are, of course, deep rifts in their communications.

The book focuses on young Auriga, called Rigi, and her friend Tomas. Although this book could easily

be categorized as YA, the series follows Rigi as she grows into adulthood, marries, has children, so for me it's more like a maturer version of Anne of Green Gables or perhaps Little Women as that story goes into the sequels. I like this pattern very much, and it's rare.

Rigi and Tomas have spent most of their lives on Shikari, so they can speak the Stare language, and more importantly, they can smell the scent portion of the language which adult humans cannot, or at least not well. This puts them in a unique position as interpreters. They also have a shared uncle (just don't try to pin the adults to the exact relationship of how many times removed he is) who is a xenarchaeologist. Rigi and Tomas discover and explore enigmatic ruins, with Rigi using her budding artistic skills to draw in a way that sophisticated technology can't scan. It's a mystery. One that isn't solved in this book, but as you read through the series more and more is revealed.

Which I am not giving away in a review! Go read the book! I think my readers will really like it. It's very much a family story, and yes, you could hand this to any reader aged 12 and up and feel safely confident they would enjoy it without themes which would discomfit parents.

And yes, I did do that cover, although not the others in the series. I'll be doing the cover for book 7, though.

Thunder God of Mars: A Superhero Prose Novel by John Taloni Review by Trevor Denning <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Lightweight, colorful entertainment

Ancient powers do battle, and the fate of the first colony on Mars hangs in the balance. In the not-too-distant future Ares challenges Thor to a duel on the red planet, with the intention of making his Norse counterpart protector of the humans struggling to survive both the elements and other supernatural forces.

The story

Ares, the Greek god of war, challenges Thor, the Norse god of Thunder, to a throwdown on Mars. The competing gods have already thrashed each other all over Earth, but Mars is Ares' planet, so he should have the upper hand. Not that a little thing like that will stop Thor, who is as brash and impulsive as both the ancient legends and the recent pop culture iterations have portrayed him. After a short but intense battle, however, Ares fades from existence in what turns out to be an act of self-sacrifice.

The duel was just a ruse to get Thor to Mars, where a group of humans have set up a colony. Lacking the resources to provide for the struggling colonists, the god of war knew that the god of thunder could be persuaded to look after them if he saw their need. Now Thor finds himself fighting enemies from multiple pantheons and looking for assistance from unexpected allies.

The characters

Thor, obviously, is the reason anyone will pick up this book. The portrayal here is drawn from mythology and pop culture in ways that pay equal homage to both. All of his allies and enemies receive similar treatment, though readers familiar with the Norse mythos will probably find more to appreciate. The colonists themselves provide a nice counterbalance to the supernatural goings on, though none of them really stand out.

The world

Since the story opens with a Greek god facing off with a character from the Norse pantheon, virtually anything or anyone from mythology can appear as friend or foe. The old gods' power and very existence hinge on their relevance in the mortal world, and they are all interested in a getting a foothold on the red planet or going out in a blaze of glory.

Mars, as portrayed here, is slowly being made habitable for humans and the story spans decades and generations of colonists. For the time being, they have to remain in their buildings and ships if they want to survive. Meanwhile, Thor and his ageless, supernatural counterparts aren't affected by the alien atmosphere. Able to travel between realms with ease, Thor can call up anyone he wants, whether that be Hela the goddess of death to gather new Valkyries, or frost giants to build him a house.

As Thor intervenes on behalf of the colonists, some of them become suspicious of otherworldly goings on. Not wanting to be sent back to Earth on a psychiatric discharge, they keep their observations to themselves.

The politics

No real politics to speak of. This is more of a silver age comic book with prose instead of pictures than the agenda driven drivel leaking into mainstream comics today.

Content warning

Some colorful language and comic book violence, but nothing graphic or even approaching gratuitous.

Who is it for?

It's for anyone who misses silver age comics and when Star Trek was bright. It's also for fans of Norse mythology.

Why read it?

Why not? Thunder God of Mars is lightweight, colorful entertainment. It's comic book escapism in prose, which is even more fun than it sounds. Taloni takes a chance on risky concept (I mean, it's a superhero comic without pictures!) and makes it work.

Tree of Liberty by Terry Mixon
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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! I kept reading, obviously, since this is the third book in the series.

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. If you want to read my thoughts on book one, [click here](#). And then, check out what I thought about book two by [clicking here](#). I clearly enjoyed the first two books, because I'm still reading the series. I hope that gives you some confidence that this is a fun little romp through time and space. Don't take my word for it, read it yourself and chat with me in the comments below!

Now, in this third novel, those characters are on their little jaunt around Earth and through the solar system, visiting Mars, dead asteroids and everything in between. I loved seeing the main character, Harry Rogers, illustrating the skills that made him an exceptionally talented super special squirrel for Uncle Sugar. And we saw Jessica Cook growing into her role as a partner in Humanity Unlimited. Oh, and while we got to see Harry pew pew the shit out of it, we got to see Jessica... science the heck out of it? Math the crap out of it? Does anyone know what space engineers do besides engineer? Like, math is involved, right?

Anyway, the first book was getting the private space program off the ground, the second novel 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. In this third novel, the political games bear fruit, the Bennett Problem is dealt with, and alliances are made. I loved this book too, so read the rest of this review and then read the book!

The Story

In this novel, the third in the Humanity Unlimited Series, our protagonists are spread across the galaxy exploring and capturing alien technology. They're trying to solve the mystery of their disappearance, of Earth B and prepare for the inevitable confrontation with the alien menace. In this mad dash to protect Earth, there are only two sides. Theirs, and everyone else.

In this book, that ‘everyone else’ proposition includes his final showdown with Kathleen and Nathan Bennett. Will they win? Will they die? Can the evil in his bloodline be stopped or will their treachery win in the end? Only time will tell, so read the book and find out for yourself! You’ve been warned, because those two diabolical characters have stolen an alien spaceship and are making friends and enemies across known space.

As those alien revelations set the globe on fire, Harry must stop shadowy enemies from enslaving humanity. If he can. With the help of Jessica Cook, his friend and business partner. Except, Jess becomes more than that in this novel, she becomes a fighter. When her secret base is overrun, she fights to the last bullet to defend her land and went out like a champ. But even the Reaper feared her, because almost dying didn’t stop her from fighting the good fight. After all of that, she was placed into an alien device that might just save her life. Will she live? Will she die? Only time will tell, so keep reading!

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 *Tree of Liberty*, 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. Plus, a lot more kinetic action than we saw in previous novels. 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 flutter 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 eggheads, vastly different than leading Spec Ops troops across the globe. In the next novel 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! Some of those, coincidentally, involve the weapons he trained on as he uses gunboat diplomacy to woe the world and win the day.

Jessica Cook: She started as an employee of Rainforest LLC, working for their space department. She's a space engineer and designed the Liberty Station conversion and revitalization. She served as the Rainforest's 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 combat while defending the New Zealand base and engaging in political negotiations. She's become the star of this novel, as she grew and improved her overall levels of badassery. 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 sold Rainforest LLC, then founded Humanity Unlimited, LLC which he plans to use to break humanity out of the Terran Rut she finds herself in. His new company is also an international company who seems to have their fingers in every pie. During this novel, he takes a more active role in the political shenanigans, setting up the scaffolding that the future new world order will be built upon. 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 to 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. And in the end, he shows he's got balls of steel, a real class act! He still reads as a likable fella, but 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 from 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. Even better, he finally gets his comeuppance... but no spoilers from me!

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. Or what's

left of it after the American political class got involved. 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, now she can't work through proxy toadies, she has to do her own dirty work. Through the course of this book she's demoted to a minor baddie, now that the alien menace of this series finally shows up. In those scenes, she dances with the devil, but can she win? Will she outsmart him, or will she get got? Only time will tell! But in this book, we saw a lot more of her, as her status quo rocked her back on her feet. So, will she make it out alive? Will she play an even larger role in the final book of this series? Or will she 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. He played a larger role in this novel than in the last, but he's still extremely unlikable. I really want to watch him get smacked in the face, just once, before the series ends!

Ambassador Chen: He's a Chinese diplomat and the middleman for the Heavy Worlder secret cabal known as the Dragon. He's physically fit, cunning and evil, bent on subjugating humanity and enslaving them to his alien overlords. He views them as almost deific, which is weird, but I'll ride with it and see where it takes us. Like Queen, I want him to get a punch to the face as well!

The World

Tree of Liberty is the third book in the Humanity Unlimited Series, and I absolutely loved it. The world was fleshed 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 that seemed inconsequential earlier came up in this novel, so I can't wait to see what he does with the remaining plot hooks! Those dangling ideas from the plot arc to date make me think that the larger mystery would continue to grow and expand until it's solved in the final book. So far, the payoff has been worth it. Terry has skills, so I am positive that it will only get better. I really loved reading the scenes of combat with the Revolutionary Era troops on the Volunteer World and against the Heavy Worlders. It was an exciting segment to read and left me wanting more.

During those scenes, Terry showed his baseline understanding of basic squad tactics. He made no obvious blunders, likely a residual from his time as a crusty Army sergeant. Was he a grunt? Well, nobody's perfect. But he learned enough to make the combat scenes pop and focused on the aspects that moved the plot forward. Magazines ran dry, bullets weren't always plentiful, and combat wasn't clean. Good people died and the survivors suffered through it. I loved that he used these combat interactions to add heightened stakes in this world, it made for a better read.

Throughout this book, Terry built upon the legwork of the previous novel, more specifically with the way captured or acquired gear became useful and the eggheads' discoveries that gave them access to the almost magical alien technology. Throughout those scenes he added enough new details to make the setting pop. Every base and spaceship felt unique, but real. He fed us those new sensory 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 *Tree of Liberty*. In fact, I don't remember Terry mentioning a single political party. It was just one corrupt politician after another. Even corrupt alien politicians! 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 world has plenty of internal politics, though it is only part of the plot for this adventure. Since it is a near-future world, the geopolitical shenanigans don't directly tie into our status quo. The story does touch on the issue of political corruption, but I like to think that condemning such topics is a bi-partisan endeavor. That said, this is a space thriller novel. Those are all about politics and the consequences of corruption. The story is set in a world where America is a fallen empire, the caliphates rule Europe and the world is in chaos with only India and China left as viable polities. If that bothers you, move on, but I found the disconnect between this novel and the real world made this one a non-issue.

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. In *Tree of Liberty*, there was less of the implied violence against women by the bad guys. Those guys start to get their due, the piper has come calling for Nathan Bennett. Again, none of those activities happened on screen, but they were implied. As for the violence, what was there wasn't gratuitous. We didn't see the gore or splatter porn, that part of it happened after the scene faded to black. There was 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'll say that this narration was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did good! This isn't a dig at Veronica Giguere, the narrator, but the

cast of characters in this book was tight so there wasn't a huge call for a slew of accents. Also, bear in mind that I've suffered hearing loss while chasing dragons for Uncle Sugar, so your mileage may vary. I will say the accents that Madam V did were well done. Seriously, I'd listen to more books by this narrator, and I even listen to her order her dinner or hire her to work some of my stuff. Wait, I did hire her for some of my anthologies. Her audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about! She didn't commit the Cardinal Sin, which is my only real requirement; she didn't sound like a robot, she didn't bore me, and she didn't use accents that annoy the bajesus out of me!

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.

In this novel we sailed past the events that put the plot in motion and watched as a galactic drama plays out across our solar system. We see our main characters facing against the storm that started in a Guatemalan Jungle and ended in space, our not so final frontier. It all leads to one heck of an amazing adventure. 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!

War By Other Means by Karl Gallagher

Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The seventh book in The Fall of the Censorate doesn't disappoint.

War By Other Means, the seventh entry in The Fall of the Censorate series is another expertly done genre shift, giving readers a rare glimpse behind the diplomatic lines of war.

That is the most unique aspect of this series. With each entry Gallagher gives us a different look at what it takes to bring down an empire. From adventure, to war, murder mystery, and how to operate an insurgency, The Fall of the Censorate has expertly run through several genres. In this latest entry we see what it takes to hold together a disparate alliance of various liberated worlds, each with unique concerns and cultures.

The Story

Winnie Landry and the many adopted members of Clan Landry travel between the many worlds of the Fieran-led alliance against the tyrannical Censorate, trying to keep them united as cultural rifts begin to show themselves. This is made all the more difficult as the economically challenged Fierans threaten to assert their military might over the worlds they helped to liberate. Meanwhile, the no-longer-Admiral Pinoy is hatching a new plan to strike against the growing rebellion.

The Characters

Like her husband Marcus, Winnie Landry has had to take on a variety of roles throughout the course of the war. Most recently, she has been appointed ambassador by her homeworld of Corwynt. And once again, she proves herself more than capable as she navigates the egos of interplanetary politics.

Most intriguing is Governor Huang. We met him in the previous book when he led the entire Oyun

province in joining the rebellion, helping Marcus Landry in achieving a decisive victory over a Censorate invasion fleet. Here, we see him demonstrate his political skill engaging in several maneuvers that could either save the rebellion or put him at the head of a new Censorate.

The World

Set in the far future things still don't operate much differently than they do in our current world. This is due to Gallagher's excellent understanding of human nature and how different groups have a way of building their own unique cultures with their own rationales for practices that a neighboring world might find abhorrent. The nuances of the debates make it easy to relate to the difficulties Landry experiences despite taking place in a world with interstellar travel.

Politics

The aforementioned nuances of the interplanetary debates and cultural clashes are handled so well that there is little hint of the personal politics of the author. Political systems on display involve matriarchies, republics, parliamentary systems, slavery, and tribal animosities.

Content Warning

None at all.

Who is it for?

For those who enjoyed the interplay of cultures seen in Star Trek DS9 and Babylon 5 you are going to love this.

Why buy it?

Because it is intriguing, thoughtful, unique and moves the overall story along...by other means.

24-Hour Warlock by Shami Stovall
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

We're off to kill the wizard

Time-Marked Warlock, the first novel starring Adair Finch, was an entertaining murder mystery starring "Adair Finch, Warlock for Hire." (Yes, he refers to himself like that, complete with the capital letters. I think Jim Butcher would be amused.)

The follow-up, Chronos Warlock, was a complex, almost convoluted sequel.

Book Three, 24-Hour Warlock, is almost simple by comparison.

Adair Finch is about to have the longest day of his life... again.

The Story

Adair Finch lost his brother over a decade ago to a coven of witches. Adair's sister-in-law, Jessica, has tracked him down. Good news: she found a way to track down the witches.

Bad news: the source of her information is the Aztec wizard Maldonado, who is almost as insane as he is evil.

Worse news: Jessica agreed to assassinate some magic CIA officers for Maldonado, and reneged on the deal, so she's being hunted down by Maldonado, all the legions of monsters at his command, AND the Magical CIA.

Adair's day will be filled with supernatural intelligence officers, vampire lawyers (blood-sucking lawyers, how redundant), meth heads, shadow monsters, magical drug dealers, a witch with a bad attitude, Nephilim, and an overcaffeinated 12-year-old.

Again, this is almost simple compared to Chronos Warlock. Adair has to defeat one lousy guy ... except this one lousy guy is almost impossible to kill, with more power than Adair and his allies put together, with demons at his command.

I must admit, this one was just fun. Instead of one "save point" where Adair resets back to earlier in the day, we have several times where he has to mark the time over and over again.

Stovall's writing is also getting better. She seems to know what an actual quip is now. She so overused the word in the previous novels, I was getting quiplash.

It's also fun to watch how this series is developing. By book three, we realize that a series plot has been developing since before the events of book one, a developing threat that was in plain sight the whole time. It's all so much fun, and so well-crafted.

The Characters

Finch is still as cranky as ever. He's not quite as much of a misanthrope as in the last book, there's some development, but life has done a number on him and he's working through some trauma. One of the biggest character developments for Adair is that he's finally trusting other people to get the job done.

His sidekicks have been interesting. Enzo the werewolf is still fun, though there are moments he gives off a slightly Bruce Banner feel (Bill Bixby, not Ruffalo). Liam Blackstone and his daughter Bree add more to those one than their last outing; Bree herself is less of an insufferable 12-year-old than last time, but she still needs a net thrown over her.

The World

We add a little more in the way of world building outside of Finch's little corner of the world. There is SHADOW: the Supernatural Hazard Analysis and Defense Operations Wing (clearly, someone really wanted the initials to spell SHADOW). They have some interesting and colorful agents, and that's just from the sample size of one we see in this novel.

24-Hour Warlock also sets up more of the world-building in terms of long-term threats. There's a rising threat that was hidden in book one, explained at the end of the novel, while at the same time also foreshadowing book four.

We also get more into the mechanics of magic—making deals with things, the side effects and consequences of said deals, etc. We've got dwarves, demons, witches, and how magic is developed in this world. We haven't quite gotten to "magic is highly advanced biology" but we may get there.

Politics

LA is run by idiots, film at 11, mostly around McKinley Park, another “quick construction project” that will never be finished.

Or to quote the werewolf Enzo: “California only works at one speed, and that speed is f***you.”

Also political (if you’re into that sort of thing): Aztec mythology. And we don’t even get into how many human sacrifices they performed a day.

There is a hint of politics here, but I could just be oversensitive. There is mention of “new gods” being born, one of which is “pollution.” My reaction is probably silly; there is exactly one paragraph on it, and the rest of the book has nothing to do with it. But it was a discordant note in an otherwise well-orchestrated novel, so it made me wince. It felt felt very ... Neil Gaiman. I promise that is the most insulting thing I will say about her writing.

Content Warning

There are discussions of a sexual nature, like a coven with “group Thursdays”—but it is largely used for comedic effect. There is some cussing, but nothing I didn’t hear in my Catholic schoolyard.

Who is it for?

If you like Harry Dresden or Daniel Humphreys, with the mystery building level of Rex Stout, you’re going to enjoy 24-Hour Warlock.

Why buy it?

24-Hour Warlock is a tightly-written, fun little puzzle within the urban fantasy genre, keeping up the rapid pace of a Harry Dresden novel, without needing all of the explosions.

Literary Criticism

The 2024 Short Fiction Hugos By Tom Feller

Although I haven't attended a Worldcon since 2016, I still buy supporting memberships so that I can participate in the Hugos

Novellas

The Brides of High Hill by Nghi Vo—

This is the fifth installment in the author's Singing Hills Cycle, which is set in a fantasy world loosely based on China before the invasions by the Western powers. The main character is Chih, a monk from the Singing Hills Abbey who journeys about the countryside collecting stories. In this novella, they (the monk's pronoun is always "they" or "them" and their gender at birth is never revealed) have fallen in with a wedding party. It is transporting Nhung, the daughter of a merchant family named Pham to Doi Cao, the walled estate of Lord Guo, to become his bride. After they arrive, they hear whispers about the nobleman's previous wives that are reminiscent of A Thousand and One Arabian Nights and meet the nobleman's crazy son, Guo Zhihao, who might not be so crazy after all. Doi Cao itself evokes the feeling of the gothic mansions of horror stories and romances such as Jane Eyre. There is a plot twist at the end that is completely unexpected yet completely logical in retrospect. This is a good, solid novella. Although the stories do not have to be read in any order, it would be a good idea to read one or two before tackling this one, because there is one plot point that does not make sense if this is the first story in the series that you have read. My Ranking was \$4, but the other voters must not have liked it and ranked it #6.

The Butcher of the Forest by Premea Mohamed—

The main character in this fantasy story is Veris Thorn, a 47-year-old woman who lives with her grandfather and aunt in a village outside the imperial castle of their country's ruler, referred to as The Tyrant. He had conquered the land when she was a girl, and she lost both her parents shortly after the occupation began. She comes to his attention when he learns that she is the only person known to have successfully entered a haunted forest known as the North Woods, aka Elmever, and retrieve a lost child. (The child died two years later, but the importance of the death is not revealed until close to the end.) She learns that his two children, Eleonor and Aram, ran off during the night and entered the forest as an adventure. He orders her to rescue them. If she fails, he will have her grandfather, aunt, and all the residents of her village put to death. Obviously, she cannot refuse, although the odds are against her, especially since she has a 24-hour deadline. (No pressure!) Furthermore, she knows that weapons are useless, so she is armed only with three magical charms. Another challenge is that it is dangerous to eat or drink anything inside the forest, so she only has as much food and water as she can carry. During her quest, she has a series of encounters that test her both physically and psychologically. This is a first-rate quest fantasy, and I ranked it #2. The other voters did not like it quite as much and ranked it #3.

Navigational Entanglements by Aliette de Bodard—

The premise of this space opera is that interstellar travel requires the special abilities of a

select group of people called “navigators”, who are divided into five clans. Those clans are the Rooster, the Ox, the Snake, the Rat, and the Dog. The first four are independent, but the fifth is affiliated with the Empire that governs human space. The navigators can open gates to a form of space called the Hollows. The Hollows are inhabited by a jellyfish-like species called the Tangles, who have found that humans make for good eating. Prior to the beginning of the story, one of the Tangles escapes from the Hollows and enters an inhabited star system.

The first point-of-view character is Viet Nhi, a young member of the Rooster clan who lacks social skills. The other POV character is Hac Cuc, a young member of the Snake clan who also serves her clan as an assassin. Their romance becomes one of the sub-plots. They have been chosen to be part of an inter-clan task force assigned to seek out and neutralize the tangler. The other members of the team are Bao Duy, a young member of the Rat clan and a scientist specializing in tangles, and Lanh, a young member of the Ox clan and a survivor of a close encounter with a tangler. The leader is Ly Chau, a senior member of the Dog clan, but she is killed by poison in her hotel room early in the story, which also makes this a locked room mystery. Her murder forces the four young people, who were selected for reasons not revealed until later in the story, to work together. It starts slowly because of the world building but really picks up steam by the end. This is a very interesting space opera with an ending that would allow sequels, so it may be the beginning of a new young adult series. I would like to read more stories in this universe, and I ranked it #3. Once again, the other voters did not like it as much and ranked it #5.

The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain by Sofia Samatar—

This novella is set in a future in which the Earth is no longer habitable, and humanity has moved into space habitats. These habitats are attached to asteroids so that they can be mined. However, the miners are slave laborers using picks and shovels and live in the part of the habitat called the “Hold”. They have bolts inserted into their ankles when they are children and constantly wear chains, so they are called the “Chained”. Occasionally, a slave is promoted from the mines to one of the service occupations such as guard, driver, garbage collector, food service workers, etc. Exceptional slaves can get scholarships for advanced schooling.

The two point-of-view characters are “the Boy”, seventeen years old, and “the Woman”, aka “the Professor”. (The author does not give names to the lower-class characters but does for the upper-class ones.) The Boy displays a talent for drawing and is given a scholarship to study art. He is mentored by the Professor, herself the daughter of an elevated slave. As someone born into the society’s lower class, she is required to wear a blue-lit anklet, whose true purpose is not revealed until toward the end. She ends up learning as much from him as he does from her. The principal villain is Doctor Gil, the Woman’s advisor, although one could argue that the system itself is the bad guy. This story is in the tradition of science fiction stories such as *The Time Machine* with the Eloi and the Morlocks, the *Star Trek* episode “The Cloud Minders”, and television shows such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downtown Abbey*. This story is a worthy addition to that tradition, although this is such a competitive category that I could only rank it #5. The other voters liked it a little more and ranked it #4.

The Tusks of Extinction by Ray Naylor—

In the first life of Damira, she is a Russian scientist who is one of the world’s foremost experts on elephants. However, she is no ivory-tower intellectual. Far from it. She spends most of her time working as a ranger fighting against ivory poaching in Africa. About a year before she is murdered by poachers, her memories are uploaded to some sort of AI system. About a century later, those memories are taken out of storage, and she is invited to participate in a Russian attempt to revive the mammoth. She agrees, and her memories are loaded into the brain of a female mammoth in Siberia.

She uses her human knowledge of elephant behavior to lead a herd against her old enemies, ivory poachers, and new ones, trophy hunters.

There are also flashbacks to Damira's life as a human, including scenes from her childhood and those depicting her friendship with Kenyan ranger Wamugunda. Sub-plots include 16-year-old Svyatoslav's relationship with his poacher father, and strains on the marriage of Vladimir and Antony climaxing with the latter's desire to hunt mammoths for sport. The story lines all seamlessly come together at the end. This book is a worthier successor to Jurassic Park than the recent movies, and I ranked it #1. The other voters liked it as well and awarded it the Hugo in this category.

What Feasts at Night by T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon)—

This is a sequel to *What Moves the Dead*, which is a retelling of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". Three characters return from the earlier story, which is set in the late 19th Century: Alex Easton, the scion of a wealthy family and a retired army lieutenant who suffers from PTSD, Angus, his valet, and Eugenia Potter, a scientist who studies mushrooms. Alex, who serves as narrator, is from the fictional eastern European of Gallacia, and his family owns a hunting lodge. Alex hasn't visited it since he was a boy but invites his friend Eugenia to visit so that she can study the mushrooms in the area. (They are not romantically involved. The romance, what there is of it, is between Angus and Eugenia.) When they arrive, they find the place in disrepair, because Codrin, the caretaker, had died two months earlier under mysterious circumstances. When Angus visits the nearby village to hire another caretaker and a housekeeper/cook, he finds little interest even though most of the residents are unemployed. They believe he was killed by a breath-stealing creature called the Moroi, although Codrin's daughter insists he died of natural causes. Angus finally finds the Widow Botezatu and her grandson Bors. They are desperate enough for money that they take the jobs. Things are going well until the young man becomes ill and then Easton himself comes down with the same thing. This illness has a supernatural cause loosely based on the Night Hag legends, but I did NOT find Easton's solution, if you can call it that, to curing himself and Bors satisfying so I ranked it #6. The other voters liked it a lot more and ranked it #2.

Novelettes

The Brotherhood of Montague St. Video by Thomas Ha—

The title refers to a store that will, among other things, convert old VCR tapes to the latest format. In this future, traditional books have become collector's items, although the unnamed protagonist calls them "dead", because they have no power supply. He comes across one and actually reads it, despite the fact that he cannot adjust the brightness or the type size. Then he reads an e-book version of the same novel and discovers that the ending has been changed to a happy one. He is in the middle of cleaning out his late mother's apartment and has a girlfriend who insists that he only look at her while using virtual reality glasses. This means that he only sees her as she wants him to see her. The plot is driven by the pursuit of that book by a man who calls himself Calper John, and he will stop at nothing to get it. This story is in the tradition of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Orwell's 1984, and I liked it well enough to rank it #2. However, the other voters did not like it quite so much and ranked it #3.

By Salt, By Sea, By Light of Stars by Premea Mohamad—

In this fantasy world, wizards first undergo formal schooling, much like Hogwarts in the Harry Potter books. However, in this story, they are also required to apprentice to an established wizard before they can be certified. Cane, a male apprentice, is sent to Firion, an elderly female wizard

who lives in Weystone, a village by the sea. However, Firion is undergoing a personal crisis, because she has lost the ability to perform magic. It doesn't help that she has seen the signs of the coming of a giant sea dragon they call Bouldus. Every 8-12 years, the dragons undergo mating season, and the fighting among the males causes considerable collateral damage to the coastal areas. Bouldus always wins. The villagers usually have enough warning to evacuate themselves and their livestock while Firion hangs around to try to minimize the destruction. However, this time she will have to rely on her apprentice without revealing that she no longer has her powers. This is a solid, entertaining story, and I ranked it #3. Once again, the other voters did not like it as much and ranked it #5.

The Four Sisters Overlooking the Sea by Naomi Kritzer—

Morgan Strand, the point-of-view character in this story, had a promising academic career ahead of her after finishing her dissertation on seals in Maine. However, she became pregnant by her husband Stuart, a fellow academic who took a tenure track position at the University of Minnesota, where there are no seals. His specialty, on the other hand, is watersheds and wetlands. She gave up her own career after her laptop became damaged, and the only backup of her research was lost. She has to be satisfied with editing her husband's papers, and she feels that she does more than editing and should be credited as a co-author. When he takes sabbatical leave to spend a year doing research at Harvard, they, along with their teenage daughter Cordelia, aka Cordie, rent a house. It is located in the coastal town of Finstowe, Massachusetts on Cape Cod, two hours away from Cambridge by car. The "Four Sisters" refers to a rock formation with stones resembling those found in stone circles in Great Britain, and there is a local legend about them concerning selkies that becomes relevant later in the story. There is also a local seal population that she begins to study, and, to her pleasant surprise, they include "Murphy", a seal she had named when she was doing her Ph.D. research. The supposed twist ending is fairly predictable, but nonetheless, this is an enjoyable read, so I ranked it #4. The other voters liked it a lot more and made it the winner in this category.

Lake of Souls by Ann Leckie—

There are two point-of-view characters in this story: one alien and one human, which places this story in the tradition of Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey". The alien is called "Spawn", because it is a youngster by the standards of its species, who are called "lobster-dogs" by the humans who have surveyed their planet. For the alien, it is a coming-of-age story. For the human, it is a survival story, because they are the expedition's last survivor. The alien's story is much more interesting, especially when it visits other villages in its quest to find the "Lake of Souls" and thereby obtain a soul. Their paths cross, and they become companions. I made this my top ranked story in this category. The other voters did not like it quite as much but still ranked it #2.

Loneliness Universe by Eugenia Triantafyllou—

Story begins when Nefeli, a 20-something graphic designer, tries to re-connect with her childhood friend Cara. They agree via texting to meet at a bus stop that means something to them. However, when they arrive, they discover that each one is invisible to the other, nor can they talk on the telephone. They can only communicate electronically, either texting or e-mailing. Then Nefeli realizes that the same thing has happened with all her friends and family members. The only people she can see and talk to are strangers, and if she gets to know someone, they become invisible as well. Next, she discovers that this is happening to other people. This is supposed to be metaphor for how we have lost the ability to talk to people in person. As a general rule, I do not like stories using crude metaphors, and this is no exception, which is why I ranked it #6. The other voters must have agreed, because they gave it the same ranking.

have worked for the other voters, on the other hand, because they ranked it #3.

Why Don't We Kill the Kid in the Omelas Hole by Isabel J. Kim—

This story is based on “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin, which I don't recall ever reading. If so, it did not make a strong impression on me. The premise is that for Omelas to be a utopia, there must be a child in a hole suffering. It is supposed to be a metaphor for how rich countries can only be rich by exploiting other countries. It is yet another story using a crude metaphor, so I ranked it #5. However, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association strongly disagreed and awarded it the Nebula in this category, and the other Hugo voters ranked it #2.

Summary

The other voters and I only agreed on two stories this year. We all felt that “The Tusks of Extinction” was the best novella, and that “The Loneliest Universe” was the worst finalist in the Novelette category, but we also felt that none of the finalists were so bad that any of them warranted the “No Award” option. Our biggest disagreements were over “What Feasts at Night” in the novella category, and “Five Views of the Planet Tartarus” in the short story category. This is normal for me.

Prose Bono

The Outsider: My Life in Intrigue by Frederick Forsyth
Review by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

The autobiography of an author

I've heard of Frederick Forsyth but hadn't picked up any of his work prior to this, that I can recall. I add the disclaimer because I have read voluminously all my life, and there are books I've forgotten-- authors, titles, and it's only when I start to read it again the memories flood back in. I picked up Forsyth's autobiography for two reasons, and neither of them had to do with his being an author like I am as I wasn't looking for writing tips. Firstly, it was on sale, and secondly, I have been slowly researching a book which will focus on espionage in the Cold War era in Europe.

What I got was that, and more than I bargained for. The Outsider: My Life in Intrigue tells the tale of a young man who set goals, reached them, and when his honor was impinged on, walked away from a career. In order to survive and earn money for food after that, he sat down, wrote a novel in a month, and that novel went on to sell continuously until this day, became a film, and sparked many more works. All of them meticulously researched. I am more than a little in awe of what Forsyth has done to lend authenticity to his fiction.

Signs of Life by Sarah Pinsker—

Two Sisters, Veronica and Violet, became estranged forty years previously when Veronica eloped with Violet's high school boyfriend. Veronica's marriage only lasted a year, her second marriage also ended in divorce, but her third marriage lasted until her husband's death. She is very successful as a television newscaster but is close to retirement. Violet married and raised a family, but not only is her husband, a mining engineer, deceased, but so are her three sons. She lives out in the country in the Maryland mountains with her "grandson". Violet is an artist, constructing her works out of junk. She actually visits a junkyard looking for material in one scene, for instance. She has secrets, which she eventually reveals to Veronica, and they reconcile. This is a very good work of magical realism, but this category was so competitive that I could only rank it #5. The other voters liked it a little more and ranked it #4.

Short Story

Five Views of the Planet Tartarus by Rachael K. Jones—

The planet referred to in the title is a prison planet, and the method of imprisonment is both original and horrific and definitely qualifies as "cruel and unusual". It is a first-rate flash fiction story, less than 600 words long, so there's not much I can say about it without giving away the ending except to say that the classical reference in the title is quite appropriate. My ranking was #1, but the other voters strongly disagreed and ranked it #5.

Marginalia by Mary Robinette Kowal—

Margery, her ten-year-old brother Hugh, and their ailing mother live on a small farm in a medieval-fantasy world that is menaced by giant snails. The mother had once been chief housekeeper for Lord Strange, the local nobleman, and Margery is an upstairs maid. When one of the snails menaces the area, Lord Strange and his squire ride out to fight it. After the squire is killed, it turns out that the lord needs help from Margery, Hugh, and even their mother. This is a good story, and I ranked it #2. Once again, the other voters disagreed and ranked it #4.

Skitched to Skin Like Family Is by Nghi Vo—

The point-of-view character of this work of magical realism is an unnamed young Chinese American woman traveling in Illinois in 1931 in search of her brother. His last letter mentions a boarding house out in the middle of nowhere, which she finds. She has the unique ability to recall the history of a piece of clothing when she touches it. Suffice to say that she finds out what happened to her brother. This is another good, solid story, and I ranked it #3. The other voters liked it much more and made it the winner in the Short Story category.

Three Faces of a Beheading by Arkady Martine—

This is a rather complicated short story in that it has three story lines. The first is an on-line role-playing game in which one of the players makes a move so unusual that it shocks the other players. The second is an historical event that influenced the game's story line, and the third is an academic review of the game. It was too complicated for me so I ranked it #4. The other voters liked it even less and ranked it #5.

We Will Teach You How to Read/We Will Teach You How to Read by Caroline M. Yoachim—

This experimental story is supposed to be a transmission from an alien civilization in which they read everything at once. Unfortunately, it did not work for me, so I ranked it #6. It must

Forsyth is very upfront that this result on his first book was highly improbable, and he goes into detail about how it was a fluke. Still, the skill in his writing is evident, so he didn't start from scratch.

It's an enjoyable, immersive read, to boot. Forsyth's voice in his autobiography is dryly humorous with a sizable helping of self-deprecation. I liked it so well that I went looking for his first book, *The Day of the Jackal*, and finding it was also on sale, grabbed the book to see how it was. For a first novel? Dang. Really, well done and I can see how it launched Forsyth right into the stratosphere. I'll definitely pick up more of his novels.

You can see, in *Jackal*, particularly for me coming out of having read his autobiography and the real-life experiences which sparked the fictional telling, that Forsyth was a journalist of the old school. The school where you reported the facts, no more and no less. Which was dying, even in his time, and that's what led to his shift to writing fiction, where he could tell those stories with perhaps less spin than his former employers wanted him to put on purported non-fiction recountings.

If you enjoy a good thriller - not the modern angsty psychodrama, then I would say pick up the *Jackal*. But I really recommend the autobiography, for a glimpse into how a great writer's mind works, and a dark world which set the stage for many modern conflicts and socio-political ailments. Plus, I dare say you'll get as choked up as I did when he closes the loop he started at the tender age of six, wrapping up his life's tale.

Word Salad
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Word Salad

Is delicious. I like mine with juicy ripe tomatoes, succulent cucumbers, and just a bit of finely chopped onion. But not lettuce. Greek vinaigrette, a crumble of feta, and heaven. On the other hand, you might like lots of shredded iceberg lettuce as a vehicle for ranch dressing, bacon, and cheese. Still a salad.

Still a story. Words do matter, but how much do they matter? I find myself fighting with word choice while writing from time to time. When the story is flowing, I will sometimes get stuck on a word, 'argh' and move on, because I need to write the scene. Other times I find myself lingering and obsessing over the right word to use here.

I was thinking about this as I prepare to go over the latest manuscript with final edits. Some of what I will be doing is finessing my words. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it. I mostly want the pacing to be solid, the continuity smooth, and the character to have a logical growth arc with setbacks for realism. I'm not writing poetry here, just a story.

And yet there are times a well-crafted sentence can be a thing of beauty. I'm not personally a fan of novels that read like poetry, each sentence sculpted like one of those radishes carved into a rose. Those tend to be hard to follow the story, and you lose sight of the plot in this massive vegetal maze of intricate cuts and curls. Look up vegetable carving sometime... who would eat that?

Who wants to read that? Sure, sometimes I want to soak in the amazing versatility of the English language. I've been working on my Spanish, recently, and marveling at how much of the vocabulary I can deduce from knowing that an English word also came from that root. words like *largo* for long throw me a bit - I want to read that as large, which it isn't. The ability of this language of ours to create a mental image with a few well-placed words is dumbfounding.

Most of the time, though, I am reading not to revel in the words, but the words are tools to convey as quickly and succinctly as possible the content in front of me. You can tell a deep, emotional story without using language I have to look up in my dictionary app with my phone while reading on my tablet. I do love to learn a new word, but sometimes I just want to lose myself in the story. And when I am reading non-fiction, I'd rather not have the emotional tugging and pulling. I've been reading a book for research on the history of Siberia, and it's taking me forever to get through it, because the author is spending time building a word picture that is painful to read. It's not the writing, it's the world through her eyes, the pervasive alcoholism and hopelessness and impoverishment of spirit... I have to walk away from it before the light fades and let some sun back into my soul from time to time.

For me, when I'm writing, I am not thinking about the level I'm writing on. I was amused when one of my professors discovered I wrote, and asked to read one of my books, to discover that three full-tenured professors had discussed, and eventually looked up, a word I'd used. I hadn't thought twice about it - anencephalic seemed quite acceptable as an insult when paired with goon. But it's not the first time that I've had eyebrows raised over the vocabulary I use. My young adult books are, in theory, too difficult a reading level. I refused then and now, to dumb down my words. I learned much of this vocabulary in the first place by reading.

My daughter came home from school the other day and was talking to me about a failed vocabulary test. Her teacher, it seems, had neglected to supply her with a word bank to study (she was a new transfer and it slipped his mind). She took the test, failed it, and was disappointed in herself. I looked at her and asked, "you know what to do about this?" Yes, I need to read more.

Reading, voraciously, has many benefits in my humble opinion. From bibliotherapy to vocabulary, words jumbled together, combed into tidiness, and arranged in pleasing designs are marvelous things. Just like salads. The combinations are nearly infinite. In practical terms, unlimited ways to write stories, tell them effectively, and create mental images exist. And they are all delicious. Even if you don't like lettuce.