

The R3F Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

September 2019

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Editorial

And greetings from the September 2019 issue of **The N3F Review of Books**. In this issue we have reviews of two dozen books, not one but two articles for Prose Bono, two letters of comment, and reviews of two volumes of literary criticism, one being that most peculiar of creatures, a volume of literary criticism analyzing a fantasy (in the sense of the founding fathers of the N3F) novel.

We continue to face a challenge on keeping a line between book reviews and discussions of politics. The line is currently set at avoiding remarks castigating authors for their political or social opinions, or past political deeds, for example, involvement in the Hugo awards debate of some years ago. Of course, this means that readers are missing some of the more flamboyant discussion and interesting analyses of some of our authors and letter writers. **Readers, what are your preferences here?**

A word of thanks goes to long-time Neffer Jean Lamb, who volunteered to help proofread our reviews. Yes, we have good reviewers, but even with modern electronic support it is very difficult to edit and proofread your own work. A word of thanks also to Bob Jennings for suggesting that we should organize the list of novels we are reviewing in each issue.

We continue to welcome book reviews both from our regular reviewers and from N3F members and others. Because we are published electronically, there is no current practical limit to the number of reviews we can publish. At a guess, publication will be monthly.



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NOVELS

Asbaran Solutions by Chris Kennedy Review by Pat Patterson

Mad props to the people who did the cover, Brenda Mihalko and Ricky Ryan. Great spooky mecha art, and a design that fits in with the rest of the series.

Nigel Shirazi has spent his recent life hating his name. He hates his first name because it has become a personal acronym for repeated failure: "Never Is Good Enough: Loser." When taunted, he lashes out, and lands in trouble, sometimes in jail, and the cycle is then repeated elsewhere.

He hates his last name because it means that he is an unwanted member of the family that owns Asbaran, one of the Four Horsemen, the mercenary companies who survived the initial rounds of contract warfare when the Earth was admitted to the Galactic Union, with nothing to offer in exchange for economy-wrecking technology except fighters.

And Nigel doesn't want to be a mercenary. Nobody else wants Nigel to be a mercenary, either. He gets paid off to be a dilettante, a remittance man, someone who will stay away and not bother the important people who are carrying on the important business.

And then a bad thing happens.

Several bad things, in fact. All of the male senior members of the Shirazi are killed, the single surviving female is captured, and some strange events in the trading of securities and equipment have resulted in the company going bankrupt.

There is no alternative but to bring Nigel the Loser out of the junkyard, and put him in charge. He immediately dashes to the Border of Insanity, a place he has lived most of his life, and resolves to use the limited resources remaining to Asbaran to complete the same mission that has crushed everyone else.

There's something bizarre going on, though. It doesn't make sense that Asbaran would have been offered the mission in the first place. It's a garrison mission; go here, take up positions, and defend it, until a specified time. That's NOT what Asbaran does; they are an assault company. Drop in, kill things, then go away to the next mission. There's something funny about this, and it isn't Monty Python.

Excellent book. Lots of exploding spaceships. Lots of room for character growth. Lots of Red Shirts. Lots of Bad Guys getting their just desserts. Buy it!

Castaway Planet by Ryk Spoor and Eric Flint Review by Jim McCoy

Have you ever wanted to just chuck it all and get away from EVERYONE? Have you ever thought about what really roughing it would be like? Has it ever occurred to you that being off the beaten path would be a good thing? Would you enjoy a chance to take on the whole world and everything in it

with just a few of your nearest and dearest? If so, then *Castaway Planet* by Ryk Spoor and Erik Flint is for you.

At the beginning of the story we're treated to the rather idyllic scene of our main character Sakura Kime and her friend Harratrer aka Whips (a genetically-engineered alien Bemmius Novus Sapiens) playing stalking games in the corridors of a colony ship. There is an lifeboat drill called. Soon after there is an accident aboard ship and that's when the action starts.

The family in the pod finds itself adrift in interstellar space. I'm not an expert here, but their method for identifying the closest star seems both well-researched and actually possible. Fortunately, Sakura is a pilot-trainee, being still a teenager, but has learned her lessons well and manages to get them onto the planet safely. Things seem to be pretty simple at first. That is, until disaster strikes and "easy" literally sinks out of sight.

It's hard to be specific from here without spoilers, but suffice it to say that the list of challenges faced by our heroes is both long and, in many cases, unpredictable. The cast is forced in some cases to handle the predictable questions as well, things like, "Is the water potable?" and "What are we going to eat once the rations run out?" but all in all, those are subjects he could not have believably avoided. Ask any survival expert and they will tell you that the first priority in a survival situation is water. The next is food.

The equipment that the would-be colonists turns castaways bring with them is equal to the task, as are the people wielding it. It's not always obvious that either will be but this a story in the finest traditions of *The Swiss Family Robinson* or *Robinson Crusoe*. Our heroes always find a way to get through whatever fate throws at them. Whether it's building a shelter or defending themselves from the native wild-life, they manage to get through somehow.

One thing I found especially pleasing about this work is that, while it is in fact related part of the *Boundary* series, it is easily understandable with no prior knowledge of the previous books. This book works perfectly well as a stand-alone and was even more fun as a follow on to those of us who had read what came before. There are a few references early in the story, but none are critical to understanding what is going on and all feel like they were put there for the enjoyment of existing fans.

My only problem with this book is how incredibly tightly it's plotted. The twin facts that everyone in the family happens to be in their lifeboat both before and during the accident is both extremely fortunate and just a little too coincidental for my liking. The fact that the people in the lifeboat, mom Laura (doctor), dad Akira (biologist), sister Melody (no real occupation at age ten, but an organizational wiz), baby sister Hitomi and of course Whips (engineer) and Sakura (pilot) all happen to be in the same capsule together just when things go wrong seems a bit contrived. Granted, all of these coincidences are necessary to the plot and I really can't think of anything he could have done differently, but at the end of the day, they seemed to stretch things a bit further than I was really comfortable with.

That much being said, I really did enjoy the book and highly recommend it. *Castaway Planet* is the perfect excuse to stay inside a nice warm house this winter. Also, if keeping warm is what you've got in mind, it helps to read about a family stranded in the tropics, even if it does make one a bit jealous. I'm giving this one 4.5 out of 5 colony ships.

Deep Roots by Ruthanna Emrys
Review by Pat Patterson

The book in question is "Deep Roots," by a person allegedly named Ruthanna Emrys. I say 'allegedly named' because "Emrys" means "Immortal One" and is a title given to Merlin, and it just seems like the sort of pen-name a person writing "Deep Roots" would find appealing. It doesn't matter, though.

What DOES matter, to me, is that this book was nominated for the Dragon Award in the 'Fantasy' category. It ain't fantasy. It's horror.

I want NOTHING to do with horror. Ever.

It has to do with lost monster people out of Innsmouth, which is a setting described by that most nasty person with the gigantic jaw, Mr. Howard Phillips Lovecraft. As a person who actively avoids horror, the name "Innsmouth" didn't ring any bells, but then I encountered a reference to the two languages of "Enochian and R'lyeh."

Even a person who AVOIDS exposure is likely to have encountered those terms.

So, I did a quick scan of prior reviews, and discovered that this is a thoughtful piece about who the monsters really are.

If anyone wishes to paddle about in that pond, they are free to do so.

Not me, though. I don't read horror books, I don't watch horror movies, and I don't permit those in my house. It's a mental health issue. My adult bio-sons think my exclusions are silly, because I can watch folks getting shot without qualms, but draw the line at spooky stuff. That's okay; it's my line to draw.

And I don't watch just ANY folks getting shot: no women, no kids, no animals (except Ol' Yeller, still cry at that; and Bambi's mama).

No porn.

No horror.

And that's all I got to say about that.

Foundryside by Robert Jackson Bennett
Review by Pat Patterson

"Foundryside" is an amazingly smooth read. I've noticed an uncomfortable tendency to dump bizarre place and people names at the beginning of some fantasy books; it seems the author must IMMEDIATELY establish that this isn't taking place in mundane land, and they don't quite trust the "FANTASY" tags on the cover to get the point across. If they also toss in an info dump about how magic works, it makes it worse; and, if they haven't gotten all of the tendencies to purple prose yet hammered out of their system, it can be just as close to unreadable as you can get.

None of that here. Bennett does an excellent job of showing, not telling. It's only after he has established that protagonist Sancia feels the walls, and gets a complete understanding of their environment from that, and that use of that power makes the scar on her head burn, that he tells us why that's the case. It works well.

Sancia is an approximately teen-age guttersnipe thief girl, who is proficient in the use of her ability to 'hear' and understand physical structures, small enough to fit in tiny places/openings, and strong enough to handle the necessary acrobatics to climb roofs, etc. She is NO Mary Sue, though. Her ability to hear the floors, walls, etc, talking to her also means that she can't tolerate much touching her skin; it produces a sensory overload. She can't even eat meat, or drink water, because she identifies so strongly with what it is and where it's been. Plain rice, some beans from time to time, and weak cane wine is all she can tolerate. She even hates to have to put on new clothing, because she has to adapt to what the new cloth has experienced.

She has a plan, though: she has heard that there are criminal-element docs, who can free her of the gift/curse via an expensive surgery. So, she partners with former upper-class fixer Sark. He identifies worthy objects; she steals them; they split the take. The take on this last job is an unbelievable amount, enough to get repaired, and to escape the wicked city of Tevanne.

Actually, the city isn't THAT wicked. It's just horribly constructed around the use of magic. From the scraps of a prior civilization, a few magical concepts have been recovered or rediscovered. By means of scrying cryptic symbols on an object, it can be made to perform simple acts, or to have certain characteristics. Until fairly recently, though, it was too cumbersome for most uses; if you tried to scrive all the desired characteristics on the head of an axe, you'd run out of room. However, a discovery in some ancient ruins showed how all the needed traits could be linked into a single scrying, which would be small enough to fit. That condensation of instructions can be compounded further, and via a series of links and instructions, entire construction industries can be built.

If you have ever done any programming, this will sound VERY familiar to you. It's not the magic itself that is horrible; it's the uses it's been put to. All of the power is concentrated into a very few merchant houses, and they seem to spend as much time protecting their privilege and limiting access to their processes as they spend making shoes, or building boats, or whatever. Industrial espionage is a significant part of their business practice, and while they HAVE managed to come together and ban certain extremely dangerous magical uses, there is no thought of establishing anything that looks like an authority over their individual practices.

And that leaves no one with the authority, and perhaps not the inclination, to look out for the welfare of those who don't fit into the institutional structure of the merchant houses. As a result, you have lovely, clean, well-lighted dwellings for the merchants and agents of each house, all enclosed in impenetrable walls with gates and guards to keep other merchants of other houses out. And as for the refuse, nobody cares. They can live or die as they see fit, as long as they don't intrude on the business and well-being of the merchants. If that happens, doom comes, in the form of well-armed and armored troops with magical weapons and some pretty lethal non-magical weapons as well.

They kill or capture the offenders, and those who die may be the most favored. Convicted offenders (and they are ALWAYS convicted) are punished by having magical wire loops placed around various appendages; the loops then contract, slowly, until the appendage is amputated. Sometimes, this results in death; other times, in crippling. The merchants don't really care, except for the value of the punishment as a source of entertainment.

In the midst of this lawless depravity, Captain Gregor Dandolo cuts a solitary figure. A war veteran who has seen horrible things, he resolves to bring order to the city, and he starts by cleaning up the waterfront. He hires guards to watch over the area, and they eliminate the theft and trafficking taking place, until thuggery departs.

Which makes the waterfront a safe place to store things. And one particular thing, from this safe location, is what Sancia must steal in order to earn her monster, life-changing paycheck.

And, she steals it!

The object she steals is contained inside a simple wooden box; she has to preserve it for three days, before she can meet up with Sark, and make the transfer. However, her escape plan got a little too enthusiastic, and instead of just causing a distraction, she burns the whole waterfront. She fears that the enraged Captain Dandolo will be hot on her trail, and she needs to have some way to stay safe, yet retain possession of whatever is in the box. So, she opens the box, and finds a gold key.

And discovers the key can talk to her, and hear her thoughts. It's a unique key, that can open any lock, and detect scried objects from a distance. In the hands of a merchant house, they could have immediate access to the secrets of all the other houses; nothing would be safe.

And, THEN, it gets weird.

This is a very well-written book, with lots of flashy, bang bang boom boom bits of violent conflict tossed in to keep the characters motivated. The villains are boo-hiss dastardly. The heroes are sufficiently flawed to make them lovable. The logic behind the magic only requires the SLIGHTEST bit of suspension of belief, because it's clear that it takes a good bit of organization and skill to make the devices work as intended. If a world is posed in which any dope can do any magic, it just doesn't play, because there's no realistic conflict possible. Here, magic is a resource, and access to it can be controlled similarly to access to energy, food, and so on.

As for The Question: Is "Foundryside" a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Fantasy Novel?

My opinion: Out of the five books I've reviewed in this category, two of them are non-starters. One, "Deep Roots" by Ruthanna Emrys, I exclude because it appropriately belongs in the horror category. But I think it's a horse race between "House of Assassins," by Larry Correia, "Lies Sleeping" by Ben Aaronovitch, and "Foundryside." I think it's going to come down to the size of individual fan bases, and personal preferences.

So, yes, this one is a worthy contender.

Gemini Warrior by J. D. Cowan
Review by Declan Finn

Publisher Silver Empire has developed its own superhero universe, a book version of the MCU. Contributors range from the relatively new to Dragon Award finalists.

The latest entry in the series is brought to you by JD Cowan's -- Gemini Man.

The night shift at a science lab sounds like the break Matthew White has been waiting for. A steady paycheck. A simple job. Absolutely no contact with another human being.

It's perfect.

But Matthew gets more than he bargained for when he accepts a different position with the company. A job that is highly paid – and highly bizarre. He is plunged into the terrible machinations of his new boss, Mrs. Stohl. A sullen teenaged boy named Jason is along for the ride. The fact that Jason is practically his twin only makes it all creepier.

Dragged through a mirror into an alien dimension, Matthew is in way over his head. He should have known the job was too good to be true. To escape, Matthew and Jason must brave the wilds of this new universe and learn to control their new powers.

And hardest of all, Matthew must learn to be a hero.

Will they escape Mrs. Stohl's terrible plans for them? Can they make it home to their world, or will they be trapped in the mirror dimension forever?

Join Matthew and Jason on their pulp superhero adventure. Read Gemini Warrior today!

Gemini Warrior was different in many respects from the previous Silver Empire superhero universe novels. The other books were largely character based. This is both character and world based. Which makes for an interesting shift in tone and execution.

Even the tone is markedly different at times from the other novels. There are a few sections in the opening where you can imagine it being from a black and white movie, where Edward G Robinson or Jimmy Cagney is spitting out dialogue in a solid, entertaining rant. It's one of the nice things about having a shared universe spread out among so many different authors. Even the descriptions of persons and actions seem very noir.

And when the description says that this is a pulp superhero adventure, this is less the Shadow, and more Flash Gordon. We even have an evil emperor who has magic powers (come now, Ming could walk through fire, and the "science" was more magic than anything else), as well as other super powered lackeys to do his bidding. And many of the villains look like they utilize a combination of mad science and magic in order to wield the unearthly forces at their command.

... And yes, I did recently watch the complete Buster Crabbe Flash Gordon serials. Why do you ask?

As for our characters ... When we meet heroes Jason and Matthew, it's fun watching the inevitable train

wreck coming their way. One of the opening scenes involve locking the two of them in a room together so they can get to know each other. We soon find that while they are of similar temperament, most of their opinions are diametrically opposed to each other.

I'm looking at the note I made on the Kindle edition. "We're going to link these two at the hip, aren't we?" Yes, yes we are. And we're going to give them the code names of Castor and Pollux, because JD is that literate, and superheros are just that subtle.

So we have another, well developed world, and evil dictator wielding magic to rule over the world. We have random encounters and fights with potential friends.

Over all, I enjoyed it. Do I think it's the best of the heroes thus far? Nope. I think that award goes to the next in the sequence. In any sane system, it would be a mid-range novel -- a solid setup to an interesting universe that I would get the next books in order to see where it ends up. But given that Amazon has turned a 3-star rating to "critical," (No, Amazon, I LIKED this book) I'm going to have to give this 4 out of five stars.

Get Gemini Man here, today. And enjoy.

Justified by Jon del Arroz Review by Jim McCoy

I recently had an interesting experience that made my face turn purple and made my head want to pop off: Someone (and I don't remember who) had posted something about fantasy authors in particular being unChristian. What really set me off was when I found out that one of the excoriated authors was C.S. Lewis. Why? Because EVERYTHING THE MAN WROTE WAS CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY!!! It kind of gets my goat, especially as a Christian who loves those books. That reminds me. I need to get copies for my eight year old.

Sorry.

I bring this up to underline this fact: Science Fiction and Fantasy have a long history of religious themes and that it works IF IT'S DONE WELL. Fortunately for Mr. Jon Del Arroz and those of us who consider themselves his fans, he's done a damn good job with Justified: Saga of the Nano Templar Book One. Seriously, I love this book.

Justified is the story of Drin, a Templar warrior serving the Elorian people. It has a lot of combat to be sure. That's good. It's Space Opera with a touch of Space Fantasy. If you like Star Wars and not Justified I don't know what to tell you. It's got that kind of epic scope and maybe even some similar weaponry.

Del Arroz himself has referred to Justified as Deus Vult in space (And no, Deus Vult is not a Nazi saying.) and it fits. This is definitely a Crusader style book set in a different segment of space where there are no humans. All of the characters are aliens, and he had to adapt the Gospel story to another setting but it works.

What works better, to my mind at least, is that Drin himself has a major crisis of faith. Sort of. Maybe it's less a crisis of his faith than it is a doubt that he's spreading it in the correct manner. When one

spreads their faith through war and combat and the head of the religion (called Yezuah in the book) is a man of peace, it makes sense to take pause at the forcible seizure of real estate in the effort to convert the populace. I get it.

I also get the other characters in *Justified* and that's what makes the book work so well. A man of faith is a believable construct since they do exist in real life (on my better days I like to think I'm a good one) but not everyone is of God. That's not just a fact, it's a reality that must be dealt with on a regular basis. And not everyone in the book is a man of God. Most don't try to be. A few happen to be members of a competing religion. It's fairly obvious which one, too.

That's good though. Every epic saga needs a definable enemy and Del Arroz has picked an ancient foe of his religion. The battle for souls is not a new one and it translates well over interstellar distances. Del Arroz has packed just enough history into his fanciful setting to make it work while still realizing that he's not writing history and he doesn't have to get all the details of the Siege of Wherever correct, because that's not what he's writing about.

The point I was trying to make before I so effectively derailed myself though is this: Drin loves to proselytize his religion. It's his calling. Not everyone he witnesses to believes at first. That's normal. It doesn't work that way in real life. In the end though, many do. That's also realistic. Christianity is the world's largest religion. It didn't get that way because people refused to convert.

The battles in *Justified* sometimes feel a little more Fantasy than they do Science Fiction. I think it has to do with Drin's use of a light sword and the enemy's use of battlemages. I really enjoyed that aspect of the story. Battlemages are potent opponents and present a massive threat. It's fun to watch Drin sweat when he knows there's one around. Suspense is a good thing.

Most of the combat takes place on the ground. I'm good with that. In any real world military campaign the most important actions always take place between armies. Fleets are good and aircraft can certainly turn the tide of a land battle, but at the end of the day if one wants to take a city, they'd better put some boots on the ground. *Justified* is no exception. On the other hand, Drin spends a bit of time on a massive starship and I wouldn't mind seeing a deep space slugfest at some point. I mean, this IS Space Opera.

Del Arroz does a fine job of mixing the cultures in his book. Not only do we get a good look at the culture of the hated Sekarans, but also the Skree and a bit about a race known as the Deklyn. I love the fact that space isn't covered with a monoculture. There are actually serious differences between the groups and it's fairly easy to tell which species someone is a member of based on how they're acting. That makes sense. Culture is a thing.

The world building here is both good and somewhat limited. Drin is separated from his fellow Elorians in the first few chapters and we don't see much of them after that. We get a good look at Drin's personal dislike of the enemy and how he manages to gather some allies but what we don't see a lot of is him interacting in his native culture. This is the first book in the series, so it's not like we won't see more in the future and it's also not like there was a whole lot of opportunity for it but it still strikes me as a bit weird that the only culture we don't see a lot of is the one the main character is part of. Oh well. I guess I'll just have to buy the sequel.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Nannites

Kingdom of Souls by Rena Barron Review by Chris Nuttall

Kingdom of Souls is one of those books that is quite difficult to review.

It was actually mentioned to me by someone who read *The Zero Blessing*, with a suggestion that Rena Barron copied my work. That isn't true. Save for skin colour and (apparent) powerlessness, Caitlyn and Arrah – the heroine of *Kingdom of Souls* – have very little in common. They come from different worlds, have different backgrounds, different magics ... in short, they're not the same.

Kingdom of Souls is set in a very African setting, with elements drawn from all over north and west Africa. The heroine comes from a line of witch doctors, powerful magic users. But she fails at magic, fails to call upon the ancestors and can't even cast the simplest spell. Her mother, who is terribly abusive, is incredibly disappointed in her. Many of her peers openly mock her. However, when children in the kingdom begin to disappear, Arrah undergoes the dangerous and scorned process of selling years of her life for magic. This leads her to discover the sinister truth behind the missing children, a deadly plot for revenge and – ultimately – that she is all that stands between her world and utter destruction.

There's a lot I liked about the book. Arrah does not give up, even when the odds are stacked against her. She has no qualms about fighting bullies, even bullies with magic; later, when forced into semi-servitude, she finds loopholes that allow her to fight back and eventually break free. She has friends and a warm relationship with a boy who is practically her boyfriend, although this is stained – later on – when he's tricked into having sex with the villain. Arrah is willing to take the ultimate risk, even to cut herself off from her community, to safeguard those she loves.

The book is also a grim warning of just how far someone can go in their quest for revenge. The villain – Arrah's mother is the first villain of the book, although she's not the last – is ready to tear down just about everything, including her daughters, to take her revenge. Perhaps she has reasons. Arrah thinks as much. It doesn't excuse everything she does and Arrah makes no bones about it. What seems, at first, to be a simple story becomes something greater along the way.

At the same time, however, there are two weaknesses. The background is stunning, but it is often obscure. It's hard to keep track of who's who, what's what and a lot of other details you need to follow in order to read the book. Like most 'diverse' books, we don't have an instinctive understanding of the setting and need more explaining; the book could have benefited from a detailed outline of the setting, perhaps as an appendix where it wouldn't have impeded the storytelling.

A more serious problem is that the story seems to swing around a lot, as if the author wasn't sure where she intended to go before settling on a course. Things change, oddly; it starts with Arrah making a bargain for power, then finding herself battling her mother and an entity who may be the worst. May. Questioning everything you're told is a theme in the book. Really, I expected it to stick with Arrah making the bargain, discovering the downsides, probably being kicked out for it and, finally, coming back in glory. There's probably a story there, if someone wants to do it.

Overall, *Kingdom of Souls* reminds me of *Children of Blood and Bone*, although the storylines are very different. In some ways, the setting is better. In others, it's a little too different. In both cases, however, the stories are YA; suitable for teenagers, less suitable for older and younger readers.

Lies Sleeping by Ben Aaronovitch Review by Pat Patterson

I don't LIKE fantasy; I find it too pretentious. There are exceptions, certainly. I THINK that one of the reasons I liked *The Hobbit* and the rest of the *Lord of the Rings* saga (except for the *Silmarillion*) is because they are written as history, and the narrative really doesn't make too many intrusions into goofy-king-and-queen-land. The *Silmarillion*, on the other hand, HAS no narrative that extends beyond the short sections, and is slap-full of visits to goofy-king-and-queen-land. I have never yet had any success at completing any sizable portion of it before lapsing into a coma. A pleasant (for me) note: Peter Grant, the protagonist of this novel, agrees with my opinion on "The *Silmarillion*."

This is not the Peter Grant who writes British gay sex farce, and not the Peter Grant who just published "Gold on the Hoof."

The first book I am reviewing today is a series book, as are the vast majority of the books I've read thus far in the Dragon Award series. I've discussed the issue of series vs stand-alone books before, but not really applied it particularly to the Fantasy category. So, let me dispose of that right now. Yes, it can be significant, in a tightly-written series. I think we would all agree that opening the *Foundation* series by reading of the *Mule* is going to leave a great amount of the story un-Founded (see what I did there?). You really have to know about *Hari Seldon* first. Others, and I'm thinking specifically of two of the current entries in the military science fiction, really triumph as stand-alone novels, because their stories are almost entirely self-contained. Yes, you may WANT to go back and pick up earlier entries, but you don't HAVE to.

But fantasy doesn't necessarily require access to the prequels. Part of that, assuredly, is my personal prejudice; I disregard the significance of fantasy because I'm a snob. But another part is that in fantasy, it's a given that the rules of physics don't really apply, so if a grnknyr wedferets, you just pick up the meaning from the context, and drive on. You don't really have to know that in 2026, a hyperwave by-pass was constructed, requiring the destruction of Earth.

The last large portion of affection I had for fantasy took a massive hit when I got to the end of "A Dance With Dragons," the fifth book in the "Song of Fire and Ice" series, popularly referred to as "Game of Thrones," and discovered that not only were we not at the end of the series, but that new plot lines were opening, there was no projected timeline for the future volumes, and NO END WAS IN SIGHT. I'll not sully the lines of this post by relaying to you the thoughts I had at that point.

"Lies Sleeping," by Ben Aaronovitch, is Book 7 in the "Rivers of London" series. I found it both delightful, and, for the most part, quite coherent. The POV character is Peter Grant, although it took me quite a few pages before I harvested that bit of info from the book. He is a member of a London-based police unit, which works exclusively on cases in which criminals use magic to commit their crimes. He himself has magic powers, although some members of his unit do not, and a few others are more powerful.

The current target of their investigations is one Martin Chorley, a bad, wicked, and proficient wielder of magic they have associated with a number of prior crimes. He appears to be using former members of an Oxford College club called the "Little Crocodiles," a group of posh individuals who enjoyed the play of dabbling in magic. Some of them were strictly in it for the amusement and affiliation, while others were attuned to the actual working of magic. It is the latter group that Chorley has selected to run

errands for him.

Very quickly, we discover that whatever is taking place, it has lethal implications. As soon as members of the team enter the house of a former Little Crocodile, a gent named Richard Williams, a disturbance erupts. Peter and his partner Guleed emerge from their stake-out vehicle to see a woman burst through the tiles of the roof, blood smeared over her face. She leaps from the roof, overpowers both of them, and makes her escape on foot. However, the blood on her face came from an attempt to kill Williams, by biting out his throat, and she missed.

The incapacitated Williams is hospitalized in a secure facility, with a machine-gun wielding police constable on the outside of his room, guarding the door.

The series title is “Rivers of London,” and whatever else that entails, we find that there are river gods and goddesses around. In fact, Peter is semi-keeping house with one of them, Beverly. They have the usual and customary physical relationship, but Beverly will manifest certain powers from time to time, from moving through rivers at will, to making some things happen quickly in the kitchen. Even so, she still exhibits normal concern for the well-being of her main squeeze, and he for her.

There is quite a bit of conventional detective work that has to be done in tracking down Martin Chorley. Quite a lot of it is boring, such as sitting in surveillance locations, interviewing witnesses, and the necessary but tedious filing of paperwork and attending meetings. Enough attention is given to these details that we are aware of them, but we aren't beaten to death by police procedural trivia.

That's not QUITE what my experience was with the magical / architectural trivia. As this was my first book in the series, and as a person who has spent a grand total (perhaps) of 72 hours in London, I found the descriptions of the history of some of the architecture to be other-than-illuminating. Now, SOME of this was necessary to the plot. However, other parts seemed solely designed to bewail the loss of a distinctive London-ness to the efforts of developers and financiers. There were also plenty of references to things that I'm sure would make sense to a person familiar with the London city streets, but which I found to be tedious.

Along those lines, the book was filled with I can only suppose to be specialized slang terms that I've never heard. For example, a police car goes on pursuit with blues and twos. From the context, I'd say flashing blue lights and a siren, but that's just a guess. There are other similar slang expressions that take a bit of thinking for this Redneck Biker, but it only slowed me down; it didn't take me out of the story.

A bit more problematic was the inclusion of untranslated Latin phrases. I had a half-year of Latin in 1966, and I was failing that. Fortunately, I discovered that there is an entire wiki, dedicated to the series, and a Google search for the Latin phrases yielded that site as the first result. The translations, and the context for the quote, were to be found there. While it was quite an interesting addition, I did not utilize the wiki further.

Some of the events are funny, although perhaps not so much to those involved, but the thoughts of the POV character were often extremely amusing. Tossed in at random were any number of pop-culture references, such as the running joke “and one hard-boiled egg” line from “A Night At The Opera.” Unfortunately there were some references that were clearly meant to be humorous that went over my head; I'm not British enough (or at all).

Finally, there were certain plot developments that DID require some knowledge of events from prior books in the series. Here are just two examples:

Occasionally, late at night, I wonder whether this is true of Mama Thames and whether, perhaps, her blessing can make an old man kick his heroin habit and take up his trumpet again. (Aaronovitch, Ben. Lies Sleeping (Rivers of London) (p. 80). DAW. Kindle Edition.)

The first time while I was buried underground, and later when Martin Chorley launched his abortive attack on Lady Ty. (Aaronovitch, Ben. Lies Sleeping (Rivers of London) (p. 134). DAW. Kindle Edition.)

I have no idea what these quotes are referencing, or even if they ARE referencing something in an earlier book, or, in the case of the first quote, it's simply a jazz-insider reference.

On the whole, though, it was a very enjoyable read. I think I would be MILDLY interested in pursuing the rest of the series, as long as it wasn't at the expense of my regular reading patterns.

And now for The Question: Is “Lies Sleeping” a worthy candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award in the Best Fantasy Novel category?

Dealing with the series vs stand-alone question first, I'd have to say that I didn't really suffer from coming into the series at this point. Yes, there were a few parts where I knew I'd missed something, but I had no trouble at all in grasping the overall story line.

With respect to the consideration of the other factors, I guess it comes down to what you want fantasy to do for you. I DID enjoy the story, and found myself looking forward to the next event; I liked the characters I was supposed to like, didn't like the bad guys, and felt appropriate ambivalent sympathy for those caught in the middle. It didn't INSPIRE me, though, which is something that I have enjoyed in some of the fantasy works I have read.

Like A Mighty Army by David Weber Review by Jim McCoy

David Weber's Like a Mighty Army is the latest in his Safehold Series, a post-apocalyptic step back in time. In some ways the older books have read almost like a period piece set in the European Renaissance, although the Harchong Empire does seem similar in ways to feudal China. Like a Mighty Army and, to a lesser extent, its predecessor *Midst Toil and Tribulation*, read more steampunkish. This is a good thing as one of the major goals of the series protagonist, Merlin Athrawes, is to gradually increase the tech base of the planet Safehold until it is capable of fighting against a genocidal alien race known as the Gbaba.

The story itself covers a year of campaigning in a war pitting The Empire of Charis against the Church of God Awaiting and its corrupt leadership, the Group of Four. This war is not new to this book and has in fact been going on for nearly the whole series. Things are looking grim for The Empire of Charis and its ally, the Siddarmarkian Republic. They were pushed back hard in *Midst Toil and Tribulation*. Many crops were burnt in the fields. Hunger stalks the land. Several large masses of homeless refugees are putting a strain on not just food stocks, but also the amount of homes available and just about every other conceivable item as well. The Charisians have a higher tech base but they're outnumbered many

times over. I wonder if Mr. Weber hasn't done some reading about the Korean War, because the situation is in some ways reminiscent.

That brings up another strength of this story. Weber has very obviously spent hours and hours in research for his series. His knowledge of various subjects is used to make the story believable in ways I would not have anticipated. Fans of Weber's Honorverse will recognize the author's trademark use of naval battle, this time with a lower tech base. The suspicious part of my mind wonders if perhaps Weber didn't study land-based warfare in an effort to shut those of us who wondered if he could write it up. Regardless of why he wrote it, he delivers. Weber's combat scenes are fast-paced, bloody, graphic and utterly believable. His knowledge of early industrial processes is impressive as well.

Weber, mainly through a character named Edwyrd Howsmyn, walks us through every step of the improvement in technology for both sides of the conflict. Some of it is quite frankly above my ability to evaluate for accuracy (he has done the research, I have not) but it all makes sense. He has taken the economy from being powered by wind, water and muscle to hydraulics, pneumatics and steam. It's a fascinating trip.

The characters and their motivations make sense. Merlin Athrawes is a survivor of the war that exterminated most of humanity and is out to save his species when a second round of fighting comes. Cayleb Ahrmahk is the Emperor of Charis and is fighting both to avenge the wrongs done to his people by the church and to improve the standing of both himself and his empire in the world. Maikel Staynair is a priest searching for the true meaning of his religion and steadfast in his faith. Zhaspar Clyntahn is a member of the Group of Four corrupted by power and fully committed to ending the threat to himself, his wishes and Mother Church.

For all of that, the story is not perfect. Readers may have already noticed part of the problem. The naming conventions that Weber uses can make it a bit difficult to read some of the names. This does detract from the story in a fairly significant way. He has admitted this himself in interviews, but states that it's too late to change it now. Also, much of the knowledge I mentioned earlier is presented to the audience in a series of infodumps that are frequently several pages long. The cast of characters is also quite frankly enormous, and it does get a bit confusing. There is a *dramatis personae* at the back but that is a bit more work than I typically like. Also, this book is not by any stretch of the imagination a good place to start the series.

Safehold is a world that is rich and varied but it is not one that is easily understood this far in. I would recommend the first book in the series, also known as Safehold, to just about anyone. That much being said, this is one series that it is best to read in order. The relationships between both characters and nations and the history that led to them are best absorbed one step at a time. Start this one at the beginning and you will save yourself some major confusion. All of that being said, I still really liked this book.

Bottom Line: 4 out of 5 cannonballs.

Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger by Adam Lane Smith
Review by Declan Finn

Adam Lane Smith (yes, his real name) described Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger as John Wick, but with a burrito (not a puppy).

An action novel for fans of John Wick, Demolition Man, or Die Hard.

Maxwell Cain, also known as "Bloody Rain Cain," is a cop fed up with the murderous hooligans who control the streets of San Pajita, California.

After years of public service, Max is fired for executing too many dirtbags, and he seeks solace at his favorite taqueria. When his comfort burrito is sullied by the careless actions of brutal thugs, Max finally snaps. What begins as an argument over a ruined lunch quickly spirals into a hurricane of blood and revenge.

Max is joined in his fight by the gorgeous Kate Valentine, a baker with an itchy trigger finger. As the two rush into battle against an entire criminal organization, they are hunted by the relentless terror of the seedy underworld: Johnny Legion.

This book is designed to feel like watching a classic 80s or 90s American action flick.

This one isn't ... quite as insane as it first appears...

Kind of...

Sorta...

It's complicated.

To begin with, unlike the deep, complicated events and emotions behind "Puppy = killing spree," the burrito in this instance is less the puppy, and more the last straw. In a city that is as corrupt as Chicago, only with an extra layer of scum at the top, San Pajita's police force is so overwhelmed that the police "can't respond to every little shooting." But no one at the top cares, because the criminals pay "fines" (usually a portion of the take from the crimes) that go into the private coffers of public officials. They could be some of Dirty Harry's superiors in LA.

This one opens with one of the best opening lines since Jim Butcher's "The building was on fire and it wasn't my fault." Adam's line is "Maxwell Cain had killed dozens of men. In fact, that was kind of the problem."

It even has a little setup tag that sounds like an 80's film trailer. You can just hear the narrator read "In a world where one man..." etc.

But after a day where Maxwell Cain (I'm sure that it's a coincidence that Max Cain sounds like Matt Payne, honest especially the parts that go into bullet time) kills six bank robbers, then is fired for it, all before lunch, he's pissed off and hangry (No, I didn't misspell it).

When some random gangbangers hipcheck Cain into spilling his burrito, he whips out the cheesy one liner ("maybe I'll be a teacher. And teach manners." The next chapter is called "Lesson Plan", and the joke concludes with "Class dismissed") and goes to beat up some thugs. When the thugs need to be put down, it turns out that they were off to pay a mafia bag man -- who still wants his payoff. That confrontation spirals into a war with an entire mafia family, who assume he's a hit man sent by another family.

With a few breaks to pause for something strange, like character moments, this is basically a 250-page running shootout. The scene that best exemplifies this is where a gunship blasts a monorail train off the track, causing the car to land on top of a hotel roof, which eventually crashes through every floor to land into an electrified pool, into which Max Cain Sparta-kicks a thug while declaring "THIS! IS! SAN PANJITA!"

Did I mention that there's a bit of hat tipping in this book? I'm surprised that Max doesn't end up losing his shoes while walking through broken glass. There's every set piece shootout ever seen in a film -- shooting up a mall, a hotel, a public art exhibit (the Pieta re-imagined with lizard people -- kill it with fire!), a run and gun car chase, a hotel, a mobster's home strewn with tacky artwork, a train, "the docks," the standard warehouse, and a few other places thrown in. And he double-wields every chance he gets. We have Jackie Chan's baseball wielding thugs in suit and tie. He has John McClane's habit of yelling at gunmen. (An RPG tears up the street, he yells, "Do you have any idea how much it costs to fix a pothole that big?"). At least one man killed during a poker game held aces and eights (subtle).

Did I mention that the mafia enforcer dresses in white and carries a golden desert eagle -- meaning that he's the man with the golden gun?

And like John Wick, Max Cain's only weakness is being hit with cars. That, and the running gag that every time he sees a burrito and reaches for it, he summons more gunmen.

Then there's the new stuff -- like "gunfight selfies" (I can see that being a thing) a running gag of shopping during a gunfight, comparing someone's home to a serial killer den, and this is the first Catholic action hero I've seen since William F Buckley JR wrote spy thrillers.... and not written by Declan Finn. And the prescient "City council declare it was unfair for cops to get protective gear when civilians don't, said we needed to even the odds."

Most of the combat is very well done and highly detailed. All the action is tightly paced. Though after a while, even Adam stops detailing the path of every bullet and discusses how everyone is just firing on automatic and spraying faceless gunmen with bullets. To be perfectly fair, Adam does try to describe every minion who lasts more than a few lines, though that's a lot of bald or bearded men after a while, and I wondered when there would be other descriptors used. Though that's probably just "one writer nitpicking."

And the one liners. Oy, the one liners. To fit in more one liners, Max Cain talks to himself. A lot.

Some examples?

After his lunch is ruined and one of the killers is run over: "Lunch hour traffic will really kill you."

"I'm the best cop in the department."

"You're the most violent cop in the department."

"That's what I said."

"I don't want water. I'm thirsty for blood."

While surrounded by gunmen: "Well, yippe ki yay."

This feels like a Dirty Harry movie starring Ahhnuld, meets Falling Down, but with John Wick level stunts.

Anyway, I fully recommend it in all of its utterly insane glory. Buy Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger.

Psychic Undercover by Amie Gibbins Review by Declan Finn

Ah, vampire romance novels. They are the cotton candy of the literary world. Even the more substantial ones are so light and fluffy, you could drop them in the ocean and they'd work as a life preserver.

Luckily, Amie Gibbons' book *Psychic Undercover (with the Undead)* is more urban fantasy than vampire romance, so thankfully we have plot, we have character, we have a bit of a police procedural, and we have action.

The FBI's about to find out ghosts and vampires aren't the only things that go bump in the night...

Singers are a dime a dozen in Nashville, so despite her mama's urging, psychic Ariana Ryder's working her way towards a career in law enforcement at the FBI, one tray of fetched coffee at a time, instead. She's got an extremely handsome boss, a dancing partner among the lab techs, and a solid year as the team rookie under her belt...

Right until the director gives her a big break, working undercover as a singer at a club to investigate why it's being targeted by a serial killer. This might have worked better if the club didn't happen to be a vampire nest.

Now, with the vampires' investigator, Quil, on the case, the sparks are flying and the jurisdictional battle isn't the only thing heating up as they race to solve the case before the killer strikes again!

Amie Gibbons is both an author and a lawyer -- but please don't hold that last part against her. Thankfully, unlike other lawyers like John Grisham or Scott Turow, she doesn't make a point of inflicting her law degree on the readership.

Like most UF, it's a first person narrator. Our main character Ariana is well defined, and certainly a product of her environment. She's a Nashville girl with a mother who's a romance novelist and a father who's a former marine and a politician. She's girly, and as professional as the plot allows ... read it, you'll understand. I especially liked that she has a fear of "being trapped. I get the same reaction when I'm lost or stuck in traffic" ... which apparently explains her driving.

Short version, imagine Kristen Chenoweth as our protagonist.

For the record, I have to point out that the description above only spills the plot up to chapter 3. which I appreciate. I've had some problems with other novels that spoil up to halfway through the book.

The book has a good sense of pacing, as well as a sense of humor and world building. I like the sense of vampire society, as well as the fact that Gibbons has vampires who are still largely predators by nature. (While this does have a romantic male lead who is a vampire, it's pointed out more than a few times that he's very, very different from the rest of the vampire society -- even the people he's friends with or works with). I'd like more elaboration about the way vampires are developed, but that's for later books, I'm sure.

The portrayal of the feds in the book is far more fluid than I've come to expect from the FBI. For anyone who thinks the feds aren't this thoughtful, creative, or fluid in their thinking ... well, that's because this is a world without professional monster bounty hunters, and where the FBI must actually solve crimes and have a certain flexibility about them. All of the traditional FBI agents (rigid, glorified bureaucrats) have probably been eaten by this point in the timeline. Not to mention that the character arc in the first novel explains that yes, this FBI team is different than most, if only because they have to incorporate care and feeding of their pet psychic into their team. Gibbons takes pains to point out that yes, this is a strange group of Feds to start with. (Also, the NY stereotypes were a little grating after a while). If you have a problem with the portrayal of the FBI, at least finish up to the end of Chapter 10. It's self-explanatory.

One of my few quibbles with in the book is her superior officer. Not because of his character or his mentality -- he's the most like what one would expect from the FBI in this novel. I even like that he holds his private meetings in the bathroom (not the elevator?), or that he is summoned if you mention his name too often (why, yes, I think he is related to Gibbs). And he will even defend his people against his superiors -- the only way they die is if he kills them. Except his name is Grant, and Ariana keeps calling him General... which strikes me as something I wouldn't want to do in the South to someone I liked. Seriously, you want him shot?

The other quibbles are minor. The narrator uses phrases that are jarring. I presume they're local. Also, have Spotify handy. There are multiple song references kicking around I've never heard of. There is also a reference to "Why don't they use silver bullets?" -- but if Larry Correia has taught me anything, silver is too hard to be a bullet, and it wouldn't rifle properly. But that's a narrator problem, not an author problem (again, our narrator is a rookie).

All in all, *Psychic Undercover* (with the Undead) was a solid book one, with a built-in book two, at once creating a continuing plot without anyone feeling cheated by this book. It is definitely a five star book, without question -- especially if you're looking for something in the female led UR/PNR genre. She's better than most -- I'm looking at you Sookie and Anita. This may lean only slightly more PNR than UR, but it's serviceable as either. She's better than Lynsay Sands, as good as Kerrlyn Sparks, and more entertaining than the last five of Sherrilyn Kenyon's novels.

Red Queen: The Substrate Wars by Jeb Kinnison
Review by Jim McCoy

Red Queen: The Substrate Wars is both a thoroughly entertaining read and a primer on modern day rightism from a member of the rightist movement. I don't want to go too far down this road though. Red Queen is, at its heart, a story of Science Fiction and rebellion and one that does a terrific job of entertaining first and delivering message second.

When we meet our hero, Justin Smith, he is hard at work in a computer lab running a simulation of the evolution of a planet full of life. The life in the simulation is, at this point, incredibly basic. It's a concept we'll come back to throughout the story though and makes a good metaphor for the advancement of the plans of Justin and his friends as the story moves forward. As their movement expands and becomes more complex so does the life in the simulation. I'm not entirely certain I'm doing a good job of describing what it adds to the story, but there is definitely something here. It is entirely possible that there was something here that I missed as well, as the interpretation I made at the beginning may have been overridden by later developments. I'll leave it to the sequel to see if I was right or not.

This novel is not the quickest to start, but given the fact that it is the first in the series that is hardly surprising. As a matter of fact, I debated about reviewing it at first because the SF part of the story doesn't really come into play until we meet Steve Duong and find out what he's building. Once it does though, it's off to the races and the plot starts moving very quickly. Our friends find their involvement in things illegal and semi-legal deepening at every step. Government monitoring starts and is gradually increased. A couple of our heroes are arrested and make the kind of escape only possible in an SF novel. Another planet is visited using a method that I won't reveal here, except to say that it is similar in some ways to a spacefold in Robotech and also similar to the method of travel seen in Event Horizon, yet totally different in that it doesn't actually involve a ship.

The story eventually turns into one of a revolution aborning. The problem with a story like that is that there is no way that a group of college students could pull off a revolution without making some fairly major mistakes. Kinnison's solution to the problem is to let them make those mistakes in ways that are both believable and entertaining. Sometimes it's a small thing, like a password left written on a notepad. At other times, foul-ups come as major issues like the siren song of another man's woman. Regardless of how they happen, they never fail to move the plot forward and keep things interesting.

The story is not perfect. Kinnison frequently injects political statements into conversations that run a bit longer than they really need to. It seems to me that the characters in the story are a little too quick to understand all of the potential uses and consequences of the quantum computer in the story. Steve Duong picks up on something monumental off-screen and does it in seemingly less time than it takes to talk about it. That much being said, all of these are forgivable as well as probably being plot-necessary. I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a well written story and is prepared to either enjoy or accept some political content to go with it.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 quantum computers

Somewither by John C. Wright
Review by Declan Finn

Everyone knows the phrase "down the rabbit hole." It's an Alice in Wonderland reference, where the main character is in their normal, everyday life one moment, then in someplace utterly insane the next. Reality is utterly, totally, and completely different.

For John C. Wright's Somewither, the rabbit hole wasn't good enough. No. We needed an inter-dimensional portal that opens up to an invading army, sucking our hero into a realm that makes Wonderland look positively friendly and harmless.

Ilya, as he has secretly dreamed, is called upon to save the mad scientist's beautiful daughter. With his squirrel gun, his grandfather's sword, and his father's crucifix, Ilya races to save the girl, and, incidentally, the world.

So it is, Ilya Muromets is a big, ugly, motherless boy who does not look like anyone else in his Oregon town. His father is often absent on mysterious Church missionary work that involves silver bullets, sacred lances, and black helicopters. One night, Professor Dreadful sends a warning to Ilya that his Many Worlds theory correct, but that his experiments have opened a door that should have remained closed, and his beautiful daughter, Penny, is in trouble.

The 2016 Dragon Award-winner for Best Science Fiction Novel, Somewither is the first part of A Tale of the Unwithering Realm, a new science-fantasy series from science-fiction master John C. Wright. It is an adventure, it is a romance, and it is a coming-of-age story of a young man who is not a man, in a world that is only one among many. It is a tale of a greater and darker evil with longer reach than anything he could imagine, of pain beyond measure, and of the faith required to surmount all three. It is a story of inexorable destiny written in the stars and the stubborn courage that is required to defy it.

I loved this book. It was so delightfully insane, and so marvelously put together. I enjoyed it from the first page. Especially as our hero narrates that this was all for a girl named Penny Dreadful.

.... Yes. He went there. Somewither doesn't stop there, and this is just page one. Which includes the line "If you blame the damsel in distress, you are not the hero."

The opening chapters may be a little slow to people who are not nerds. But you're reading a book that's one part scifi and one part fantasy. If you are not nerdy enough to enjoy Wright's conversation about the how's and why's (and why not's) of branching timelines and alternate universes, why are you even reading this review?

But this is John C. Wright. He can probably describe paint drying in an entertaining fashion. Especially when he describes one incident with the supercollider as "let's just say over a dozen scientists, staff members, and visitors were electrocuted, microwaved, and Hiroshima'd."

I told you he could make anything entertaining. There's even an entire conversation between Ilya and his father ... during which you realize that things aren't all that normal with this family ("Now Ilya, you've known that since you were twelve, when we taught you quantum mechanics." Huh?). The punchline of this conversation ends with one of the most awesome reveals that I've seen in a while, and

more or less backhands Stephen Pinker into next Tuesday, casually and easily, in one paragraph.

And the lovely little dissertations along the way are charming, and so un-PC, it's delightful. There's a conversation on lovely damsels. Or getting two halves of the brain arguing with each other lest they gang up on the hero to stop him from heroics. (The note I made on points like this is "Remember when Peter David was funny? Pepperidge farm remembers.")

After Ilya falls into another world, and the plot gets off to a running start, one of the running gags throughout the novel involves language. Let's just say that I think that if John C. Wright wrote *Lord of the Rings*, he would have sentence diagrammed elvish.

Once we get to meet the villains, they are delightfully evil pricks. In a world where astrology is an accurate science, and fate is everything, even some of the men running the evil empire are trapped. It strikes me very much like the Persian empire -- "freedom" wasn't even a word in the language. It's not in this language, either. Neither is "right and wrong." Funny that. They are so unambiguously evil, even the narrator points out

"On principle, I was not helping any group that called itself The Darkest Tower against places called the Great Golden City and Land of Light. That was a no-brainer. I mean, get serious. Suppose you were from another world and came to ours circa 1940 and you saw an SS officer in his black uniform with the silver skulls on his collar, and he said he wanted to exterminate some folks called The Chosen People from some place called The Holy Land, who would you think the bad guy was?"

Despite how obviously evil the adversaries are, they are not shallow evil. There is a bit reminiscent of Sam and Frodo being shanghaied by orcs -- Ilya is given a tour of The Tower by a creature that even Richard Sharpe would have identified as a Sergeant just by his banter. In it, we get a perfect picture of a Screwtape bureaucracy where Ilya concludes that the empire "is all full of bureaucrats and lawyers? This place is hell."

Also, there is a lot of casual bits of humor scattered throughout. Such as the misattributions ("There is an old saying: if you want peace, prepare for war. I think it is in the Bible or something."). And the little shots scattered throughout this novel are so much fun to behold. There's the "Professor Dreadful" referred to in the blurb, who is a "Harvard trained symbologist" (to which Ilya's father replies, "Amazing what they give degrees in these days.") And the Templars are the good guys. (Dan Brown felt that one.) The bad guys of the piece are from The Dark Tower. And all of the evil sorcerers carry golden compasses (snicker). Some of the warnings of prophecy are right out of Lovecraft. When Ilya hears that someone is a ringbearer, he says, "You mean like at a wedding? Or do you mean like Sam Gamgee carrying Albrecht's ring when it got too heavy for Tom Covenant?"

Even the casual comments about other timelines are entertaining ("Dude, my planet is run by Prussians You need paperwork to get permission to go to the outhouse.")

Then there's the bit that compared Fantasy Island to *The Tempest*. I feel like Wright has a lot of stuff in his head and it's all stacked on top of each other.

And I swear the entire building of the final team is a reference to the X-Men, only interesting and without the angst. (We have an unkillable killing Machine. A wind manipulator called a "Cloud Walker". A ninja. A Norse Shadow meets Moon Knight. The monster that chased Bugs Bunny. Captain Nemo. And at least one reference to Lady Hawk.) Though I'm relatively certain that Wright was going for a D&D

campaign given how often he comments on character classes.

For the record, I feel I must note the sections that boil down to torture porn. If I didn't know better, I would swear that Wright was a fan of Hellraiser.

If I were to sum up this book in one phrase, it would be "Anime Narnia." Thus, it would have a ton more action, epic fantasy, and make most of the golden era pulps look slow. Yes, there is a slow part here, but that's mostly a horror element.

Of course, this book ends on a cliffhanger.

Thankfully, the next book is already out. So get *Somewhither* today, and get the sequel immediately after it.

Sons of the Lion by Jason Cordova Review by Pat Patterson

I need to get some personal stuff out of the way first.

Most of my family is half-Nigerian, via a smooth-talking man who came to the United States to get rich via various schemes. He was eventually deported, but that did not, and can not, and should not separate all the blood and cultural connections to the home country.

I am a born-on-a-dirt-road redneck, I have been FORCED to attend to some issues because of my love for and responsibility to my family. It has been my task to help those who wish to discover the connection, in such a way that they are not scarred by it. I have not had the luxury of ignoring things taking place in the continent of Africa; I have family living there.

Do you see why this book resonates with me?

Yes, it is primarily a good, old-fashioned, shoot-em up exploding spaceship story. Yahoo! However, it is set in Western Africa, mostly in Liberia, and the poverty, corruption, cynicism, beauty, and steadfastness of that area are treated seriously in this book. It doesn't fall off the cliff of white guilt on the one hand, nor does it fall off the cliff of blaming everything on incompetent savages on the other side. I found it to speak the truth, based on my own personal experience and research.

Furthermore, the love of country, expressed primarily through the unmitigated patriotism of the protagonist, makes this book a special gift to me. Others may have a different experience. I challenge the reader who is inclined to blow off the book's serious examination of a complicated situation to speak to primary sources, and to listen, listen, listen. Just as the author did: he listened.

And now, to the book.

We start with some insights into the Veetanho family structure, which pretty much makes most Human families look like paradise. Males are useless, except for breeding, after which they are murdered. Sterile females become something akin to sadistic harem mistresses, with the sole, declared intent to make life for those under their care to be the very worst imaginable. And, it appears to me, within the creche there is ONE dominant Alpha, and everyone else serves as prey, to be tormented to no end, other than

to reinforce to the Alpha that they are truly the Alpha. I may have missed some subtleties, but that description hits the high points.

So: no wonder Peepo is a psycho. It's what she was TRAINED to be.

One who has (somehow) managed to break the mold a bit is Thorpi. A biological female, she passes herself off as a male; how she got away with THAT, I don't know. She has found a valuable place as Logistics Officer with the Kakata Korps, a merc company based out of Monrovia, Liberia, and has totally escaped the demands of Veetanho society.

Until they want her back.

Senior members of her family have noted her place, and decide to use her influence with the Kakata Korps to persuade them to take on the role of enforcers for the Mercenary Guild, and then to serve as their agent-in-place. It's a tough position for her, because her loyalties are torn so severely.

The enforcement role is plausible on the surface for commanding officer Colonel Mulbah Luo, because Kakata Korps was NOT in the inner circles of the mercs, didn't know what was happening with the Four Horsemen, and came back from a mission to find that there is an apparent rebellion against the Galactic Union. They are tasked to bring the remaining rebels to heel.

It's a nasty job, but on paper, it seems appropriate. There are, after all, records showing all the broken rules the Four Horsemen left in their wake as they abandoned Earth. It's a trap, of course, but it's baited with some sweet, sweet cheese. If the Kakata Korps takes the legal contracts given to them by General Peepo's faction, they will be rewarded with enough money to buy the best equipment first, and promises of influence a little bit later.

Here's where an understanding of some of the basics of African politics is helpful. In almost every case, the borders that define African countries were drawn up by EUROPEAN nations at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The reasoning had NOTHING to do with the political, religious, or cultural affiliations of the Africans, and everything to do with carving up land for colonialism without causing conflict for the Europeans. From the beginning, the tribal structures extant were ignored, with the result that life-long enemies were thrust together and told to stop fighting. Not effective. Still causing problems TODAY, and so, into the future of the 4HU.

Despite the mess, Col Luo LOVES his country, and hates the turmoil that the impoverishment resulting from hi-tech only available from the Galactics has brought to the people of Africa. So, the temptation he cannot resist: he is promised influence, if not actual dominion, over most of West Africa. It's not in him to turn down the chance to bring order to a region that has been unable to provide peace and a decent standard of living to its people, despite abundant resources.

Of course, this brings him into conflict with the graft-collecting bureaucracy, and he anticipates having to stage a coup. However, a reform candidate has just been elected to the Office of the President in Liberia, a man with the same dreams for the future.

Now, ALL of that is the background. From here, you get into the exploding spaceships, which manifest in various ways. In addition to the allegedly 'rogue' merc units General Peepo sends him after, there are numerous psycho warlords who collect the very finest filth by the power of intimidation, forced drug addiction, and child enslavement. Think they can co-exist with the virtue Col Luo is attempting to

bring?

And now, for The Question: Is "Sons of the Lion" a worthy candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Military Science Fiction?

My wife is the most beautiful woman in the world. Do you think that I could be an impartial judge of a beauty contest if she were in it? Not a chance. She would win, hands down, if it were up to me. The same principle applies here. There is no way, given what this book means to me personally, that I can give an unbiased opinion.

I regret that the publisher has two candidates in this category. It would be better for them if there were six, or only one, because that way, the vote-splitting wouldn't happen, and the excellence that they have come to represent in the field could be given proper recognition.

And personally, it doesn't matter to me anyway. I know what this book means, and awards and honors have zero impact on that. For the author, I hope the proper accolades come in the form of green pieces of paper, with a preponderance of Mr. Franklin's picture (although President Grant is rather comely as well, if of smaller stature).

Space Traipse: Hold My Beer by Karina Fabian Review by Tamara Wilhite

A Tumbler post turned into a great novel. No, really. Actually, a Tumbler post on what aliens would really think of humans turned into the "Space Traipse: Hold My Beer" story series. The first set of stories has been published as a book by Karina Fabian, drawing on her blog of the same name. For those who followed the blog series, she's added new content true to Star Trek and her unique parody of it.

"Space Traipse" is a family-friendly and funny take on Star Trek. Why do the physically and mentally superior logicals let us do all these things with their technology? Because we think of things to do with it they would never dream ... and wouldn't dare risk themselves in testing while we high-five, slam down a beer and punch a hole in the universe. Why do other aliens let us dominate the Federation? Because our response to meeting the logicals wasn't worship or envy but an offer to party ... and we try to make friends with everyone else while exploring every niche and cranny of the universe. The Captain of Space Traipse, for example, discovered a sentient plant species. The one he rescued became his ship's Sexy. Yes, this series is PG. She's the fill in for Counselor Troy, and there is plenty of detail in the explanation of her real role – including morale for the crew. The chief security officer is from the generation ship "The Hood".

Yes, really. And it is played seriously even when later stories discuss the aliens that tried to pacify the violent population that rose up against them.

I like the little details in Karina Fabian's series that explain things that seem like oversights or contradictions in the Star Trek universe. Why do you have engines that make sound and flash lights? Because it gives humans instant feedback on how much power they're drawing or how close they are to overload conditions. When the sound feedback systems go out on her flagship, the bullpen of backup bridge officers helpfully hums to provide the same feedback ... this explains how you get replacement officers for those going off on away missions or rotating into other roles. And they are eager to get credits or become the focus of an episode.

Then there are the bits of humor playing off of Star Trek. Did you reverse the polarity? Yes, of course, and I even tried 45 degrees. It still didn't work. Let's run the guy through the transporter to remove the alien infection that upgraded him to near godhood. Purge him of any extra biological contaminants. Brush teeth good and give him an enema, yes, sir. These sorts of exchanges are laced throughout the story, every "episode".

If you like "Star Trek" but love "The Orville", you'll enjoy "Space Traipse: Hold My Beer" by Karina Fabian.

Spinning Silver by Naomi Novik Review by Pat Patterson

First: what an absolutely GORGEOUS cover!

In other words, I have other reasons, beside the deadline, to want this review posted.

And so, I resorted to an ANCIENT reading trick I used last WELL more than a half century ago: after reading enough of the book to find out what the story was going to be, I, um, well, you see...

I skipped to the end, and read the last chapters so I could see how it was going to come out.

There, I said it.

I really just needed to know if the beauty and skill of the first quarter of the book was going to be sustained. I was hoping that would be the case, that the promise of a good story would be delivered on. And it WAS!! I'm not going to spoil it for you, but in this case, what begins well, ends well. I also grabbed up my resource lists, and I ripped through them to see what **Respected Others**, and **Dis-respected Others**, had to say about the book. I needed confirmation, you see. And, what I found was that the people who have a good head on their shoulders consistently raved about how lovely this was; the idiots foamed at the mouth. And both of those are ringing endorsements.

So, here we go:

Miryem's father is a moneylender, and he's not very good at it. You could call it soft-hearted, if you wanted to, I suppose. However, I spent a LOT of time in sales and marketing, and I'd have to say the guy just isn't a very good closer. You HAVE to be able to ask for your money.

Particularly when you are a Jew, and most professions are closed off to you; and there is a need for cash, and the Gentiles are prohibited by church law from loaning money at interest.

But, whether soft-hearted, soft-headed, or just not cut out for the job, he can't get it done. So Miryem, seeing her mother sick from too much cold and no food, gets the job done. And, it turns out that she's good at it.

Wanda's farmer is a drunkard. He borrowed money from the moneylender to get medicine for his sick wife, drank and gambled most of it up, and what he had left wasn't enough to help. She died, along with the newborn babe, and was buried under the white tree. This did NOT improve things for Wanda and her two little brothers; they were just BARELY scraping by, until Miryem shows up to demand re-

payment of the loan. When she sees they really have no means to repay, she instructs Wanda's father that she'll accept a half-day of labor from Wanda in exchange for a half-penny reduction of the amount he owes. Although it is not readily apparent, this deal DELIGHTS Wanda, who will escape beatings from her drunken father, as well as get fed at least one good meal per day, as well as what she can forage from the stale bread for the chickens. As time goes by, Wanda makes a way to earn money for herself, and for her brother as well.

Irinuska's father is a nobleman. Having married once for love, and then lost her in childbirth, he is resolved not to love again, so Irinushka has a permanent last place, after the stepmother with the huge dowry, and the two tiny stepbrothers. She can benefit him in no way, until he is presented with a chance to marry her off to the insane tsar.

I read enough to know that this is an EXCELLENT story, and well-told. I read enough to know that the author has the skill to make a situation look like one thing, only to discover that it's something else entirely. I read enough to know that this book will NOT be a DNF (Did Not Finish), but a NFY (Not Finished Yet).

Alas, I DO have this deadline. And, in the faint hope that this last review will be of a benefit, I submit it to you, as is.

As for The Question: Is "Spinning Silver" a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Fantasy Novel?

My opinion: Oh, heck yeah. In fact, the fairy-tale aspect (the story is, I believe, derived from the Rumpelstiltskin story) makes this the most charming of the lot. I don't know if that's what YOU are looking for in a fantasy; in fact, I don't know if that makes it a better contender for the award. However, it really is a strong contender.

Sword and Blood! by Sarah Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson

"To me, musketeers! To me, of the king! TO ME, MUSKETEERS! TO ME, OF THE KING!"

Why in the HECK do they call them Musketeers? There is not a musket in evidence, EVER, in any of the literature or the movies. It's all swords and swordplay, and dashing to and fro.

Here's what I think: I think this is all elitist propaganda, designed to convince us that the ferocity and training of heroes is supreme. That's crap. If you want to triumph, ask the guys who are 5'6" and 130 pounds to get the job done, and the moderately sized non-heroic people will use muskets (or the modern equivalent) to win yer war for you and save civilization. Average guys, not some privileged small-brained aristocracy with feathers in their hats, flouncy capes, waving around sharp pointy things.

Anyway.

France, the jewel of the world (HA!) is overrun with vampires. Since this is before America, they have no one to turn to for rescue, and so they make a truce with the enemy.

Wow. Couldn't see THAT one coming, could ya? The French making a treaty with the enemy? Oh. My.

And of course, Athos, one of the Famous Guys With Sharp Pointy Things gets bitten, and then we are off to the races.

Secret truth, here: there is a good reason he became a Famous Guy instead of living out his life as a Fabulous Aristocrat. It seems he killed his wife by hanging her, and has since then been filled with remorse. Seems he had spotted the sign of the COLLABORATORS (this is before the treaty) on her neck, and strung her up.

The incompetent Fabulous Aristocrat can't allow himself to do a competent job of his impulsive act, though, and carelessly leaves her body intact, instead of whacking off her head, driving a stake through her heart, burning her body to a crisp on the barby, etc. He's a Fabulous Aristocrat, and can't be bothered with doing things correctly, so, picking the absolutely worst choice available due to a combination of fear, shame, and the grinding edges of a broken heart, he runs away from her inviolate corpse to Paris. where he allows himself to marinate in guilt, brandy, self-hatred and doubt, while becoming a Famous Guy With A Sharp Pointy Thing.

Because there are no other options. It's a planned economy.

Meanwhile, D'Artagnan, a brave and talented, though unschooled, member of the country gentry arrives in Paris in the nick of time to hook up with Famous Guys With Sharp Pointy Things. They are killing vampires, and that's what he wants to do, since the vampires have killed his parents, among others.

Lots of running around and hiding secrets from friends and enemies, and some fighting.

Turns out that having yer blud sucked out is a lot like sex, at least for some people in some circumstances.

Wow. Never saw THAT coming, either!

(Okay, I jest, I jest. I know that there are certain tropes that are essential to the story, and that one is key. If you don't include the sensual aspect, you are betraying every writer in the genre since Bram Stoker, and also eliminating a lot of the reasons the vamps aren't all killed in about 15 minutes after discovery. Everybody wants good sex, it seems, and in a country formerly ruled/heavily influenced by a celibate clergy, vampires mean you can dance around the issue in confession. A bit. Until you die, or turn.)

BUT! Where do the vampires come from? What's the origin myth? It's been a LONG time since I read "Dracula," and I don't follow the genre, but I recall nothing about the origin of the monsters in Bram Stoker's version. The Sparkly Vampire literature, of which I know nothing at all, may give a back story, but the letters of Jonathan Harker don't mention it. (I could be wrong about this. It has been some years since I read the original.)

I LOVE a good back story, and TA-DA!!! "Sword and Blood" provides it, quite nicely, thank you very much. AND that's one of my two favorite things about the book. Well, three, if you include 'it gives me an opportunity to mock the French.'

My favorite thing? Read the BOLD WORDS at the top of the page.

(In my opinion, it's quite as well done as "Hello! My name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!")

This book was originally published under the pen name Sarah Marques.

The Black Chamber by S. M. Stirling Review by Pat Patterson

S. M. Stirling has co-written some of the books that helped me hang on, during that long, bleak period when it seemed NOTHING was being written that I liked to read. In fact, it was with the discovery of some books he co-wrote with Jerry Pournelle and David Drake that I discovered there was something new going on, and that all science fiction was no longer incoherent snapping at our own flesh. Thus, I am pre-disposed to look favorably on something he writes, although I couldn't really say he is well-represented in my library. I'm not sure of the reasons why.

At any rate, I was glad to see his name as one of the authors with a book among the finalists for the 2019 Dragon Awards. The category makes a lot of sense to me as well. Even though I think I only read one of the volumes, his "Draka" series was Alternate History, so I knew he had some experience with it.

Refreshingly for a book in this category, we are immediately informed of the point of deviation from our timeline. It takes place on May 25, 1912, when incumbent president William Howard Taft dies of a heart attack, leaving the Republican field open to challenger Roosevelt. In our timeline, Taft lived to run, and Roosevelt took 27% of the vote, which allowed Democrat Woodrow Wilson to be elected. This was the highest turn-out ever for any third-party candidate for the presidency, a result even more remarkable in light of the assassination attempt on Roosevelt in October, when he took a single .38 Special to the chest, and still gave the intended speech that evening.

With the progressive Roosevelt at the helm, US foreign policy was more assertive. The border raids in Mexico by bandit Pancho Villa were met with a full invasion, instead of the milder and ineffective punitive raids ordered by Wilson. As a result, Mexico loses sovereignty and becomes a protectorate of the US.

A survivor of the revolutionary banditry associated with the Mexican revolution, Luz O'Malley Arostegui joins an American special operatives group, known as the Black Chamber. Operatives are given training to engage in counter-intelligence work, and she is chosen to impersonate an Irish-Mexican-American (is that too many adjectives?) named Elisa Carmody de Soto-Dominguez, who has been captured while engaging in terrorist activities, and has probably died under interrogation. Fortunately, Luz bears some characteristics in common with Carmody.

Using that identity, and traveling in the guise of a wealthy socialite, Luz boards an airship to Europe, knowing only that she is to meet with a German agent on the trip, and the code name he is using.

And here, regrettably, we start running into some profound Mary-Sue territory, and whatever the male equivalent is called. And we never exit the territory, either.

Luz is the perfect example of female pulchritude, disguising a first-class brain (yawn), and furthermore, is skilled in all forms of combat, armed, unarmed, and stark naked. And her German agent is the perfect example of masculinity, disguising a first-class brain (another yawn) and is also, etc.

So, naturally, they start having sex with each other immediately, while on the airship.

I am SO tired of having to hear about other people's sex lives, and their sexual prowess, and their sexual preferences. I do understand that there are segments of the population that really enjoy that sort of thing. When I first discovered the original James Bond books, as they were still being written, I also took great interest in reading that sort of thing. However, I was 12 years old at the time. (WRONG!)

Heck, yeah, reading about passionate kisses and embraces was exciting, because I was 12 years old at the time! (Nope, that's not true. I just checked the dates, and I started reading them in 1963, when I was 10 years old. Sorry!)

Honestly, I'm asking myself now: is this book aimed at 12-year-old boys? Because the plot is rather simplistic, in precisely the way that the 12-year-old boy inside my brain likes them. The team Luz is a part of ALWAYS prevails, often at great peril, without sustaining any severe injuries. And they are always heroic beyond belief. And they are always lucky beyond belief.

Even the book points this out, as more than one observer says that if they had been told this by anyone else, they wouldn't believe it. And, as I reflect, I don't believe it, either.

If this IS a book aimed at 12-year-olds, well, shame on you. If not, could we PLEASE have more realistic characters next time? I really don't WANT the protagonist to be such a sex bomb that every male and female has uncontrollable lust for her, and when one male character doesn't, she immediately concludes that he is gay, and outs him to his co-conspirators, as a clever part of her plan.

A small, insignificant, and perhaps mistaken point, concerning the use of the Thompson sub-machine gun in 1916.

First, I get it: this is alternate history. Second, this is alternate history with Teddy Roosevelt as the sitting president, and he is mobilizing the country for war in a way that Woodrow Wilson didn't. However, in OUR timeline, the Thompson wasn't even a thought problem until 1915, and it took until 1917 that a design was produced, with the first models not coming off the line before the war was over in 1918. However, in the novel, it's been in production long enough for the first design flaws to be rectified, and for enough production to be diverted from America to the Germans, that the raiders are equipped with them.

And Luz is highly proficient with one, as well. Sigh. Mary Sue.

Okay, that's not a deal-killer for me. I am willing to accept the idea that under Roosevelt, the design happens much earlier, and that it's Springfield Armory that produces them, and not Auto-Ordnance.

Still, in the end, the deal is killed. It's the combination of the Mary Sue nature of just about ALL of the characters, plus the pansexuality being trotted out all the time, that closes the door on this one... It's really too bad, because I loved the concept.

As for The Question: Is “Black Chamber” a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Alternate History?

My opinion: no, for the reasons cited. It's a great concept, and yes, Taft was morbidly obese, and might very well have had a heart attack; and, if so, Roosevelt MIGHT have gotten the nomination. I'd like to believe he would have done all of the other wonderful things ascribed to him, and I enjoyed reading the what-ifs. I just needed a more realistic protagonist, and I DO wish we could permit everyone, even fictional characters, the right to privacy concerning who sticks what where.

Prices move around, perhaps in response to impending Dragons, perhaps for other reasons. These numbers were accurate at the time.

Here's what you will pay for this book on Amazon:

Kindle: \$11.99

Audio-book: \$29.95

Paperback: \$7.00

Hardback: \$ 17.10

Amazon reviews: 118; 3.9/5.0 stars

Goodreads reviews: 107; 3.70/5.0 stars

The Black Prism by Brent Weeks Review by Jim McCoy

In general, I'm a fan of fantasy before I'm a fan of SF. I know that's sacrilege to some, but it's true. Don't blame me, blame Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. It's all their fault. I am also a fan of the Night Angel Trilogy. So when I found out that Brent Weeks was working on a new series, I flipped out. I am an unapologetic fanboy, so keep that in mind while you're reading this review. I may be a bit biased, but I think he's earned it. Stories like this are what keep bringing me back to the genre. What story? The Black Prism by Brent Weeks.

Our hero is Kip, a poor boy from the edge of town. The problem is that Kip is not very hero-like. He's short, fat, of average intelligence, is terrible with girls and is not exactly the bravest of souls. He is, however, an enterprising young lad and the beginning of the book finds him scavenging for a substance called "luxin" when the invaders approach his hometown. What follows is a nightmare sequence with Kip running for his life, losing his mother, seeing his friends cut down, and learning that he can draft.

"Drafting" is the form of magic that Weeks uses in his Lightbringer novels. In essence, a drafter can create luxin based on his abilities (most drafters can only use one or two colors) and the light that is available. So, for example, a green drafter has to see something green in order to use his magic. Different types of luxin have different properties. It takes a minute to get used to all of the permutations, but it's worth it, because in a world with luxin, a drafter can make just about anything at any time. It's both fascinating and frightening in its implications and Weeks does a good job of showing off the good, the bad and the ugly as far as the implications of the magic goes. Sometimes the characters find new things to invent using the luxin and sometimes they use it to recreate technological innovations in the real world. Either way, it's awesome.

The consequences of being a drafter are horrible. As a drafter uses his power, luxin begins to collect in

their irises. As more power is used, more power collects. When the "halo" as it is called expands too far it breaks. Once a halo breaks, the drafter is expected to kill himself. Any drafter who fails to do so is hunted down and killed.

Kip, our young hero, is eventually thrust into a world of political intrigue at levels that few ascend to and even fewer survive. But through it all, he continues to either keep his wits or panic just right and get through it all. A revelation about who his father really is changes his life. That's all just the beginning.

Is this story perfect? No. The plot gets really Machiavellian in spots and it's not always easy to follow. Kip is mainly a likeable guy but he can be a little clueless in some areas. I wanted to shake him a few times. The concept of drafting is awesome, but it starts out as a bit confusing until the reader gets the hang of how it works. The mentor in the story is not a very nice guy either, which makes for a nice change of pace but can be grating if it's not what you're expecting. Despite all of that though, I really did enjoy this book.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of five luxin bricks

The Chaplain's War by Brad Torgersen Review by Jim McCoy

One day, I'm going to be comfortable enough with myself to admit publicly that I waited too long after downloading this book to read it. At some point, I will shamefacedly emerge from my cocoon and tell the whole world that I goofed. I'll acknowledge the fact that I goofed and ask for help from all of you in moving on. Today is not that day. Today, I will simply tell you all how much I loved this book. I may even mention that I voted for this book as Best SF Novel for the Goodreads Awards as a write-in candidate, but don't count on it. Nor will I mention that Brad is the leader of the Sad Puppy Brigade and that they have my full moral support, even if I couldn't justify the expense of paying for a con membership when I knew I wouldn't be able to go to the con. Granted, it's all true, but I'm not talking about it.

Brad Torgersen's *The Chaplain's War* is, paradoxically, the best SF book of the past year for the same reason that I didn't read it immediately upon downloading it: It's about a Chaplain. Actually, Harrison Barlow, our main character, is a Chaplain's Assistant. He is a surprisingly secular Chaplain's Assistant though, and one who finds himself in a position he's not entirely comfortable with. As a man of no faith himself, he finds himself building and maintaining a chapel at the request of the Chaplain he had previously served under. He also finds himself instructing the alien mantes in the meaning of god.

The foil for our hero is The Professor, a mantis who is basically an xeno-anthropology professor. He, along with his students, have come to the human colony on the planet of Purgatory in an attempt to learn about human spirituality. He is not at all pleased that Harrison is not able to assist him with it.

This is where Torgersen's work departs from the tradition Mil-SF hero and that's a good thing. I don't hate Mil-SF. I love Mil-SF, but I've never seen this take on it and it's awesome. John Ringo's Mike O'Neal is the type of character I would normally expect to see as a main character in this type of story. He runs a unit, kicks ass and takes names. Harrison Barlow is not an ass-kicker by any stretch of the imagination. He's actually more of a peacemaker. And therein lies the appeal to the book.

Barlow is a man of peace. He is a man who built a chapel for all because it was necessary. He is not a

SF/F and a pulse.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 fake coins..

The Raven Tower by Ann Leckie Review by Pat Patterson

I'm going to tackle a subject in this blog post that has been bothering me. I'll keep it off the two condensed book reviews that I do, but THIS is my blog, and I get to say stuff. I'll also put it toward the END of this blog post, because I think for some, it's going to be off-putting.

Maybe not most who read my blog posts, though. Who knows? I certainly don't know who reads my blog posts, unless they leave a comment, and not always then.

This is my 21st book review in the series, and the second in the dead tree version. This one actually is the hard back, with dust jacket. See my comments in another review about dead trees costing less than electrons.

I've not read this author, Ann Leckie, before. I am aware that she hit the science fiction field big time not too long ago: she was awarded the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Arthur C. Clarke awards for her first novel "Ancillary Justice." The cover of the version I saw has a picture that's probably little space-ships shooting a big spaceship, so that's good; exploding spaceships and/or pirates improve just about any story. I read that part of the book's impact had something to do with the use of pronouns. Why pronouns should be an issue, I'm not sure, but there you have it.

I'm pretty sure I have never read a book with this POV before. It's that of a (seemingly) objective observer, who happens to be focused on one particular character, by the name of Eolo, a riding companion of Mawat, who is a person of importance.

Over the course of some flash-back reveals, we learn that the POV character is, most likely, a rock. Furthermore, the rock is sentient; and, eventually, we discover that the rock is a god. However, it's rather hard at the beginning to determine exactly what that means, other than 'sentient rock who can observe things.' The reveal progresses, and we learn that people have taught the rock language, and that their offerings provide the rock with power.

Without exception, the following applies to all gods, although it's mostly the rock who is used to introduce us to the rules.

Power and language are, evidently, two facets of the same item for a sentient rock, and THAT is a really interesting concept to dwell on. Deny a person the ability to communicate; how much power can they be said to have?

I love it when the boundary rules of a story are spelled out, and Leckie does a great job of doing that via the rock's self-examination. The CORE rule is that all utterances must be the truth. That happens to have a significance in this universe that the same statement does not have in ours; in THIS universe, if the rock says it, then it HAS to be true, even if the universe itself has to change to make it so. If one of the gods voices an impossibility, then they have to pay the price. Therefore, the rock has to be very careful what it says; there is no such thing as a word spoken without consequence.

A permutation of the rule: the rock can report what someone else told it without being responsible for the truthfulness of the statement. In such cases, the expected form is to say “Here is a story someone told me,” or words to that effect. Also an implied result: it's better for the rock to speak generally, rather than specifically.

That last is a particularly elegant rule, as it covers all of the cryptic prophecies given in stories about magic, ever.

The rules for the rock are essential for the plot development. Also essential for the plot development is the otherwise merely-very-interesting memories the rock discloses. The time it sat on the floor of the ocean; trilobites and bony fish; glaciers, which recede, leaving it on top of the hill; dinosaurs; meteorites; people, who brought it offerings, and taught it language. Fortunately for the rock, it experiences the passage of time differently than we puny people do, else I fear it would have experienced some huge amounts of boredom along the way.

It would be POSSIBLE, perhaps, to strip out all of the plot pertaining to the gods, and still have a reasonably interesting story. It wouldn't be nearly as interesting, though, as it would just deal with humans striving for power. Removing the gods, here's what it looks like: Mawat's father was the Human-in-Charge, and his term and life were at an end. We encounter him in the first scene about to enter the city, expecting to have to take over. Instead, he finds his uncle on the throne. Power struggles ensue.

Yup, that is the making of a fairly good story, but not that distinctive. It's been done, at least in Hamlet form, many times. It's the addition of the actions, and inactions, of the rock and other gods that sets this apart.

Well, that, and the unusual point of view. I'm reminded of the “little did he know” interplay in the movie “Stranger Than Fiction,” with Emma Thompson, as the author, and Will Ferrell, as her character. It's not so much a god perspective, as it is an author perspective. I do understand that some found it tiresome, but I thought it made for a nice change-up. I doubt I'd like a DIET of that, mind you, but it was rather fun.

Then again, I also enjoyed the trilobite story, and from what I've read, some people didn't, at all. I wonder about their commitment to science fiction; if you don't enjoy a good trilobite reference, how can you be claim to be a fan? Well, never mind. Not my circus, not my monkeys.

As for The Question: Is this a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Fantasy Novel?

My opinion: No. There is one troubling element that just reeks to me, which I will now explain to the best of my ability, and in the most accurate, least offensive language I can use.

The following is a rant. IF YOU DO NOT WISH TO BE EXPOSED TO A RANT, SKIP TOT HE NEXT REVIEW., WHICH IS A PAGE AND A HALF FORWARD FROM HERE

I have already commented on the strangeness I found with the finalists for 2019, compared to 2018. The preponderance of trad pub books, at the expense of indie and small house publishers, is a troubling development. The exultation from previously unknown-to-me sources that at last the Dragons had gone “mainstream,” I found to be deeply disturbing.

Now, with some of the books coming from the trad pub area, I had no problem with including them among the finalists; even those with only a few reviews might very well had some cult followers that championed their choice. Yay, freedom!

However, it was with the reading of “The Raven Tower” that I finally identified a theme that I’d noticed earlier, and that had distorted some of the books: the determined focus on non-binary sexuality in humans.

In previous works, it was just an aggravation. The catastrophe that is “The Light Brigade” seemed to take great satisfaction in refusing to provide the gender of the POV character. However, with all else that is wrong with that book, there was no point in emphasizing any particular deficit. Similarly, “A Memory Called Empire” was so severely flawed by the purple prose and the excessive, dragging length that the intrusion of same-sex intimacy between the protagonist and her companions really didn’t enter into the review at all. The real offense in “The Calculated Stars” was gender-based (men are exploitative/repressive), but not sexual in nature. And, in “Black Chamber,” it’s the pan-sexuality, not the homosexuality, that is the turn-off.

But in “The Raven Tower?” The author can only wait until page four before she introduces non-binary sexuality. And, although it is briefly mentioned a few more times, IT NEVER MATTERS TO THE STORY. So, why include it?

I do not know. In this respect, I resemble the rock, in the book. I don’t know what’s going on inside people’s heads; I can only know what I see, what they tell me. And what they are telling me is that they have a great deal to say about non-binary sexuality. More than I have ever heard, in fact, in any other context. Save one.

Starting in the eighth grade, and lasting for about a year, that seemed to be the only source of derision available to boys. According to the vile little creatures, everything was ‘queer, queer, queer.’ It was the sure way to isolate a target, to make them an object of contempt: tell a ‘joke,’ and make them the subject.

In retrospect, it’s pretty clear that this was about power, and not about sexuality, per se. There were a few boys with effeminate mannerisms, and for whatever reason, they never seemed to catch the abuse that was heaped on others. This was the form that bullying took; later, as a middle school counselor, we learned to call it by the name of sexual harassment, but that wasn’t a term we had heard in 1966.

And the behavior of the wannabe thugs in a tough all-boys school seems to be echoed in the behavior of writers of books I have reviewed over the course of the last month. The hostility between those writers and publishers previously OUTSIDE the works considered for the Dragons, and those who have been Dragon contenders since the beginning, is well documented. The DragonCon group have been called just about every name by the WorldCon group except Larry, Brad, Sarah, and Kate. Instead: fascist, racist, sexist, patriarchist, cis-normative, white, Mormon, male.

And, in that context, it’s very hard for me to attribute even neutral motives to what seems to be an artificial inclusion into the majority of the works I’ve reviewed. Instead, it sounds like this to my ears:

“We’re going to speak of sexual deviance in an enlightened manner because it makes you uncomfortable, because you are all latent homosexuals, repressing your true feelings.”

These are the tactics of bullies in all places, at all times.

Perhaps I am too sensitive about some things. It's just that I do not regard human sexuality as a spectator sport. I DO understand that there are some forms of literature that require, or rather, that audiences expect, to have sexual activity involved. Hooray for choices! I am accustomed to skip over certain passages in the works of some of my favorite authors; for example, in the "Ghost" series by John Ringo. But, in those cases, it's a matter of taste, and the explicit sexual scenes were part of the character arc of the protagonist.

But today, there was absolutely nothing contributed to the story by making a point that the character was a non-binary human. I can't read that as other than politicizing, or weaponizing, sexuality. And I find that despicable.

I warned you it was going to be a rant.

Here's what you will pay for this book on Amazon:

Kindle: \$13.99

Audio-book: \$25.54

Paperback: \$15.99

Hardback: \$ 17.10

Amazon reviews: 141; 4.0/5.0 stars

Goodreads reviews: 1059; 4.00/5.0 stars.

Uncompromising Honor by David Weber Review by Pat Patterson

That's certainly NOT the way I started out. I guess if there had been an "On Basilisk Station" party, I would have shown up with home-baked bread, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes for EVERYBODY! But, after failing to connect with recent works, I had an inkling...

This is reported to be the 19th Honor Harrington book. I haven't verified that count personally, so I don't know if it includes the delightful stories that feature other characters than Honor, but regardless, this is an overwhelmingly successful franchise. It was prompted by the actions of Jim Baen himself, and the author includes that particular reference in the Afterword, along with sly suggestions that there may be more on the way.

The cabal running the Solarian System have managed to move the entire polity from a stodgy keeper of intergalactic law, and the greatest economic power, to a huge, blind puppet in the hands of a few mean old men and women, determined to keep a firm grasp on power. All of the backbiting and political treachery we have seen in the past gets accelerated, without even lip service being paid to the military restraint of past centuries.

That doesn't mean that the Solarian Navy is now composed of dimwits and fools. There are plenty of competent officers and crew, and leadership roles are often filled with people who avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. However, the ranks of the Navy have been depleted to a significant extent by a one-sided battle that takes place before the book opens. Those that are left are hungry for revenge. And it's up to Manticore and her allies to stop them, regardless of the cost.

A word about battles: Weber writes space battles with attention given to every detail. We know the classes of ships involved on both sides; their tonnage; their offensive capabilities, down to the last missile; we know how their defensive systems work together. We are given a look inside the mind of the commanders on both sides, see their plans, and their counters to the actions of their opponents. Even though we root for the Star Kingdom of Manticore, for any given battle we don't have a guarantee that the good guys are going to win, and the bad guys are going to lose. Hence, there is always a certain amount of on-the-edge-of-your-seat tension in a space battle.

Sigh.

I fear that here I must insert my opinion that this is a strength that has become a weakness. The first battle in the book just drags ON and on and on, page after page (and I could tell you how many pages, if it weren't for the Kindle being stubborn) and it just got to be TOO technical for me.

Another sigh.

And the same thing is true of the non-battle scenes as well. Everything just drags in this book. The conspiracy-discovered scene. Feeding the children green peas. The discussion of the secret weapon.

I fully realize that in saying this, I am speaking against good sense. David Weber has pleased an untold number of readers with his descriptive powers. You can't argue with success! Well, I'm not really trying to argue; I'm just saying that for THIS reader, it's just too much. Maybe, if I were sent to a mountain cabin for a week, or a hermit, or incarcerated, I'd find myself pounding on a table with the handle of a broom, and screaming "MOAR! MOAR!" But I suspect it's just a matter of taste.

And now, The Question: Is "Uncompromising Honor" a realistic candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction? I hope to kiss a duck, if it ain't. Weber has won this category TWICE. He has a HUGE fanbase. It's not my choice, both because of the personal tedium I experienced while reading, but also because it's an Honor Harrington novel.

Now, before you scalp me, let me explain that. I'm saying that's a deficit with this particular novel, because it really doesn't do enough with Honor Harrington. All of the character development has taken place in the existing work; I don't think her personality stamps this book in the same way that you'll find in the previous books in the series.

I'm just going to leave that here; make of it what you will. Know that I really, really DO know that I'm swimming upstream with this opinion. But, I've got to give you the best I have to offer, and this is it.

We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity **Edited by Chris Kennedy and Jamie Ibson** **Review by Pat Patterson**

"We Dare" is one of the books I was reading when the Dragon dropped in, and disrupted all the plans that were in place. Now, that ended a week ago, and I haven't been QUITE idle since then. In fact, almost as soon as the last review was filed, I grabbed up some Heinlein I keep for just such occasions, and lost myself in the tales of The Man Who Sold The Moon, and so on. Quite lovely. In fact, I doubt that I have reviewed those oldies, since I only started doing this a little over five years ago, and I really don't know when I read some of his works. But, that's for another time.

There ARE some others that were high on my list of TBR&R, and they will come in as rapid a fashion as I can honorably do so. So, Jennie, Mackey, Laura, Doug, Peter, Jerry, Chris, Nitay, Robert, and all of the others: YES, I have your books, and I am champing at the bit to get them into my brain and the results out of the ends of my fingers. Everybody else, all of you who have been patient, have been patient, and have been patient, I'll put out a request for new materials as I clear up space.

“We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity,” is a collection of fifteen stories from fifteen authors, and MOSTLY, the only thing they have in common is that they deal with implications of a world in which human beings are able to receive machine enhancements. Not a new concept, it received popular attention with the 1970's series “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Good thing, or bad thing? It depends on who you ask, it depends on what you read.

“A handsome young cyborg named Ace
Wooed women at every base.
But when ladies glanced at
His special enhancement
They vanished with nary a trace.”
(Alpha Centauri, Firaxis Games)

Some who read this may be old enough to remember purchasing vinyl LP record albums. One of the marketing approaches was to take two hit songs by a group, add 10 mediocre songs, and form a playlist: the first song on side A was a hit, the last song on side B was a hit, and all the stuff in between was mediocre filler. That's not the way these books are put together. ALL of the stories are good stuff.

KADE by Christopher Woods. The protagonist of “This Fallen World” has, somehow, managed to live to a ripe old age. He's still a rapscaillon, as much as his 90 year-old, much-abused body permits him to be. Rather than augmentation in the form of repairs and enhancements, he is offered a chance to start as a new adult, with additional features. However, this world is run by corporations, and they don't like competitors to get advantages.

TAMING THE BEAST by Kevin Steverson. Sadly, I am not familiar with the universe this story is drawn from. I hope that changes sometime in the future. Here we have Gunny Harper, who has been given prosthetic legs to replaced the destroyed originals. The problem: while they are good for some activities, there is no way that he can operate with the pain which remains. The Beast referred to in the title is an obstacle course. If the Gunny can't beat it, he is going to retire.

TANK by J.F. Holmes. The tank is a former cyborg soldier in the Army, now a NYC cop. The question is: are you still a human? He doesn't really know the answer to that, but an encounter with a similarly enhanced criminal, an an astoundingly nasty criminal, and some criminals with suits and nice jobs, all conspire to force him to discover the answer.

CRADLE AND ALL by Quincy J. Allen. The corporation, no matter where it's located, is always concerned about the bottom line. Who decides about the ethics of the situation? Usually, that's someone else's job. However, when we are referring to our own children, that answer isn't good enough.

DO OR DIE by Jamie Ibson. “All problems can be solved with the proper application of C-4.” Or, Deton-8, in this future. Except, not really. Some jobs require a proper application of heart, In fact, without the heart, the jobs aren't really worth doing. In this universe, people born with neurological condi-

tions that are debilitating and ultimately lethal are, shall we say, re-purposed. But, the heart comes over, regardless of whether the pump is included.

YELLOW IN THE NIGHT by Philip Wohrab. “The King In Yellow” is one of the creepiest, multi-level stories, ever, so why NOT add to it? These enhanced warriors KNOW they are being lied to from the beginning, but they also know the mission orders are valid. They hope the lies aren’t going to mean they don’t have a chance,

THE CHAOS OF WELL-SEEMING FORMS by Rob Howell. The Hatfields and the McCoys, or the Montagues and Capulets, on Mars. Howell can take a bizarre set-up like that, and ALMOST make you cry. Probably WILL make you cry, if you read it when you are alone, instead of in the car while waiting on teen-age girls to buy their school supplies.

FORTY ACRES AND A MULE by Luke R. J. Maynard. There is such sadness associated with this term; it comes from an attempt by the victorious North to provide the former slaves in the defeated South with property. That would have ended much of the economic disparity that prevented access to inherited wealth. In this story, we see the retirement longed for by a man given the strength of the mule by his enhancements.

IMPERFECT MIND by Jason Cordova. In a hard, cold, distant future, children born with imperfections are dumped into people warehouses until they age out. Then, they get dumped anywhere else. However, some of them get picked for other things, other uses that the elite might have for them. That could be anything, really; sex slave, dog food, whatever. One young girl gets picked to test-drive a cyborg-soldier package. It gives her the chance to experience love, for the very first time. And that’s what makes this story particularly nasty. I wish I could not draw a line between this fictional piece, and the brutal reality of child soldiers; I really, really wish I could not do that.

BAG MAN by Jack Clemons. This one takes place in my semi-adoptive home town, and I recognize the place names, have visited a number of them, and I would prefer that we could find a path so that things will not work out this way. Humans with vastly modified brains and bodies do rough justice(?) for money. The choice of a theme park for some of the action clearly has nothing to do with the fact that it was the setting for gang activity in real life. It’s a sheer coincidence. But things won’t work out this way.

COME UP SCREAMING by Kevin Ikenberry. Captain Mairin Shields commands an armor unit used as a screening force for an assault team trying to re-take a formerly human city. In addition to her conventionally-acquired skills, she also has access to the memories of an ancestor who also drove a tank. This reminds me of a comic-book series from my youth; the tank was haunted by the ghost of Jeb Stuart, I believe.

ANGEL by Robert E. Hampson. I did my medic training at places found in this story. Some of my cadre could very well have been the models for medic sergeant Martin. He was given experimental nanobots to save his life, and they do that, repeatedly. Not sure it really works to his benefit, in the end, but it sure does allow him the opportunity to pay it forward.

TO DUST by Marisa Wolf. Ignored and abandoned, and going insane. Who HASN’T had that experience? Well, hopefully, none of us. But even if that’s the case, you don’t just up and quit. After all, there are your comrades, and they are depending on you.

If you recall, at the beginning of this review, I said that anthologies no longer use the recording industry practice of placing the hits at the beginning and at the ending of the book. However, if I were to be persuaded otherwise, the next two stories would be the best evidence. Each one is excessively wonderful. Taken together (they are a pair), they are almost unbearably great.

NOW YOU SEE ME by Kacey Ezell. Ezell cheats, and it's not fair. This book is a collection of stories about enhanced humans, people who are given special powers, sometimes contained in their own skin, sometimes by being coupled to machinery. There IS such a thing, you know, and I have experienced it: I'm a biker. The physical limitations I feel in the flesh seem to vanish, when I throw a leg over the V65 Sabre in my garage, crank the engine, and move on down the road at the speed of heat. I am AUGMENTED, baby! And although I don't know that Ezell has ever been a biker, I DO happen to know that she has strapped a big honking jet turbine to her spine, and danced the sky on laughter-silvered wings. So, when she tells you the story of Cary, who pilots a shell, and inhabits a body of a MOST powerful force, she is drawing from her own experience. It isn't fair! It's a lovely, lovely story, though, particularly because it's half of a Rashomon.

NOW YOU DON'T by Josh Hayes. This is the other half of the Rashomon, and I THINK Hayes is a cheater as well. He's got the perspective of Gage, the other POV in the story of techno-thieves, and his recounting of the sequence rewiring a crashing aircraft while waiting for an explosion are just a little bit too vivid to be completely selected from YouTube videos. Shucks, y'all, this is an excellent pairing of stories, and I would surely love to see more like it, 'deed I would.

Conclusions: Do not, under any circumstances, plan on missing this book. Also, do not plan on starting it one month, and finishing it the next month, and then think you are going to dash off a quick review.

I'm a diehard fan of the Human Wave fiction, in which people find a way to survive, and technology is our friend. Most of these stories would not fit into that category; there is too much forced on individuals. However, I didn't find anything here that really felt off; they are all possibilities. While I would hope that the possibility of augmented humanity will mean that those of us who are physically limited will have a shot at turning cartwheels again, I also know that it's not likely to be a technology available to everyone with a need. So, we will just take it as it comes.

Peace be on your household.

When the Gods Fell by Richard Paolinelli Review by Declan Finn

Mars Is Hiding A Secret

When the first small group of humans arrive on Mars, they expect to retrieve some probes and learn more about Earth's neighbor. Instead, they find Oracle Veritas, of House Delphi, who has waited 65 million years to brief these children of Olympus about their own origins, their very essence ... and the danger that threatens them.

Seas and lakes, deserts and icecaps, forests and mountains once covered this planet then called Olympus. Veritas tells them that it was home to a race of immortals—Zeus, Odin, Yahweh, Lucifer, and others—who guided the fates of other worlds and fought among themselves for supremacy.

Zeus, Odin, Yahweh, and Lucifer, supported by characters from other realms, had battled for control. As civil war loomed, the most powerful of all the gods, Zeus, foresaw chaos and destruction. Left with a single, terrible solution to save all the worlds, Zeus turned to the only person he could trust to carry out his last order ... and change all existence forever.

This was hands-down awesome. This is one part 2001: A Space Odyssey, one part Dan Simmons, and one part Babylon 5, with a hint of Mass Effect.

The short version? The concepts are brilliant. The execution is spot on. There is about 10-15% of the book that needed a little bit of a trim, but aside from that? Wonderful.

This one is very much a novel. I don't mean to be nasty about the description. But this is as much of a novel as *The Martian*. Only without as much smart ass. Okay, there's still plenty of smart ass -- with the Mars station Von Braun, and rovers named Aldren and The Glenn -- but this one is a bit more serious than *The Martian*. The execution of the science bit felt a lot like the *Martian* -- sensible, straightforward, and sciencey. (I especially like how Russia, in 2040, is still trying to cover their inferiority complex with bravado.)

As the flap copy mentions, the martian crew is wandering around the planet, minding their own business until they stumble upon a woman just standing in the middle of the martian landscape. She's so happy that the humans seeded on Earth finally made it to Mars. Of course she managed to survive that long -- she had become a being of pure energy (damn Vorlons. They get everywhere). And it's a story 65 million years in the making (yes, I stole the Jurassic Park ad campaign).

The following story is an epic tale of ... well, we're going to take ALL the mythology, and make the gods aliens with style. There were so many mythological references in this one that I'm certain that I missed some. As this is mythology, there are enough betrayals and back stabbing to make the cast of *Game of Thrones* look like amateurs.

We have Caste Zion, led by Lord Yahweh, where everyone in the City of Eden is part of the national guard, which was helpful when Lucifer's House Satania challenged Chronos Saturnius' Caste Olympia a hundred years before hand, and Lord Marduk and Lord Tiamat of Houses Canaan and Dagon are plotting a followup coup....

Okay, this book is a little chocked FULL of smartass, if just requires a degree in classical studies (or a read-through of Bullfinch's *Mythology*) to really get the jokes.

As I said before, when Richard uses ALL of the mythologies, he uses ALL of the mythologies. If he missed one, I can't tell you what he may have left out. We have appearances by Thor, Loki, Shiva, Kali. Nippon, a literal Mount Fuji okay, Ganesh didn't make it into the book, but there's a sequel. And yes, Loki is still Loki. Then again, when everyone's pantheon gets together, everyone starts to look a little like Loki. (Honestly, straight up mythology has enough murder and incest porn to make *Game of Thrones* look like Kindergarten).

Now, in a book that mixes mythology and scifi -- especially when one turned mythology into Scifi -- you'd normally expect a ton of handwavium. Not really. I especially enjoyed describing Hades' House Orcus as underground, on the banks of a fire river Styx but that Styx had carved out tubes and caves from pole to pole, and the way the water is described as being laced with enough methane so that the water was always on fire. It was just such a nice touch. It's less scifi and more ... fi.

And the ending well, all I can say is that you should pay VERY close attention to the numbers they throw about.

There is only one problem with this book.

And no, I'm not kvetching about "Yahweh is a Vorlon." Even in the book, the Oracle telling the story said that yes, there was a Deity to whom these "gods" prayed. And I saw no mention of one of the kids becoming a carpenter. If you're that concerned, unbunch your panties and just relax. This is not Dan Brown. Paolinelli is not poking at your faith with malice aforethought.

The real problem: As the book nears the end, it's fairly obvious how this runaway freight train is going to end. In fact, we kinda know how the book is going to end from the beginning -- but the journey to how it gets there is so interesting and so readable, you don't care how it ends, you want to see how they got there. But after a certain point, runaway train is not only running off the rails, but is on fire. What comes next?

What comes next ... is a heck of an epilogue that sets up for an apocalyptic battle that I'm sure will be very interesting....

But damnit man, why did you have to end it THERE?

Anyway, at least pick up *When the Gods Fell* , and you'll see why I considered it for my Best SF novel for the Dragon Awards.

LITERARY CRITICISM

The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon by Moira Greyland Peat Review by Tamara Wilhite

Before #Metoo was Breendoggle.

Breendoggle refers to the pedophilia scandal in the science fiction community centered on Walter Breen, a man later convicted of multiple counts of pedophilia. He's most famous for his books on coins, but he was active in the sci-fi world. The trials brought to light the involvement of his wife Marion Zimmer Bradley, author of "The Mists of Avalon" and the Darkover science fiction series.

The sex scandals faded away, though the legacy of pain and the defensive fandom of both authors remained. The book "The Last Closet" by their daughter Moira Greyland Peat is a personal memoir of her and her siblings' sexual abuse at the hands of both authors. It remains close to verified sources like court records for much of the length.

This book is important for several reasons. First, it has been a top selling sexual abuse survivor memoir and led many to share their own stories. They are literally coming out of the closet to say yes, this happened to me, too. Second, it shows that subcultures like science fiction fandom may ignore the

sexual abuse by celebrities and cover it up, even years later and though the person was criminally convicted of horror. In that light, some of the Me Too Hollywood stories become more plausible.

Third, the book comes from a rather silent minority – the children of homosexuals. Walter Breen and Marion Zimmer Bradley were both open homosexuals, though they chose to create several children. Moira addresses the performativeness demanded of such children to always advocate for and ever support the parents' decisions and politics.

As their child and as someone who documented many details of the book, sexual activists can't criticize her for that. Instead, they denigrate her as deluded or criticize her choice to become religious. They've attacked her book and her income as a musician. This is how her harp music was falsely labeled "explicit". The Celtic-inspired music often has no words, though the book itself is easily rated R for sexual content.

What about the book itself? "The Last Closet" is the story of a little girl in a most unusual counterculture family, and her struggle to reconcile her love for her father with a desperate need to stop him from injuring every child he meets with his sexual addiction. The book is an effort to tell her story and save others from that fate.

View from the Cellar A Literary Analysis of Laird Koenig's The Little Girl Who Lives down the Lane by R. W. Watkins Review by George Phillis

And now we come to that *rara avis*, a book of literary criticism of a particular SF novel, its film, and the corresponding play. This is a truly important book.

In a certain sense, this is a challenging review to write. Your humble reviewer must bring together a discussion of literary criticism and its relationship to science fiction, a discussion of the original novel, and only then a discussion of Watkins' book, without which it will be difficult to understand why *View from the Cellar* is such an important work.

I begin with a few observations on divergences between literary and genre fiction. My remarks are drawn in part by remarks by L. E. Modesitt, Jr. many years ago at a Boston science fiction convention, though what you are reading is my memories of a few of his remarks. On one hand, we have genre fiction, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, detectives, and westerns. On the other hand, we have literary fiction, fiction said to have deeper meanings. Many readers of each sort of fiction to some extent tend to deprecate the other sort of fiction. Under present conditions, the divergence has reached core issues of style. For example, genre fiction is usually written in past tense, while modern literary fiction is generally written in present tense.

We now advance to a vastly oversimplified description of schools of literary criticism. Literary fiction is with some frequency subjected to literary criticism; genre fiction reviews are typically quite different. There are at least two prominent sorts of literary criticism. Realistically speaking, there are more, but there are two that are significant here. On one hand, there is classical literary criticism, which asks about symbolism, literary references, beautiful turns of phrase, character, simile and metaphor, and the

like. Classical literary criticism considers, for example, the plays of Shakespeare, especially plays like *King Lear*, and shows how the Great Bard used choices of word, phrase, and dramatic structure to create his tragedy.

On the other hand, there is political literary criticism. Political literary criticism corresponds roughly speaking to political novels, works like H. G. Wells' *In the Days of the Comet*, Jon Ross's *Unintended Consequences*, Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, or Andrew MacDonald's *The Turner Diaries*. These four novels reflect four radically different political positions, but each seeks — whether the author intended it or not — to excite the hopes or fears of the reader about some possible future, often dystopic. For better or worse, each of those novels has been of significant political influence. Corresponding to each of these novels is a school of literary criticism, a socialist-Marxist-Stalinist-Maoist school, a libertarian school, a feminist school, or a far-right school. Some of those schools are larger than others. A Marxist might ask what a novel says about the class structure and its consequences. A feminist might ask what it says about the role of women and the patriarchy; reviewers in the same direction might ask about a novel's treatment of race and color or the status of differently-sexually-inclined people. A modern extension of political analysis makes the claim that authors do not understand their own works, so that only through literary criticism can a valid interpretation of a novel's symbolic content be obtained.

We now turn to the novel and the film. *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* was first published in 1974. Laird Koenig's style is spare, every detail chosen to set a mood or advance the plot. The film was made the next year, with Jodie Foster at age 13 in the lead role as 13-year-old Rynn Jacobs. There are actually two versions of the film, a European version, and a shorter American version in which the nude scene (using a skin double for the actress), and a segment with Rynn and her boyfriend in bed necking gently, were deleted. The novel and film are very gentle horror, an area once recognized as part of the N3F's remit. There is almost no blood or gore, no actresses proving they studied screaming as a substitute for acting, but the dramatic tension builds at every step until the last moments. The villain has his last gasp. End. Watkins proposes that this is a Hitchcockian film. Director Nicolas Gessner proposed instead that the film is a teenage love story.

To summarize the plot, Rynn's father had divorced her abusive mother. He and Rynn flee to America to protect her from her mother. He is dying, but finds a secluded house in which Rynn can hide, living by herself until she reaches 16. Before the novel's start, he disappeared. Her mother then appeared, and is served tea laced with a white powder her father said would calm her nerves. True, Potassium cyanide does that. Rynn was left with a body hidden in the house's basement. The abusive landlady appears. At one point she physically assaults poor Rynn. The landlady then forces her way into the basement, finding the corpse. In the film, she screams, is hit over the head with the basement trapdoor, falls, and dies. In the book, Rynn traps the landlady in the cellar and kills her. Rynn then gains a boyfriend, Mario Podesta, who moves the landlady's car to an unsuspecting location. Through much of this, Rynn has been stalked by the landlady's son, the town's resident child molester, Frank Hallett. Hallett actually appears in the film's third scene. Rynn is warned about him by the friendly police office, Sergeant Ron Miglioriti, who is sure that something odd is going on. He never quite figures out what. Boyfriend Mario helps Rynn bury the two bodies; they then have a brief physical affair, following which he is hospitalized with near-fatal pneumonia. Finally the child molester sneaks into her house. He loses a duel of wits with Rynn, the film ending with him drinking cyanide-laden tea and dying.

The novel spends all its time with Rynn. People pass through her life, like interstellar comets flaring brightly as they pass by the sun, to be seen once or twice, then to fade from sight forever. She is the

one constant, her deadly focus being her own survival as an independent person. In the film, the drastic integrity of the tale lay almost entirely on Jodie Foster's very young shoulders. Martin Sheen played the truly creepy child molester. The boyfriend, the landlady, and the village policeman play their roles well, but in the final analysis this was a single-character film whose success was entirely determined by the thespian talents of the lead actress. (And, indeed, this was her first lead role.)

The film was met with considerable controversy. At age 13, Rynn deliberately kills one (film) or two (book) people, gets away with it, and has an affair with a boy a few years her senior. Some film critics fulminated.

Now we reach Canadian poet R. W. Watkins and his book *View from the Cellar*. His primary thesis is that Laird Koenig's film is heavily laden with Jewish, Holocaust, and to a lesser extent Christian symbolism, with a dash of Ayn Rand Objectivism at a few points. This is not quite what one expects of suspense/horror novels, but what Watkins demonstrates is that the symbolism is there if you had only bothered to look. Alas, there is little danger of fans of literary fiction *elevating themselves* – they would say *lowering themselves*--to see what might be found. In fact, Watkins finds nearly 40 pages of symbolic references.

For Jewish references, as found by Watkins, I note only a few examples from a much longer work: Rynn is found practicing Hebrew using a linguaphone recording. Very early in the film, Rynn is found lighting candles on her birthday cake, seeing herself as performing a ritual act, reminiscent of the custom of lighting Sabbath candles. Her caftan (in the book) has blue embroidery, said by the Moroccan who sold it to her to keep her safe from the evil eye. Frank Hallet's pervert hands are described as having the pores of pig skin, pigs being unclean and forbidden within the Jewish faith. Rynn's first dinner with Mario is interpreted by Watkins as being reminiscent of the *seder*. The foods include lamb, lettuce, the bitter herb parsley with the potatoes, and wine. The house door was (perhaps inadvertently) left unlocked, with in the end an extra glass of wine left on one corner of the table. As Watkins observes, the novel even has a gas chamber, used to kill a dangerously prying adult.

The list of Christian symbols is fewer. Mario perhaps plays the role of Rynn's savior by helping her dispose of two corpses, corpses much like the two thieves alongside whom Jesus was crucified. He disappears to have dinner with his eleven siblings and his uncle, officer Miglioriti, this last supper mirroring Jesus's last supper with the 12 Disciples. Mario then almost dies.

The Holocaust symbolism, 24 pages of examples, is the longest portion of the analysis. This symbolism is central to Rynn's predicament. She must stay very small and hidden, or she will be found out. Even if the bodies pass unnoticed, her free life will come to an end. Toward the beginning, we have Rynn confronting authority, cashing traveler's checks at the bank while a teller with his thin Hitlerian mustache looks on dubiously. Toward the end, well after dark, she reaches home after visiting Mario in the hospital, seeing the light she left on at the door. The house was "the only place on earth where she belonged"... "This was her home, this was where she lived." The house, says Watkins, is a symbol of the Jewish right to inhabitancy in Europe, and Rynn is representative of the individual's commitment to realizing that right." At the very end, she kills the neighborhood child molester, and then discovers that she won the Thanksgiving turkey, a peculiarly American custom "this incident is probably symbolic of a European Jew obtaining safe passage to the United States during wartime."

Watkins has watched the film, he notes, perhaps a hundred times, is sensitive to every detail, and finds a series of modest continuity errors. An effort to reconstruct the floor plan of the house from what is seen on film runs into obstacles. Some rooms can not be quite where one might have expected.

Watkins emphasizes the Randian notion of the survival ethic. The reference is to a short essay by Ayn Rand on emergency ethics, invoked by a clever use of a few lines by Emily Dickinson. He then proceeds to the anagram. Rynn is not a conventional name. Indeed, there appears to be no precedent for it. Watkins proposes, as part of his analysis of the book from an Objectivist standpoint, that the name is half of an anagram of Ayn Rand. After all, the name supplies the four letters R-Y-N-N. The difficulty is that there are three extra letters, A, D, and A. He leaves it to the reader to complete the anagram. The completion will be immediately obvious to most, namely the letters form the name Ada, the reference being to Ada, Countess Lovelace, the world's first computer programmer, sole legitimate daughter of Lord Byron, who like Rynn was brilliant, studied privately, as a juvenile fended off the attentions of a tutor if less dramatically than Rynn fends off Frank Hallett, and apparently had multiple affairs.

On one hand, Watkins' book should be of great interest to readers who wish to bring literary analysis and criticism to the sf world. We've certainly had sf novels filled with symbolism and allegory; we need go no further than the sf works of the greatest twentieth century Christian apologist C. S. Lewis. Watkins shows that the same analysis is possible with more conventional novels. The notion that orthodox novels of suspense, horror, fantasy, and science fiction bear up under classical literary analysis is new; it is clearly demonstrated in this exemplary case by R. W. Watkins' brilliant analysis.

On the other hand, if you are about to head off to college, or if you have children or grandchildren who are about to head off to college and have to take English criticism courses, this volume will be an incredibly valuable book for children or grandchildren to study carefully. It shows by demonstration how to mine a work for literary allusions. Some readers will suggest that the allusions will be found like the evidence for guilt found by the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police, namely the evidence will be found whether it was there or not. On this matter, I close with a sf reference, a short story of time travel, in which the physicist friend of the Shakespearean scholar confesses that he had brought William Shakespeare forward to the current time to see what people remember of his work. Shakespeare chose to take the scholar's course on Shakespeare, saying of it 'what a torrent of words are wrung like a flood squeezed from a damp mop'. The scholar asks what Shakespeare thought of his course. "You flunked him" was the answer. Nonetheless, if you are a budding undergraduate faced with the need to wring torrents of words, here is a fine demonstration showing that those words are actually hidden in the work, waiting only to be called forth by the thoughtful student.

PROSE BONO

Prose Bono #2: A Tale of Two Writers by Robert Runté

Back in the day, I knew two fans equally determined to make it as writers. One of them went on to publish a dozen stories and three novels (so far), and the other hasn't. With the benefit of hindsight, I'd like to suggest an analysis of what characteristics allowed one to become successful and the other not.

Dedication, Effort, Perseverance

On these dimensions, Fyodor and Charles were much more evenly matched. They both produced drafts for every meeting of the critique group, they both listened to and responded appropriately to feedback, and they both understood the concept of a second draft. They both put in the hours necessary to master

their craft and kept it up for years.

Talent and Ambition

Although it would have made a better comparison if both had been equally talented at the outset, this was not the case. Everyone in our writers' group believed that the one of the pair—whom we'll call Fyodor—was clearly the more talented. Fyodor was well-read, had an excellent command of the written word, and aspired to write literary fiction. His early drafts showed significant progress towards this goal. He strived not only to produce meaningful stories, but to master style. There was definitely poetry to his writing. I joked that he was the next Dostoevsky.

In contrast, the other fellow—let's call him Charles—was hoping to write well enough to get published. He had a few good ideas, and his writing was competent, but not outstanding. "Clear" was how I most frequently described his style. By the standards of our group, Charles was about average.

The Deciding Factor: Dostoevsky Syndrome

As you've no doubt guessed, Charles is the published author. So what happened?

My theory is that Fyodor, wanting to be taken seriously, wanting to be the next Dostoevsky, completely sabotaged his own career. Let me break this down into its component parts.

First, by aspiring to write literature, Fyodor placed too much emphasis on style and substance, rather than 'story'. To be successful, especially in our genre, there has to be a driving narrative that keeps the reader turning pages. I love beautiful language as much as the next reviewer, but that poetry has to be in service of—not instead of—story. And I love it when a story has something to say over and above the action, but you can't say anything if there is no story to get the reader from point A to point B. Fyodor couldn't see that his writing was often so dense that the narrative got lost, or that the deeper meaning wasn't always evident if the reader couldn't follow what was happening. In contrast, Charles' stories were always clear because he was focused on telling the story. The words were maybe a little bland at first, but you could always clearly picture what was happening.

Second, If Charles expression could sometimes be a bit 'off the shelf', Fyodor's imagery could sometimes become too much. Not only would Fyodor pile the imagery on so thick that the reader lost the storyline in a tangle of description, the images themselves could be a little obscure. I recall one metaphor in particular that described rotting durian fruit hanging low on its branch. Since none of us had ever heard of durian, let alone seen or smelt one, the image missed the mark. When I thought about it, I realized that his imagery was all like that: one often had to stop and look something up to understand what was being depicted. In retrospect, Fyodor's insistence on evoking images that were out of the ordinary, could be seen as . . . a bit pretentious. It was much easier to identify and correct Charles' occasional slip into cliché, than to correct Fyodor's use of imagery that was so original that the reader couldn't actually picture it.

(Part of the problem, I now recognize, was a reluctance of Fyodor's beta readers to confess that we couldn't understand what he was saying. Because his writing was obscure and difficult to wade through, it was easy to conclude he must be smarter than us and writing above our level as mere SF readers.)

Third, because Fyodor always aimed so high, his reach always exceeded his grasp. He was constantly frustrated that his drafts never achieved his impossibly high standards and so became increasingly discouraged as he never seemed to get any closer to his goal.

In contrast, focused on story-telling, Charles worked on mastering the basics of plot, setting, pacing and so on. Consequently, Charles made steady and rapid progress. His initial stories had always sort of worked, and as he eliminated all the common beginner errors, his stories became much better. They may have not been deeply moving or things of jaw dropping beauty, but they worked, and Charles could take justifiable pride in them.

In my view, then, Fyodor's fundamental mistake was Dostoevsky syndrome: the mistaken belief that great writers spring forth fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, skipping the step where one learns through practising on the basics. Although instructors can sometimes spot innate talent, it still has to be developed. That means one's voice and style evolve over time as one works to master and continually refine their handling of plot, setting, characterization, and so on. But Fyodor felt 'simple' storytelling beneath him, and was impatient to move on immediately to write his Crime and Punishment. Uh, no. Not the way it works. Fyodor wasn't just trying to run before he had practiced walking, he had registered for a double marathon his first day out. His disdain for 'mere story telling' had led him in the wrong direction.

In contrast, Charles' much more modest goals had allowed him much more immediate success in selling a few short stories to SF markets (still no mean accomplishment). Having mastered the basics, Charles did not stop there, but continued to get better on all fronts, including developing stories that had something to say beyond the obvious action. By his latest book, his language was as beautiful as anything Fyodor had ever attempted, but was ultimately more compelling because it remained clearer. Charles' most recent novel is brilliant on every level and was even nominated for an award (It might well have won had the novel not been saddled with an appalling cover. Why publisher's covers are often terrible is a topic for future column.)

Fyodor never gave himself the chance to get better, because he expected to start where others (like Charles) ended.

The Moral?

Talent, effort, and perseverance are all necessary but not sufficient factors in a writer's success. The other necessary but seldom emphasized factor is the need to start with the basics. In Japanese culture, for example, it was common for an apprentice potter to spend ten years preparing clay before considered ready to actually attempt a pot. North Americans arrive at the master's studio expecting to start at 'pot'. The Japanese master is usually horrified at the suggestion that 'pot' is remotely possible without the requisite intuitive understanding of 'clay', learned through years of apprenticeship focused purely on preparing clays.

I'm not going to push that analogy so far as to suggest that a thorough knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, and so on should be mandatory before starting your novel. As an editor and writing coach, I'm happy to teach each of those skills as we go, and I've always believed that having a story the person wants to tell is the first step in motivating learners to take grammar and structure seriously. But... I am going to argue that getting story telling down is a necessary pre-requisite to achieving 'literary'. Charles' ultimate achievement of award-winning quality came by continuously developing his skills over time, by learning how to tell a coherent story, and then developing the other elements of 'story' to the point where it was memorable. Clarity and a strong narrative must come first, because narrative is the scaffolding from which everything else hangs.

The Three Elements of Dostoevsky Syndrome

(1) Comparing Yourself Against the Wrong Standard

This is where a lot of procrastination, blank page syndrome and especially writer's block comes from. Beginning writers (who often don't really understand that everybody's first drafts are, by definition, extremely rough), look at what they've written, then look at the writing they see around them, and give up. I frequently have to explain to my students/clients that they are comparing their first draft with other writers' twelfth or thirteenth draft. What's more, the the last four drafts of anything that's been professionally published has benefitted from professional structural editing, professional line editing, professional copy editing, and professional proofreading. Of course your first draft cannot approach that quality. No one's first draft does, or could. What makes it even worse is, these beginners are not comparing their work with other newly published writers, but usually against the writing of their five favorite authors of all time! So their personal top five favorites of the top thousand published writers in the country/genre, ever. Head::Desk. Yeah, you really can't compete with that.

[If, on the other hand, one believes one's first draft is far better than anything currently professionally published, then one is not suffering from Dostoevsky Syndrome, but rather the Dunning-Kruger Effect.]

(2) Writing for the Wrong Genre

Those with Dostoevsky Syndrome are not just doomed to disappointment that their writing isn't already up to Dostoevsky standards, they're focused on the wrong criteria. I haven't thought to ask him directly, but I'm willing to bet even Robert J. Sawyer—who has won more Awards than any other SF author—doesn't compare himself with Dostoevsky. It's not just that Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment*; it's that it's a different sort of writing. Sawyer is a master storyteller in the tradition of, say, Charles Dickens. Sawyer, like Dickens, addresses contemporary issues and forces you to see their long term implications or to see the issue in a new light. It isn't that you can't get to Dostoevsky-good without first passing through Sawyer-good or Dickens-good (which is already ambitious enough), but that you have to understand how to frame a story, how to construct a compelling narrative, before you can think of experimenting with forms without such structures.

Take, for example, e. e. cummings, who essentially invented modernist free-form poetry. The students who showed up in his writing classes all expected to be taught how to write blank free verse, but cummings told them, don't be stupid, you have to master sonnets before you can move to blank verse; you have to know the rules before you can think of breaking them. The rules for writing sonnets are there because they make writing poetry easier. You can't start with the insanely hard stuff; you can't start in free fall. Same applies here: You can't write *Notes From Underground* until you can sell a story to *Analog*. Narrative first, then the other layers and forms.

(3) Losing One's Own Voice

The third component of Dostoevsky Syndrome is lack of faith in one's own voice. Stop trying to be Dostoevsky or Dickens or whomever. As a writing coach, I frequently have to deprogram graduates of creative writing programs / English majors: Because they been told that these books over here are what constitutes "great literature", they naturally think that's what they're supposed to be writing. NO! You're supposed to be doing what those writers did that made them such standouts—which was, develop their own unique voices. In Canada, students read so much Margaret Atwood, they all end up trying to write

like Margaret Atwood. What I have to explain to them is that we already have Margaret Atwood, thanks; we do not need a second rate imitation Atwood, especially since every other college writing graduate is also doing Atwood impressions. What we don't have yet is your voice, your vision, your contribution to the conversation. Stop trying to write 'literature' like a pretentious idiot, and just write your story. As you develop and evolve as a writer, you'll automatically grow into the writer you were meant to be. Trying to be Dostoevsky is a sure fire way to fail.

The Art and Craft of Writing: Words on a Page by L. Jagi Lamplight Wright

This is the introduction to The Art and Craft of Writing indiegogo.com/projects/the-art-and-craft-of-writing#/ , the writing class for which we are currently running an Indiegogo indiegogo.com/projects/the-art-and-craft-of-writing/x/18937494#/ campaign:

All writing is just words on a page.

What does this mean, and why does it matter to us? To answer that question, I must tell you a bit of a story.

When I was young, I was in awe of the ability of good authors to transport us to an entirely different life. Reading the greats was glorious but also occasionally intimidating. A good book can make us sympathize first with a frightened rabbit and then with a hungry fox. They call upon us to “burn with the bliss and suffer the sorrow of all mankind.”

I loved what I read but I despaired that I could ever accomplish anything half so wonderful. I feared I would never figure out the mystery of how my favorite authors conveyed so much.

Then one day, it struck me. Books were just words on a page. Nothing more.

If an author could accomplish something within the pages of his book, it had to be accomplished by the use of specific, individual words.

If I could figure out which words produced which effects, I could learn to do the same thing.

I remember one of the first time I figured out how to indicate an emotion indirectly. I was quite proud of myself. However, it led to an unexpectedly funny conversation with a dear family member who had some very odd beliefs—in this case, this person believed in some sort of extra sensory perception.

My family member: I perceive here that your main character is angry.

Me, delighted: Yes! I went out of my way to slip that in. So glad it worked.

My family member: No. I'm not talking about what you wrote. I am telling you that I am discerning that your character is secretly bitter about what is going on.

Me: Yes, I put that in on purpose.

My family member: No, I am telling you that I am picking this up psychically.

I didn't win that argument, but I had successfully taken my first small steps towards using words to capture the magic that is the story.

In this class, we will consider words upon a page. We will look at how to make them work for us instead of against us, at what kind of words we need to put down to get the effects we desire to achieve.

Books are enchanting. They are like a draught of strong wine. A good story sweeps us off our feet and carries us to true love, to far off places, to Narnia or Barsoom. With stories, we can reach others, lift them out of sorrow, sometimes even sway the course of lives, or nations.

All of us yearn to write, or we would not be here. We long to bring to vivid life those stories that burn deep within our hearts. We wish not only to see them given life but also to share them and, perhaps, touch the heart of another.

Books may just be words on a page, but look what we can make those words do!

Welcome to The Art and Craft of Writing

LETTERS

Dear Neffers,

Congratulations to all for the first issue of The N3F Review of Books. As a former editor of The Fan, I've long been fond of book reviews, and the review section — at one time titled: "Re: review section" — and as a primarily literary SF fan, books themselves. So it's a dream to see.

The numbers are impressive. For reviewers, twenty-five reviews, and thirteen Dragon award nominations. Ten of the books or by women, either because of their title selection or by diversity among the Dragon nominees. I didn't check. And Patterson was working, and reading, overtime, contributing fifteen of the twenty-five reviews. Kudos!

I have a few zine editing comments. Something we could consider doing in all our club zines is italicizing titles. It makes them stand out a little more, which eases reading. I'd also like to know the publisher and publication date without having to look it up myself. And I wonder whether organizing reviews by title or author, in this case breaking out the Dragon nominees in a special section, would also aid reading.

Regardless, the reviews let me to several titles to my want list, particularly the Jemison titles, the Kowal novel, and the Adeyemi book.

Given the editorial comments addressing political opinions, I was a little surprised by Nuttall's remarks about diversity in his Jemison reviews. I would suggest that Nuttall's concerns about diversity in the book might actually be concerns about characters or plot, or based on his own understanding of the context in which the author draws upon. Dismissing comments about "social justice warrior", a phrase generally used to denigrate others or to lessen their concerns, didn't necessarily signal an empathetic reader. In fact, I suggest that most of his concerns have to do with world building rather than diversity.

Exposition describing an alien world might very well slow plot, but might be needed, especially if there is a concern about not describing alien aspects enough. That said, I've not yet read any Jemison, and I don't mean to challenge Nuttall. I'm just aware that as a white man, my challenge to understand the worldview of the woman or person of color says as much about my point of view as it does about their works.

I appreciated Patterson's mention of timelines for "Waldo" and "Magic, Inc.". I read those in April and don't quite understand his comment on taking liberty with facts. If I recall correctly neither story is especially composed of facts, liberated or otherwise. I wonder if he means that his suspension of disbelief and credulity were challenged. That might've been the case!

I don't read a lot of alternate reality, almost none, so I was slightly amused by the quibbles that seems to suggest Kowal's alternate history might be too alternate. I imagine there is a range of alternate states, from the not so different to the very different. And readers reception might be a matter of rash or patience.

McCoy, what role did you play in the Hugo controversy? I'll have to check out axolotl roadkill and catch up on the charges of plagiarism. What did someone plagiarize?

An auspicious debut with plenty to think about and explore. Kudos to all involved.

Heath Rowe

Editor:

I read the new N3F Review of Books with interest. I thot most of the reviews were excellent and did a good job of critically examining the titles covered. I am concerned that this new pixel format zine seems to have no logo, and used no illos of any kind.

I am also concerned with what seems to be an ongoing process of splintering Tightbeam into tiny pieces which spin off into brand new publications. My original concept in relaunching Tightbeam a few years back was to provide the club with an all purpose genzine that would offer a wide variety of material covering a very wide range of subjects. But now we have all the movie reviews spun off into a separate club fanzine (altho I haven't seen an issue recently), manga commentary and reviews has spun off into Mangaverse, and now the book reviews are being spun off into their own separate fanzine title. Worthwhile fiction created by members goes into the Eldritch Science zine. What's going to be left of Tightbeam?

I might also mention that fanzines exclusively devoted to book reviews have not generally fared very well. The LOC response rate is usually low, which often leads to difficulties getting relevant reviews from more than a few core staff members.

Bob Jennings