

The R3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono  
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor  
January, 2026

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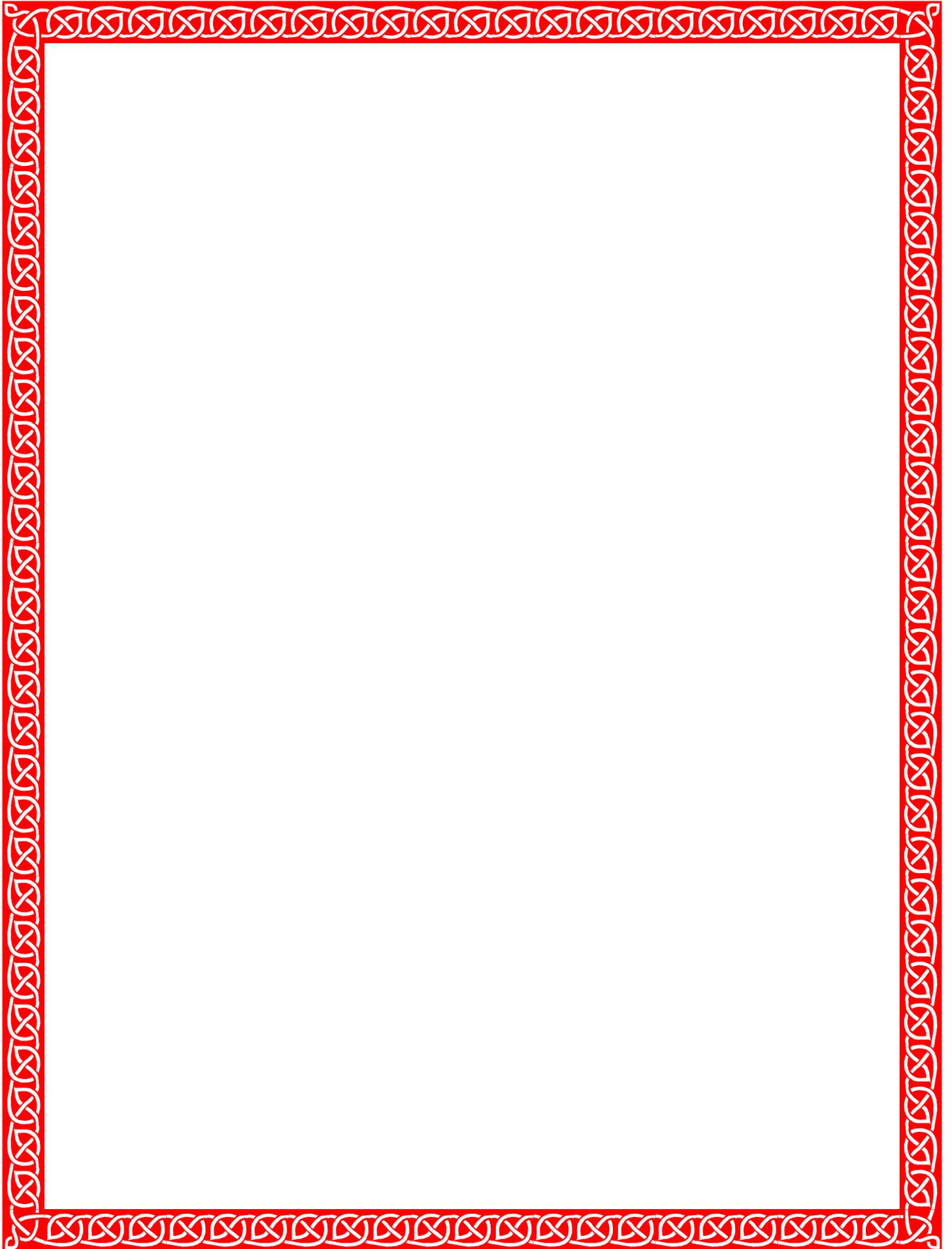
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# Editorial

For better or worse, we have advanced to bimonthly publication, to alternate with Eldritch Science. This issue of the Review is only two and a half weeks late. The delay this time was that our web site was hacked, the contents having been destroyed.

The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 and is distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. In most issues superb proofreading support is provided by Jean Lamb. Many of our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Some of them link from their reviews on the internet to Amazon. If you buy at Amazon.com via our reviewers' web pages, they get a modest financial reward.

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# Letters

George,

I was reading through the recent FanActivity Gazette and realized that Raconteur Press is missing out on listing our publications with you. Which made me think that we're missing out on sending eARCs to your reviewers... which made me wonder what else we might be missing out on.

So, some quick questions - for the N3F:

How can we submit review requests (or the right person to submit them to)?

How can we submit out list of open calls (for writers) or upcoming publications (for readers)?

What can we do for YOU?

On that last... we have close to 200 authors that are members of our Discord server. If you are looking for articles, stories, reviewers, etc. I would be more than happy to post what you're looking for, and see if there is anyone who might be interested in working with you or your various sub-editors.

--

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## Literary Analysis

### The Death of Arwen by Genny Harrison

In the winter after her husband's death, Arwen Undómiel returned to Lothlórien and lay down alone among the barren mallorn trees to die. She was 2,901 years old. The forest where she had once walked with her grandmother Galadriel stood empty, its Elven inhabitants departed across the sea, its golden light extinguished. This ending, stark and solitary, is rarely discussed in popular retellings of Tolkien's work, yet it contains within it something profound about what it means to choose mortality after millennia of immortal existence, and what we lose when we reduce complex existential decisions to romantic gestures.

Arwen's story begins not with meeting Aragorn but with inheritance. Born in the year 241 of the Third Age in Rivendell, she carried in her blood the weight of impossible lineages. Through her father Elrond, she descended from all three kindreds of Elves, from the Maia Melian, and from both branches of the Half-elven line. Her great-great-grandmother was Lúthien Tinúviel, who had chosen mortality for love of the mortal Beren in the First Age. This was not genealogical trivia but genetic destiny, a pattern written in her very nature that would repeat across thousands of years.

The term Half-elven in Tolkien's mythology carries specific metaphysical weight. It does not mean half Elf by blood but rather describes those rare individuals granted the choice between immortal and mortal fate. Elrond had chosen the Elvish path. His twin brother Elros had chosen mortality and founded the royal line of Númenor. That choice, offered once per generation to their descendants, now fell to Elrond's children. It was not a choice between comfort and hardship but between fundamentally different modes of existence, different relationships to time, different endings or lack thereof.

For the first 2,268 years of her life, Arwen lived as Elves live, in the deep time of immortal consciousness where decades pass like seasons and centuries accumulate like snowfall. She learned lore that predated human civilization. She spoke languages older than the sun and moon. She walked in gardens tended for thousands of years by hands that remembered the light of Valinor before it was destroyed. This was not merely long life but a different quality of being, one where memory stretched back through ages and forward toward an ending so distant it ceased to have meaning.

Then in the year 2509, her mother Celebrían was captured by Orcs in the Redhorn Pass. Though rescued by her sons, the torment and poisoned wound she received proved beyond even Elrond's considerable healing powers to fully mend. The following year, Celebrían sailed West to the Undying Lands, leaving her daughter behind. This departure marked Arwen with a grief peculiar to immortals. Her mother was not dead but gone, alive in bliss across an ocean mortals could not cross and Elves could not return from. For the next thousand years, Arwen carried this specific absence, her mother existing but unreachable, a kind of loss that stretches across centuries without the closure mortality provides.

She spent much of this time in Lothlórien with Galadriel, dwelling in the realm her grandmother sustained through the power of Nenya, one of the Three Rings. There, under the golden mallorn trees where time moved strangely, Arwen learned what Galadriel already knew with terrible clarity. The age of Elves in Middle-earth was ending. The great kingdoms were fading. The Eldar were departing. To remain was to watch everything built over millennia crumble, everyone loved either sail away or die, until you stood alone in a world that remembered your people only as myth.

This fading was not metaphorical. Elves who remained in Middle-earth as ages turned grew weary, their spirits consuming their bodies until they became shadows, trapped between physical form and the pure spirit that was their nature. The rings of power could delay this, preserving pockets like Rivendell and Lothlórien outside time's full weight, but even this was temporary. When the One Ring was destroyed, these preservations would collapse, and the Elves would face the choice: sail West to Valinor or fade into nothingness in Middle-earth.

What gets simplified as romantic choice in most retellings was actually metaphysical transformation. In choosing mortality, Arwen rejected not just immortal life but her entire nature as an Elf. She accepted that she would age, weaken, and die. She accepted that she would never see her mother again, for mortals could not sail to Valinor and the dead passed beyond the circles of the world to a fate unknown even to the Valar. She accepted abandoning her father, who would sail West and exist eternally while she vanished into death. After living 2,778 years as something greater than human, she chose to become fully mortal in a world she had helped shape across millennia.

Her marriage to Aragorn in 3019 of the Third Age mattered not as love story but as the irrevocable binding of this choice. In wedding a mortal king, she accepted the Gift of Men, the ability to die and pass beyond the world rather than remain bound to it until its ending. She bore children, ruled as queen, and had what must have felt like a single breath of happiness compared to the ages she had already lived.

Aragorn died in the year 120 of the Fourth Age at 210 years old, exercising the ancient Númenórean right to surrender life willingly rather than wait for decay. What followed reveals the full cost of Arwen's choice. She left Minas Tirith and returned to Lothlórien, but the golden wood stood empty. Galadriel had departed. The Elves had gone. The light had gone out. There, on Cerin Amroth where she had once pledged herself, Arwen lay down in winter and died alone.

This ending deserves more attention than it receives. She did not die peacefully surrounded by loved ones. She died in a dead forest, in winter, having outlived her husband and separated herself from her children. She died mortal in places built for immortals, human in a world that no longer contained her people, alone in ways perhaps only someone who had lived three thousand years could understand.

Her story is not about love conquering death but about accepting the unbearable weight of existential choice and living with consequences that stretch across ages. In choosing mortality, Arwen chose not diminishment but a different kind of courage: the courage to end, to release, to pass into uncertainty rather than fade slowly across centuries into shadow and regret.

The Gift of Men was precisely that, a gift, not because death is pleasant but because it offers what immortality cannot. An ending. A rest. A laying down of burdens too heavy for eternity to bear.

In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien describes the moment when mortality enters the world not as punishment but as “the Gift of Ilúvatar to Men.” This is where most readers stumble. Death, a gift? The idea seems perverse, a piece of theological sleight of hand meant to reconcile suffering with a benevolent creator. But Tolkien, who lost most of his school friends in the trenches of World War I and spent decades constructing a mythology to process that loss, meant something far stranger and more unsettling than divine euphemism.

The Gift is not death itself but freedom from the Music.

When Eru Ilúvatar, the Creator, first revealed the fate of Men to the Valar, the angelic powers who shaped the world, they were troubled. The Elves would be bound to Arda, the physical world, for as long as it endured. They were woven into the fabric of creation, immortal within its confines, their fates prescribed in the Great Music sung before time began. But Men would be different. “It is one with this gift of freedom,” Tolkien writes in *The Silmarillion*, “that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not.”

This is not a consolation prize. This is the more dangerous gift, the one that makes the Valar uncomfortable. Men alone can act outside the predetermined harmonies of creation. They alone are not bound by fate. And because they die, because their time is brief and unrepeatable, their choices carry a weight that immortal choices cannot match.

The Númenóreans were the greatest of Men, the survivors of those who fought alongside the Elves against Melkor in the First Age. They were given an island kingdom, Númenor, west of Middle-earth and within sight of the Undying Lands where the Valar dwelt. They were given lifespans three times that of ordinary Men, reaching three hundred years or more. They were given wisdom, craft, and power. And for two thousand years, they used these gifts well, becoming master mariners, healers, and scholars. But the sight of Elven ships sailing west to a shore they could never reach began to corrode their gratitude.

“Why should we not go thither?” they began to ask. In *Akallabêth*, the account of Númenor's fall in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien traces how this question metastasized into grievance. The Númenóreans looked at the Elves and saw beings who would never lose their loved ones, never watch their children

age and die, never face the terror of the unknown beyond the circles of the world. They forgot what the Elves knew: that immortality is its own prison, that to watch ages pass while you remain is to become a ghost in your own life, perpetually mourning an age that will never return.

The Elves understood this intimately. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Legolas speaks of how his people “dwindle” even in their immortality, fading as the world changes around them. In *The Two Towers*, Treebeard the Ent mourns that “we are tree-herds, we old Ents. Few enough of us are left now. Sheep get like shepherds, and shepherds like sheep... But it goes on and on.” This is the curse of immortality: not death, but endless diminishment, watching everything you built become ruins, everyone you loved sail away or fade, until you are alone with memories in a world that has forgotten you.

The Númenóreans began to treat death not as liberation but as deprivation, an injustice inflicted by stingy gods. And once that frame took hold, every other good they possessed became inadequate. Their long lives felt short compared to Elven eternity. Their island kingdom felt small compared to the vastness they were forbidden to reach. The Gift became the Doom, and the Doom demanded correction.

Tolkien writes that they “began to ponder in their hearts how they might escape the ending of their days.” They turned to medicine not to heal but to extend. They built tombs more magnificent than their houses, elaborate monuments to the dead that consumed more resources than the living. They stopped having children, hoarding their own lives rather than passing them forward. “They began to hunger for endless life unchanging,” Tolkien notes in *The Silmarillion*, and in that hunger, they inverted the logic of the Gift entirely.

This is where Sauron found his opening. When he was brought to Númenor as a prisoner after his defeat by the Last Alliance, he did not corrupt the Númenóreans with lies. He corrupted them with a theology that validated their resentment. In *The Silmarillion*, Sauron tells them that the Valar “take the whole world for their own, and beyond the mountains of the North there is endless riches. Why have the Lords of the West set bounds to your adventure? Why should you not be masters of all that is?” He reframed the Gift as theft, mortality as artificial scarcity imposed by jealous powers. And the Númenóreans, already primed to see themselves as victims, believed him.

The final madness came when King Ar-Pharazôn, greatest and most powerful of Númenor’s rulers, assembled an armada so vast that “the light of the sun was darkened at his coming” to invade the Undying Lands and seize immortality by force. Tolkien writes in *Akallabêth* that the king “deemed that in such strength the Valar would not dare to oppose him.” This is the pathology of power meeting the pathology of grievance: the conviction that sufficient force can overturn the structure of reality itself, that death is merely a policy that can be changed through political will.

Ilúvatar’s response was not battle but removal. The Undying Lands were taken out of the physical world entirely, placed beyond the circles of time. Númenor itself was drowned, swallowed by the sea in a cataclysm that killed everyone except a faithful remnant who had refused the madness. Tolkien, in a 1964 letter, called this “the Atlantis theme” and noted it haunted his dreams throughout his life: the image of “a great ineluctable wave coming in out of the West, mounting higher and higher, towering over green lands,” unstoppable, final.

But here is what makes the tragedy complete: the Númenóreans were not wrong that death is terrible. Grief is real. Loss is agony. Watching someone you love die while you remain is one of the cruelest experiences consciousness permits. The Elves know this intimately. When Arwen chooses mortality to marry Aragorn in *The Return of the King*, Elrond, her father, tells Aragorn: “I shall not again renew it, I shall not now forsake the twilight of my people.” He means that even after he sails to the Undying Lands, he will spend forever knowing his daughter is gone beyond his reach, aging and dying in a

world he has left behind.

The Númenóreans' error was not in finding death painful. It was in believing that pain indicated injustice, that suffering was evidence of deprivation rather than the cost of genuine choice. They wanted the freedom that mortality granted without the loss that made that freedom meaningful. They wanted to act outside fate while living forever within the world. They wanted the Gift without the gifting, the departure without the leaving.

Tolkien, writing in the aftermath of two world wars and the deaths of nearly everyone he loved, understood something contemporary culture increasingly denies: that mortality is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be accepted, and that the alternative to acceptance is not transcendence but corruption. In a 1956 letter, he wrote: "The view that death (that mere escape from Time) is a gift seems to me... one most rarely held." He knew this was a hard teaching, especially for a generation that had watched industrial slaughter on an unprecedented scale.

The Númenóreans' technological and medical advances were not evil in themselves. What destroyed them was the refusal to let those advances serve life rather than forestall death, to use them for flourishing in the time given rather than for the endless prolongation of time itself. They built an entire civilization around the denial of limitation, and when limitation could no longer be denied, they tried to conquer it by force.

We live now in a culture that treats aging as a disease, death as a systems failure, grief as a mental health crisis requiring pharmaceutical intervention. Silicon Valley pours billions into life extension research, cryogenic preservation, consciousness uploading. We speak casually of "solving death" as if mortality were a software bug rather than a fundamental feature of human existence. We have rebuilt Númenor in server farms and longevity clinics, convinced that the Valar were lying, that death is not a gift but an engineering challenge we are finally sophisticated enough to overcome.

But the Gift was never about living forever. It was about living in a way that mattered because it would end, making choices that carried irrevocable weight, risking genuine loss because the alternative was the slow fade of immortal irrelevance.

The question Tolkien poses through the drowning of Númenor is not whether we can escape death, but whether we can bear to live as mortals without trying to, and what we are willing to destroy, in ourselves and in the world, in service of that refusal.

## Grey and White Wizards in Tolkien's Work by Genny Harrison

The difference between a grey wizard and a white wizard in Tolkien's work is structural, not moral. And that is precisely what makes it so devastating to understand.

Let me be clear about the hierarchy Tolkien created. The white wizard is the chief of the Istari, the head of the order sent to Middle-earth to oppose Sauron. This is an institutional position with formal authority. The grey wizard ranks below, a counselor without command, an advisor with power but no organizational mandate to enforce his vision. White gives orders. Grey makes suggestions. White speaks for the council. Grey wanders and observes and hopes someone listens.

Saruman the White did not fail because he was unusually wicked. He failed because the office itself is a

Great War was managed by men in positions of institutional authority who possessed every credential their society could confer. They had studied at the right schools, risen through the proper hierarchies, demonstrated their superiority at every level. When their strategies produced unprecedented carnage, they did not question the strategies. They questioned the execution. More artillery. Better coordination. Stronger discipline. The model was sound; reality simply needed to comply more rigorously.

The structure repeats across history with numbing regularity. Institutional hierarchies elevate people who demonstrate mastery of existing frameworks. These people gain authority. The authority insulates them from the friction that might reveal the frameworks' limitations. They become, in effect, white wizards, speaking with the confidence of those whose every prior success has confirmed their methods. When catastrophe comes, it comes wearing the white robes of legitimate expertise.

The grey wizard's epistemology offers no protection against this. Gandalf could not prevent Saruman's fall by being more humble himself. The grey robes are not a solution; they are a diagnosis of what institutional power destroys. You cannot maintain the grey wizard's relationship to uncertainty while holding the white wizard's position. The office corrupts the thinking. The robes change how you see.

When Gandalf returns as Gandalf the White, having passed through death itself, he gains what he needs to challenge Saruman's authority. He can finally command rather than suggest, direct rather than persuade, override rather than negotiate. The text marks this transformation carefully. He is more effective in some ways, more dangerous in others. He rallies Rohan, coordinates the defense of Gondor, speaks with the authority needed to unite the fractured kingdoms of men. He also becomes harsher, less patient, quicker to anger when his counsel faces resistance.

Tolkien does not present this as straightforward improvement. The quest succeeds, but the cost accumulates in margins the victory parades ignore. Saruman ends as a petty tyrant, murdered by the servant he abused once his power finally failed him completely. Denethor, another figure of institutional authority who could not tolerate the gap between his analysis and reality's refusal to comply, lights himself on fire rather than admit his vision was incomplete. Even Frodo, who carried the burden to its end, cannot remain in the world he saved.

The white wizards destroy themselves. The grey wizard saves Middle-earth but cannot save what made him grey. This is not a satisfying moral. It does not offer clean lessons about how to organize power more wisely. It simply describes a pattern Tolkien saw operating across centuries of European history: institutional authority and epistemological humility cannot coexist indefinitely in the same person.

We have built entire civilizations on the assumption that they can. We create hierarchies designed to identify and elevate the most knowledgeable, then express shock when their elevation transforms knowledge into arrogance. We certify expertise through institutions, then wonder why institutional experts become incapable of recognizing the limits of their frameworks. We give people white robes and expect them to maintain the grey wizard's doubt.

It has never worked. Tolkien knew it would not work. He showed us Saruman as warning, not exception. The white wizard always falls. The institutional position always corrupts the thinking it was meant to serve. The robes always matter more than the person wearing them.

There are no structural solutions to this. You cannot design a hierarchy that rewards doubt or an institution that maintains permanent humility. The best you can do is remember that the white wizard will always sound more convincing than the grey, will always have better credentials and more impressive analysis, will always possess the authority to override alternative perspectives. And that none of this

trap. When you hold the highest institutional position, when your authority is validated by structures older and more powerful than any individual, when your decisions carry the weight of organizational legitimacy, something happens to your relationship with reality. You begin to believe that your access to information, your breadth of study, your depth of analysis makes your judgment not just informed but correct. Disagreement becomes insubordination. Doubt becomes disloyalty. Alternative perspectives become threats to be managed rather than insights to be weighed.

The text is explicit about this. Saruman studies the enemy so thoroughly he begins to adopt the enemy's logic. He concludes that power must be met with power, that the Ring should be found and wielded by someone wise enough to use it properly, that the old strategies of patience and alliance-building cannot match the efficiency of direct control. These are not crazy conclusions. They follow reasonably from his analysis. They are the kind of conclusions someone reaches when they have spent decades in rooms where their wisdom is never successfully challenged, where every major decision ultimately defers to their judgment, where the white robes announce to everyone present that this voice matters most. The white wizard is always the smartest person in the room.

That is the job description. That is also the pathology.

Gandalf the Grey operated under different constraints. Without institutional supremacy, he had to live in the world as it actually was rather than as he wished it to be. When he suspected Bilbo's ring might be dangerous, he could not simply confiscate it. He had no authority. He had to investigate for decades, gather evidence, consult sources, build a case strong enough to persuade independent powers who owed him nothing. When he warned about the growing shadow in Dol Guldur, he could not unilaterally declare war.

He had to argue, cajole, compromise, accept half-measures from allies who thought him paranoid.

This was humiliating work. It meant watching people make mistakes he could foresee. It meant deferring to leaders he knew were wrong. It meant accepting help from hobbits when he would have preferred professional soldiers, taking advice from kings when he had already spent centuries studying these problems. The grey robes meant perpetual vulnerability to being dismissed, ignored, overruled by people with less knowledge but more formal power.

But that vulnerability was the only thing that kept him honest.

Here is what Tolkien understood, writing in England after two world wars had demonstrated what happens when certainty meets institutional authority: the grey wizard stays sane precisely because he can be wrong and the world will punish him for it immediately. His plans fail and he has to notice. His counsel gets rejected and he has to wonder if maybe, possibly, he missed something. He cannot retreat into the cognitive comfort of blaming others for failing to execute his vision properly. The grey robes mean his failures are his own.

The white wizard gets insulated from this corrective friction. When Saruman's strategies stop working, he concludes that others are not implementing them with sufficient rigor. When his predictions fail to materialize, he decides the timeline needs adjustment, not his model. When trusted allies begin questioning his judgment, he interprets this as their corruption or weakness, not his error. The white robes create an envelope of unfalsifiability around his thinking. He can be wrong for years, decades, and never quite have to confront it.

Tolkien was careful about these details because he had watched this pattern destroy his generation. The

prevents the fall. The white robes predict the trajectory as surely as they mark the rank.

Tolkien wrote fantasy that reads like history because he understood that the pattern was old when Rome fell and would remain when our own certainties collapse. The white wizard always wins the argument. The grey wizard wanders in from the margins, too late to prevent disaster, in time only to help rebuild from the ruins.

We keep choosing the white wizards anyway. The robes are too impressive to resist. The certainty too comforting to refuse. The authority too legitimate to question until the moment it fails catastrophically enough that the robes themselves catch fire.

And then we promote the next one, absolutely certain that this time will be different.

## Novels

1-800-Starship by J. N. Chaney

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews. This is a book that I received from the author as pre-launch swag. He reached out because I co-host The Blasters & Blades Podcast and have previously loved his other books. I ended up reading this novel anyway and here we are! This book was written by J. N. Chaney as a galactic empire story with a sweeping space opera storyline and shades of military science fiction I love. Throw in the nostalgia vibes and I was sold!

Before we go any further, let me show my bias. I loved J. N. Chaney's Renegade Star Series and his Last Hunter Series that he co-wrote with Terry Mixon. I was already a fan of his work when I started this novel. I went in expecting to like this new book. It's written like many of Chaney's solo books, in the 1st person POV with a somewhat snarky character. 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 new series. There is currently one book released with the second novel out for pre-order. After reading this book, I'm already invested and hoping for more! I've heard rumors that Chaney might continue telling epic adventures without co-authors, which I'm here for! I have high hopes, since I want more from this awesome author. I've met Chaney in person at one of the 20 Books to 50K author conventions. I was pleasantly surprised to find that 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, J.N. Chaney. He's a former US Air Force where he worked as a Client Systems Specialist. I had to look that one up, I don't speak fluent Zoomie. That means that Chaney was part of the Cyberspace Support career field. So, he made sure that the computers worked, and the comms and terrorists didn't take control of the Stargate Program. Wait, am I allowed to admit that one? Meh, they'll censor us if I spoke out of turn!

During his one tour in the Air Force, he was one of the airmen who kept that branch of the military working. He worked as one of the much-vaunted E-4 Mafia capos, though the redneck cousins of the more famous Army branch of that fine group of people. After he left the Air Force, he went to college and earned a degree in creative writing. Then he forgot all of that literary nonsense and started writing the kind of stuff people want to read. And boy howdy, do I want to read what he writes!

Now that I've triggered half of the academic 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 Chaney's knowledge of air power that he learned from working with the USAF showed with how believable the space fighter pilot program in this world was. I totally bought into the idea that these Nova Slingers could be real. I actually thought that Chaney had consulted subject matter experts on the topic. Like, I assumed he checked in on the physics and stuff. Big brain ideas that make my head hurt! He faked it better than I've seen in quite a while.

The basic premise of this series centers around the main character's quest to survive in this brave new world that he's been thrust into. He accidentally enlisted into the Nova Slinger Corps and is now a member of the war effort of the Kin Federation of Worlds against the Ascendancy. In the pursuit of that drive to survive, we get to see Mark learn to pilot his Nova Slinger space fighter pilot. This book fits in the space fleet side of military science fiction, but it should be its own thing, under space fighter pilots. This story was all small craft squadrons against the galaxy, one ship at a time. Sometimes that meant they fought capital ships, other times it was two fighters dog fighting.

This book technically starts this year (2025), but he then leaves Earth so it the culture is a snapshot in time as far as how it impacts the story. This means that this novel will have more staying power, with regards to longevity. Not all stories set in the modern-day age well. This book will, I guarantee it! Now let's talk about this book!

## The Story

It all started with a phone call. He'd seen an ad that said, "Call now, become a Nova Slinger today!" Then Mark Allen made a spur of the moment decision to call the number on the back of the old 1980s comic book that he'd found in his uncle's retro 80s arcade and greasy spoon diner. It should've been a lark, except the number worked and someone answered.

From then on, Mark's life changed. For the better? That remains to be seen, but his days of serving hash and burnt coffee are over. His break time spent playing Galaga and Pac-Man arcade games are at an end as well. Why? Because an old man shows up at his doorstep wearing strange clothes and driving a DeLorean that would make Marty McFly proud. This enigma of a man calls himself "The Recruiter," because why not be vague and mysterious? When the man first arrives, Mark thinks that he's won a prize from some long-forgotten contest. Reality proves to be far stranger, and his future is irrevocably changed.

Why does it change? Well, ya see, the old man came to take Mark to a faraway space station. In a scene straight out of *The Last Starfighter*, our illustrious hero arrives to begin training for an impossible fight against an enemy that threatens everything and everyone that he cares about. To his horror and dismay, he learns that the comic book was real... and so was the war. Don't worry, this isn't a spoiler, the author gives this away on the book jacket! I know, I checked.

His arrival on this space station pushes the main character into a galaxy teeming with life and full of countless species and untold alien cultures. Surprisingly, each of them has somehow heard of Earth pop culture from the 1980s. They've watched *Pretty in Pink*, devoured *The Goonies*, and marveled at what

Star Wars got wrong about space combat. When and how did Earth's culture find its way to the rest of the galaxy? And why did it all stop in the late 1980s? Those are questions Mark Allen certainly wants answers too!

Now that we've talked about the book's basic concept, let us dive into the writing! Gotta give it to Chaney; his novel was chock-full of Grade-A visualizations. You could definitely imagine yourself on this far-flung space station learning to pilot a Nova Slinger. He described things across the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells and even how bleak the world felt. Well, how bleak it would be if the Ascendancy won. While I could vaguely visualize all of the characters, I'd love it if Chaney described the characters' physical traits in more detail. He kept it light on the details as usual, with just enough specifics to allow you to visualize it for yourself. However, he gave you amazing artwork showing them through the cover art, his website and the gift box that he sent me!

Now onto the prose! In this novel we see proof that Chaney understands how flight operations work. He created an extremely believable fighter squadron with the Nova Slinger Corps. From the way he described the cockpit, to the descriptions of how the flying worked, it felt real and believable. I never felt like this was a janky SciFi novel with generic terms for the engines. His use of nicknames for the parts of the fighter made things feel even more real and lived in. The cassette for the cockpit, named for the cassette tape-like shape, was a genius reference to the 80s. And the Rubix cube as the small box for the engine that allowed them to warp space time so they could engine in space flight was icing on the cake. I liked the nickname of fruit punch for the red liquid that filled the cockpit to shelter the pilot, because I know military members do create such shorthand terms for items.

I know that Chaney has an expansive vocabulary, he did get a master's degree from Handwavium University. He proved it by the way he used language in this novel. Mostly the book was written in workman-like prose, but there were a few terms slipped in where his education shown through. Not in a snooty way, but there were words I had to look up and some I hadn't heard since college. And when he did, it never felt gratuitous or like he was navel gazing. When paired with the loving homage to *The Last Starfighter*, the story became a symphony of awesomeness. I mean it, I had fun reading the words and I normally prefer audiobooks!

The author also did a good job with the pacing of this book. He balanced the explanation of this distant SciFi world with the need to move a story along. This book didn't have a single place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, though I filled in a lot of the details myself. Together, his words and my imagination added to the world. It felt tangible and I enjoyed it. The author's description of his universe was evocative, and enough to please your average readers. I always prefer more description over less, but Chaney did enough to get the job done.

In summary, I didn't find any issues with the descriptions and was impressed by the literary skills of Chaney. 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 is mated with *The Last Starfighter*, then this is the book for you!

## The Characters

This novel was set in the first person and told the story from the point of view of our hero, Mark Allen. Well, except for the prologue scene, Mark would allow that theft of his screen time. The story told in *1-800-Starship* serves as his coming-of-age adventure. It is here where we see the boy become a man, and a capable leader to boot. He was an adult already, sure; he had his own job and was manning the fort, but he hadn't found his stride. Not to the extent that the military, and more specifically combat, forces upon you. As I read this book, I got to see that and experience that with Mark.

The main character was written in the same way as the main character from *The Last Starfighter* was. Both Mark Allen and Alex Rogan wanted to escape from their small-town roots. They didn't really know how and part of the joy as the reader was watching them figure it out. Both of those young men were lost, whether they knew it or not. Because of that, they threw themselves into arcade games to pass the time. At its core, this was their ostrich moment, where they hid their heads in the sand. Alas, that only lasts for so long before the fates come a' knockin.

But let's stay focused on our friend Mark Allen. He was well written, and I really loved spending time with him. He'd totally fit in with the kind of people who would join the military, I know because I served with that archetype. Given his time in uniform, we know that Chaney did too. I never knew many pilots, but Mark didn't clock as cocky Top Gun jet jockey. Instead, he was written as a fish out of water, trying not to drown and learning to swim. This made him more accessible and relatable to the average reader. He could've been any of us and that was part of the fun. I really loved his "every man" status, I love that in main characters, it is more fun than super-duper special soldiers who can never lose.

Overall, this was the kind of bro you'd have a beer with and kick back to talk smack as you spent hours playing Mario Kart. Or throwing darts. Maybe, need I say it, busting out some quarters for the arcades? I loved how expertly he was written and how well rounded he was. I think you'll enjoy spending time with him too!

### The World

1-800-Starship is the first book in the series of the same name, and I absolutely loved it. The world was flushed out, and everything was explained in a way that made sense. The universe was consistent, with just enough of the mundane facets of life thrown in that it all felt grounded in this reality. It helps that this is basically Earth culture as we know it from the 1980s and again in 2025. Chaney stuck to the pop culture references, since the story takes place away from Terra Firma.

Everything in this world made sense and sucked you into the story. Some of the details seemed inconsequential, but those hooks just make me think that the larger mystery would continue to grow and expand. For example, the prologue seems random but plays a part in the climax of this novel and likely in the sequel to this book. This is a spoiler free zone, but there are a lot of other scenes like that, where they become important later and you kick yourself for not seeing it coming. I hope the payoff continues to be worth it, but Chaney has skills so I am positive that it will.

One of my favorite scenes that set the vibe was when Sam introduced Mark to the arcade on the space station. He got to see dozens of pristine older games that fed his own love of games older than he was. It is there that we learn more about the artificial intelligence that recruited him into the Nova Slinger Corps. It was a fun break from the action of training for combat and learning to coexist with the many species that make up his fighter squadron of fellow recruits. Plus, I too like old arcade games and was a tad jealous because I wanted access to that bastion of joy!

In that arcade scene, Chaney spoon fed me the details in a way that didn't feel like an info dump. I could hear the sounds of the pinballs hitting the bumpers and the bells ringing on the games. I could hear the buzzing of the machines, that low grade sound that the machines always made that my older ears would miss. There was never anything he described that I couldn't envision, or that felt like it wasn't "real." It helps that I spent my childhood inside of Flipper McCoys Arcade, which is why that little nugget of awesome inside of this novel spoke to me.

Like I said previously, when it came to describing the world, Chaney was light on the details. That's his style, his authorial voice in action... but it wasn't 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, Chaney has upped the bar of excellence, adding more sensory input to the mix: sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. And I don't say that as a dig, this book was pure nostalgic escapism. After I finished reading this book, I had to rush to introduce my boys to *The Last Starfighter*. This book just hit all the feels in that way, and I wanted to spread the love. I'll probably pass along my hard copy as well. Nah, who am I kidding? That is 100% a shelf trophy, I'll buy them a cheaper paperback!

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 J.N. Chaney 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 J.N. Chaney.

## Politics

This was an apolitical novel, in that none of our current zeitgeists made it into this book. However, the political and military struggle between the two opposing polities, the Kin Federation of Worlds and the Ascendency was covered. This book would appeal broadly to people on all sides of the political spectrum; the book was pure escapism in the best possible ways.

## Content Warning

If this book were a movie, it would be rated as PG-13. There was space combat and a few characters died, but nothing gratuitous and nothing on screen. The blood did not run red on the page, much to my dismay. But that did mean that I could show this book to my kids and not worry about emotionally traumatizing them.

## Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who looks back to their childhood in the 80s with fondness. It is for people who enjoyed *The Last Starfighter* and wanted to revisit that world, or one like it. On a scale of 0 to Awesome, I'd position *1-800-Starship* in the booming "space opera lite" niche... think *Guardians of the Galaxy* meets *Top Gun* in zero-G.

## Why buy it?

This novel was a homage, a love letter if you will, to *The Last Starfighter*. It felt like the spiritual successor to that iconic 1980s feature film. It also gave nods of respect to the rest of the 80s pop culture. If you remember those days fondly and love a good romp through space, then this novel is for you!

If I sold this book to you, then I highly recommend that you click [here](#) and buy *1-800-Starship* by J.N. Chaney!

The Adventures of Mary Darling by Pat Murphy  
Review by Cory Doctorow <pluralistic.net>

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A cracking read, a virtuoso act of gender jiu-jitsu, a Sherlock story like no other, a rough trip to fairyland, and the real, true story of Peter Pan. What a book!

Science fiction great Pat Murphy has written some classics – including books that were viciously suppressed by the heirs of JRR Tolkien! – but with *The Adventures of Mary Darling*, she's outdone even her own impressive self:

The titular Mary Darling here is the mother of Wendy, John and Michael Darling, the three children who are taken by Peter Pan to Neverland in JM Barrie's 1902 book *The Little White Bird*, which later became *Peter Pan*. If you recall your Barrie, you'll remember that it ends with the revelation that Wendy, John and Michael weren't the first Darlings to go to Neverland: when Mary Darling was a girl, she, too, made the journey.

Murphy's novel opens with Mary Darling and her husband George coming home from a dinner party to discover their three children missing, the window open, and their nanny, a dog called Nana, barking frantically in the yard. John is frightened, but Mary is practically petrified, inconsolable and rigid with fear.

Soon, Mary's beloved uncle, John Watson, is summoned to the house, along with his famous roommate, the detective Sherlock Holmes. With Holmes on the case, surely the children will be found?

Of course not. Holmes is incapable of understanding where the Darling children have gone, because to do so would be to admit the existence of the irrational and fantastic, and, more importantly, to accept the testimony of women, lower-class people, and pirates. Holmes has all the confidence of the greatest detective alive, which means he is of no help at all.

Neither is George Darling, who, as a kind of act of penance for letting his children be stolen away, takes to Nana's doghouse, and insists that he will not emerge from it until the children are returned. He takes his meals in the doghouse, and is carried in it to and from the taxis that bring him to work and home again.

Only Mary can rescue her children. John Watson discovers her consorting with Sam, a one-legged Pacific Islander who is a known fence and the finest rat-leather glovemaking in London, these being much prized by London's worst criminal gangs. Horrified that Mary is keeping such ill company, Watson confronts her and Sam (and Sam's parrot, who screeches nonstop piratical nonsense), only to be told that Mary knows what she is doing, and that she is determined to see her children home safe.

Mary, meanwhile, is boning up on her swordplay and self-defense (taught by a Suffragist swordmaster in a room above an Aerated Bread Company tearoom, this being the only public place in Victorian London where a respectable woman can enjoy herself without a male escort). She's acquiring nautical maps. She's going to Neverland.

What follows is a very rough guide to fairyland. It's a story that recovers the dark asides from Barrie's original Pan stories, which were soaked with blood, cruelty and death. The mermaids want to laugh as you drown. The fairies hate you and want you to die. And Peter Pan doesn't care how many poorly

Murphy's mashup of Holmes, Pan, South Seas pirate anarchists, and other salutary and exciting person-ages, milieux, furniture and tropes of the Victorian adventure story is an unmissable triumph, a romp, a delight.

**Between Earth and Sky: A Trilogy**  
**By Rebecca Roanhorse**  
**Reviewed by Tom Feller**

This trilogy won the Hugo Award this year for Best Series. I had already read the first novel when it was nominated for the Hugo in the Best Novel category four years ago and re-read it for this review. The author and her publisher were gracious enough to include all three books in the Hugo Award packet.

Most fantasy stories are Eurocentric in the sense that they are based on European myths, legends, and/or history. *Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings* are good examples of that. This trilogy, on the other hand, utilizes Mayan, Incan, Aztec, and other pre-Columbian myths and legends. It is set on a world called Meridian, a continent surrounding a sea resembling the Mediterranean, and the ships that travel on it are based on the ones the Polynesians used to go from island to island.

**Black Sun**

The title of the first novel refers to an event called the Convergence, which is a total solar eclipse during the winter solstice. There are three primary and one secondary point-of-view characters. When Serapio is twelve years old, he is blinded by his mother Saaya in a religious ceremony during a solar eclipse. She killed herself immediately afterward, and he was raised by three consecutive tutors who train him for a mission. The main part of the story takes place ten years later when he journeys from Obregi, an inland city, to Tova, the religious and political center of Meridian and his mother's hometown, for the Convergence. Despite his blindness, he is an expert martial artist and has magical powers. Much of his story is told in flashback chapters.

Xiala is a Teek, a kind of Amazonian mermaid with magical abilities. For reasons not explained until the third book, she was exiled from her people and earns a living as a sea captain. She meets Serapio when she is hired by a mysterious merchant prince named Lord Balam to transport Serapio to Tova. Serapio and Xiala fall in love, but their romance is complicated by the fact that he is on a suicide mission.

One part of Serapio's mission is to kill the Sun Priest, who is actually a woman named Naranpa. Her family came from a Tova slum called the Coyote's Maw, but she escaped by becoming a servant in the temple of the Watchers, who rule over not only the city, but also the entire continent. After 23 years, she has worked her way up to the very top of the Watchers but immediately finds herself in the middle of political intrigues. She has to seek help from her younger brother, who has become a crime lord in Coyote's Maw. One of her supposed allies and a former lover is Iktan, the Priest of Knives, which means the head of the Watcher's assassination and bodyguard bureau.

Although he gets relatively few pages, the fourth POV character is Okoa, a warrior. Okoa is the son of the head of the Carrion Crow clan, which is the clan of Serapio's mother. Decades previously, the Watchers and the other three "Sky Made" clans slaughtered many of the Carrion Crows. Serapio's mother was one of the survivors and vowed revenge. All the clans are matriarchal. Upon the death of Okoa's mother, his sister becomes the head of the clan, and he becomes her chief bodyguard. This nov-

trained Lost Boy starvelings die in his sorties against pirates, because he knows where there are plenty more Lost Boys to be found in the alienated nurseries of Victorian London, an ocean away.

More importantly, it's a story that revolves around the women in Barrie's world, who are otherwise confined to the edges and shadows of the action. In Barrie's Pan, Wendy is a "mother," Tiger Lily is a "princess," and Mary is a barely-there adult whose main role is to smile wistfully at the memory of when she was a girl and got to serve as Peter's "mother."

And Holmes? Apart from one love interest and a stalwart housekeeper, Holmes has very little time or regard for women. This is so central to the Holmes canon that the Arthur Conan Doyle estate actually sued over Netflix's Enola Holmes movie, arguing that Enola displayed basic respect for women, a feature that doesn't appear until the very end of the Holmes canon, and – the estate argued – those final stories were still in copyright:

<https://www.cbr.com/why-enola-holmes-has-nice-version-sherlock/>

Murphy's woman's-eye-view of Peter Pan, Neverland and the Lost Boys dilates the narrow aperture through which Peter Pan plays out, revealing a great deal of exciting, fun, frightening stuff that was always off in the wings. She gives flesh and substance to characters like Tiger Lily, by giving her the semi-fictionalized identity of one of the many American First Nations people who toured Europe and Africa, putting on Wild West shows that won eternal fame and cultural currency for the "American Indian," even as the USA was seeking to exterminate them and their memory.

Likewise, Murphy's pirates are grounded in the reality of pirate ships: democratic, anarchic, and far more fun than Robert Louis Stevenson would have you believe. While Murphy's pirates are about a century too late (as are Barrie's), they are in other regards pretty rigorous, which makes them extraordinarily great literary figures.

If you read David Graeber's posthumous *Pirate Enlightenment*, you'll know about the Zana-Malata of Madagascar, the descendants of anarchist pirates and matriarchal Malagasy women, who pranked and hoaxed British merchant sailors for generations, deliberately creating a mythology of south seas pirate kings:

<https://pluralistic.net/2023/01/24/zana-malata/#libertalia>

This hybrid culture of bold, fierce matriarchal Malagasy women and their anarchist pirate husbands play a central role in the book's resolution, and Murphy's pirate utopia is so well drawn and homely that I found myself wanting to move there.

This is a profoundly political book, but it's such a romp, too! Murphy has a real flair for this kind of thing. Back in 1999, she published the brilliant *There and Back Again*, an all-female retelling of *The Hobbit* (in spaaaaace!) that was widely celebrated...right up to the moment that Christopher Tolkien used baseless copyright threats to get the book withdrawn from sale:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There\\_and\\_Back\\_Again\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_and_Back_Again_(novel))

Billionaire sons of long-dead writers notwithstanding, you can still read *There and Back Again* by borrowing a copy of the book from the Internet Archive's Open Library:

[https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15436385W/There\\_and\\_back\\_again](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15436385W/There_and_back_again)

el was hard to put down, although the ending was abrupt, which is typical of the first book of a trilogy.

## Fevered Star

All four of the point-of-view characters survived the ending of the first book, and a new one was added. Although wounded during his attack on the Watchers, Serapio, to his surprise, survives. Xiala was not invited to the Convergence ceremony, although she did see mobs of people fleeing the massacre. Naranpa's enemies within the Watchers took her prisoner prior to the Convergence, which had the ironic effect of saving her life. She was able to escape and take refuge with her brother. In the process, she gained magical powers. When he learned of Serapio's existence, Okoa persuaded his sister and the leading members of his clan to stay away from the ceremony, so they also survived.

Although he was an important character in the first book, Lord Balam is now the latest POV character. He had been one of Serapio's mother's lovers and is a member of the illegal Jaguar cult. Having obtained an ancient book on sorcery, he becomes a "dream walker", someone who can enter the dreams of others. This was also illegal prior to the Convergence.

Much of the plot derives from the consequences of Serapio's actions at the Convergence. Besides wiping out the Watchers and much of the Tovan elite, Serapio's magic is so powerful that he froze the sun and moon in place. Unfortunately, the author's handling of the environmental consequences of that action was inconsistent in both this and the third book. Naranpa helps unite the various crime lords to fill the power vacuum left by the massacre. Serapio becomes the God-Emperor of Tova. Xiala is taken prisoner by the Golden Eagle clan, who had conspired to overthrow Naranpa, and forced to join a caravan. They are traveling to a meeting in another city where they hope to determine what the post-Convergence world of Meridian will look like. Okoa serves as the mediator between Serapio and his sister.

This novel suffers from the inherent problem of being the second book in a trilogy in that there is no satisfactory ending. In the first book, all the story lines converge on the Convergence, but at the end of this one the characters are following their own story lines, and all the story threads are loose.

## Mirrored Heavens

All five of the POV-characters are still alive at the end of the second book, and another one is added. The new POV character is Iktan, formerly the Priest of Knives (chief assassin) of the Watchers. He had not attended the Convergence, meets and gets to know Xiala on that caravan in book two, and initially joins the forces under Balam before turning against him. Serapio consolidates his power as God-Emperor of Tova, but Okoa is recruited by his sister and the surviving leaders of the remaining Sky-Made clans to assassinate him. Xiala escapes from the Golden Eagle clan and returns to the Teek islands, where she becomes their queen following the assassination of the previous queen, her mother. She learns that in the years she was absent fertility rates went down and the practice of their magic, called the Song, has declined. Naranpa makes her way north to a village next to a place called The Graveyard of the Gods, where she apprentices under a witch to learn to dream walk. Balam, now the Jaguar King, becomes leader of the forces intent on conquering Tova and the rest of Meridian.

Serapio's actions are influenced by a cryptic prophecy from the Coyote God, whose cult had been suppressed before the Convergence but is now ascending. Among other things, it says that for him to survive, he must kill both his father and his bride, or so he believes. Xiala has to lead the Teeks against the forces of Tuun, an ally of Balam, who seeks to conquer the Teek islands and commandeer their ships, the best in Meridian.

There are several flashback chapters that help the reader understand how some of the characters became who they were at the start of the first novel. Balam meets and falls in love with Saaya, Serapio's mother, who uses him to further her own ends, and Iktan meets Naranpa when he is a novice and she is still a servant.

This installment is hard to put down as the story lines all come together at the end, and you want to find out not only who is still standing, but also whether any of the lovers are still together. .

## Conclusion

The author's world building was so skilled and efficient that I would compare it favorably to J.R.R. Tolkien's and George R.R. Martin's. Based on my original reading of the first book four years ago, I had ranked the series #3 behind Seanan McGuire's InCryptid series and Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach series. However, even if I had read the entire trilogy prior to the voting deadline, I doubt that I would have changed my vote. I liked the series, but not as much as the other two, and the author failed to develop the full consequences of Serapio's actions at the Convergence.

## Blood of Patriots by Terry Mixon Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews. This is a book that I initially bought just to support an author whose other books I loved. It was written by Terry Mixon as a post-apocalyptic space opera world set in the not-too-distant future. To be honest, I forgot that it was in my library until Amazon recommended it to me. In digging into it, I realized that I already owned it! So, I downloaded it and gave it a listen. I wasn't sorry, that's for sure! 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 to fake 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](#). Finally, if you want to see my thoughts on the third book, [click here](#). I clearly enjoyed the first three 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 fourth and final novel, the characters that we know, and love are in the thick of it. They're on a 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 his command skills as he let the battle on Volunteer World. We knew he could lead small units; he had those skills from his time as a super special squirrel for Uncle Sugar. And we saw Jessica Cook growing into her role as the senior partner in the Humanity Unlimited corporation. 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?

But let's talk more about this character, Jessica Cook. In the last book she was healed in the alien sarcophagus, looking at you Stargate! Anyway, she's now gifted some intelligence about the aliens and a slew of kick ass skills. She can shoot like she was born with a gun in her hand, she can fly spaceships like a Top Gun candidate and do who knows what else! Except, rather than become GI Jane, Terry Mixon allows Jessica to flounder, as she struggles to accept her new skillset and then adapt to them. It didn't change the basic make up of her personality, one who was basically a lover and not a fighter. She'll kill you dead if you threaten those she cares about it, but she won't like it.

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. In this final published novel in this series, many of the plot arcs are wrapped up. I loved this book too, so read the rest of this review and then read the book!

## The Story

In this fourth and final novel in the Humanity Unlimited Series, our protagonists are no longer spread across the galaxy exploring and capturing alien technology. Now they're trying to solve the mystery of Earth B and prepare for the inevitable confrontation with the alien menace on Volunteer World. In their mad dash to protect Earth, fend off the Dragon and the Chinese, there are only two sides. Theirs, and everyone else.

We see a tense situation in this novel Harry and Jess thought they had enough on their plates, but fate

had other ideas. They struggled against genetically altered humans bent on galactic domination, the Asharim who wanted to wipe humanity off Volunteer World and finally the Dragon. Those holdover remnants of the alien loyalists on Earth want to regain their former glory and serve as the best warrior slaves as they could for their alien overlords whom they deify.

Now that we've talked about the book's basic concept, let us dive into the writing! Gotta hand 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.

One of the parts of this story that I really loved was how Terry handled the battle on Volunteer World. It was the culmination of the epic cast of characters' efforts to create a galactic foothold for humanity. Part of their desire to reconnect with their brethren scattered across the galaxy. The plan was for the former slaves to unite together in a shared mission to defend each other against the incursions of the Asharim. That vile alien race sought to subjugate the humans on Volunteer world, seeking to eradicate them during battle. Sure, these alien slave masters were on their decline, but they weren't dead yet.

During this part of the story, we saw Terry write scenes that were both visually and thematically compelling. He moved the battle along in a way that made sense, both from a historical perspective and within the needs of the larger plot. Maybe it's the combat veteran inside of me, or maybe it was my love of history, but I loved the number of details that the author put into this aspect of the novel. The combat itself was relatively quick on the screen, but the buildup to it and the planning was a lot of fun. Normally, I'm not a fan of these planning scenes, but in this case it worked. Maybe because Terry handled in nontraditional means?

I really loved Terry's attention to details in this final battle. His characters off-the-cuff thinking allowed the command staff to find alternatives to their modern doctrine. They adapted and overcame, though they didn't cheat with easy alien technological solutions. Nope, everything they had would work today, shy of the alien guns and flying craft. And, thankfully, those were in short supply. I loved that the soldiers turned dirt bikes into mounts for their quasi-mounted cavalry unit. They utilized those tactics as one would expect for that type of unit, basically becoming the horse infantry of old.

In *Blood of Patriots*, 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, there was even more kinetic action in this novel than we saw in previous ones. 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 is mated with the post-apocalyptic genre, then this is the book for you!

## The Characters

This wasn't a story where there was only one main character, instead there was an ensemble cast of disparate personalities. I was pleasantly surprised at how well each character was portrayed, given the

large cast of main characters. Then throw in the numerous secondary peeps who flitter on and off screen, well hat tip to the author's skill. Everyone had individual personalities, none of them felt like they were cardboard cut outs. Oh, and none of them were talking heads with no personalities. 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 that's mostly gone 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. It was nice to see him process those feelings in this novel, given how things ended in the last book. Speaking of his idealism, I really liked how it was 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 the commanding officer of the Humanity Unlimited forces comprised of his ex-military forces and the military units that allied nations provided. This makes him a general, no? He seems to grow into his role as a leader of a larger number of troops, vastly different than leading small teams of Spec Ops troops across the globe. If there are more novels, and I hope that there are, I expect that we'll see him continuing to grow into his role within the Humanity Unlimited Corporation.

Jessica Cook: She starts 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 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 flying shuttles and lightweight planes into combat on Volunteer World. 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 if this series continues? 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 senior partner of Humanity Unlimited. I like that we see her becoming even more well-rounded, which the scene with the heavy worlders demonstrated clearly. She's 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.

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 represents 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, but he's still extremely unlikeable. There was a brief period where we had hope that he'd become a decent human being, but nope. I still 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! In this book, he becomes one of the two big bads, though resolution to those issues will have to come to us in book five. Hey, Terry, are you listening? If we're purely speculating, I think he'll make a play for the leader of the Dragons, descendants of Asharim loyalists who maintained a shadowy organization for years.

Brenda Cabot: She's a former FBI Agent and the leader of "The Families." She started out as an unlikeable jerk, but I grew to like her in this book. She goes out of her way to help provide for the needs of Harry Rogers and Humanity Unlimited when they're deep in combat against the Asharim aliens and their slave races. Without her, the fighting on Volunteer World would've been a disaster and many innocent civilians would've died from the wonton slaughter of the humans. She proactively assists them in their dealings with potential allies so they can unite against the alien menace. Even cooler, she shows an understanding of human nature and uses her skills as an FBI agent to shepherd humanity into a new golden age after the aliens are rediscovered. I really liked watching her evolution in this novel into somebody that I liked as a main secondary character. If there are more books in the series, and again I hope there are, I would love to see her take center stage. I want her standing right next to Jessica and Harry as they conquer the galaxy and beyond!

## The World

Blood of Patriots is the fourth book in the Humanity Unlimited Series, and nominally the last one. I absolutely loved it and didn't want this series to end. 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 on alien planets and in space. 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. I could buy into the virgin colony planet that was called the Volunteer World. I loved the idea of a world inhabited by quasi colonial folks. I loved the black powder muskets in a sci-fi setting; it worked for me. And I found the cultural stagnation in this culture worked, given the state of perpetual intra-planetary war. It felt like a cool world to settle, if they were taking people from Earth there.

Like all of the previous novels, Terry brought in some of the plot hooks from the previous novels and made them significant here. Some of the details that seemed inconsequential earlier came up in this novel in this final book. I can't wait to see what he does with the remaining plot hooks when he writes book five! I am trying to manifest that into existence, because I want more from this world! I need answers to the open plot hooks. Oh, and I want to explore the galaxy with Harry and Jessica.

Speaking of those dangling ideas from the previous plot arcs, it made me think that the larger mystery could continue to grow and expand until all of those pesky arcs are also solved. So far, the payoff has been worth it. Terry has skills, so I am positive that it will only get better with enough peer pressure. I really loved reading the scenes of combat with the Revolutionary Era troops on Volunteer World. I also loved exploring the Heavy Worlder planet, though it isn't the planet they were engineered to exist on. It was a fun segment to read and left me wanting more.

During the Volunteer World combat scene, Terry showed his baseline understanding of basic combined arms 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 fo-

cused on the aspects that moved the plot forward. He combined the aviation elements with the mounted troops and basic foot soldiers. I loved that he used cavalry tactics with troops using dirt bikes to maneuver around the field. It is close to how I used gun trucks in Iraq, so I cheered for him getting it right.

Tactics aside, Terry got the minutia right as well. Battles never go the way they were planned because combat is a democracy, and the enemy gets a vote. He correctly illustrated one huge aspect of war that others tend to ignore. Sometimes good guys die; one second, they're there and the next they're dead. It can be senseless and capricious, and nobody really wins. He also got other details about military service right. Magazines ran dry, bullets weren't always plentiful, and combat wasn't clean. Like I said earlier, good people died, and the survivors suffered through it. We saw that with Jessica and Harry dealing with a friend who died on the Volunteer world. 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 novels, more specifically with the way captured or acquired gear became useful and the eggheads made discoveries that gave them access to the almost magical alien technology. It showed how political posturing bore fruit in the final battle on Volunteer World. 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 *Blood of Patriots*. 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. The only part that I hated was that not all of the plot hooks were wrapped up in this final novel. I wanted all of the answers, all of them!

### 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 marks this one for mature audiences only. In *Blood of Patriots*, the violence, what was there wasn't gratuitous. We saw combat, but Terry did not dwell on the carnage. For those with squeamish stomachs, he faded to black when things got nasty. We didn't see the gore or splatter porn, that part of it happened in our dark imaginations. 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 won't rehash the one issue I had with the transitions, that horse is already dead after the first two reviews. Instead, I'll say that this narration was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. Bear in mind that I've suffered hearing loss while chasing dragons for *Uncle Sugar*, so your mileage may vary on the accents that were present. I will say, the accents that Madam V did were well done. Oh, and did I mention that she used vocal inflections to set the tone and mood of the tense scenes? Cause during the battle scenes she kept us on the edge of our seats... but oh, what a ride it was! Seriously, I'd listen to more books by this narrator, and I even listen to her order her dinner or hire her to work on 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 bejesus out of me!

## Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who loves *Stargate* and *Indiana Jones*, with shades of *Cain and Abel* thrown in for good measure. If you are a fan of political thrillers set in the near future, peppered with military action and large set piece battles, then this is the book for you. Throw in a time travel plot, 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. We get to experience large battles on alien planets, fighting on foreign soil and arguments on the floor of the United Nations. It all lends itself 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!

## Dracoheim Confidential by Misha Burnett

Review by Denton Salle

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

### Tales From the City of the Dragon

Misha Burnett's *Dracoheim Confidential* is a collection of short stories, continuing the stories of a detective in a fantasy world. Short stories are my favorite readings, and Burnett is a master of the craft. These are engaging and fun looks at a very different university. This is the second book in the world, following his *Bad Dreams* and *Broken Hearts*.

You should read that too. But you don't need to as this collection stands on its own. But it's good too.

While that previous collection was focused on the detective Eric Rugar, this book introduces a second character, Magus Leonid Vetch. Both he and Rugar deal with the changes in technology in their world.

### The Stories

Starting with Magus Vetch teaching his Sixday class when a classroom demo goes wrong, the stories alternate between Vetch and Rugar. Vetch's problems deal with being a traditional mage teaching magic technicians at a college while Rugar's deal with a cop when the criminals are moving from guns to magic, as well as the introduction of non-humans from other worlds across the dreamsea. Both give glimpses of a world no longer like ours. Both sets of stories poses problems caused by the change introduced by the other worlds across the dreamsea.

### The characters

The two main characters are Magus Leonid Vetch and Agent Eric Rugar of the CPS Criminal Investigations.

Eric Rugar, the protagonist of Burnett's previous collection, is an investigator for the Committee of Public Safety in Draconhiem. He deals with crimes that involve the other worlds that inhabit the worlds of Nightmare. Be they moreau, indines, aefrits, norms, incubi, chigoes or the forged – each of the nine worlds have their own dominant race□they have human intellects but may share little else. And these other worlds all have things that humans want, like the illegal drug, Tigerberry. Rugar deals with these and other issues as an agent of the CPS.

Leonid Vetch is a traditionally trained mage, who has adapted to some degree to the new world and teaches.

### The world

These stories take place in several of the worlds of Nightmare: Midworld, the world to which humans are native, being where most things at least start and where things common are based. We end up visiting others by accident, during the job, and once for vacation.

### The politics

Nothing relates directly to our world's politics. Politics vary with the world and are specific to it. One

world has problems with terrorists, and all seem to have problems with smuggling.

Content warning

None really. A little bloodshed, a kiss or two, but generally suitable for all audiences.

Why read it?

It's fantastic and well done. It deals not just with magic but the interaction of beings with very different forms and behaviors. Both main characters are likeable and the world they jointly inhabit is very well done.

Who is this for?

Anyone who likes fantasy but wants some different from elves and dwarves.

## The Family Business by Mike Kupari Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

What happens in an alien invasion story after humanity wins, and we're left to pick up the pieces of civilization? The Family Business puts us alongside a military veteran who makes his living hunting down pro-alien collaborators and bringing them to justice. When the Feds hire him for a particularly dangerous job, things will get...interesting.

The Story

You don't have to look very far to find a story about aliens invading Earth, and humankind uniting to pound them back into the cosmos. What made The Family Business cool was that it showed us the world a few years after the human victory, when our planet is trying to recover from population loss and damage to our infrastructure, to say nothing of our government or legal system.

It was also a fresh take on a bounty hunter story, where the focus is on bringing people in alive instead of constantly hunting dangerous fugitives. Our protagonist, Nathan Foster, has been at this for years and while he's a veteran of the war, he's not entirely jaded or downtrodden. He believes in the system and in what he's doing.

That makes him the right guy for the job when the Feds hire him to capture an escaped prisoner. He uses his wits and his contacts before he uses his guns.

I'll always have a soft spot for a good shoot-em-up sci-fi, and I kind of expected that from The Family Business, but this story wasn't afraid to show a little more creativity than that.

The Characters

Nathan Foster is our main guy. He was a tank commander in the war with the Visitors, and the other three guys in his unit all died. His business partner, Stella, is a hot secretary who's good at keeping his paperwork in line, cutting through the red tape that still exists even after an alien invasion. (Bureaucracy, man. It's the underwear rash of the civilized world.)

Rounding out Nathan's staff is his teen nephew Ben, who was orphaned during the war. He had a little bit of "Wesley Crusher" to him, in that he was a young kid that all the adults turned to with tech problems, but he wasn't annoying or anything. Just eager to learn and share his skills.

Then there's Emmogene Anderson, a former collaborator with the Visitors. They experimented on her but she doesn't know how because they wiped her memory; one such experiment left her with a device in her brain that can control other people. The other experiment, well...that's for you to discover, dear reader. It's pretty interesting.

Rounding out our principal cast is Swiss super-commando Anthony Krieg, a collaborator diehard and Emmogene's lover. Dude's got a few screws loose and he's not afraid to leave a body count behind him. He wants to retrieve Emmogene and get her help to bring the Visitors back to Earth. I kept seeing Dolph Lundgren in my head when I read this guy, even though he's Swedish. Kind of a paint-by-numbers 80s movie villain, though he has a unique motivation.

While there's a good handful of characters in this book, it's really the plot that moves things along. The first half is pretty linear--a few days here, a week there--and then there's a jump of several months about halfway through, which I was fine with because it kept things moving. The action scenes were swift yet the in-between stuff didn't drag, and I liked that it was easy to keep the pages turning. That's important in a sci-fi novel.

## The World

In the not too-distant future, humanity repelled an alien invasion. On their way out the door, the aliens dropped a few meteors on major cities around the world, leaving millions and millions of people dead.

Despite all of this, a lot of developed countries are almost back up and running, they just need help from independent contractors to perform certain tasks, at least until critical infrastructure is rebuilt.

Kupari's handling of a post-invasion Earth is utterly believable, especially since the government wasn't entirely destroyed. All of the government bureaucracy stuff feels very familiar and realistic--not even an alien war can really kill the administrative state.

There were the odd infodumps here and there, but in keeping with Kupari's pace throughout the book, they weren't overly long. Half a page here, maybe a whole page every once in a while, and they were easy to digest. I got the feeling he cared more about only putting in the relevant info and not copy-and-pasting his worldbuilding notes into the text. It did slow down a little near the end, because it had to switch gears from a combat climax to a diplomatic closing. That said, I was still intrigued to the last page.

If I have any complaints, it's that there were certain parts of this fictional world we didn't get to see very much, namely the fauna. We're told that the Visitors brought some life-forms with them from their own ecosystems and introduced them to Earth, where they took over in some areas, but we only get one real scene with the humans going up against an alien animal. While more of these scenes could have slowed the story, it would have been cool to see some variety on that front.

Oh, and the cover--while very cool--was rather misleading. Nathan never hunts an actual alien. His focus is on the collaborators. You'll see when you read it. I think it sells the general concept decently enough, though.

## The Politics

Since we see most of the story from Nathan's POV, we get plenty of "independent man can do, while bloated government cannot do" stuff. Other political considerations have to do with what the Visitors want and what mankind wants, and whether those two objectives can be reconciled without war.

## Content Warning

Plenty of R-rated language and violence. Some talk of rape, and a little bit of consensual sexy-times, but not in excessive detail.

## Who is it for?

I could see an audience consisting of military fiction readers, sci-fi fans, and people who like bounty hunter stories. It's a little bit western, but not too cowboy. It's set mostly in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

## Why read it?

I was most impressed by how real it felt, and for an alien invasion story, that's saying something. This is my third foray into Kupari's writing and his military experience always comes through strongly in his books. He's walked in the main character's footsteps, and he knows how to include the details that take you down the same path. It wasn't just the plot and the worldbuilding that gave this book a unique flavor.

## Knightmare Arcanist by Shami Stovall

### Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

## Harry Potter meets Codex Alera

After trying out Shami Stovall's not-Dresden Files universe (the Chronos Warlock series, starring Adair Finch), I thought I would try her not-Codex Alera series.

## The Story

Like every Young Adult protagonist and Disney princess, Volke Savan wants ... more!

Volke wants to be a hero, a magical swashbuckler. To do this, Volke needs to be bonded with a mythical creature, and gain magic through the bond, becoming an arcanist.

And no, you cannot "collect them all."

Through various and sundry circumstances, Volke finds himself bonded to a Nightmare, which looks like a suit of armor, but is made of shadows and fear.

Armed with this new companion, Luthair, Volke needs to be trained. At a magic academy for arcanists, Volke has to deal with student drama, a drunk mentor, pirates, a plague that mutates magical creatures, and an evil mastermind behind it all.

Unfortunately, Luthair the nightmare lost his last human, and has sworn revenge, and has made Volke's aid in that revenge part of the deal.

When the nightmare fingers the most legendary magic wielder in the land as the killer he seeks, Volke finds himself dealing with a murder mystery as well. If Luthair is wrong, all well and good, but if it's correct, things are going to get ugly.

This was a fun little book. There is definitely some overlap with Codex Alera, but then again, that was explicitly stated as part lost legion and part Pokemon, so there's no real complaint here. It definitely felt more "young adult" than Codex Alera ever did. Heck, I don't think Alera slowed down enough for some of the drama involved in this book. But overall, it was fun. I don't think I enjoyed it as much as the Chronos Warlock series, but I'll try the next book in the series for certain (as of now, there are eight entries. Oy.)

## The Characters

Volke is a good kid. He's not as whiny as most YA protagonists. He's an adult by most standards, even if he's still technically a teenager. He's largely sensible and knows enough when to be scared and still runs in anyway.

I think my only real quibble with Volke is that he grows more knowledgeable throughout the book but doesn't really have character growth. But then again, this is book one of eight, he has time. And who has time for character development in less than a month? (If it was longer than that, I'd be surprised.)

The Luthair is interesting as a counterpart. He's an adult Nightmare, and almost feels like a father figure to Volke. Luthair is steady and secure in what it knows and how the world should work, with Volke being neither. It's a dynamic that works well.

## The World

The world didn't get much in the way of building. There's some history, and glimpses of other countries, but not much. Most of the world built was around Volke's original island, which came off as a small province. It leaves room for more world building later on. Don't expect this to go full Middle Earth in book one ... I expect it to develop over time.

Basically, the only world building that happens is directly important to the story.

## Politics

None. This is a pure fantasy world with no relation to ours. Come to think of it, I'm not even sure how this world is governed.

## Content Warning

Think of everything that can go wrong with magic plagues... no, it does not go full The Hot Zone, but there are moments.

Honestly, I think I could give this to a young teenager or a smart child. (Keep in mind, I'm strange. I read Jurassic Park when I was ten, so your mileage of "smart child" may vary)

Who is it for?

This is for fans of Harry Potter or Codex Alera.

Funny thing is, I have that in my notes and found several reviews matching that exact description on the Amazon page, so I'm clearly not the only one who saw the similarities.

Why buy it?

If you want to get into a new epic fantasy series that is appropriate for all ages, but doesn't talk down to the readers, this will be for you.

## Minimum Wage Magic by Rachel Aaron A Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So you'll imagine my happiness when I wandered across Rachel Aaron's Minimum Wage Magic (DFZ Book 1) and realized that DFZ stood for Detroit Free Zone. Yes! Yes! YES!! Somebody finally wrote a fantasy story set in my hometown! That was followed quickly by "She better not screw this up! This is my hometown!" Believe me, us Motown types get a bit emotional about our city. It's not just me.

But anyway...

Aaron has me hyped up for this series. She missed one or two details about the city (IE a Great Lakes flood would have to wipe out almost the whole state to get Detroit and Troy only comes south to 14 Mile which is nowhere near 8 Mile, Detroit's northern border and the namesake of the Eminem movie, 8 Mile) but overall this is a terrific story which totally never had me tearing my hair out. I mean, except for those two times.

Part of it is the way in which Aaron has remade the city. The Detroit of the DFZ is a living entity. Literally. It has been taken over by first one goddess then another. The second one wields so much control she can move the buildings and roads in her city. Aaron has turned the whole city into a huge version of the Hogwarts staircases and I love it. Lord knows I'd love to see I 75 move closer to someplace I need it to be while I'm on it. Probably. Maybe. I mean, it might be a little scarier, but if it saves me five minutes..

Yeah, Detroiters are like that.

This also makes Minimum Wage Magic more enjoyable if you're a Detroiter. She didn't put a building at the wrong intersection, the building moved. That road DOES go there, and it has for the last six months at least. Honestly, I love this whole concept. I'm glad I don't have to live in Aaron's Detroit (imagine getting lost on the way to your favorite Coney Island) it's a lot of fun to envision.

And lawlessness is the rule. The goddess (who I don't seem to remember as having a name) who rules the city isn't big on rules. Magic has returned. Cybernetic implants are common and easy to get if you've got the money. Think Shadowrun (the Will Smith film Bright was based on Shadowrun if you're not familiar) only it's more fun despite having no metahumans. Oh, and Detroit instead of Seattle.

Enter Opal Yong-ae, our main characters. She's a Cleaner, meaning that she cleans out the homes of people who have passed with no known heirs or whose family refuses to make a claim. Think Storage Wars writ large. She bids on places in auctions then goes in to clean them out, hoping to be able to sell the stuff she sells for more than she paid for it, thus making her living. She had been pretty good at it prior to the last couple months during which all of her auction wins have been losers as far as turning a profit. But then she finally comes across an apartment full of stuff with massive spell work on it and finds out what it's for, and we're off and running.

Along the way, we get organized crime (does it still count as organized crime in a city with no law and order? I'm confused now.) shootouts, magic fights (more on that in a moment) and some pretty decent detective work. Also a dragon, because dragons are cool. Of course this dragon is way uncool and quite frankly deserves a beating but that's neither here nor there and I don't do spoilers.

Opal is an enigma. She has a fancy degree, but she doesn't want to use it. She could live in luxury, but she'd rather risk her life and financial wellbeing by cleaning out spaces formerly occupied by the dead. All she has to do is not pay a debt and she can be on a private plane in the morning. Minimum Wage Magic centers around her struggles to pay that debt. She makes no sense at all and yet I get her and respect her for what she's willing to do. I like this chick.

Most of the mages in Minimum Wage Magic are very scientific in their use of magic. They use runes. They gather power carefully. They distribute their power judiciously and channel it carefully with the intent of producing a single, predictable effect. Think of a surgeon carefully removing a patch of skin cancer and deftly wielding a sharpened scalpel while making sure to get it all and leave minimal or no scarring.

Not Opal. No, Opal using magic is the rough equivalent of seeing a skin cancer and trying to knock it off with a thirty-pound sledgehammer. What she lacks in finesse she makes up for in raw enthusiasm and a tendency to overdo things a bit. I have never been known for my subtlety in any way shape or form, my chemistry partner in high school used to refer to me as "Ramjet Boy" for my tendency to pour things too quickly, yet I can't feel like Opal has me beat. Her raw talent and ability are amazing. Her lack of patience and skill are frightening. Opal is definitely not a weapon I'd want pointed at me. Or the guy standing next to me. Or, put bluntly, the guy down the street. A few blocks away is probably okay. She does, however, get results.

I'm kind of embarrassed that I hadn't found Aaron's work before now because a brief look at her author page shows that she not only has a lot more books published, but that there is at least one other DFZ series. I'll be burrowing into her other stuff soon. Minimum Wage Magic pwns.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 magic eggs

## On Tiber's Edge by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

If you've followed my blog for any length of time (and I'd like to say thank you to both of my longtime readers) you know that I review a lot of Declan Finn and a lot of Land & Sea. It should therefore surprise precisely zero people that I have recently obtained a copy of Declan Finn's On Tiber's Edge: Land & Sea Season 2. Of even less surprise, perhaps, should be the fact that I loved it. I don't do serial reviews of things that suck. I'm not that much of a glutton for punishment.

And trust me, the only thing that sucks about *On Tiber's Edge* is the vacuum pulling the money out of your pocket to pay for the book. It's that good. I mean, the book is that good. You could probably get by with a relatively weak vacuum. I guess I wasn't all that surprised here but, being a book in one of my favorite series written by one of my favorite authors, it had a lot to live up to. I'm actually kind of relieved that it did. I'd hate life if I had to sit around and whine because I was disappointed.

And a whining Jimbo is a big ball of patheticness is an image that you're likely to be stuck with for the rest of your life. Some things you just can't unsee. Trust me. The world is a better place when I'm not whining.

But there's no reason to whine this time because Finn knows his stuff. I should've known that. Actually, I did know that. That's why I picked *On Tiber's Edge* up in the first place. Believe me, I'm not short of stuff to read. I had to check this thing out.

Before I really get started though, I'll drop the standard Declan disclaimer: Finn is a devout Catholic. So are a lot of his characters. If religious imagery and/or prayer are things you find to be offensive, there are other things to read. As for me, while I take my dose of the Opiate of the Masses with a more Protestant flavor, I'm happy to read about Christians doing Christian things for Christian Reasons.

*On Tiber's Edge* is named after the river that runs through Rome. Finn's Pope, Julius III is a warrior Pope. That's what the world needs with the Fish invading and so it makes sense from a religious point of view. God would, of course, send a warrior to defend his people. And this Pope declares a Crusade against the aliens who are attacking his planet. Of course, Julius III does not fit the mold of the kindly father confessor that many expect of the Pope. This is a man who does what's necessary. He's a good man without necessarily being a nice one. I approve.

Word of the Crusade eventually spreads to Chicago, Illinois, USA and we take up the story from there. Why Chicago? Why not? Chicago is a cool town with lots and lots of lakefront to defend from amphibious aliens. It's also got a street grid that can be a bit confusing and an elevated train system that Finn has a ton of fun with.

Finn seems to have a much better grasp on the geography of Chicago than he does of Detroit, which appears briefly early in the book. I have this vision of Finn sitting in front of his computer with an old school Rand McNally Road Atlas and his phone open to Google Maps double checking himself as he's writing *On Tiber's Edge*. There is at least a ninety-five percent chance that none of that ever happened, but from what I can remember given my own experiences in Chicago, he's got the city down cold.

Finn's characters are, as usual, gritty and realistic. They know what needs to happen and they focus on making it so. At least the heroes of the story do. Finn also includes the occasional behind covering politician and a realistic look at the majority of the population of Chicago, many of which leave either before the Fish hit the city or shortly thereafter. This makes sense. The only people who belong in a war zone are the trigger pullers. And make no mistake about it, both Chicago and Rome become war zones fairly early in *On Tiber's Edge*.

And that's the best part about *On Tiber's Edge*. Finn's mind is almost as twisted as mine, and he has a penchant for finding ways to kill things that borders on the psychopathic. While I'll grant you that the weapons used in this book are a little less comical than the Super Soakers loaded with holy water of his St Tommy NYPD novels, they're no less deadly. They're actually more deadly. Although, let's face it, a lot of the reason I enjoyed some of action sequences so much is because the guys who raise the hell

are guys just like me; gamers, people with an interest in science, people who like to use their ability to think to solve problems from a decent distance away and kill the enemy in new and interesting ways. I don't want to spoil too much here but go in with your head on a swivel and be ready for anything.

Land & Sea is, of course, an ongoing series with nine books before this (I've only read eight of them, but I'm planning to fix that soonish) and only God knows how many more to go. If you're a Finn fan who only wants to read the book he wrote, you could probably get away with reading *On Tiber's Edge* as a standalone. I don't recommend doing that, because this is an awesome series. I'm just saying that it would work. Finn puts enough into the tome that you could follow it if you came in cold. All of the characters are brand new and there is a brief history-ish type thing of the war included in the beginning. That's enough to make it followable.

I also hear rumors that Finn may be working on another book in the Land & Sea series. If true, I'm looking forward to it. If not, I'm going to whine piteously. Someone call Declan. Tell him to get to work. No one wants that.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Kablamification Processes

## Outlaw of the Outer Stars by John C. Wright Review by Brian Heming <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Space Opera from the best of all realities

Imagine an alternate universe, where they made Star Wars sequel movies that were good, with every single major character being awesome. Coming from our timeline, with its drab token cutout characters and boring Hollywood cash-grabs, this universe might be hard to imagine. Fortunately, science fiction grandmaster John C Wright has seen sideways in time and brought us alternate-Earth's greatest gem—a larger-than-life space opera, epic in scope, entertaining in action, and towering in its pulp heroes.

Note: this is the fourth in a series. Read the first three, they're also awesome. Also, the fifth came out already. Get that one, too.

The Story

Having infiltrated Liska's pirate crew as first mate, Athos Lone, now posing as Black Jack Rackstraw, must survive undercover as a pirate and use his position to find and destroy the King of Pirates and all his works. Meanwhile, Lirazel Centauri seeks her lost homeworld, aided by Nightshadow but hindered by mysterious and awesome servants of The Dark Will, the Merry Catburglar continues to steal ancient relics, and a clone trooper realizes the evils of the Empire he serves.

The Characters

Here, Wright's vision outshines those of the Star Wars sequels of our reality by a million supernovas to a brown dwarf. Athos Lone's pirate infiltration is in the great tradition of the Gray Lensman, but with even more pulp aplomb, with duels to the death, life and death hanging in the balance, and explosions galore in the tradition of Ed "World Wrecker" Hamilton. His space sorceress, Lirazel Centauri, is full of tragic backstory, rule-breaking, femininity, and awesome superpowers. His clone trooper is no token, but full of dark powers, loyalty, but eventual disillusionment with the evil empire he serves. Wright

makes excellent versions of every character the Star Wars sequels ruined, and more.

## The Politics

You may glean the not-particularly-controversial message that Evil Empires will force their citizens to believe in untruth and seek to strip the magic and divine from the world. Wright's evil empire is properly dark, evil, corrupt, and worth fighting.

## Content Warning

Multiple perspective characters, as needed to make awesome versions of each of the characters of the movies. While I'm big on stories with a single viewpoint character, the perspective flipping on this one never dragged, with each character's amazing backstory unfolding in parallel with the action of the story.

Oh, you were asking about naughty stuff? Clean and family friendly but not lacking in poignant romance.

## Who is it for?

For lovers of grand space opera, epic characters, Star Wars movies that don't suck, and fans of good old larger-than-life heroes firing blasters with their capes blowing in the wind while the fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance.

## Why buy it?

The best space opera for your buck still in copyright. Larger-than-life pulp space opera at its best, by one of the greatest masters of science fiction alive today.

Outlaw of the Outer Stars is the fourth book of the Starquest series, written by Sci-Fi Grandmaster John C Wright.

**Phoenix by Lori Janeski**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So what do a deaf interrogator, a field agent, an "insig" and an M1911 pistol all have in common? If you haven't read Lori Janeski's Phoenix (The Carter Files Book One) probably not a whole lot. If you have read the book, you get it and you're probably about to mention that other thing but that's spoilers and we don't do those here. Ever.

For sure.

Mostly.

Okay, it happens because our head writer (alias "Jimbo") can't force himself to find a way around doing so. But, let's face it, that's work and he's a blogger. If he wanted to work, he'd go into sales or sumfin'

Yeah, that is what I do for a living. Stop asking questions and read the review. You're ruining my concentration.

Yup, totally your fault. I'm not scatterbrained in the slightest.

Why did every human being who has ever met me just start laughing?

Oh yeah, the book.

Listen: Lori Janeski can write. If you had read the book you would already know this. Since you haven't you should. Now I'll tell you why.

I mean, I get the fact that we all love star spanning magnum opuses (opi?) with galactic settings and exotic aliens, and well, you know what I'm saying. I would assume that applies to pretty much everyone who reads my reviews, because if you didn't you wouldn't be here. I get that, but sometimes it's nice to keep things in the Solar System. Sometimes, a maglev train that connects planets just works. And sometimes a totally not FBI officer (seriously, it's "Interplanetary Police Force") trying to stop a whole bunch of heinous stuff from happening. And sometimes, I can sit and just be happy that Phoenix ended up on my Kindle where I read it.

It's a weird coincidence, I'll grant you, but it works.

What really makes the story isn't just the titular Agent David Carter, it's his interactions with desk jockey/interrogator/human lie detector Veronique de Tournay, who was totally appointed to be his partner and observe and not act as a babysitter to make sure that Carter didn't go off the rails again.

Seriously, Carter is this well-known super-agent but he's not known for his subtlety or his aversion to violence. I'm not saying I don't approve. I'm just saying that the IPF really did need somebody to ride herd on this guy to keep him from doing all the things that draw the negative press. I won't tell you if it worked or not.

His partner is Veronique de Tournay. She's also an IPF employee, but she works more on the in-house side of things as an interrogator with a penchant for detecting lies. She has a hearing impediment and a pair of hearing aids, but she doesn't let that slow her down. She's also the daughter of the former director of IPF Division 7, which Carter works for. She knows people. Then again, so does Carter.

Phoenix is, at its heart, a detective story. But it's also crossed with conspiracy theory and some terrorists. I like that about it. I used to read a lot of detective stories as a kid. Nowadays, I'm more of a straight up SF/F fan, but crossing my two really awesome genres is a good thing. That's especially true since Janeski managed to do so seamlessly. Phoenix isn't a Science Fiction story and a detective story. It's a Science Fiction detective story.

The one thing that I did find a bit odd about Phoenix is that the series it's part of is called The Carter Files but the main character of the story, at least to me, was de Tournay. Don't get me wrong. I love strong female protagonist. I just expected the main character of The Carter Files to be, well, you know, Carter. And it's not like Agent Carter isn't all over this book, it just struck me as a strange thing when I got a second for it to occur to me.

There are a whole bunch of action sequences in Phoenix. This is my kind of detective story. There are

some dust ups and a few brawls, maybe a shootout or two and at least one really cool chase scene. Janeski seems to have planned these out beforehand because they flow really well and make sense. And give credit where credit is due: de Tournay gets involved when she needs to. She's even effective at times. But Janeski seems to have successfully resisted the urge to have her female character go heads up with a man three times her size and beat him to the ground.

Some of what Veronique goes through makes even a rough, tough guy like me cringe, but she gets through it in a realistic manner. De Tournay is tough without being unbelievably strong or skilled. I appreciated that about her. She's a real woman and not some monster. She feels like a woman in a lot of her non-combat scenes as well and I like that as well. Veronique is a woman, not a man with boobs.

Any good detective story takes a few twists and turns to get to where it needs to go and Phoenix is no exception. Come to think of it, people highly susceptible to whiplash may be tempted to purchase a neck brace before reading this thing. The fact remains that all of the twists and turns are well foreshadowed and logical. Nothing feels like it shouldn't be there. I wasn't thrown from the story. Everything kept moving forward at the same breakneck pace and I loved every minute of it.

Phoenix is the first book in a series and there was definitely some world-building necessary. The good news is that it doesn't interfere with the story. Janeski Heinleins her world into the story. Everything you need to learn is there but there is no need to study it all. I mean, you can. There's that one guy in every crowd who knows where Jefferies Tube 7989989980878098 leads to, right? But that's unnecessary for those of us who don't take it that far. There's enough there to make the story make sense without endless pages of exposition.

Phoenix, as noted previously, is Book One of the Carter Files. That means there are more books coming, although there is only one sequel available on Amazon to date. I'm sure there will be more, but with Janeski recovering from a serious car collision I'm not sure how long it'll be. Hopefully not long though, because this has the makings of a long series and I want to see where it goes.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Mahjong Tiles

## Primary Inversion by Catherine Asaro

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

When you're a book reviewer, going back to read old favorites can be worrisome, Love it or hate it, the fact is that books don't always hit the same way they did before starting a book review blog almost a decade ago. I still love Science Fiction and Fantasy. I always will. Sometimes, though, I find myself finding flaws I didn't know were there. I don't go looking for them, but it happens.

Reading Catherine Asaro's Primary Inversion, however, was a real treat. It's the first time this has happened, but it was actually even better than I remembered it. I pulled this thing off the bookshelf randomly because the title sounded cool and bought it because the blurb on the back cover sounded good right after it came out back in the Nineties. I've read a bunch since, but I kind of lost the thread when my divorce blew my life up. I'll have to pick it back up though, because Asaro can spin one whale of a yarn.

Jimbo's Awesome Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

And the interstellar politics was off the chain. It's not just the Skolian Empire versus the Eubian Traders. I totally left out the Allied Worlds of Earth, whose neutrality in the Skolia/Eube war leaves them in a place as valuable as it is awkward. Asaro does a masterful job of keeping things straight and guiding us through the peaks and valleys.

Not all is revealed, of course. Primary Inversion is the first book in a thirteen-book series. There's plenty left to discover. Nor does Asaro bog herself down in Weber-esque infodumps. She Heinleins in her details and makes it look effortless although anyone who has spent five minutes attempting to write a fantastical story would know better.

And none of that has anything to do with what's going on in Sauscony's head. Soz has been at war for literally decades and has led from the front. She has experienced combat both from the inside of her head and the point of view of those who were trying to kill her. She's lost lovers, comrades, and friends. She's at her breaking point but she won't give up. I once said that the Alex Carew novels were the first books I read that dealt with the cost of war upon its survivors. I was wrong. I read Primary Inversion long before I heard of a guy named JA Sutherland. I just didn't have the eyes to see. I hate the fact that I didn't appreciate Asaro's work properly as a youngster, but I learned a lot by reading it now. Better late than never, I guess.

Primary Inversion is a work of Science Fiction that includes FTL travel and cannot, therefore, be one hundred percent scientifically accurate. It is, however, a work of science fiction written by an author with a doctoral degree in physics. I don't have any expertise in physics but I'm guessing the science is pretty good here. If you claim otherwise, you'd best have the skills necessary to go heads up with the owner of a physics company, because that's what Asaro uses that PhD for. She gets it as right as any scientist thirty years ago was going to (Primary Inversion was originally released in 1995). and she does it without condescending to her readers. Bravo.

## The Revenant and the Tomb by Herman P. Hunter

### Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Like any good fantasy adventure, The Revenant and the Tomb opens in a tavern.

When Drahm is approached by the golden haired young man, he assumes it's another foolish treasure seeker rushing to his demise, and he's not far off. Halsedric and his companions are looking to take that treacherous path, though treasure isn't his objective. While he has taken parties into the mountains before, Drahm warns, none of them have ever returned. Or if they have, it's as bloody and broken shells of their former selves.

Naturally, it wouldn't be much of a story if Halsedric was dissuaded. Nor would it be very interesting if this group of adventurers was anything but ordinary.

#### Story

Like any good fantasy adventure, The Revenant and the Tomb opens in a tavern. Drahm, the old guide, is disturbed by a handsome young stranger in search someone to show him the way to the mountains of the southern reaches. Many have gone there in search of treasure, and as long as they pay up front Drahm isn't above showing them the way. Most of them never come back, though.

The story revolves around one Sauscony “Soz” Valdoria, heir to a seat on the Triad - sort of a monarch type role, but crossed with the responsibility for powering the Kyle Web, sort of galaxy spanning internet. It enables communication across interstellar distances simultaneously ala Star Trek’s subspace communications, but it’s powered by psychic ability instead of fiber. Only Rhon psions can power the thing, and without it the Skolian Empire (a Constitutional Monarchy if there ever was one, only with three monarchs instead of one) will surely fall to the Traders of the Eubian Concord and their ruling dynasty of Aristos, led by the Qoxes.

Sure, I’ll define some terms for you. Take notes, these might come in handy later:

Psion - A person with the ability to feel someone else’s emotions through a psychic link. More powerful psions can read and project thoughts. The absolute most powerful (approximately one in a trillion per the text) are Rhon psions, the absolute most powerful. Rhon psions are not reproduceable in a lab.

Aristo - in this context an Aristo is a person who is almost a psion in reverse. They feel the pain of other people as pleasure, making them the ultimate sadists. They make frequent use of providers.

Provider - A slave that serves an Aristo. They are tortured in order to provide the pleasure that the Aristo craves. Psions are preferred for this role because their emotions project more powerfully and provide a more intense pleasure.

Soz, the main character, is a “primary”. It’s a naval rank equal in respect and stature to an Admiral, although she only commands a four-person element. All four pilot “Jags”, space fighters with supercomputers that can link with their “Jagernaut” pilots, who have to be psions. Only powerful psions can be Jagernauts because only a psion has the mental power to communicate with the computer with no interface other than their own brain.

All Jagernauts are utter badasses, not only in space but on the ground as well. They receive a huge amount of bionic implants to be able to do their job. They can destroy your spacecraft full of people in a dogfight or burn you down in the middle of an empty field with a pistol sized particle cannon called a “Jumbler.”

Oh, and Faster than Light travel takes place using a process called “inversion.” Hence the title “Primary Inversion.”

And that’s what I took from the book in my late teens. That’s a lot and you could legitimately stop there and still have an amazeballs novel. Soz does do some very action novel type things. With just that, this is a good book. Primary Inversion is so much more though.

Soz Skolia is so much more than a woman who can stomp a mudhole in anyone who makes her angry. She is a living, breathing, thinking, and feeling human being. On first blush, I didn’t pay much attention to that. If it’s not your first day at Jimbo’s you’ll probably know that I love a strong female protagonist. Soz is one of the reasons for that. But DUDE...

The whole book, the freaking plot of Primary Inversion, is Soz dealing with interpersonal and interstellar relationships. The Skolia family has enough internal politics to fill a Shakespearean play and stuff a Herbert novel with the leftovers. Seriously. Hamlet who? And dude, if you thought Romeo and Juliet had an ill-fated romance based on their family histories you really need to read Primary Inversion and find out what fictional family pressure is really like. It made my head spin.’

But Halsedric isn't a typical treasure seeker. It turns out, he's not interested in riches at all. He, along with his companions, the Wodeman Tulvgir and Herodiani of the Elanni, are on a quest of much greater importance. The trio is obviously inspired by a third of Tolkien's Fellowship. However, the opening chapters also reminded me Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories, sans wenching.

The nature of Halsedric's mission isn't dissimilar to Frodo's, in that it's almost the opposite of a treasure hunt. Yet there's a clever twist to Herman P. Hunter's story which makes it stand out from the other imitators. While the writing style is arguably overwrought and flowery, this twist, the inventive action sequences, and religious symbolism kept me invested.

## The characters

Drahm is both the guide for our heroes and the audience. He knows, or thinks he knows, everything about his world and surroundings. Not a religious man, he doesn't rule out the power of the gods either. Hasedric, however, opens him up to new worlds of possibilities.

The Revenant of the title refers to Halsedric, who appears to be an ordinary mortal. However, he's actually received a holy calling from the Allfather, the eternal God of the West, and is supernaturally equipped for its pursuit. There are many things he still doesn't know or understand, about himself and his God, and I'm sure future installments in the series will tell us more.

Wodemen are the dwarfs of Hunter's world. Tough and hungry, Tulvgir is the team's muscle. Meanwhile, Herodiani is elfin in her attributes. The least developed characters in the story, their respective races offer some interesting storytelling possibilities that one hopes Hunter will eventually flesh out with some original ideas.

## The world

This is your fairly typical fantasy realm, with all the expected Medieval technology, flaming swords, hordes of the undead, and so forth. The balance leans a little more toward Robert E. Howard style pulp than Tolkien's pastoral visions. Most of the story takes place in the wilderness, not in the small villages, so it's difficult to get a sense of the society.

## The politics

No politics to speak of, as the author is more interested in religious symbolism than in making political points.

## Content warning

In order for good to have a great victory, the evil must be very, very evil. This story isn't afraid to go to some dark places, with all the accompanying gory violence. No sex or language. Just lots of death and destruction.

## Who is it for?

This is for anyone looking for a quick, fantasy adventure. Fans of Tolkien, Howard, and Leiber should find something to like. There's no overbearing message or nihilism, just nifty escapism. While it may not be the most original story, there's something to be said for the familiar.

Why read it?

At under 200 pages, the book only asks for a small amount of our time and moves at a good pace, with some solid narration and colorful images. Just because *The Revenant* and *The Tomb* leans heavily on familiar tropes doesn't mean that Hunter isn't willing to take some chances, which generally pay off well. There's a germ of a good idea here, and one hopes it's further developed and explored.

## Storm Between the Stars by Karl Gallagher Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Karl Gallagher mixes his experience and expertise as an engineer with his abilities as a story teller to give us an engaging and very realistic tale of a clash of civilizations in the far future in *Storm Between the Stars*.

The story

Hundreds of years in the future, humanity has at last branched out and colonized other worlds. One small system, Fiera has been cut off from the rest of humanity for 900 years, trapped in a hyperspace bubble. While doing a routine survey of the hyperspace "weather" that keeps them inside The Bubble, the crew of *Azure Tarn* finds an opening and ventures back out into open space, hoping to learn how humanity has fared in the meantime. In short order, they stumble across a mining outpost where they pick up some information on how the language has changed, as well as a load of raw material for trading purposes. The *Azure Tarn* soon comes into contact with the Censorate, an interstellar empire that has arisen in the 900 years since Fiera was trapped in The Bubble. The crew spends plenty of time on the water world Corwynt, mostly learning local customs, including strange ones such as an artist's art has to be destroyed when he dies. That and a handful of other minor incidents lead Niko Landry and his crew to realize they haven't just stumbled into a different culture, they stumbled into a dictatorship that controls information with such an iron fist that no one is allowed to know simple things like how big the Censorate actually is.

The characters

Most of the story is told through the eyes of Marcus Landry, a young cargo master and the son of the captain and first mate of the *Azure Tarn*. His life is a simple one, directing the loading and unloading of cargo while trying to figure out how he should interpret the flirtations of his shipmate Alys. The solution to that particular problem presents herself in Wynny, the daughter of Vychan, the broker they contact to offload their goods from the mining colony. It's also through her that we learn much of the culture of Corwynt. Each of the characters is well-developed for their purpose in the story. Niko and Lane Landry are both good parents and professional about running their ship and knowing when it's time to fold and leave the game while they still can. In the final pages of the book, Niko is also shown to be a more than competent tactician. Others are less developed, but they serve their purpose, Becky is the consummate pessimist while Welly is the resident "fun girl" who realizes settling down might not be so bad. The rest of the crew and the natives of Corwynt are crafted in such a way that they all serve the plot without taking over from the main characters.

The world

Gallagher's MIT engineering degree comes into play with the world building, helping to give it a depth many sci-fi novels lack. He gives a great deal of thought to how a hypothetical hyperspace might work

and the way different ships are configured for different purposes, but he shines the brightest when building the world of Corwynt. Corwynt is where most of the story takes place. It's an ocean world dominated by massive hurricanes, sometimes many at once. The human presence there is thriving though, having built durable cities on the few islands large enough to support them. The author spends time describing how they are built specifically to withstand the rigors of the violent world. It isn't all engineering though. While Azure Tarn and her crew come from a culture that most readers would easily identify with, the world of Corwynt is clan-based, with family and business relationships so intertwined they are one and the same. The clans aren't the only culture on Corwynt though. There are also the Jaaphisii, a culture that spends most of its time at sea, hunting the giant monsters that inhabit the depths and bear names like Kraken and Leviathan. They are free of the Censorate's rules and taxes, but at the expense of an always grueling and usually short life. The details are all delivered in a natural way, never feeling forced or like you're just sitting through a data dump of information you really don't need. Indeed, the author's ability to convey large amounts of information in the way he does is the greatest strength of the book.

## The politics

There are some eerie parallels with the modern political scene. The Censorate and its tight control of information and literal erasing of history are the obvious villains while the primary protagonists are free traders from a much smaller, more individualistic society. It isn't always so simple though as the more family-focused clan structure of Corwynt is also shown in a very positive light, with many comparisons made between it and Fieran culture. In short, the book is pretty clear that if you are the one censoring information, you are definitely not the good guy.

## Why read it?

Storm Between the Stars is the first book of Gallagher's that I've read. I quickly bought and read the second book, Between Home and Ruin. While Storm is slow paced with little action until the end, I never felt bored. The characters and their desire to learn more about how humanity had developed in the nine centuries since they were cut off drew me in from the beginning.

At times, the cultural comparisons reminded me (in a good way) of Heinlein's Citizen of the Galaxy and its exploration of different ideas of freedom. And if you don't read the final battle of the book and think of Wrath of Khan, I'm not sure how to help you. The sequel as I said is already out so get this book now, and then get to the sequel, which I'll be reviewing here soon.

## The Summoned Sage by Denton Salle Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

## Chinese Isekai

A few months ago I was hired to edit a book called The Summoned Sage. It was fun, down-the-rabbit-hole Isekai fantasy. For the most part, it was a solid read. If it had sucked, and I needed to fix more of it ... well, I charge by the hour. This was a cheap editing job.

Now the book is out.

What did I think?

## The Story

Muchen the scribe is trying to summon a hero before he can be mowed down by assassins.

What he gets is a retired, widowed Texan named Tom from 21st century America who practices martial arts.

On the bright side, our new arrival's decades of martial arts training now translates into actual magical power, making him almost a weapon of mass destruction.

On the downside ... Muchen dies after summoning Tom, so our hero has been assigned a mission to save the world, he's a stranger in a strange land, hunted by tongs, ambushed by monsters, stalked by other magic users. And Tom doesn't exactly know how to control all this power. So, he might just destroy the world before he saves it.

Overall, this was a fun novel. The cultural clash comedy is entertaining. The pacing is brisk. The characters are fun to follow. It's more grounded in traditional mythology than something as delightfully gonzo as *Gun Magus*. And while one could describe the plot as a glorified road trip, the same could be said for *Wizard of Oz*. We're off to see the wizards... if we can avoid the landmines, boobytraps, and ambushes by monsters out of myth, and oh, do try to avoid being eaten.

The culture clashes lead to some interesting plot moments ... Such as when Tom pays for the Inn's servant girl to work with him while he's in town and only realizes later that he now owns a slave.

## The Characters

Like Thomas Covenant, our hero, also named Tom (I wonder if that's a coincidence?) spends at least half of the book wondering if he had a stroke or an aneurism, and was interacting in a dream world. Unlike Thomas Covenant, he errs on the side of caution, and acts like a decent human being from the moment he sets foot in this world. In part, because he's not fully convinced it is one. He's playing Pascal's Wager with reality.

And then there's Fan, the slave he ends up freeing by accident. She has quite a bit of character development, especially since she's younger than Tom, but she's more knowledgeable about the world.

It's also nice to have a partnership in a male/female duo rather than a Waif-Fu relationship.

## The World

The world building is solid. It has one narrative tone, it's consistent and thorough. And while we're not going Tolkien-deep, the book could probably go there if need be. It's based off of pre-existing mythology, so that shouldn't be difficult.

## Politics

None

## Content Warning

I wouldn't hand this one to any children. There's nothing really graphic, but you have cannibals, prosti-

tutes, death by medieval weaponry, and that's just in the first half.

Who is it for?

If you're fond of anime, manga, general Isekai, and martial arts films, you'd probably be interested in reading this one.

Why buy it?

It's a fun action fantasy novel that doesn't waste your time or dawdle by navel-gazing. It's just entertaining. Have fun.

## War of the Scaleborn by Courtney Alameda

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I just got back to World of Warcraft about a month ago. I think my subscription renewed last Friday, so that would have been exactly a month. I first started playing long ago when I was still married and my oldest daughter was a baby, then took a break to go back to college, then played for about another five-ish years and then took a break for about another five years. It's been a long, strange road but here I am, just getting back in after missing a good chunk of Battle for Azeroth, all of the Shadowlands and the vast majority of Dragonflight. I had forgotten how much I enjoy this game and its lore.

And I do thoroughly enjoy the lore. If you're familiar, I have the Loremaster achievement although it's only caught up to BFA. I'm going to have to go back and do Shadowlands and Dragonflight. I've already got a plan though, so it's just about finding the time. (And I might go back and plan through Burning Steppes again at some point. Hysterical!) And lore is something Blizzard is very good at.

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Whenever I pick up one of the lore novels attached to the game, I look forward to it, but it also makes me nervous. I'm never quite sure whether the author of the book (in this case Courtney Alameda) knows as much about the preceding lore as I do. More importantly, I always worry about whether they love the lore as much as I do. That matters to me. I never expect an author to write a story the way I would, but I do expect them to pay homage to what came before.

Yes, I'm coming to the point. Seriously. Right now, as a matter of fact.

All of that is to say that Courtney Alameda did a terrific job and War of the Scaleborn is an awesome book. She must have spent some time studying. She got things pretty much spot on. I was wondering how the whole Deathwing angle was going to work but Alameda navigated that mess perfectly. (WOW fans get what I'm talking about. If you're not familiar you probably still won't be at the end of the book, unless you read this and are paying very close attention.) She did a fine job of not just writing a good story, but of keeping things in context.

And context was needed here. Names like Alexstrasza, Nozdormu, Neltharion and others are very important to the lore of the game. Making those characters live and breathe was important. Making them believable to the people who know them (and we, in the form of our WoW toons have adventured with

a lot of these characters) was of supreme importance. Alameda knocked it out of the park.

But that's not to say that only WoW players should read War of the Scaleborn. This is a book that stands very well on its own. It's the lead into a WoW expansion, but that translates to it not referring to any events that happened in game even if it involves the characters that committed some of the actions that led to those events. This is a story that's pretty easy to follow if you enjoy what it's about.

Oh, yeah. I should probably talk about what the book is about in this book review. That might be somewhat important, right? Sorry, got lost in the sauce for a second. It happens to the best of us.

War of the Scaleborn is, at its heart, a war story. Of course, the war is fought between Dragons and their allies. That's where the "Scaleborn" part comes from. It's a titanic struggle and it's fought to decide the fate of pretty much every dragon on Azeroth. The two sides are defined as the "ordered" dragons, those altered by the magic of a race known as the "Titans" (Yes, Greek myth is where the name comes from, but these are not the Titans of Greek myth) and those who have not, the "Primalists". The Primalists have the numbers. The Ordered dragons have a well-prepared defense, their magical boosts and a determination to survive and be left alone that is, quite frankly, frightening in its intensity.

The ordered dragons are led by the Aspects; Magically supercharged dragons infused with a particular power. For example, Alexstraza is the queen of dragons and is known as the Life Binder. Her job is to defend life. She has a lot of healing powers. Nozdormu is the Aspect of Time. Think Dr. Strange and his ability to see the future and you wouldn't be too far off in some respects.

The Primalists are led by the Incarnates. Each is empowered by and controls a different element. Their leader is Iridkron, who controls Earth. He's the fearsome type and he hates him some ordered dragons. He does have legitimate reasons for his beef though. I'm not going to tell you what those are because spoilers, but dude is not happy with what he sees going on around him.

What this leads to is a titanic battle worthy of a Battletech novel. It's great too. I've read a lot of accounts of dragons battling, but it's usually just a few. Not in War of the Scaleborn. This is entire wings of dragons flying straight at each other. There are some ground forces among allied races but for the most part the war is fought in the air. It's intense. It's realistic -or at least plausible- combat between dragons. Breath weapons, tail buffeting, claws, bites. I've read a lot of fantasy combat in my time and seldom has it been this up close and personal.

The political machinations in WOTS are worthy of a Frank Herbert novel. There is a lot going on here. Deals are made. Secrets are kept. Not everything is as it seems to the characters, although the readers know more than pretty much any of them. Alameda does a great job of showing how sometimes the people in charge have to compromise their principles for the good of the realm.

And "people" is precisely the right word for them. I've never met or corresponded with Alameda, but she seems to be familiar with one of my favorite sayings; "Dragons are people too." They're intelligent. They communicate. Dragons, in short, are self-aware and have many of the same concerns as humans although, properly done, they probably won't view things the same way a human would and may have some different needs based on biology.

Seriously. I'm a huge Harry Potter fan, but the one thing that I didn't like about the series is the way Rowling treated dragons as basically dumb animals that could breathe fire. I'm much more of a fan of the treatment that people like Naomi Novik (read the Temeraire series now if you haven't already) and Christopher Paolini (Eragon) treat dragons. As of right now, Alameda is going on that list as well be-

cause she hit the nail on War of the Scaleborn.

And Alexstrasza's character arc has to be seen to be believed. She goes from young and naive, to making decisions based on necessity. Then she becomes hardened by years of war. Finally, she goes into an honored statesdragon mode and realizes that what she did was wrong, even if it was pragmatic. Her vision for the future of dragonkind is a great one by the end of the book. War of the Scaleborn is so much more than just Alexstrasza's story, but it's worth reading because of her alone.

Speaking as a World of Warcraft fan, I loved Alameda's work. Speaking as a fantasy fan, I loved War of the Scaleborn. Speaking as a fantasy fan, this was an awesome read. And speaking as a fan of dragons in particular, it doesn't get any better. I'm going to read this again, and I'm going to do it soon.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Stolen Eggs

## Prose Bono

The Art of Design  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

*Long before the fantastic tools that AI gives us came along for Indie Authors trying to figure out effective book covers and marketing materials. The principles in the post apply now, more than ever. The art doesn't matter much if the design is terrible. Even if you aren't making your own covers, you need to understand the concepts to guide your choices of a designer or \*shudder\* premade book covers.*

I took a design course over the winter term, and there were some points we covered which I knew would be useful to the readers here. Design is not just for Graphic Designers, artists, and engineers. Indie authors can use the knowledge of what works (and what doesn't) to better plan and approve ideas for book covers, promotional material, and ad design. I'm not going to replicate the entire course here, but I can recommend the textbook (which was surprisingly affordable) and hit some high points that I think are useful.

The first one I wanted to talk about is the aesthetic usability effect. In a nutshell, people like pretty things. The books say that 'designs that look easier to use have a higher probability of being used, whether or not they actually are easier to use.' This may not seem applicable to a book - most people know how to use one, even ebooks. But the reactions of people to a book cover - that is where aesthetics comes in for the indie author. A beautiful cover will promote more positive reactions from the reader. So will a well laid out ad, or attractive art on promotional products. Striving for a more appealing overall look on your blog or website is worth the time and effort because the relationship browsers and readers have with you will be more positive.

Alignment, the placement of elements to line up their edges along a common (and usually imaginary) line, or their bodies around a center, is a somewhat intuitive thing for most of us. Alignment helps the eye connect related elements and speeds the comprehension when used with written elements. Area alignment is similar but related more to images. When you are working with an asymmetric object, it's better to line them up by the body of the shape rather than the edges.

Ever wonder why all the images you see on book covers are beautiful people? That's because we humans perceive attractiveness as being related to intelligence, competence, morality, and sociability. There is actually a known waist-to-hip ratio (0.70 for women, 0.90 for men) that is ideal for the perception of attractiveness. Also, women with exaggerated lips, and men in expensive clothing... I'm not making this up! A related principle, and one that is easier to see immediate applications for book covers, is the Face-ism Ratio. The ration of face to body showing in the image determines how the person is perceived. A high face-ism ratio with just the face showing rates as being more intelligent, dominant, and ambitious. A lower face-ism ratio, where the face takes up perhaps 25% of the image, is perceived as focusing more on the sensuality and physical attractiveness of the person.

Let me show you why this applies to your headshots, also. Something to keep in mind - as an author, you're not just marketing your books, you are marketing *you*. Choosing the right headshot for book or website use, for public appearance announcements, is important. Never use a headshot that is too old, especially if you do public appearances, as it will deceive the viewers and leave a bad impression.

A low face-ism ratio, combined with the costume, makes the perception of this image very different than the one next to it.

Moving away from imagery back into text, we should talk about Chunking, or why you shouldn't swamp your readers with lots of text on promotional materials or the book covers. By using a limited amount of text and breaking it into smaller units, your reader will better remember vital information like your name, book titles, or website. Simplifying the design does not mean eliminating text elements but rather keeping them short and tightly written - don't waste a word of them. Consider the signal to noise ratio in your design. More signal, less noise makes the message much clearer to the reader.

When it comes to catching the eye of the viewer, there are some techniques that you can use like Classical Conditioning, which provokes a response in the viewer based on the stimulus given. Kittens make people smile, an image with a badly scarred or wounded person makes them wince. I'm not saying kittens belong on the cover of your space opera. I'm saying that spaceships, planets, and humanoids in space suits provoke a response to stimulus: oh, this must be science fiction! This is why we talk so much about cueing properly with the art on your cover, people are conditioned to react to elements they may not consciously recognize. If they pick up that cover with a spaceship and read about magic and fairies and... WTH? They are experiencing cognitive dissonance. While it can be used as an attention-getter, the design needs to alleviate the dissonance (say, in the blurb on the back) if the reader is going to be comfortable with it.

Which brings me to the von Restorff Effect. This is a phenomenon where things that are very different are more likely to be remembered than something commonly seen. You can easily picture in your head the effect. If you are driving down the road, you are surrounded by vehicles. Sedans, trucks, semis, but the one you will remember when you get home and tell people about is being passed by the Oscar Meyer Weiner driving down the interstate. The thing that is different is highlighted (another important principle of design) in your memory.

Finally, we come to the Entry Point. Your book's cover is the entry point. "The initial impression of a system or environment greatly influences subsequent perceptions and attitudes, which then affects the quality of subsequent interactions." **Yes, people do judge a book by its cover.** A bad cover means that they are negatively influenced before they even begin to read the story you've worked so hard on. Now, I've only lightly touched on the concepts you can use to make your output better. Next week I'll be back with more, and possibly homework.

## The Art of Design Part II

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

We have so many tools now for design, as Indie Authors. It's exciting and can be a lot of fun to create marketing materials for your books, but still and always you need to understand what works, and why. It will make your work more effective, and wasting time is the last thing you can afford to do!

I started this last week as a way of passing on the material I'd recently learned in a design class. Although much of this is quite broadly applicable, we indie authors can take it and use it for book covers, promotional materials, ads, and more. Even if we're not doing the design work, the principles here will help us better understand how to ask someone else to make magic happen.

The Rule of Thirds is usually applied to photography, but it works with any visual image. If you want to add interest to your layout, don't center the main focal point. By offsetting the focus, you draw the attention more naturally to the main object of the picture. "Two distinct, equal lights, should never appear in the same picture : One should be principal, and the rest sub-ordinate, both in dimension and degree : Unequal parts and gradations lead the attention easily from part to part, while parts of equal appearance hold it awkwardly suspended, as if unable to determine which of those parts is to be considered as the subordinate." John Thomas Smith, writing in 1797 to first enunciate the concept. It's been around for a while.

One of important rule of composition in photography is the 'Third Rule'.

The Gutenberg Diagram does a similar thing, but with text. The concept is to describe the pattern a reader's eyes take when presented with evenly distributed information. If you divide your page into four imaginary quarters, the eye will begin at the top left, drift across the page, diagonally back to the left, and finally to the bottom corner. If you're laying out, say, the back cover of a book, or a postcard, this can be very useful in telling you where to put the vital pieces of information, and which areas are less likely to be noted by the reader.

When you're putting text elements on a cover, in addition to the rule of thirds and Gutenberg diagram, you want to keep Proximity in mind. It seems obvious - the closer two things are spatially, the more they are related - but it makes a difference. If I'm going to have a title, my name, and 'author of Pixie Noir' on a cover, where do I put that last element? What about "Five Space Opera Tales"? If I reversed those and put the 'author of Pixie Noir' next to the title instead of my name, it could be confusing.

This handsome cover (Ok, OK, I'm biased. But it's a handy prop) also shows propositional density. Propositional density is the amount of data a design is conveying. Designs which have more density are more interesting than designs which are very simple. There's a fine line here, you don't want it to become cluttered. But you can say a lot with iconic representation - I have a spaceship, so that's science fiction, and the red, white and blue seems obvious (although it's not actually part of the stories in an implicit way). The art doesn't have to be highly detailed, relatively simple elements can be rich with meaning on a subconscious level.

The next principle I'm going to talk about is somewhat tricky. It's related to branding, which you should be doing for yourself and your books, and it's called the Exposure effect. The idea here is that a concept people are neutral on, or even lightly negative toward - will through repeated exposure become more likable. The reason it's tricky for Indie Authors is that we all know that one person who never

does anything except blare ‘buy my book!’ on social media. Instead, this is about making people familiar with you in positive ways. The strongest effects are seen with pictures, meaningful words (buy my book would not seem to be the right ones here), names (you! and not Author Jane Doe, no, make your name the one people recognize), and logos. How many of us can instantly recognize a Baen Rocket on a shelf full of spines and gravitate toward that book? However, be aware that the exposure effect can be overdone and it will bore people and weaken if it is repeated too often. Which means you need fresh material to put in front of the readers, whether it’s new promo, ads, books, or just blog posts.

While you are exposing yourself (heh! No, not like that!) you should keep the performance load in mind. “The greater the effort to accomplish a task, the less likely the task will be accomplished successfully.” (Universal Principles of Design) In other words, people are seeing your stuff and they like it. How easy is it for them to actually give you money? Do you have a clickable link that takes them to a buy button? Are there clear places on your blog where folks can select and purchase your work? If they look for you on Amazon, is all your work in one place with a clearly recognizable you on the Author Page? You wouldn’t believe how difficult it can be to make sure you’re tracking down the right person, with the right books, from people who really ought to know better. Keep in mind that humans, like water and electricity, follow the path of least resistance. Make it easy, or leave money on the table.

Oh, and don’t forget that the picture really is worth a thousand words. I know it sounds trite. But the Picture Superiority Effect is well documented, and it makes a big difference when people are looking for you. People remember that logo, photo, or book cover, when the words that accompany it have long faded from memory.

And finally, since I promised, homework.

I’ve been debating what to give you all that isn’t too terribly hard, doesn’t require website design (not for the faint of heart) and will be immediately useful.

Postcards!

So here’s what I want you to do. In the program you’re most comfortable with, be it GIMP, Photoshop, or what-have-you, lay out a 4x6” postcard. You should use book covers for the graphics, a logo if you have one, and just enough words to ease the performance load. Keep the visual principles, and the Gutenberg diagram, in mind. Also, you want to keep your legibility of any text high, and the signal-to-noise ratio low. I’m going to suggest you create and add a QR code to the postcard as well. It’s your choice if you want to do front and back, or just front. Save it as a jpg or png file. But do follow along to learn how to make yours better.

The last postcard I did was a quick piece to promote my best selling series. There’s nothing on the back of this one, it was only intended to be handed out at cons. [Note from the present - all of these books have new covers, and I no longer use this postcard, but the principles remain!]

## Writing a Bingeable Series

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I’ve been reading, since I spent two weeks sick and then recovering (my husband would like me to say I’m still not recovered...) from what was likely a bout with the ‘flu. When I’m sick, I read. Furthermore, I have specific things I look for to read when I’m unwell and not wanting a challenge mentally.

Since I read very fast, I want more than just one book. I want a cozy book – one that I can wrap around my brain like a warm blanket to echo the one around my shoulders while I sip warm tea. For me, I have a predilection for cozy mysteries, so it's not that I'm looking to avoid drama – or, for that matter, pathos, since one of the series I've been reading made me a little, well, let's just say the room got dusty. No, cozy is more a feeling of being comfortable with certain characters, the setting, and the friendships portrayed in the books.

First point, then: must have likeable characters. There can be villains, and characters who betray you, but the primary cast should be good people doing competent things, showing human emotions, and who draw you into thinking they could be friends. Kindred spirits, to use a phrase from a favorite girlhood author.

Second point: the plot doesn't have to be a heavy one, but it shouldn't be stupid. I get annoyed very quickly with many cozies, where the (usually female) MC is simply too stupid to live. Since cozy mysteries are generally being investigated by someone whose job is not to be an investigator, you really want to have a good reason for them to do this. Or at least, I do.

Third point: to be a bingeable series, there needs to be a reason to go from one book to the next... usually. Sometimes it's enough to have characters the reader really enjoys, and each mystery is standalone. Sometimes it is very helpful to have unresolved plot threads which the reader cares about and will keep reading to find out what happens in the next book. The series I've been most recently reading, *The Homefront Sleuths*, has a few of those, including one revealed in book five which was, in my opinion, unnecessary and a bit too pat. On the other hand, I'm trying not to put spoilers here! there was an earlier is-she-isn't-she? which had me on the edge of my seat rushing to the next book to find out. Which is exactly what you want to do to your binge readers.

Final point: know when to stop. This is perhaps the most difficult part for authors, and readers, and frankly there may not be a right point to give it up. I have finished up a series and wanted more. I have wandered off, bored, from a series and never bothered to go back to finish it, even though I loved the first several books (the Peter Shandy series, book 5 threw me out of the series so hard\*, and even though I did read about to book 7) because the later plots became repetitious and I felt I knew what was going to happen. Long running series are difficult to pull off, the best of them, like Alma Boykin's *Familiars*, or John Van Stry's *Valens*, actually take a break to shift focus on a new cast of characters. In both those series, from one generation to the next, but it can also be done in other ways. In all cases, there comes a point when the series goes stale. The author starts to phone it in, and you can tell. If you the author aren't sure when that point is? Your sales numbers will tell you, I think. I can't be alone in giving up and wandering off at certain books in a series. If the author is paying attention, this is a cue. Also, you won't bring those readers back with the next book in the same series. It is time to find a new theme, new setting, new characters, and start over fresh, because this, I think with my reader hat on, will get the readers back again. I know I have authors I enjoyed well enough to go 'oh, new books/series, will look at this!' and picked up even when I'd been bored by end of the last series.

For comfort reads, I'm not looking too hard behind the curtain. As long as the historical accuracy is paid lip-service and doesn't have an egregious howler, so long as the world hangs together well enough to set the story and give the characters their stage, I'm happy with it. Remember, I tend to read these when I'm sick and my brain is foggy. Given the difficulty of finding a decently written cozy in the ever-widening stream of the Big River's books, once I find a series I'm satisfied with, I'll likely binge it. Which you, my dear authors, should think about as you write.

\*The reason the *Curse of the Giant Hogweed* threw me so hard was that it was a weird fantasy/dream

setting in the middle of what had been a slightly tongue-in-cheek small town mystery series. And it was a slog to get through, as the author was hung up on playing off the characters established quirks rather than a plot. It was just... no. Didn't work for me.

~Finis~