

Tightbeam 374

November 2025



Cliffs of Abudar
by Tiffanie Gray

Tightbeam 374

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What is Tightbeam? Tightbeam is the our literary fanzine, not our novel and anthology fanzine, but the fanzine that tries to cover all tastes in fandom, such as anime, comics, cosplay, films, novels, biographies, poetry, music, short stories, food, ...

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Table of Contents

Art	
Front Cover	
Back Cover ... The Cylon Ambush by Jose Sanchez	
Anime	
4 ... Ms. Vampire Who Lives in my Neighborhood ... Review by Jessi Silver	
Books	
6 ... Pebble in the Sky by Isaac Asimov ... Review by Heath Row	
7 ... The Final Reflection: Star Trek 16 by John M. Ford ... Review by Russ Lockwood	
8 ... Phantoms by Dean Koontz ... Review by Heath Row	
8 ... A Flag Full of Stars: Star Trek 54 by Brad Ferguson ... Review by Russ Lockwood	
Comic Books	
9 ... Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction ... Review by Heath Row	
Games	
11 ... NORAD The Third: New Edition ... Review by Russ Lockwood	
11 ... Vikings: Cards ... After-Play Report by Russ Lockwood	
Literary Criticism	
12 ... Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right ... Review by Thomas E. Simmons	
Magazines	
13 ... The Spider No. 2 by Grant Stockbridge ... Review by Heath Row	
Movies	
14 ... Phantoms ... Review by Heath Row	
Food of Famous Authors	
15 ... Hummingbird Muffins ... Cooking by Cedar Sanderson	

Anime

Ms. Vampire Who Lives in my Neighborhood Review by Jessi Silver



Due to a strange incident, Akari Amano is rescued by a vampire girl named Sophie Twilight, and Akari becomes interested in her. – ANN

Streaming: Crunchyroll

Episodes: 12

Source: Manga

Episode Summary: Akari Amano is really into dolls, so when she catches wind of a mysterious girl who, according to legend, lives in the forest and never ages, she assumes this person must be some sort of living doll. The truth is even more amazing – the girl’s name is Sophie Twilight, and she’s actually a vampire. Sophie lives alone in her large house, and Akari takes it upon herself to keep Sophie from feeling lonely. The thing is, Sophie enjoys her loner night-owl existence, and Akari’s budding obsession is starting to get in the way. When Akari leaves for a time, however, the difference is noticeable to Sophie. Though she appreciates the quiet, she realizes that Akari’s presence brought a fun atmosphere to her home. Without the constant chatter and questioning of her vampire lifestyle, Sophie feels as though something is missing. Akari is way ahead of the game, having decided to pack up her things (including several of her dolls) and move into Sophie’s home. Though the logistics might need some hammering-out, this could turn out to be a fun adventure for both girls.



Impressions: Vampire lore is full of sexually-charged scenarios and dubious consent, so I wasn't exactly looking forward to watching a series where all the characters look like kids, including the titular vampire. "She's actually 800 years old" is a trope that most anime fans are unfortunately probably familiar with, considering that it's a frequent excuse when it comes to characters who appear too young to be sexualized, but are anyway. I was surprised to find that this is actually not "that" series (or at least that episode); the first episode manages to toe a very narrow line between being too cutesy and too lusty for its own good, and the end result is a cute, fluffy outing with a nice flavor of homo-romantic humor that feels fairly fresh.

Though Sophie Twilight is the episode's resident vampire (it appears there may be at least one more introduced later on), against-type her character is actually the more aloof of the two leads. She's gotten to be very comfortable in the way she leads her life; though she never reveals her actual age, I would imagine as such a long-lived person one would have to be fairly in tune with enjoying one's own company. The thing about being comfortable is that sometimes too much comfort can lead to stagnation. I was reading a review of this episode elsewhere and another commenter referenced *Laid-Back Camp* as somewhat comparable in its

character relationship. While I'd say so far the interactions between Sophie and Akari are sort of inferior to Rin's and Nadeshiko's relationship in that series, I believe the comparison is sound – a loner character is challenged in their solitude by someone with a very different personality, and generally positive things result from the interaction.



Sophie has all the vampire skills you might expect.

All I can say about Akari at this point is that she is absolutely a piece of work. She's incredibly shameless in her admiration of Sophie and desire for her attention. I have to admit that she was initially a little bit too much for me to handle, mostly because her interactions felt borderline invasive. As someone who values peace and alone time, one of my great anxieties is being dragged out in public to interact in a manner that's not on my

own terms as an introvert. Not only does Akari have a dubious understanding of personal space, she's also unafraid to display lust or attraction, or whatever other emotion it is she has towards her new supernatural friend. I went back and forth throughout the episode trying to decide how I felt about the way she was acting towards Sophie; often times these kinds of characters come across as predatory. Again, this is where the episode manages to strike a kind of balance between allowing Akari free reign to be terrible, and giving Sophie a strong enough reaction to make it clear that she's under control, just mildly confused by Akari's enthusiasm. It's definitely not a relationship dynamic that will sit well with everyone, but surprisingly enough I found myself buying in by the end of the episode.

The episode is more comedic than I expected. Series like this tend not to hit well with me; while I can appreciate the fact that there are jokes and gags, they're often straightforward and predictable to the point that I don't find them that funny. Most of the humorous moments in this episode come from Sophie's consistent dismantling of vampire tropes, which manage to disillusion Akari to amusing effect. Sophie, being up all night

most of the time, has become something of an otaku, so of course her snug, comfy coffin is decked out with a body pillow of her favorite anime character. Likewise, her blood-consumption is maintained by blood supplies purchased online. I think my favorite new revelation is that vampires won't enter a room unless they're invited in – not because they suffer some physical consequence, but because it would be grossly impolite to walk in uninvited. The delivery of these gags is very matter-of-fact, which works well in the situation and matches with



Sophie's personality. Again, it's the type of humor that might come across as too cutesy for some, but I found it entertaining.

Sophie is an otaku through-and-through.

While I'd like to think that my state of mind has less bearing on my anime opinions than it actually does, the truth is that the last few weeks have been rough for me and in those circumstances it can be difficult to engage with anything overly-serious, violent, nihilistic, or cynical. Especially so when I realize my critical opinions are decidedly outside the general fandom norm and I know I'll need to muster up some energy to participate in the debate. It's during these moments that I find myself open to "dumb anime fluff," the kind of anime that doesn't necessarily have a complicated statement to make and just exists to cultivate a warm, pleasant atmosphere. This show seems to fit well into that category. That's not meant to be a dig in any way – frothy entertainment definitely has its place, and this is a good example. If you prefer your vampires without all the gore and non-consensual sex, this might be a fun Halloween-flavored outing.

Pros: Surprisingly humorous. There's good balance in the central character relationship.

Cons: Toes a very fine line between cute and irritating.

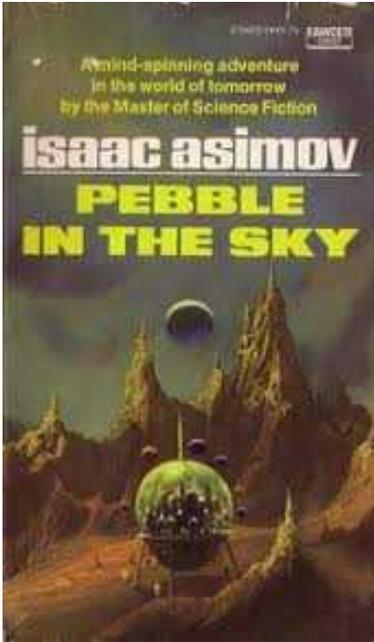
Grade: B-

Books

Pebble in the Sky by Isaac Asimov Review by Heath Row

I recently read an Orb ebook edition of Isaac Asimov's 1950 novel, *Pebble in the Sky*. The book was the author's first novel, though portions of the *Foundation* series had been published as early as 1942, before it was published as a novel. This book is not a fix-up or collection of interconnected stories; it is a novel featuring a consistent set of characters.

Originally titled *Grow Old with Me* and heavily revised, the novel is part of the *Trantorian Empire* series, which is in turn part of the *Foundation Universe*. Attentive readers might detect some discrepancies with later Asimov works, but I didn't find anything overly disruptive or distracting. The storyline focuses on a retired tailor from Chicago who is thrown 50,000 years into the future. Unable to communicate with the people of that time, he is mistaken for an intellectually disabled person and finds work as a farmhand.



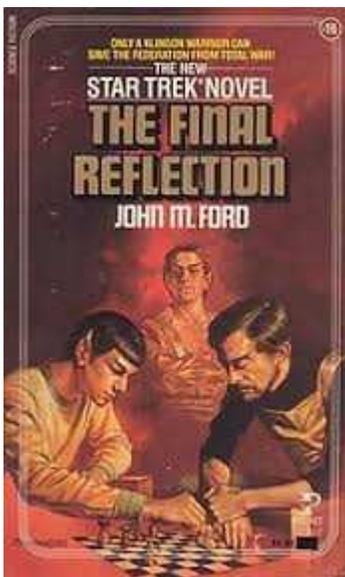
Volunteering as a subject for an experimental procedure—the application of the Synapsifier—his mental abilities are increased, he’s able to speak the local language, and he develops telepathy. He becomes involved in a dispute between the Galactic Empire, which oversees the “backward” planet, and its inhabitants, who might represent the original humanity before it spread throughout the solar system, galaxy, and universe.

The Earth of the future is largely radioactive, and religious zealots keep others from exploring the ruins of the earlier civilization. Of the characters, Joseph Schwartz, the displaced protagonist; Affret Shekt, who invented the Synapsifier, and Bel Arvardan, an independent-minded archaeologist visiting from offworld, are especially interesting. Pola Shekt is also an occasionally strong woman character.

While I enjoyed what I’ve read of the Foundation series (The N3F Review of Books, May 2022), I might have enjoyed this novel more. It’s a little less about politics and a little more action oriented. I also found the consistent presence of characters enjoyable—and the characters perhaps a little more fully realized.

I was especially interested in the concept of people no longer being considered useful to society when they turn 60. I was also intrigued by Schwartz’s consideration of which group of humans to align with. Does residing on Earth make us human? Are people who travel elsewhere more or less human? The same questions could also be applied to citizens of nation states. Does one need to remain in America to be American?

The Final Reflection: Star Trek 16 by John M. Ford Review by Russ Lockwood



Just about all these Star Trek novels are what I called "milled" in that they are turned out as fast as authors can type. I base that in part on a discussion with an author's spouse who said three novels in two months was about average.

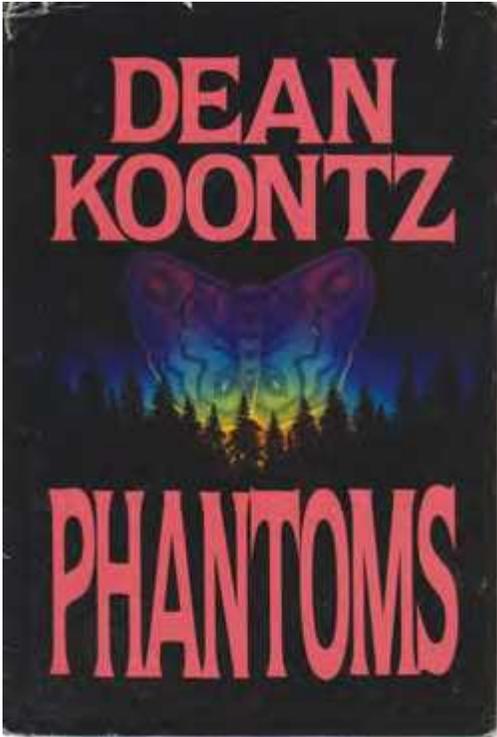
Most are never that good and you can almost discern the outline the author wrote to. Every once in a while, one or two stand out. They are the novel equivalent of fast food. I've picked these up for 25 cents or 33 cents each, and that's about what they are worth – light reading when I don't want to read history.

In this novel, a somewhat disjointed tale involves Klingon commander Krenn tasked with bringing a StarFleet ambassador to the Klingon homeworld. Only a StarFleet admiral has plans to start a war with the Klingons, a desire happily embraced by some Klingons. So begins travel travails and a quirky StarFleet ambassador who wins over our Klingon commander hero to the idea of peace.

We even meet a young Spock who plays the equivalent of a game of chess with Krenn. Hardly even a cameo worth mentioning, though, but it's on the cover. They would have been better off with three D-4 cruisers exploding. I slogged my way through this.

Phantoms by Dean Koontz Review by Heath Row

[Editor: This book became a movie. See review below.]



Early this week, I felt like reading a story about exploring a mysteriously empty city. Searching for “novel about abandoned town” yielded references to this 1983 novel by Dean Koontz, and—having procured an ebook edition of the novel recently—I read it over the course of two evenings. It’s a very good book!

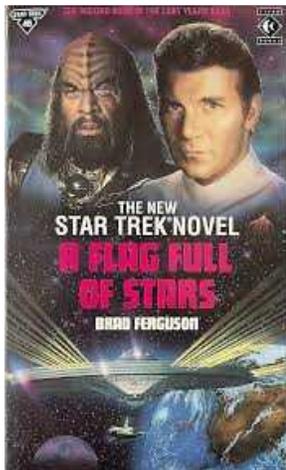
In addition to its Lovecraftian nature—the ancient enemy lurking under the northern California town is reportedly a portrayal of Nyarlathotep and one of the characters is named Arkham—the novel also resonates with Stephen King’s *It*, which was published several years later, though King started writing it in 1980. The early portions of *Phantoms* are quite frightening and suspenseful because you don’t know what’s causing the deaths plaguing the town in the Sierras. (Animal, vegetable, or mineral?) Once the reader learns the cause, it becomes more of an action-adventure tale as the protagonists challenge the ancient evil. Regardless, the stakes remain high and Koontz maintains an impressive level of tension throughout.

The book veers toward science fiction once scientists begin to attempt to learn more about the creature, and there are references to cellular biology, undifferentiated cells, cellular learning, and related topics.

Koontz also builds on Ananda Mohan Chakrabarty’s work with petroleum-degrading bacteria—which proves interesting and important.

Phantoms is also adjacent to alternate history because the author suggests the antagonist is the cause of mass extinctions and disappearances such as the demise of the dinosaurs, the collapse of the Mayan civilization, the fate of the Roanoke Colony, ghost ships including the *Mary Celeste*, and the since debunked abandonment of an Inuit village on Lake Angikuni in Nunavut, Canada.

Eager readers of Lovecraftian horror and supernatural military sf, as well as aficionados of the Town with a Dark Secret or King’s “Peculiar Little Town” trope, are likely to enjoy this novel.



A Flag Full of Stars: Star Trek 54 by Brad Ferguson Review by Russ Lockwood

A Klingon refugee scientist works as a high school teacher and somehow manages to invent a hyperspace gizmo. Two KGB agents, er, two Klingon agents, try to steal it. So begins a spy vs. spy game of cat and mouse between the Klingons and soon Admiral Kirk.

Alas, Kirk's chief of Staff Riley bungled the security for the scientist on Apollo Day, which celebrates the US landing on the moon. Transporters are such lovely kidnapping devices...and rescue devices, too. And somehow, only one StarFleet flitter is available in

the entire hemisphere for the getaway ship. Nothing else around. Even the USS Enterprise is in drydock and barely spaceworthy. No one else is home. Go figure.

Enter the 1980s Space Shuttle Enterprise, newly outfitted with impulse engines for the Tranquility Base flyby, that shows up for Kirk. Nice foreshadowing, that, earlier in the book, even if it's an absurd notion that Kirk can commandeer the only NASA shuttle left on the planet.

It's a typical Star Trek novel and about average in terms of plot and prose. Ties go to the author. Enjoyed it.

Comic Books

Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction Review by Heath Row



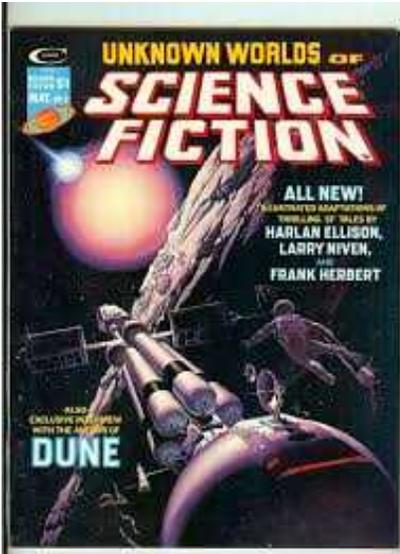
While at the Madison Comic Book Convention earlier this summer, I picked up several back issues of a black-and-white sf magazine published by Marvel's parent company, Magazine Management Co. Inc. Launched after the cancellation of Marvel's early-1970s eight-issue sf anthology comic *Worlds Unknown*, the magazine *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction* lasted only seven issues. Six bimonthly editions were published in 1975, and a special issue was published in 1976 to use up the remaining materials. Despite its short lifespan, the magazine is quite an impressive read, combining original stories, literary adaptations, interviews—even a column reporting on fandom.

Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction #4 (July 1975) opens with the first part of a framing story that bookends the periodical. Through the use of “slow glass,” a concept credited to Bob Shaw, an antique dealer is able to see scenes from distant worlds, similar to photography or television. “This prism of slow glass comes from an alternate universe, where it was positioned in such a manner as to record any interesting events that might occur in that universe,” Tony Isabella wrote. Each story in the issue, then, could be considered a story told through the imagery captured in slow glass.

The first piece is a comics adaptation of A.E. van Vogt's short story “The Enchanted Village,” scripted by Don and Maggie Thompson. I thought the story seemed familiar as I read it, and it was—it first appeared in van Vogt's *Destination: Universe!* The Thompsons' writing, coupled with artwork by Dick Giordano, successfully captures the tenor and tempo of the tale.

Following the adaptation, Alan Brennert interviewed van Vogt in a six-page feature that touches on gleaned inspiration from dreams, working with Harlan Ellison, the use of “fictional sentences” in confession stories and science fiction (the latter involves hang-ups, or “something that the reader has to fill in”), incorporating reality in fiction, Dianetics, future shock, and other topics. It's an excellent interview, offering several opportunities for further exploration, as well as a wonderful counterpoint to the literary adaptation that preceded it.

David Anthony Kraft of Comics Interview provided a one-page profile of pulp writer Otis Adelert Kline preceding Pete Conrad's adaptation of Kline's short story, "A Vision of Venus." That piece originally appeared in the December 1933 issue of *Amazing Stories*. Conrad's comic retooling results in a fun sword and sorcery adventure.



The Thompsons also weighed in with "Fantastic Worlds," a column concentrating on sf and fandom. In this issue's installment, they address fanzines (a newszine, really: *Locus*), conventions, then-new books they recommend, the Science Fiction Book Club, and fanac—specifically the different kinds of fen. "You may be weird, but you are not alone," they write. Robert Silverberg's short story "Good News from the Vatican" was adapted by Gerry Conway and Ading Gonzales. That story first appeared in the Terry Carr-edited anthology *Universe 1*. The adaptation is excellent, though I'm sure the story itself is even more worth reading. What if a robot were elected pope? There is also some original work in this issue, including pieces by Jan S. Strnad, Rich Corben, and Bruce Jones. The Jones piece in particular would read well as a short story. A two-page lettercol ends the issue, offering three letters and editorial responses.

Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction Vol. 1 (1976) is a "giant size special issue" that explicitly addresses the magazine's demise. In an "editorial last hurrah," Roy Thomas remarked on the short-lived experiment undertaken by the magazine. "[S]cience fiction was not exactly the most salable kind of story matter," he wrote. "[T]he magazine didn't quite succeed in selling the magic number of copies needed to sustain it." The title didn't lose money, but it was canceled all the same. Enough material remained for several more issues, so Marvel published this one-shot. I'm glad it saw the light of day.

Adaptations include Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" and Fredric Brown's "Arena", which might seem familiar. Original work included pieces by artists and writers such as Bruce Jones, Alex Nino, Vicente Alcazar, Redondo, Archie Goodwin, Mat Warrick, and Gonzales. Jones and Nino's "Journey's End," Jones and Alcazar's "The Forest for the Trees," and Goodwin's "Sinner" are especially good.

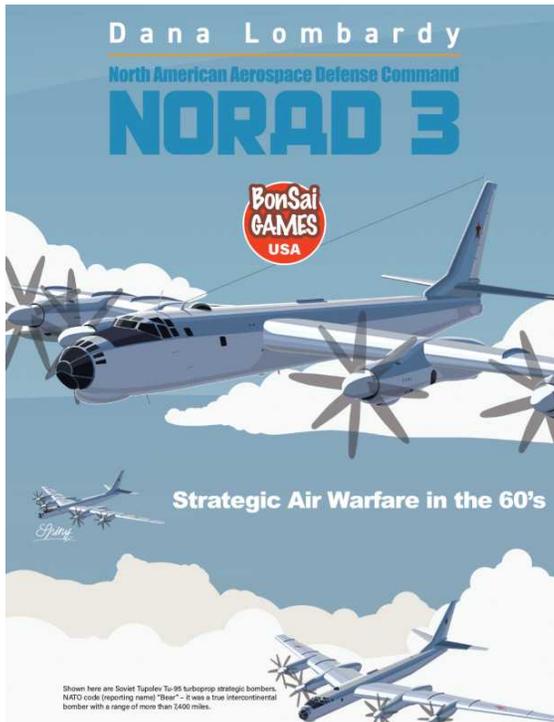
A Brennert interview with Theodore Sturgeon considers the challenges faced by sf authors who want to write mainstream novels, women writers such as Joanna Russ and Ursula K. LeGuin, the differences between biographical and cosmological perspectives, the importance of relationships, the role of education, slow sculpture, and Sturgeon's experience working with Orson Welles.

The Thompsons returned with another "Fantastic Worlds" column. In it, they discussed the growing—and perhaps concerning—popularity of and academic interest in sf at the time, the "best science fiction anthologies ever published," Pyramid Books' Harlan Ellison editions, the sf-related game *Stellar Conquest*, Doubleday's Early series of collections featuring writers such as Jack Williamson and Frank Belknap Long, and Hyperion Press reprint editions.

It's a shame that this magazine didn't last longer, though the issues that were published were excellent. *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction* is similar to other black-and-white comics magazines of the time, but it also sat adjacent to prozines and fanzines in a way the others didn't, nodding in the direction of *Starburst*. By publishing adaptations of short stories, author interviews, and the Thompsons' column, the periodical offered multiple entry points to the genre, as well as paths that readers could follow in fandom. Read the comic, and then seek out an author, pick up an anthology book, read a fanzine, or go to a con. Conan the Barbarian and Doc Savage must have been jealous.

Games

NORAD The Third: New Edition Review by Russ Lockwood



Back in the day, I had copies of Conflict magazine published by Dana Lombardy. One of the games was Norad, a game of defending the US from Soviet nuclear attack. I played it a lot back in 1973 and I may, or may not, still have that in the attic in one of my boxes. I never even knew there was a Norad II.

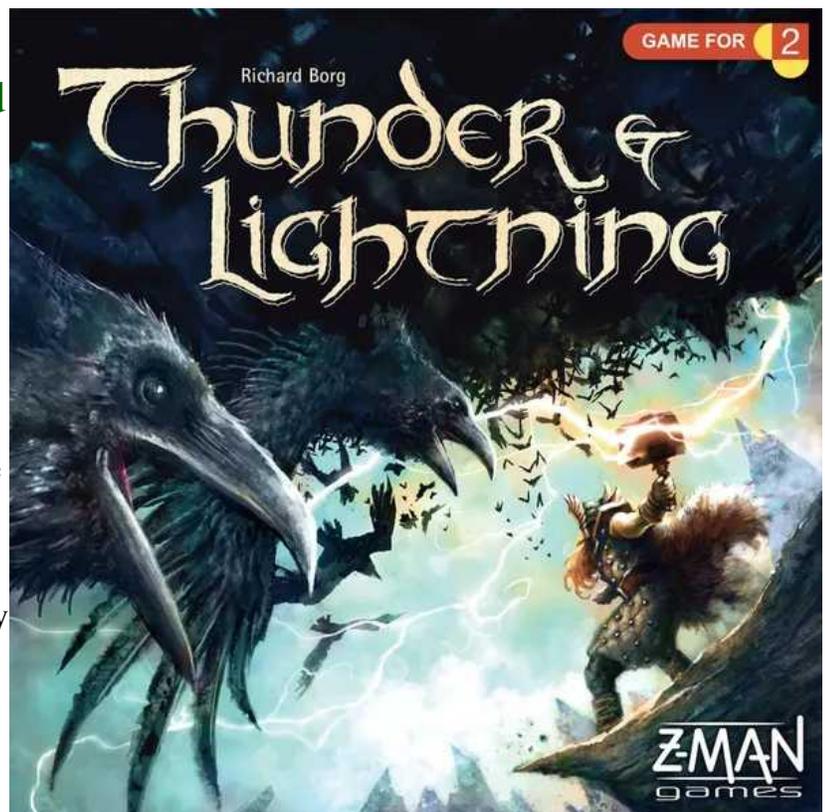
Along comes Dana and Norad Third Edition in Banzai Magazine, a Japanese-language mag. The new version contains new full-color graphics, an expanded game map that shows the USSR as well as USA targets, new playing pieces that represent USA bombers and USSR fighters, an illustrated rulebook in English that includes solitaire and optional rules for NORAD 3, Dana's 1973 designer's notes; and new rules for the Soviet Home Defense forces and NATO expansion.

As a bonus, Dana has written a backstory about creating the 1973 game and describes its 1977-2024 versions and a mini tournament held in the Basque area of Spain in 2020. \$50 includes FREE shipping to a USA address. Contact dana.lombardy@gmail.com for shipping to other countries.

Vikings: Cards After-Play Report by Russ Lockwood

Last time, we played a card game called Zeus vs. Hera. The follow-up game using pretty much the exact same mechanics but with Viking illustrations, is called Thunder and Lightning: Thor vs. Loki. Randomly, I was Loki. Basically, the same three column layout with one activation point (AP) per column with at least one card in it apply. You can use the AP to draw a card, play a card, or attack an enemy card. The problems come when one or two of your columns become empty, dropping your AP by one or two. Higher value cards defeat lower value cards and ties eliminate both attacker and defender cards. Of course, plenty of specialty cards with special instructions are in each deck to circumvent the straight-up attacks.

As we played cards, I discovered at least one difference – this Viking version had three



Shieldwall cards instead of one equivalent card in the Greek game. Shieldwall defeats all attacks except for a Shield Maiden Archer attack. I learned that when Renaud had two Shieldwall cards deployed in two columns. This slowed the game down to a stalemate until one was destroyed.

At this point, I was down to only one column -- to Renaud's chagrin protected by Renaud's other Shieldwall card. That meant I only had 1 AP to his 3 AP. Worse, he deployed Thor, giving a +1 AP to equal 4. Did I mention I had crap cards? I was drawing one card a turn for quite a few turns. Yet, he couldn't get at me, either.

I slowly built back to three columns for 3 AP and managed to ding Thor off the playing field. I then deployed Loki to get a fourth AP, but Renaud quickly dinged him.

We were in a stalemate, but then Renaud played a Raven card, which, among other things we used during the game, may attack a card in my hand. So he did and out of about eight cards, he picked Odin's Crown. Finding that card is an automatic victory.

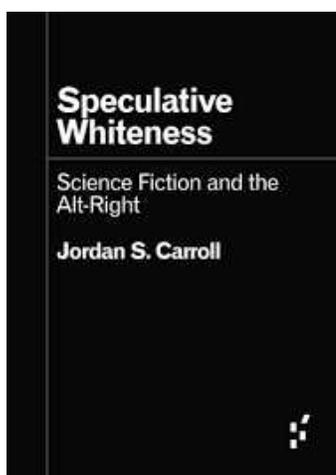
What I didn't know was that Odin's Crown, as well as Odin's Ring (my instant victory objective), could be played in a column. I should've known -- I played a card that allowed me to look at his whole hand and Odin's Nose Ring wasn't in his hand. As he had run through his deck, the only place it could be is in a column. Doh!

Typical. I figure this stuff out a day late and a crown short...

Thanks for the games, Renaud. Always entertaining.

Literary Criticism

Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right Review by Thomas E. Simmons



Speculative Whiteness is a thin nonfiction paperback which won the Hugo for Best Related Work in 2025 (beating, inter alia, Jenny Nicholson's spectacular The Spectacular Failure of the Star Wars Hotel Youtube video). The book was released by the University of Minnesota Press in 2024. Its author, Jordan S. Carroll, PhD, is an up-and-coming independent scholar.

Opposing cultural views within sci-fi are easily discerned. Robert Heinlein produced different novels than Ursula K. LeGuin. Part of their differences were stylistic, some thematic, some character-related. Varied viewpoints are concerned with various premises. Some of their differences are admittedly political. It's reductive to label LeGuin is a feminist and Heinlein a reactionary, but it's not wrong. Starship Troopers (1959) is no The Word for World is Forest (1972), though I like both books quite a lot.

Different voices enrich the genre. It's a big tent with lots of different stuff going on. So the more the merrier. It might be fractious, but rarely fascist. And with enough population sampling, it's nearly guaranteed to be occasionally fascist.

The assertion that a culture war wages within our genre is an idea with which I was unfamiliar prior to reading Dr. Carroll's monograph. (Perhaps it's better characterized as a skirmish.) I had always pictured us as – if not as one big happy family – then as a tentful of diverse readers with a shared love of speculative fiction; one of the last refuges from polarization (online fan forums and the persistent “Sad Puppies” casting chaos in Hugo deliberations aside). But it only takes a few leash-less fascists to crash a canopy.

Setting aside how one might define the “alt right” ideology, I don't need any white supremacy noodles in my sci-fi pho, especially if it's snuck into the soup as a trope to propagandize, which is one of Carroll's claims. He explains that his “goal is to show speculative whiteness is a persistent theme in science fiction culture and the broader far-right movement.” He doesn't entirely succeed in his ambition since his alt-right examples are limited to fringe garbage and pre-war fiction.

The form that speculative whiteness purportedly takes is suggesting within a narrative “that some people are genetically predisposed toward future-orientation and long-term thinking, a notion that is racialized in libertarian and fascist thought.” Carroll continues: “White elites often appear in right-wing narratives as mutants, aliens, and other futuristic beings who are beset by backward masses.”

This is a short study, comprised of only two chapters – the first on mad geniuses and gratification deferral, the second on space colonization. In such a span its author scores some interesting points, among them that fascist sci-fi, when it can be located, is uniformly bad (i.e., aesthetically). If you're not familiar with fascist-laced sci-fi, it's probably because you haven't read any. It's fringe stuff, such as *The Camp of the Saints* (1973), *Hold Back This Day* (1999), and *White Apocalypse* (2010). Carroll also excavates troubling subtexts in more mainstream sci-fi like *Odd John* (1935) and *Slan* (1940).

Carroll presents a sort of “revenge of the nerds” fantasy in which the nerds not only avenged themselves but won the seats of absolute political power. This sort of wish-fulfillment fiction is not uncommon. When it takes the form of nerd revenge or “mutational romance,” it appeals to “geek resentment.” This is utopian writing where the future is guaranteed to a select few. It's mostly unpublishable because it's so trite. But a few slip through the cracks.

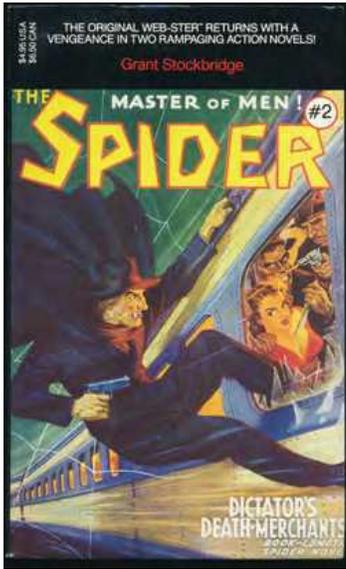
Carroll explains: “As in paleolibertarian and white supremacist thought, many popular science fiction narratives suggest that future-orientation is a fixed genetic trait inherited only by a select few. Who counts as a true fan becomes a racial question, the answers often exclude people of color.” It ought to go without saying that such views are skewed, simple, and off beam.

Magazines

The Spider No. 2 by Grant Stockbridge Review by Heath Row

This was one of the first books I obtained after arriving in Madison, purchased at Frugal Muse Books. One of eight Spider pulp reprint collections published by Carroll & Graf between 1991 and 1993, this volume contains two “rampaging action novels.” The first, “Dictator of the Damned,” was originally published in the January 1937 issue of *The Spider*, written by Emile C. Tepperman as Grant Stockbridge. The story was later reprinted by Steeger Books in 2020. The Dictator of the title is a mysterious, cruel, hooded villain who controls the underworld and law enforcement of New York City. The Spider, the secret identity of a wealthy millionaire, works with his Sikh colleague Ram Singh, his fiancée Nita Van Sloan, and his chauffeur to defeat the Dictator and his henchmen. There's little of the fantastic or science fiction in this story that I can remember—other than

a poisonous gas that could threaten Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Washington, D.C.—but it still offers pulpy fun.



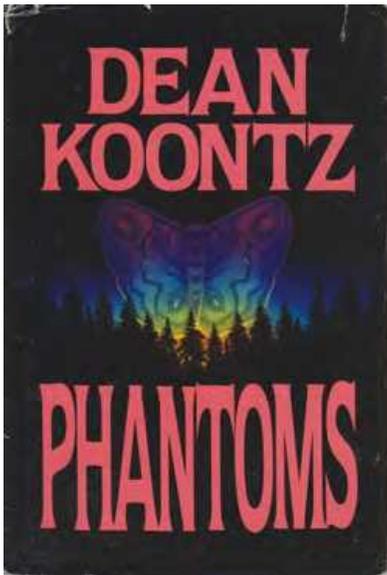
The second reprint, “The Mill-Town Massacres,” is slightly more relevant in its genre adjacency. Originally published in the eponymous pulp’s February 1937 issue, this story was also written by Tepperman as Stockbridge, later reprinted by Steeger. Set in the fictional steel-mill town of Keystone, the novel focuses on a labor dispute in which criminal forces strive to gain control of the production facilities. Workers are overcome by sudden fits of madness, caused by some kind of injection or chemical, becoming zombies that serve the criminal leaders, including a Russian second in command (Number Two) and the mysterious Number One. Don’t get confused, but the Number Three referred to near the end of the book is a production facility.

Of the two pieces, I found this story more enjoyable, and the sections in which the Spider is deducing who the leaders of the uprising are, the scenes involving the tugboat and conveyor belt, and the union leader character, Mike Foley (who might have appeared in a previous story) are notable. Even though the Spider might have been the first pulp hero I read, I’ve long considered him a distant second to the Shadow. I might have to reconsider that estimation!

Movies

Phantoms

Review by Heath Row



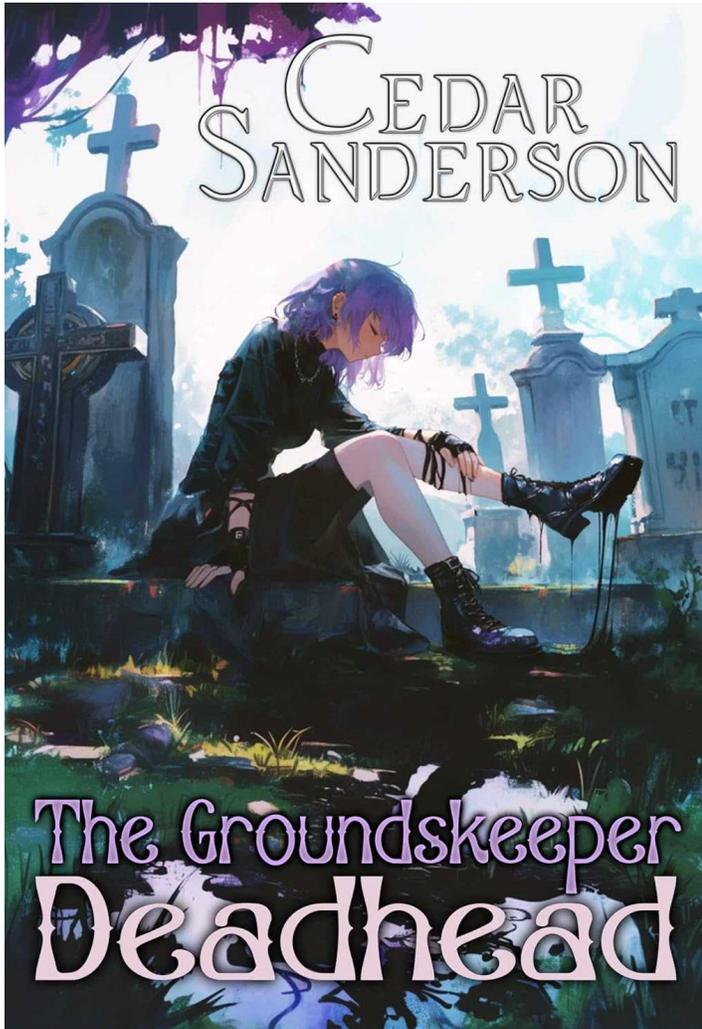
Inspired by reading Dean Koontz’s novel (above), a friend and I watched the 1998 film adaptation midweek. Given the streaming services we both have access to, we watched the movie on YouTube, where someone has created a playlist of 11 nine-minute segments of the movie. We were able to watch the movie in its entirety, but I wouldn’t recommend that method. The pixelation was pretty severe, which made some of the darker and more CGI-oriented scenes challenging. Otherwise, the segments flowed relatively seamlessly, with brief periods of blackness between segments.

The movie’s cast is pretty impressive in terms of named actors—Ben Affleck (the sheriff), Peter O’Toole (the academic), Liev Schreiber (the creepy cop), and Rose McGowan (the doctor’s sister)—but the acting is pretty poor. The film plays up the mysterious mass disappearance and ancient biological horror aspects of the story while it downplays the Lovecraftian elements—even if the ancient enemy remains “chaos in the flesh.”

While the movie hits most of the narrative beats of the novel—pretty much everything is there except for the subplot featuring Fletcher Kale and the leader of a motorcycle gang—it treats everything at a shallow, surface level and develops pretty rapidly. A tense, suspenseful piece of fiction with a good amount of uncertainty becomes a quickly unfolding movie in which the discoveries occur relatively easily. For example, in the film, the petroleum-degrading bacteria just happens to be on the shelves of a mobile laboratory. Well, that’s that!

In the end, it’s not an awful adaptation, but it’s not a very good movie. You’d be better off just reading the book.

Food of Famous Authors

Hummingbird Muffins
Cooking by Cedar Sanderson

I had some bananas which needed to be used up, badly. I also had some fresh cut-up pineapple languishing in the refrigerator. I got ideas. This recipe was a riff off the banana bread in Alton Brown's I'm Just Here for More Food, which is a great jumping-off point if you are wanting to gain confidence in your baking skills. I departed wildly and shortly from it, though, as you'll see. I was inspired by the amazing slab of Hummingbird Cake which I once shared with my husband at the City Cafe in Chattanooga, TN. I'm not sure it's still there, or still has the enormous cake display, but if it is and it does, and you're in Chattanooga, you simply must detour and visit. It is worth your time, I assure you.

These come together fast and are a great prep-ahead snack or breakfast treat.

Hummingbird Muffins

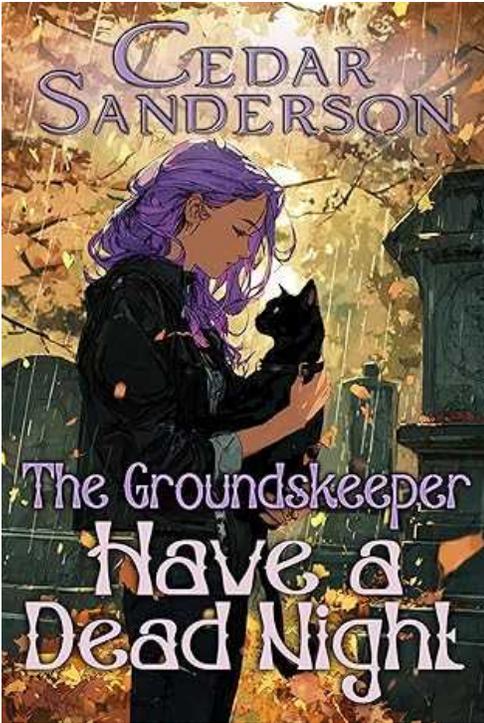
4 very ripe bananas*
 1 c ripe pineapple cut in small pieces
 1 c sugar
 2/3 c lard, melted then cooled to room temperature (it will not solidify)
 2 eggs, if pullet eggs, 3
 1 tsp vanilla extract
 1 1/2 tsp ground ginger
 1 c pecans, whole or chopped
 6 oz chocolate chips

Preheat the oven to 350F. Prepare two muffin pans with cupcake liners, or grease the tins very well. This will make about 24 regular size muffins.

Mix together the bananas and sugar until almost liquid (a stand mixer on low with a beater blade works a treat), then add in the lard, the eggs, and the pineapple. Finally add in the nuts and chocolate. Stop the mixer and set aside.

Sift together:

2 c all-purpose flour
 1/3 c coconut flour
 1 1/2 tsp baking soda
 1 tsp salt



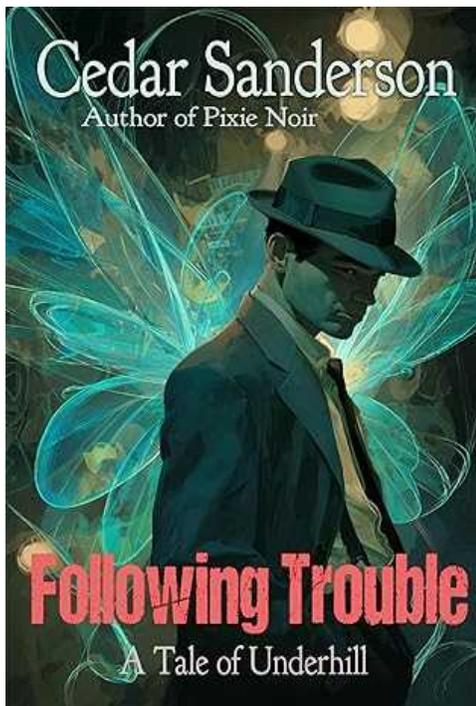
Mix this into the wet part of the batter just until it's combined, and no more. A few lumps won't hurt anything, they will bake in. Muffins are delicate!

An ice cream scoop works well for transferring batter with minimal mess.

Scoop into your muffin liners, and bake for 28-35 minutes, until a tester comes cleanly out of the center of one of the tallest muffins. These are not the fluffiest of muffins, they are dense and packed full of goodness, perfect for school morning breakfasts with children, or for a filling snack for the writer who is up to her elbows in plot and can't be bothered with cooking.

Like any muffin, cookie, or cake, these freeze very well. Simply wait until they are completely cooled, pop them in a Ziploc in the quantity you desire - or fill up a big bag and pull one or two out at a time - thaw, and consume. I like to thaw them in the toaster oven, bisected, and slather a little butter on each flat half before consumption. Mmmm... delicious Maillard reaction.

I've been thinking about the food blogging. I once did this carefully, with setting up photos and lighting and making the whole process look beautiful. Now, though, I find myself with little time and less patience. So you are getting to really see what I'm doing, and the state of the kitchen I'm doing it in. Sorry if that's too messy, but it's where I'm at in life. I seem to have lost my giveadamn. I'm likely to write up the musing in the next week or so.



*Did you know you can freeze bananas until such time as you need them? They will turn black on the outside, but you can squish them out of their peel like toothpaste and they are still fantastic in baked goods or smoothies.





The Cylon Ambush
by Jose Sanchez