

The N3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono  
Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor  
March 2020

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# Editorial

Our N3F Zines are faulted for looking too much like each other. Yes, they do use different trim colors. The N3F Review of Books uses scarlet. The National Fantasy Fan uses green. Tightbeam uses brown. This magazine uses no illustrations. TNFF uses bits of artwork. Tightbeam has full-color front and back covers and color illustrations of book covers, manga stills, and, of course, food.

We tried a typeface experiment. The typeface experiment was ill-received. We are back to Times New Roman.

We exist because our writers and editorial staff contribute their unceasing labors to our cause. We would be delighted to publish more reviews if we could get them, not to mention articles on literary criticism or prose bono—better prose.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row and Tamara Wilhite. Jagi Lamplighter and Robert Runté give us peerless writing on creating and marketing sf/fnal prose, art, and marketing. Their articles are an invaluable contribution to the future writing efforts of every reader.



The N3F Review of Books is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, POB 1925, Mountain View CA 94042. and distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. Proofreading support provided by Jean Lamb. Regular contributors include Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Robert Runté, Tamara Wilhite, and Heath Row.

Our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Several of them link from their reviews to Amazon; if you buy at Amazon.com via their web pages, they get a modest financial reward. Some of them also write novels:

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# Novels

## Aliens Versus Zombies by Mark Terence Chapman

### Review by Jim McCoy

Remember when you were a kid and you used to have all kinds of silly arguments about who would win in a fight? Would Superman win a fight against Green Lantern? Could an alligator eat a bear, or would the bear eat the alligator? What would happen if an elephant fought a tiger? I don't know that I ever argued about aliens and zombies, but those arguments are the first thing that I came to mind when I read the title to this book. I was happy too, because we actually do get to see the aliens and zombies duke it out. It was a childhood dream come true. And yes, *Zombies Versus Aliens* really does deliver. It's a rock-em sock-em gorefest and it doesn't let up.

I'll be honest in stating that the thing that I love about this book will leave some readers cold. *ZVA* is a book about an alien invasion done right. It is a rollicking good time. Translated into English for the awareness impaired: If you're looking for weepy literary message fic with the proper message and no plot look somewhere else. If you want a story where the good guys are the good guys and they use guns look here. This is a story about people doing their best to survive in a jacked-up situation that gets even worse when the aliens show up. They travel around doing everything themselves and improving their situation however they can. These people work hard. They literally go to war.

Chapman very obviously comes from the George R. R. Martin school of character development. I'd also be willing to bet that he's watched more than one episode of *The Living Dead*. He has added what I view as a necessary element of pretty much any zombie story: He will let you get close to a character and then kill them. He has no problem doing so. Given the type of story this is, he needs to. I've always been a big fan of that kind of gritty writing. That kind of story development builds suspense. When I'm not sure if the point of view character that I'm currently reading about; is going to be alive on the next page I get into the story more. I can't help turning the page to find out how things turned out and where the author is taking me next. Chapman delivered a story that kept me engaged and wanting more.

The characters in the book are in some ways more accurately portrayed than what I'm used to and that's a good thing. These are not all-knowing supermen. They are living in a zombie apocalypse at the beginning of the book. They fight, they travel, and they loot. It makes sense. They don't necessarily know how to do everything right. When they find a horse most of them don't know how to care for it. They're not expert riders their first day. It drives me crazy when you see a city boy (no offense, I am one.) just jump up on horse and start growing things out of nowhere. When they find an alien gun, they can't figure out how to use it because it doesn't work like a gun that humans would build. They eventually do figure out how to drive an alien vehicle, but they get spotted because they suck at it. When they try to blow up an electrical tower it doesn't work at first and they have to try again, etc. They know enough to survive but not much more. I enjoyed that.

Chapman's characters are believable in another respect: They react the way that they should. When two sixteen-year-old boys go off to fight the aliens they're excited. The veteran in the group tries to calm them down. They fall in love with people of inappropriate ages. They bicker among themselves. Things are never perfect.

Chapman has joined a group of zombie writers that I have seen emerge recently and I really like: His

zombies are not some mystical, magical creation. They have become zombies through an airborne contagion that damaged their brain. There is no doubt that a headshot would drop one, but headshots are not necessary. Shot to the torso will kill them and a hit on an arm or a leg leaves them wounded. They're also smarter than zombies in many other stories and learn to use weapons and true ambush tactics. This makes them not only more credible opponents in a fight but also more fun to read about. When the zombies go at it with the aliens it makes sense that they could take a few down. Chapman's zombies move quickly, and they can — somewhat — think. It takes a bit of getting used to, but it adds a dimension to the story that most other zombie stories miss.

The aliens in the book are believable as well. They're not just cardboard cutouts, but "real" people with real motivations who make mistakes. One of their mistakes comes back to bite them in a major way. They have a lot of advantages but they're not unbeatable even if it takes a while for them to realize it. They do have the advantages of technology and numbers (remember, humanity has been nearly wiped out by a zombie plague) but they pay the price when they screw up. They get cocky. They fail to do the one thing that would have ended the book in the first chapter, but they have a good reason for doing so. They really work.

I'll say this about the book as well: It includes a prologue that I enjoyed and that is also relevant to the later story. Chapman names it "Chapter 0" but a prologue is what it clearly is. It is entertaining, relevant and short all things that a prologue should be. I wasn't happy when realized it had a prologue (I'm not generally a fan) but after I read it, I realized that it needed to be there.

My one complaint about this book is the ending. I won't spoil it, but suffice it to say that I had seen it before. I knew exactly where too and one of the characters in the book points it out. I was a bit disappointed by that. It was well foreshadowed, and it fit with the story, but it left me a little empty. Once for that ending was enough. It almost felt like a cop-out. That much being said, it was still a really fun story.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Exploding Alien Heads

## Cadogan's Gamble by Ron Francis Review by Jim McCoy

Have you ever read something and had trouble nailing down your exact opinion on it? I mean, something that had an awesome premise and some good elements but wasn't quite what you wanted it to be? Have you ever been stuck in the moment unable to quite sort out what was there, what you wanted to be there, what you only thought was there and what should have been there? At some point I know I have to say something, but honestly, Cadogan's Gamble by Ron Francis has me a bit perplexed. It's not that the story itself was confusing. It's a pretty straightforward tale. It has a twist or two but nothing so unusual that I was unable to follow it. It just left me... confused about what I thought of it. Let's see if I can work this out here in public.

Cadogan's Gamble is a story about a bounty hunter who was forcibly retired from the military and his crew. They are paid to retrieve a missing alien and hopefully prevent a war. Things don't go exactly as planned, but what fun would the story be if they did? Things get twisted quickly. The crew of Cadogan's ship is not exactly normal either. You've got a mechanic with a personality disorder, the CO's ex-girlfriend as the second in command, so it's got all the right things to make a rocking space opera. Romantic connections, kidnapping and murder just scratch the surface. I mean, we're talking

about potential to put this thing right up there with some of my favorites: Robotech, Honor Harrington, Grand Central Arena (and sequels) etc.

It gets better; the alien aggressors have better technology than the humans do. The primary weapons on the human ships can't touch the alien ships, although their missiles do work somewhat. But the humans have a line on the secret to the alien tech, if they can find a way to adapt it in time. And the enemy aliens have enemies of their own to contend with. This book should be over the top amazing. There's just so much here to make things interesting. This is a work that should be awesome dipped in awesome sauce on a freaking stick. This book should be the one you're looking to buy for the third time because you read your first two copies until it fell apart.

It keeps going. I've always been a fan of dialogue driven drama. Read a David Weber novel. Some of the conversations in his Honor Harrington and Safehold series books can move the plot along at a mile a minute. I'm still amazed by Al Pacino's monologue at the end of Devil's Advocate. Dialogue is something I live for and when it's well done, I'll read a book or see a movie just for the dialogue. I mean, I work in a call center for forty hours a week and spend another eight or so hours a week on the phone on my own time just because I enjoy the conversation. Seriously. No one who works in a call center spends time on a phone but me. I just love words. I don't care if they're written, spoken, whatever.

That much being said, this book just does not live up to its potential. I really wanted to love this book and it just didn't get there for me. All of this awesome just kind of goes unused and neglected. It's like a huge, beautiful pool out behind your house that you never swim in. It might be worse than that because at least if I had a pool and didn't use it I could just up and change my mind one day and go dive in. All would be fixed the second I started my backstroke. The thing is, with a book someone else wrote there's just no way to run in and fix it.

This book suffers from much of what should be its strengths. I don't know how else to put it. There is too much dialogue. Conversations last for pages and pages and then once they end the book cuts to... another conversation. For the first probably hundred pages or so ninety plus percent of the words are devoted to talking or at least it seems that way. The book is one hundred fifty-two pages long. It's like listening to the old man in the corner tell stories about what life was like when he was young. It's just rough. You keep waiting for something to happen. I was reading one particular passage of this thing in the break room at work and someone asked me if I was okay. I guess I was making faces. It was pretty rough.

The space battles could have been much better. The first one was almost all dialogue. It takes place mainly from the bridge of the human flagship. Instead of action we're all treated to a series of sterile reports coming in from the bridge crew. I kept wondering if anything was going to happen at all. The second space battle was HUGE. Hundreds of ships were in a giant furball going toe to toe. This one battle could have put this book up with some of the aforementioned Honor Harrington novels or some of the better DS9 episodes. This thing had potential to top the Battle of Endor. It was over in about three pages. It was again mainly dialogue with very little action.

I guess the lack of action was what killed a lot of the potential that this book had. I've never read anything this long that had so little happen. I mean, there was one pretty cool torture scene where the main character was trying to get some information but even that didn't last very long. In a lot of ways, this book felt like it was a couple of actions held together by talking instead of a really cohesive story. I'd like to see this thing get a major rewrite and come out a hundred or so pages longer and all of it action. There is so much to do here. It's a shame it never happens. What we do see is never fully developed.

Bottom Line: 3.0 out of 5 Warheads

## Children of Steel by John Van Stry Review by Pat Patterson

Raj is an enhanced leopard. His conception, gestation, birth, nurturing, and education have all been paid for by the Tri Star Corporation, and they expect him to pay them back; it's a rather extreme form of indentured service.

As an 'animan,' he has no civil rights on most planets, and on some, he and his fellows are regarded as property and subject to summary execution for the most trivial reasons. Other locations are more progressive, but regardless of locale, Raj owes a near-lifetime of service to the Company. This really isn't a problem for him, since he prefers combat above all things. However, he HAS to keep his temper in check, because they will execute him if he looks like he will be a discipline problem.

Initially, his quest is to find his creche-mate Cassandra, and form a pair bond with her. Later, he settles for killing people.

I identify two Brilliances in the book:

1. I think it's brilliant that Van Stry doesn't waste our time with physiological descriptions of the characters who are derived from animal stock! It's brilliant, because it gets our imagination working in a way that wouldn't happen if we were provided with body schematics. Instead, we are told that this clan is leopard; these are tigers, and therefore bigger and a bit slower; weasels are sneaky. Maybe, listen to Paul Simon's 'At the Zoo' a few times.
2. I also think it's brilliant the way Van Stry handles the discrimination against animen by certain factions in the human population. He NEVER makes you think that he's trying for a heavy-handed 'Animal Farm' allegory; but if you can't see racism exposed in his work, you aren't paying attention. It's not just the open "I'll kill you, you animal loving SOB" attitude of the fanatics; it's found, for example, in the behavior of the human girls who seek out a sexual relationship with animen in order to piss off their fathers. Even then, it handled softly, softly. Raj questions one of the girls about her choices, but stops just short of being offended. As a reader, though, it might get you offended for him. I dunno; I'm a red-neck biker married to a strong black woman, and she would kick my butt if she thought the only reason I was attracted to her was because of the color of her skin.

Evidently animen regard sexual activity as a privilege frequently extended to friends. This may, perhaps, be programmed into them, or it may be a function of the birth control implants the females receive. Those are mentioned in a relevant scene, but we really don't get a lot of info about what goes into the sociology of animen.

The book needs a run-through with someone who is an expert in the use of commas, periods, and apostrophes. I found the errors frequent enough that I kept grimacing when I hit them; that takes me out of the story a bit, and it lost a star for that reason.

## City of Angels by Todd McCaffrey Review by Pat Patterson

I intended to write this review for Todd McCaffrey's birthday, which was yesterday, but I ran a day late.

Unlike the rest of the civilized world, I am not at all familiar with the Dragon Riders of Pern, other than to know they exist and are a pretty frappen significant part of the sci-fi/fantasy culture. Sorry; I'm told it's my loss.

HOWEVER! That makes me uniquely qualified to evaluate this boos as a stand-alone work. I read it, NOT as a book written by an author of Dragon books, or even worse, by the son of the author of Dragon books, but just because the book is listed on the Baen homepage. That's pretty much all the recommendation I need.

And I was NOT disappointed, not a bit. The book is a techno-thriller, with lots of legal things happening, and a love story. There's even a bit of 'bad guys get their comeuppance' included, but mostly, the bad guys are moved by circumstances to find redemption.

I've never spent time in LA, except for a brief lay-over at the airport, but I am quite prepared to believe that controlling the traffic would be a marvelously complicated task. And, as a former victim of the Atlanta rush hour, I can also add that it would be a job worthy of whatever efforts it took to get the job done. Developing the sensor nets for the city and amassing the computing power needed to control the operation, strikes me as an elegant way to bring about the arrival of a sentient being. There is more to it than that, actually, including some utter goofs on the part of people who should know better, but essentially, that's what happened.

Networks have become sentient in the past, of course, but where this book differs a bit is that the new being emerges as an unformed infant, and immediately begins to cry. And fortunately, she is rescued by the damaged and gifted Smitty, who can hear babies who are abandoned in dumpsters. He hears her crying, through a recently discarded telephone, and immediately begins to comfort her with his voice, while searching through the trash for her body. In doing so, he provides the spark of love that is necessary to nurture her growing awareness, and that makes all the difference.

There is PLENTY in this setup already to drive a novel, but fortunately for us, the author inserts a major plotline: Ellay, the nascent AI, can detect earthquakes, and there is going to be a BIG one (actually, three big ones), about nine months after she is born. Great idea! It means that she has to establish credibility with the adults, not only to prove she is real, but also to get corporations and governments moving together to do the right thing.

There are some creepy little subplots as well.

My favorite scene, though, is when Smitty explains the nature of free will, and how the choices are sometimes bad ones. It's expressed very simply, so that a child MIGHT be able to understand, yet it is sophisticated enough that it requires some thought on the part of those inclined to think.

All in all, an excellent book.

### Cryptic: The Best Short Fiction of Jack McDevitt by Jack McDevitt Review by Pat Patterson

I obtained this book from Baen Publishing on the occasion of Jack McDevitt's 82nd birthday.

He is a remarkable writer, in that he didn't really start writing until he had finished all of his other careers. The late start certainly didn't have a negative impact on his creativity!



The book is huge, containing (if my count is correct) 38 stories, from the beginning of his writing career in 1982 to 2008, when this volume was first published. And that rich treasure chest is why I find myself unable to take the same approach to this review as I do my custom with collections of short stories. Usually, I do a brief synopsis of each story, and then move on to the next one. I can't do that here, because it would turn into a TL;DR, and I'd become SO tempted to give spoilers, I'd probably give in. Instead, I'm just going to throw in a few impressions, of the book in general, and of a very few of the stories in particular.

General impression #1: One of my fellow reviewers states that McDevitt doesn't like conservatives or Christians. I THINK I understand how he came to that conclusion, at least with respect to his regard for Christians, but I don't think I can go along with it; of the nature of conservatives, liberals, etc, I remain intentionally ignorant. I'm guessing that the scene in which a pastor pulls a gun on a scientist is part of the reason my colleague sees hostility toward Christianity. There is another story in which an artificial intelligence, which develops the personality of St. Augustine, causes certain clergy to develop a crisis of faith. There are others as well.

I don't see them as being hostile to Christianity, however; at least, I didn't find them to be personally offensive, and I am a communicant of that faith. Instead, I see both of those stories, and others, as stripping away a false facade of human custom, without attacking the core beliefs within. YMMV.

General impression #2: The title of the collection, 'Cryptic', is as well chosen as it could be. So many of his stories are mysteries, or rather, stories which identify a mystery, without giving us a clear solution.

And some of the stories are just delightful!

My favorites:

The Fort Moxie Branch: imagine a library that contained the very best lost works of authors; and the entire output of unknowns. That's the Fort Moxie Branch!

Whistle: We get a message from the stars. It's not what we expected, at all.

LOST TREASURE is an entire section of the book that deals with what happens now that we have reached the moon (or the stars) and then pulled back. I don't particularly LIKE these stories, because they represent a reality I don't care for. They do a good job of it, though.

Henry James, This One's For You: This is my favorite of all the short stories. From the slush pile of a small publishing house comes a book that will set the world on fire. It's simply the best that's ever been written. How ELSE could the editor/owner respond, except as he did?

## Eclipse: The Girl Who Saved the World by George Phillis Review by Jim McCoy

Have you ever read a book (or watched a TV show or movie for that matter) that wasn't quite what you expected, but loved it anyway? I mean, it was a really good story, well paced, well written and thoroughly entertaining, but it didn't quite scan the way you thought it would? To the point where you'd read or watch it again but you're still kind of feeling like it's not quite in the genre you expected? I find myself at that point with *Eclipse: The Girl Who Saved the World* (The Shining Sea Book 1) by George

Phillies. Don't get me wrong. I loved the book. It's just that...

Well...

I went into this expecting a Young Adult novel. And, to my complete, absolute and totally non-shocking sense of rightness, the main character and most of the important side characters are indeed teenagers. Some of their problems are things only teenagers would have to deal with. It's totally believable if you don't hold the fact that they have superhero powers against them. They are the main storyline of the book and they're all well-formed and entertaining people. It's just that well...

Eclipse has enough political intrigue and side drama to make a good Harry Turtledove or David Weber novel. Being a fan of both writers, I mean that as a compliment. I don't want to give too much away here because that's not what I do, but there are some damn good reasons for the intrigue and political feuding at the highest levels. It makes all kinds of sense and honestly the book wouldn't work without it, but it just doesn't feel YA to me.

Now that I'm done whining like a punk...

Yeah, it was a good book. I seriously enjoyed Eclipse. I've always loved international intrigue. Eclipse mixes in some alternate history as well and that's something I've always enjoyed. The point of historical departure of this one seems to be too deep in the past for me to find out what it would be precisely, but I am well aware that there are several polities here that did not exist either simultaneously or at all. I really enjoyed trying to figure out who went where, though, and if you have a sense of world history well enough developed to pass a sixth grade history class you'll get the joke.

Phillies has a rather unique take on superheroic powers as well. It almost has a LitRPG feel to it. The way he talks about levels of powers and summoning power really feels almost like a game. It's something that anyone who has played any type of video game or tabletop RPG should find both enjoyable and easy to follow, but without feeling derivative and boring. I've never seen it done quite this way and I like it.

There are many action sequences in Eclipse and they are well thought out, well written, entertaining and internally consistent. I want to see this thing on film. Well, I mean, not if I have to pay for all of the special effects myself, but I'd totally buy a ticket or two. I might even splurge on some popcorn, and maybe a DVD after it hit. Granted, I've got a fairly decent imagination, but some of these scenes are so well described and planned that I could see them in my head when I was reading the book. And if I'm left wanting to throw plasma bolts myself, well, what geek has never wanted to throw a plasma bolt? Or fly through space? Or teleport sans benefit of Mr. Scott? (Note: That's not a slam against Scotty. I'm a proud Scots-Irish lad and I love that guy.)

Our heroine is the titular Eclipse. I like this girl. At age thirteen she is one of the best educated, most intelligent heroes I've ever read. If the history she knows doesn't match ours that's because she comes from a different dimension and the history there is different. She speaks several languages and collects books so rare that it makes a nerd like me jealous. Not only that but she manages to put her book collection together herself without assistance from any adults. She is caring, daring, and brave. In short, she's the kind of girl I'd like my daughters to be with the added benefit of having superpowers. Don't misunderstand: It would be cool to see Riley or Sealy take off and fly outside the atmosphere under her own power, I just know it'll never happen.

Phillies spent a lot of time building the world I was whining about earlier and he did a fine job of it. The world is almost recognizable. The United States is almost recognizable. The differences are real enough to keep things interesting and to avoid confusion. He didn't do things by half. I truly enjoyed the geopolitical rivalries and the way things broke down. I think this might be part of what I mentioned earlier though.

A lot of modern day Americans (as in a HUGE supermajority) and especially younger Americans, don't know much about history. I mean that seriously. They don't know American History. They don't know World History. They've been taught that Military History doesn't matter and they have no chance at all to understand the intersection of the three. That much having been said, the political stances taken by the US in Eclipse are much closer to what you would have expected out of the US in 1900 than in 2020. I worry that a lot of what made me enjoy Eclipse so much is going to make it hard for its intended audience to find it believable.

Having said that, I'd urge anyone over the age of probably twenty-five to check this thing out. I haven't conducted any surveys, but I'd be surprised if that didn't include the vast majority of my audience. So check this one out. I did. I'll be picking up the sequels as well. There are at least two of them that I know of.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Namestones

## The Gravity of the Game by Jon Del Arroz Review by Tamara Wilhite

### Introduction

“Gravity of the Game” is a short science fiction novel by Jon Del Arroz. What are the pros and cons of this scifi book? What is the intended audience of this work, and who would enjoy it?

### The Premise behind “The Gravity of the Game”

Hideki Ichiro is a retired baseball player turned baseball commissioner working with others to try to take baseball off world, both to make the sport more profitable for Earth leagues and ensure that the sport stays relevant to humanity as it moves beyond Earth.

### Points in Favor of “Gravity of the Game”

Hideki Ichiro is a rich character given the relatively short book. He's rich but modest, passionate about the sport and eager to help his fans.

It is often the little details that make a world. The arguments people have on high tech enhancements to slow down aging or medical advancements that are taken for granted, the mention of 400 floor skyscrapers that aren't yet a reality. This book does a good job of communicating the advances in technology without taking up pages to do so.

The end could have been predictable but isn't. Yet it is still logical and keeps with the theme of the book and intentions of the main characters. The conflict with the second-tier Mexican team, for example, doesn't end up neatly tied up and shoehorned into the ending.

The book is an ideal length, long enough to give you the fleshed-out story and details but doesn't add extra sub-plots that distract from the main plot in an effort to become a full-length novel. It also contains some drama without going overboard.

The writing in "The Gravity of the Game" is far better than Mr. Arroz's earlier work "Star Realms".

-The Cons of "The Gravity of the Game"

If you're a baseball fan, you'll love this book. However, you don't have to be a dedicated baseball fan to enjoy it. You do need at least some understanding of the sport to understand all the references.

Observations about the Book

There are already the famous, established teams the White Sox and Red Sox, so the Mexican team becomes the Verde (Green) Sox. There are little twists like this that make you think throughout the book.

"You're in Mexico, right? That's not a long flight to Michigan." Of course, that's in a world where Lunar trips are the equivalent to flying to Hawaii.

Baseball league politics comprise a large portion of the text. At least Del Arroz makes it interesting.

A free snippet from "For Steam and Country" is included at the back of the book.

The book is a solid PG. It is written for a broad audience and suitable for children and young adults. I have no problems giving it to my pre-teen son.

Summary

I appreciate the book as a return to the optimistic science fiction that seems to have disappeared from the main market. It is hopeful not only for the sport of baseball, but the future of humanity as a whole. I give "Gravity of the Game" five stars.

## Heroine Complex by Sarah Kuhn Review by Chris Nuttall

A while back, there was a kerfuffle over what was true science-fiction storytelling. Was it hard science-fiction, with the story grounded in hard science, or was it anything with a futuristic spin? Could science-fiction include a love subplot, could it include a love story with science-fiction trimmings? There was no good answer, as one might expect, which is probably why the debate was so tedious. But it is true that if you write a romantic novel in a science-fiction guise, you might alienate readers who wanted a true SF novel rather than *Gone With The Wind In Space*.

*Heroine Complex* tries hard to combine a superhero story with what can best be described as a cross between a coming of age story and a romantic story. It manages to be more of the coming of age story than either of the other two, but there's too much focus on the other aspects for the story to be truly satisfactory. The decent aspects of the plot – and the world the author created – are often overshadowed by the storyline itself.

Several years ago, there was a demonic intrusion in San Francisco. The aftermath of the invasion left a number of people with superpowers ... relatively minor superpowers. There are only two true superheroes in the universe, Aveda Jupiter and someone whose name I've forgotten. Aveda is more of a slightly enhanced ninja than anything else, a woman who combines demon-fighting with celebrity.

The story isn't about Aveda. It's about Evie Tanaka, Aveda's former childhood best friend and current personal assistant. Unlike Aveda, who loves the limelight, Evie tries to stay in the shadows, patiently handle her boss's tantrums and raise her teenage sister Bea. She is, sadly, very bad at standing up for herself. She isn't best pleased when Aveda is injured and she has to stand in for her boss. Worse, she has a superpower of her own that might be the most dangerous one of all.

My feelings about the story are a little complex. There are aspects I liked and aspects I disliked, some more than others. Let me see if I can put them into words.

Right from the start, I simply didn't like Aveda. She's a spoilt little diva, to say the least; she's a user and, to some extent, an abuser. The relationship between Aveda and Evie started out well – the childhood flashbacks are surprisingly sweet – but went downhill as they started their shared careers. By the start of the story, it's clear they're heading for a rocky breakup even before Aveda is forced to step back to recover from an injury. The writer tries hard to justify it – Aveda's parents regret she isn't a doctor, which comes across as absurd given how many lives Aveda has saved – but my tolerance for such behaviour is very limited. She's the type of person who gets on my nerves very quickly.

Evie is a lot more likable, but – at first – her passivity is just annoying. Again, there are good reasons for her cramming her emotions into a tight little ball at the back of her mind, but I grew tired of it fairly quickly. She – and Aveda – read more like schoolgirls than mature women. Unlike Aveda, however, she develops into a stronger person as the story moves along.

(The writer comments on the relationship between the two here.)

The storyline itself is fairly one-dimensional. It's clear how things will develop as the players take their places on the storyboard. The lover hiding a dark secret, the bratty teenage sister developing a little more common sense (although making bad calls on a regular basis), etc, etc. There are a bunch of oddities that don't quite make sense, although not really enough for me to throw up my hands in horror.

Heroine Complex is widely praised for starring Asian-American characters, as opposed to white or black characters. (It also includes a considerable number of LGBT characters.) It genuinely does let us see inside their heads, for better or worse, although it does focus on stereotypes more than I would have preferred. (Aveda's problems with her parent's expectations, for example.) It also manages to remind us that the two main characters are people, with all the wonders and follies of everyone else. Neither Evie or Aveda is remotely perfect and the book is all the stronger for it.

That said, the book does touch upon the representation trope. Aveda was inspired to become a superhero, before she actually got powers, by watching a movie with Asian-American characters. I've never been sure that actually works. Watching a movie representation of yourself – your race, your class, your water – doesn't translate into becoming ... well, whatever you're watching. The characters on scene have a friendly scriptwriter to smooth out the bumps. One of the reasons I hated Wesley Crusher so much was that he was a staggeringly unrealistic character – he was rewarded for the traits that got me beaten up when I was his age. Frankly, one should be less concerned with the race (or whatever) of the character or actor and more concerned with how the character works.

Overall, Heroine Complex suffers from many problems shared by other first novels. The author tells a fairly coherent story, but there are mistakes and missteps that suggest she isn't quite there yet. Characters act like children – Aveda worries about a zit – or make dumb decisions in the interests of the plot. It isn't exactly the superhero or humorous story I was led to expect. But she's on the way.

It wasn't my cup of tea – I would have preferred more action and adventure to interpersonal activities – but you might like it. Try the sample here or on the author's site.

## Justice and Juniors by Alma T.C. Boykin Review by Pat Patterson

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program, and that's significant.

When I first discovered Alma T.C. Boykin, this series was not a part of KU. However, her series about Elizabeth of \_\_\_\_\_ (the Colplatschki Chronicles) WAS on KU, and I went there. Then I picked up her other works.

Dear Readers, this is one heck of a talented writer. I find I am often amazed and aggravated that sterling work seems to be ignored, and drivel is purchased.

The protagonist is a cat. Sort of.

She is a female, anyway.

Sort of.

You see, she lives in a society of dragons (sort of) in which only males may bear arms. Therefore, she is legally a male, by order of the king.

And she works for a dragon (sort of) who pretends to be her concubine.

Yeah, it's complicated. Fun; no political message that I can discern; plenty of action and intrigue, accompanied by witty repartee.

And the stories are written briefly, but they stretch out over a span of years. It's a good way to tell stories about beings with extended life spans.

This volume deals with challenges to Rada's authority, and how she deals with that; it also delves into some pretty strange technology that allows dreams to be harvested in order to make art. And there are secrets, mostly concerning the origins of the dominant dragon species.

What binds the book together, though, is the story of a pair of runaway children. They are fleeing a truly evil stepfather, and are accidentally discovered in the woods by Rada and her dragon 'consort,' Zaba. It's tricky; she has to use the legal system to protect the children, and as anyone knows who has ever dealt with the system, that's not ever an easy thing.

I may try reading this book to my 10-year-old girl and 12-year-old boy, and see how they react.

## The Kinmar by David L. Burkhead Review by Jim McCoy

Alright, let's set the table. We've got two magically powered knights. We've got an unknown number of human-animal crossbreeds known as Kinmar chasing them. The Kinmar have already burned a village full of humans and murdered a little girl. Things get intense. One of the knights is wounded. The other decides to act as bait. She's outnumbered. How could she win this fight? There is magic, known as the Knightbond exists and it would help if she were better at it... This thing just keeps moving. Granted, The Kinmar is a novella and not a full-sized novel but I read the whole thing start to finish in somewhere south of forty minutes.

I was actually a bit sad about how quickly I got through this story. I was waiting outside of a place for a job interview and it didn't kill as much time as I needed it to. That much being said, it's actually a compliment for the story that I never once came up for air. There really wasn't time to. Burkhead has streamlined The Kinmar to the point where there is no natural place to pause, no wasted time to allow his reader's mind to wander. Once I opened this thing up, I was hooked, and it wouldn't let me go. It was a rollicking good time.

The magic in the book, the Knightbond, was well crafted. I'm a big fan of magic in books and an even bigger fan of magic that makes sense. The Knightbond is a type of magic that works but is limited. It takes a skilled practitioner and does not have unlimited ability to accomplish whatever it is used for. It also has uses not commonly seen in other magical systems, such as the ability to find another Knight simply by following the trail of the magic toward them. It combines effects of what a Dungeons and Dragons fan would call Arcane and Divine spells and has some of the trappings of piscine as well. Burkhead has done a good job of mixing ideas and including what works best without going the full Superman and making his characters too high powered.

Author David L. Burkhead also does something that every fantasy author should do: He gives us villains that are smart enough and have the physical capability to be a legitimate threat without turning them into unstoppable engines of death. The Kinmar have the capabilities that would logically come with their half animal forms (IE the bull is big and strong, the squirrel can climb trees well, the cat has a well-developed sense of smell, etc) and that makes sense. They also have the ability to use the same weapons that a human would. They're dangerous. The fact remains that they bleed when they're struck, and they die if they bleed too much.

Missing altogether is any mention of religion and I'm not sure how I feel about that. Yes, I'm a Christian, but it's not the Christian religion I'm missing. Typically, in fantasy fiction a magically powered knight would be a paladin and in service to one of the gods of good. Alternately, some universes have anti-paladins that have evil powers and serve the gods of evil. Burkhead's knights seem to gather their power from within rather than from an external source such as a god or goddess. I follow Mr. Burkhead on Facebook and I know he doesn't really subscribe to a religion so maybe I'm just a little more sensitive to this than most readers would be, but it still left an impression.

The Kinmar themselves are not quite as well fleshed out as I would like. There is evidence of a division in their ranks and ultimately their motivation for burning the village and killing people is revealed but it's kind of predictable. Some of this may be because this is a novella and not a multi-novel saga, but it would have been a bit more fun to find out what they're thinking instead of simply seeing them as physical threats. There is a lot still left to explore here.

Having brought that up, I'm going to go off on a rant that touches this story only tangentially. The first page of the book lists the story Treva's Children being also in the series. It doesn't say which work comes first. I checked the Amazon listing. It doesn't mention a series or another book. Please, please, please, indie authors and publishers alike: I love reading series. So do lots of other people who read Science Fiction and Fantasy. Why is it so hard to include the phrase "Number \_\_\_ in the \_\_\_ series" at the beginning of the blurb? I can't speak to the rest of the world, but I don't read a series out of order if I can help it. If I'm searching online or browsing in a bookstore, the quickest way to lose a sale is to let me find out that a book is in a given series and leave me with no way to figure out what book starts the series. I'm not saying this to single out Mr. Burkhead. He is far from the only one who does this. This is a general rant, but I honestly believe that it could help sales and it only requires six words worth of typing. That's just me though.

Overall, there was a lot to like about this book and my complaints are minor. There was nothing here that really through me and I didn't even think about the religion thing until I started typing the review. I really enjoyed this work and I believe you will too.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 broadswords

## Language of the Land by Alma T.C. Boykin Review by Pat Patterson

WOW! Just WOW! has to be my first, second, and third reaction. When I saw the term 'steampunk fantasy,' I was expecting my customary festival of clockworks and goggles, and Victorian clothing. Nope. Nope, Nope. That's NOT what this is! Although things are driven by steam, and there are clockwork-involved characters, that's maybe 2 - 4%, max, of the impact of the book.

The Blue Haloo, the Greater Crested Striped Ape Smoking A Cigar in this story is the magnificent world-building that results in a society that treats men much as women were treated before they were accorded property rights and the vote, and allowed to enter into contracts on their own. She writes in such a way as to make it REAL, visceral in impact, at least for a Southern redneck biker. Here's where to punch really came for me: A young man escorts a senior woman to the door, and realizes that it is unseemly for them to be together without an escort. (And I completely get the nature of the gender flip, up to this point, or at least, I think I do.)

And then: the senior woman asks some personal questions of him, and then states that she will call on him in the future, if his mother doesn't find that objectionable.

And I realize that the man has absolutely NO say in the matter; if the woman is interested in him, she can select him as if she were selecting a chicken to be cooked for dinner! WOW! Is THAT ever a moment of clarity!

Please don't get me wrong: if this is a feminist tract, I totally missed the preaching part. It's just good, clear writing, with a great story, and great characters.

I just think it out to be listed with Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein; or, Prometheus Unbound' in the annals of literature. Yes, I mean that. Boykin ALWAYS delivers a good story with good characters, and she writes with the complexity of a jungle, and not like a cultivated orchard. This is wild and exotic fruit, indeed!



## Minstrel by Bernadette Durbin Review by Pat Patterson

The beauty of the cover might be misleading; you might think there is no way the insides of the book are as beautiful. They are, though. The picture of the young person's face is art of the sort I would love to hang on a wall; the story inside is the sort I want to share with Alicia Ann, my sweet little fifth grader.

It's not a "just-for-girls" story. It's a story about honor, with just enough betrayal mixed in to set a clear contrast between people who choose the easy way out, versus people who hold on to the right thing. Lydia discovers that someone is trying to kill her, and she sneaks out of her late father's castle in the middle of the night to run for refuge with her twin brother, now serving with the king. And on the way, I fell in love with her, twice. The first time I fell in love with her, it was because she had very wisely learned from her adventure stories that princesses who run away from castles discover that farmers and merchants have no experience with jewels; therefore, she has prepared by providing herself with a small stash of negotiable coins.

The second time was when she realized she had NO adequate preparation for sleeping in the wild and woolly woods, and that she must therefore take extra precaution to keep herself safe.

She is not able to keep herself 'safe,' in the sense of being utterly free of danger. Vicious animals are more likely to have two legs than four, and one of those attacks her. Almost despite herself, she manages to take his life, instead, and even though it was a necessary deed, it's an act that troubles her with nightmares for the course of the story.

Eventually, she makes her way to the capitol city, where she wisely disguises herself as a boy, and makes (almost) a living as a street minstrel. However, she is on the edge, when her plight attracts the attention of the king, who impulsively directs that she be taken to the castle, and appointed as King's Minstrel, doing business as Alan.

And she ends up having more things to keep hidden.

Fortunately for the reader, the servants see through her disguise as a boy, so she only has to prevent them from discovering the secrets of her origins. Honestly, it's a bit tedious when such a basic concept as gender has to be hidden, isn't it?

The author ALWAYS plays fair with us. Although Alan/Lydia DOES turn out to be a gifted musician, and an apt pupil in other areas as well, nothing suggests that super-powers are necessary for her success. All of the key characters are given depth; even the behind-the-scenes bad guy turns out to be a poet.

This is an excellent addition to the library of anyone who wants to read about real people in rotten circumstances, persevering until the end. Although it's appropriate for my pre-teen daughter, I enjoyed it thoroughly.

## Sorcerer To The Crown by Zen Cho Review by Chris Nuttall

Sorcerer To The Crown is a difficult book to review.

In all honestly, I was first alerted to its existence by a couple of mentions by various left-leaning bloggers who praised the book for its grasp of social justice and the nuances of race and racism. I was not impressed by the idea and put all thought of the book aside until I saw a copy in the library and noted that Sorcerer To The Crown had also been compared to Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, one of the most impressive fantasy works of the last decade. That was enough to convince me to take the book home and read it.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Sorcerer To The Crown borrows heavily from the aforementioned work. The book is set in Regency England (there seems to be a war underway with the French), an England that has a Royal Society of Unnatural Philosophers and close ties with Fairyland. However, the magic supply is slowly running out as the Fairy Court is blocking its supply, straining England's dangerously declining magical stores. Zacharias Wythe, the first black Sorcerer Royal, is trying to find a solution to the problem, but his enemies are trying to remove him from his post. Visiting a ladies' school, he meets ambitious (and mixed-race) orphan Prunella Gentleman, who has just stumbled upon English magic's greatest discovery in centuries ...

The book does have its moments, but it also has a number of problems. Zacharias is a likable character – I like him – yet he doesn't have the presence necessary to lead the Royal Society. He is ineffectual; not because of his race, I hasten to add, but because of his lack of presence. I can see several reasons for his enemies to want to remove him that have nothing to do with his colour – they need Nick Fury, when what they have is a decent man out of his depth. Zacharias himself notes, furthermore, that some people have good reason to distrust him – no one apart from him knows what really happened when the last Sorcerer Royal died. They ask if he murdered his foster-father (he didn't).

Prunella, by contrast, is a far less likable character. She's prideful, arrogant, reckless and headstrong, a dangerous combination. She doesn't read out as a character who is perched permanently on the edge; indeed, she seems to act as though she belongs even though she should be aware that she doesn't. (She is aware, at times, but her general attitude suggests otherwise.) This wouldn't have been too bad, but she keeps saving the day despite her lack of knowledge and a striking ruthlessness (and a willingness to commit an act that shocks everyone.) She is, in short, a deeply flawed heroine and the text doesn't seem aware of it.

The enemies are also a very odd bag. There are some hints of competence at first – an assassination attempt on Zacharias nearly succeeded; it would have, if Prunella hadn't been there – but they rapidly decline in competence. Zacharias's enemies turn out to be humdrum opportunists, while the enemies of Britain herself work by appealing to outside help, rather than fighting the evil British Imperialists themselves.

Truthfully, this book misses a few points about both racism and power struggles in the Regency Era, both more nuanced than the author suggests. Race relations in the British Empire were often complex; it was far from uncommon for Indians and even Africans to win respect from the British, particularly the races that fought effective campaigns against Britain. (It was Africa's bad luck that many Africans were happy to sell their enemies into slavery, both to Westerners and Arabs.) Yes, skin colour would

have told against both Zacharias and Prunella, but perhaps not as badly as the author supposed. (Particularly as Prunella's 'coming out' seems to work fairly well, despite her tinted skin.) The world the author creates, furthermore, has magic in hands that are clearly non-western (the Chinese magician, in particular.) This would have had a major effect on race relations.

(In addition, the main oppressors of women in the novel (and Zacharias notes this, to his credit) are other women. This is actually quite common in real life – societies like Regency England birthed men who thought of women as children (at best) but also women who enforced the oppressive social order. Young women who stepped out of line were often marginalized because their mere existence undermined the power of older women. Prunella does not seem to realize this, even though she should.)

A second point is that power struggles within the elite (which includes Zacharias) were often genteel exercises in backstabbing. There might well be a great deal of respect between politicians who were on opposite sides, but that didn't stop the different sides from struggling for supremacy. Given Zacharias's weaknesses as Sorcerer Royal, discussed above, the colour of his skin may not have played a particularly large role in his unpopularity. Rather like President Obama, there are plenty of reasons to feel he's the wrong man for the job that have nothing to do with racism.

Overall, the book has many interesting moments. But in trying too hard to make points about racism, sexism and suchlike – and resting too much on a deeply unlikable character – it undermines the story itself.

Three out of five.

## The Starhawk Chronicles by Joseph J Madden Review by Jim McCoy

Some say that all Science Fiction should be in the form of a Spaghetti Western. I'm not convinced that it's a necessity, but when it's done right it's a sheer joy. The Star Trek franchise was, after all, created by Gene Roddenberry, who had written for many Westerns before turning to SF. When he redid the pilot, he was told to make it a Western in space. So, if you're Joseph J Madden, there is probably nothing better that you could emulate. The Starhawk Chronicles is in many ways an emulation, yet it stands on its own.

This is Space Opera done right, with heroes we can admire and villains we can hate. There is no moral ambiguity, no whiny melodrama. Yes, the heroes are given an extermination order when they track down the villains, but it's well deserved, and they don't waste their time mooning over what is necessary. Of course, it helps that they have a score to settle and that just adds to the fun.

This is the first in what promises to be an excellent series moving forward. Madden has lain the groundwork for an epic adventure. The crew of the Starhawk, led by Jesse Forster, aka Captain Kid, is a group of bounty hunters. They lost one of their own last time out and they're not happy about it. (Un) fortunately, their prey, the dread Nexus Gang, has escaped from captivity and slaughtered a bunch of people in the process. Now it's time for another, bigger showdown. Both sides know that neither is going to give. Add in a crooked politician (Boss Hogg anyone?) and things get interesting quickly.

Add in the surprise appearance of a freelance bounty-hunter after the team is assigned the case and a big plot twist and things build even further. I hope I'm not spoiling too much, but she's a woman and

Forster is a man, and this is a Space Opera... Ok, I'll let you figure it out from there. Say what you will, this is Space Opera and this needed to be there.

When the Nexus Gang returns to the scene of the crime, things get crazy fast. Some of this was a little bit stomach turning as the violence ramps up and gets a bit graphic, but that's to be expected. This is a Space Opera, not a knitting manual. (And let's face it, any knitting manual I bought and tried to follow would probably end in blood as well.) More importantly though, Madden worked my heart strings. By the time things came to a head there was no doubt in my mind who I was rooting for and why. The Nexus Gang was made up of bad people of various species, this is a Space Opera after all, that did terrible things. I wanted to hate them, and I did. Our heroes have been wronged, but they're not a bunch of sniveling victims. They're out for payback and they're determined to get it, come Hell or high water.

The hand to hand/blaster to blaster combat is solid. It's Old West style ala Gunsmoke or The Rifleman. Quick draws, fast escapes and sudden rescues rule the day. And, if we get an old school TV Trope there is a good reason for it. Let's face it; If something becomes a trope it's because it works, and it works here. Every good book needs at least one "Oh shit!" moment and this one delivers.

The best part of any Space Opera is the ship to ship combat and it's well done here. Action abounds. There are no unexplained miracles. It's well thought out. Things go boom when they should. An out-classed vessel is legitimately outclassed with no miracle weapon to save it. It's up to the crew's brains, guts and luck to see them through.

My only real complaint about this book is that it's a little predictable. Tropes are good. They're like comfort food when you're reading. Sometimes, though, it can be a little overdone. The love interest angle could not have been telegraphed any better by Western Union. The ending is a typical Western trope also, granted that it's one that I love and that was totally fitting to the ending, it was still exactly what I expected in general even if I wasn't sure exactly how the details were going to work out.

Also I have to wonder why The Starhawk Chronicles is the name of the book and not the series. I really shouldn't say much as I fight with putting a good title together for my own work, but I found it a bit confusing. I guess it worked for Star Wars as well, but I couldn't help but get confused. I was looking around for the actual title of the book for the review, not realizing that I already had it.

Having said that much, I really enjoyed this book. It was good to kick back with a Rock-em Sock-em good read and cheer for some people I could really get behind. I'll be looking for more from Mr Madden, starting with his upcoming sequel: The Starhawk Chronicles II: Rest and Wreckreation. That sounds like my kind of carnage. I hope I get to review that one too.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 DNA Samplers

## The Tally Master by J.M. Ney-Grimm Review by Pat Patterson

In the land far away where people are scratching out an existence from farming and fishing, the slightest help from magic can make all the difference. Some, like Kieran, the daughter of Engris, are healers. Others develop their gifts and become mages. But there is a cost: excessive use of magic, over time or in a moment of crisis, can rip the gift from the grounding places in the body. When that happens, the unfortunate has developed a progressive degenerative disease, with physical and emotional conse-

quences: they will become a troll. It is always fatal, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. And, as it progresses, the afflicted become more ruled by anger, and are no longer safe to live in a human community.

As a result, newly infected trolls flee human communities. Some die in the wilderness. Others find refuge in troll communities. The women collect around ice queens; the men, around war lords. They are at conflict with each other. No peace is possible.

Gael is a former mage, now managing the flow of metal in the castle belonging to Carbraes. When he took the job, there was only the most cursory supervision of how much copper and tin were brought in. The production of bronze weapons and tools was spasmodic. By organizing and tracking, he has made the operation much more efficient, and earned the respect of Carbraes, and most of his peers as well. But then, materials start to vanish.

I can't get into some of the relationships without massive spoilers, but I have to make this point VERY clear: this is NOT a castle where you want to apply for a job if there is an alternative. Although survival is not assured, somehow, certain individuals seek their own advancement at the expense of others. I have worked in an office situation like that. I THINK it is more characteristic of a place with lots of resources, and few legitimate channels to demonstrate proficiency. In that set up, some people turn to dominance games, and undercut the work of others, almost as a hobby. Usually, I think, there is no time for that sort of rivalry when survival of the company/institution is on the line. In those cases, a wise boss sees resources being wasted, and stops it.

Perhaps my theory is mistaken. Maybe, when trolls are involved, there is no good outcome.

At any rate, know that this is an incredibly toxic environment.

Delightfully so, Ney-Grimm includes an appendix describing in detail the storage methods used in the castle. I LOVE this techno-stuff; it demonstrates that all brilliance didn't just appear following Thomas Edison.

Do you expect lessons on how to live your life from a troll? You wouldn't think so, would you? But I've seen Ney-Grimm do this before: she tosses in this incredibly wise observation into a scene, and then I wander around in a daze for a month or a year. In THIS particular case, it's a basic life truth I've been advocating for around thirty years or so. I IMPLORE you to get the book, just to read the section leading up to this (but it's ALL a good book!):

"Do the next right thing, whatever it is, and you'll do right in the end."

## Tanager's Fledglings by Cedar Sanderson Review by Pat Patterson

Sanderson is known for her beautiful characters and the realistic way in which they manage unrealistic situations. This is no exception; it's a well-executed coming-of-age-in-space-with-a-basset-hound story.

Jem was picked up by Walter when he had absolutely run out of luck, and found himself gradually learning to respect and love the old man. It's still a shock to him to find that he has become the master of the ship.

Walter has left him with some specific instructions, but for most of the trip, Jem has to use his own wits to get by. That includes making a decision to sell the pup for profit, or keep it as a companion; deciding which trader to trust, and who to avoid; and when it's time to forget the profits, and devote himself to helping other explorers who are in distress. It's rather an appalling task, and I'm not sure Jem would have agreed to take it on, had he known just how difficult it was going to be. A small part of his growth is the acquisition of skills; most of it is his ability to shed the guise of cabin boy and accept his new role as captain of the ship.

Lots of derring-do along the way; we meet old friends, and have new adventures, and if this DOESN'T develop into a franchise, it had better be because we have embraced the Sweet Meteor of Death!

## Literary Criticism

**Astounding by Alex Nevala-Lee**

**Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian**

This book, originally published by Dey Street (William Morrow) in 2018, is subtitled John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction, and is a must-read for those interested in the history of science fiction (SF) in the United States.

The author points out how Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, the premier SF magazine of the genre's Golden Age, influenced the work of Heinlein, Asimov, and Hubbard -- even in Hubbard's development of dianetics, the so-called "new science of mental health."

Although the scope of Nevala-Lee's study is broad, he states that his book is mainly a biography of Campbell. It traces Campbell's frustrated ambition to become a scientist and/or inventor into his becoming a SF writer instead. After he had been writing/publishing SF since 1930, often under his Arthur McCann and Don A. Stuart pseudonyms, he was offered the editorship of *Astounding* in 1937. He was only 27 at the time, was offered the position mainly because he was in the right place at the right time, and apparently took the job because he felt that -- as the editor of the most important magazine in the field -- he could influence the development of SF even more by getting other writers to follow his leads.

"We were extensions of himself," Isaac Asimov is quoted as saying about the writers Campbell published, "we were his literary clones; each of us doing, in his or her own way, things Campbell felt needed doing; things that he could do, but not quite the way we could; things that get done in fifty different varieties of ways." Campbell had once told Asimov that, as a writer, he could only do one story at a time; but, as an editor, he could do 50 stories at a time.

Campbell helped Asimov with both his *Foundation* and *Robot* series, and Heinlein with his *Future History* series. With regard to dianetics (which was re-named Scientology, when it was to Hubbard's advantage to do so), Campbell subscribed to Hubbard's self-help "science" as one that was destined to supplant psychiatry and win a Nobel Prize. Campbell's promotion of dianetics was part of the reason why many of its first converts were SF writers and fans. Nevala-Lee writes an entertaining history of the early success of dianetics and then its abrupt downfall, a decline that effectively turned Hubbard into a paranoid fugitive, although a rich one.

Campbell himself retained his belief in dianetics, which he had helped create, even though he split with Hubbard and the various professional institutions connected with the practice. His belief in dianetics may have helped Campbell champion other dubious sciences and inventions as major scientific breakthroughs that he could promote through *Astounding*. These included the Parker Machine, the Hieronymus Machine, the Dean Drive, psionics, and other far-fetched ideas and inventions.

Some of the anecdotes in *Astounding* will be familiar to those who have read Isaac Asimov's and Fredrick Pohl's autobiographies, as well as the non-fiction studies of SF by Sam Moskowitz, Damon Knight, Lester del Rey, and others. Nevala-Lee consulted many sources for his book, including letters, interviews, memoirs, and recordings, some of it previously unpublished.

Personally, I could have done without reading about the sexual exploits of the various SF writers featured, but I suppose Nevala-Lee felt they were important in making various points about their lives and work.

I knew a lot about Asimov and Heinlein, having read their fiction most of my life, plus books about them. Hubbard I had always thought of as a minor SF and fantasy writer, and a get-rich-quick schemer. Although we were only teenagers when dianetics was announced in *Astounding*, my friends and I thought it was nonsense. When it changed to Scientology, I was studying psychology in college and thought even less of it, and of Hubbard. This book mainly confirms what I have always thought about Hubbard and the other writers featured.

Campbell I knew mainly as the editor of *Astounding*, a magazine I have read and collected since I was a teenager. On the other hand, I knew little of his personal life -- other than that his first wife had left him to marry his friend and fellow SF writer, George O. Smith. I did know that Campbell had attended MIT, but eventually graduated from Duke. I did not know that he had been asked to leave MIT, that he had a class with Norbert Wiener (founder of cybernetics) there, and that he had participated in Joseph B. Rhine's parapsychology tests while at Duke. The work of both Wiener and Rhine later influenced both Campbell's life and his work as editor of *Astounding*.

Campbell's personality was revealed, at least to me, in a statement Asimov -- who considered Campbell his friend and mentor -- made to George Gaylord Simpson, an eminent paleontologist: "Suppose you meet a man who asks you what your field of endeavor is and you tell him that you are the world's greatest living vertebrate paleontologist. ... and suppose that, on hearing this the man you meet fixes you with a glittering eye and proceeds to lecture you for five hours on vertebrate paleontology, getting all his facts wrong, yet somehow leaving you unable to argue them. You will then have met Campbell."

In conclusion, this book gives the reader a knowledge of some of the most important people and issues that helped shape the development of SF in its Golden Age (late 1930s to early 1950s). Nevala-Lee's *Astounding* deserves to take its place with the other histories written about this era of SF and the writers who made it what it was. I unreservedly recommend it to all with an interest in SF.

Other contributors to the history of this period mentioned by Nevala-Lee include Forrest J Ackerman, Poul Anderson, Harry Bates, Gregory Bensford, Alfred Bester, James Blish, Robert Bloch, Nelson Bond, Anthony Boucher, Ben Bova, Leigh Brackett, Ray Bradbury, John Brunner, Cleve Cartmill, Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement, Mildred Clingerman, Catherine and L. Sprague de Camp, Samuel R. Delany, Philip K. Dick, Frank Kelley Freas, Randall Garrett, Horace Gold, Joe Haldeman, Harry Harrison, Will Jenkins (Murray Leinster), Raymond F. Jones, Philip Klass (William Tenn), Cyril Kornbluth,

Henry Kuttner, Ursula K. Le Guin, Willy Ley, Anne McCaffrey, Katherine MacLean, Barry Malzberg, George R. R. Martin, Judith Merril, Catherine L. Moore, Fletcher Pratt, Robert Silverberg, E. E. “Doc” Smith, Theodore Sturgeon, A. E. van Vogt, Jack Williamson, and Donald A. Wollheim – to name only some of them. The author thanked many of these same people in the Acknowledgments section of his book.

The book’s eighty-four pages of notes and extensive bibliography add to its usefulness.

Astounding was a finalist for both Hugo and Locus Awards.

A minor quibble. Despite his impressive scholarship in writing this book, the author managed to misspell Fredric Brown’s name (as Frederic). As an author who has had my name misspelled several times on my publications (even on one of my books), I take exception to careless errors such as this.

About the Author: Alex Nevala-Lee graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor’s degree in classics. He is the author of three novels, including *The Icon Thief*, and his stories have been published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *The Year’s Best Science Fiction*. His nonfiction has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. At the time his *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction* was published, he lived with his wife and daughter in Oak Park, Illinois.

## Prose Bono

### Wright’s Writing Corner: The Trick! by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Somehow, I skipped over *The Trick*—my favorite writing tip of them all!

*The Trick*: Raising expectations in one direction, but having the story first go in the opposite direction.

*The Trick* is the secret to writing, the thing that makes a story work: expectation followed by something other than the expected outcome – but something that is thematically consistent with the original events.

In art, artists use shading to emphasize the lighter portion of their work. The shading provides contrast that draws the eye back to the non-shaded part. In a story, writers need to do the same thing. One way of providing that contrast is with *The Trick*.

Of all writing techniques, *The Trick* is the easiest to do. You just decide where you want the story to go, and then you indicate—through dialogue, character thought, or narration—that the opposite is coming. If you want to have a happy incident, you make your character glum. If you want something bad to happen, you make him unexpectedly happy. It is that simple, and it is tremendously effective.

You just have to remember to use it. That is all.



How best to use it, of course, gets more difficult. If you are too blatant about your reversals, the audience will not be taken in. I've read books or watched shows where every time someone was happy, I winced because I knew something bad was coming. That actually undercuts the effect. The reader is alerted rather than lulled into a false sense of security.

So, the more subtly you can apply it, the more effective your scene. But you would be amazed at how blatant you can be and still have it work. Some of the bestselling authors today are quite obvious in their use of the Trick, and yet people read their books with great eagerness.

Where the Trick gets tricky is when there is more than one expected outcome, either one of which will not surprise anyone. The author is then called upon to do some clever thinking and find a third option that will surprise and delight. Sometimes, this takes time and creativity, but it is usually worth the effort.

I ran into this problem in my Prospero books. The plot starts out with Miranda believing that everything is fine. Then, aspersions are cast upon her father. Now, suddenly, either outcome "Prospero is innocent of the charges against him" or "Prospero is guilty" no longer seems that interesting.

Either way, there is no Trick.

(The innocent option leaves the reader thinking: "Well, why did I go through all that just to get back where I started." The guilty option seems too pat: "Prospero was accused of X and Y in Book One and by Book Three, we find out X and Y are true. So? You told us that two books ago.")

Solving this problem, coming up with an ending that did not disappoint, took quite some effort (and an idea I borrowed from Tolkien. Not a plot idea, mind you, something from his philosophy on storytelling.) But ultimately, it was a matter of the Trick again. I had to find an option that followed from what had been established, but was not what was easily anticipated.

The best primer for understanding the Trick I have ever seen is the book *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. In this book, everything reverses. If the main character thinks something good is coming, something bad happens. If she expects the worst, it turns out well. The whole book is the young woman's fantasies and then the contrasting reality that ensues.

Other good examples? *Harry Potter*: which is more surprising, more interesting: a rich, popular boy saves the world? Or an unwanted boy who lives under the stairs saves the world?

*The Hobbit*, etc.: which is more surprising: a great hero defeats the Dark Lord? Or, an ordinary short hobbit defeats the Dark Lord?

Strider is a really great example. He looks all dark and sinister. No one expected the guy sitting in the dark in a cloak in an inn—the epitome of a robber or bad character—to be the hidden king! (He's such a good example, there's even a poem about it.)

How exactly does one use The Trick? Let me use an example from real life. This happened last spring.

I have a friend whose house was foreclosed by Bank of America. It was a condo, really, but it was his home. It was a very sad thing because he had been up on his payments. However, there was a misunderstanding. Some years earlier, my friend had lost his job. During his jobless period, he had arranged payment plan with B of A, where he was paying a portion of the monthly amount.

My friend is a hard worker. When he got a new job, he approached B of A and offered to return to the full payment. The person on the phone told him to stick to the current payment plan.

Fast forward a few years. My friend gets a sudden call from B of A. They say: Pay up the many thousand dollars you are now behind. Obviously, my friend did not have this on hand.

He lost his home. Time went by. There was a class-action suit against B of A. My friend participated and was part of a winning settlement.

A few days ago, the check arrived. When he called me to share the story, he said that he sat with it in his hand for almost half an hour, praying and terrified, before he opened it. You see, he knew that while some people had gotten as much as \$3000 from the settlement, many had only received \$300. He did not know if he could bear it if his check contained only \$300.

Finally, he ripped open the envelope. It contained a check for \$6000!

Pause a moment. Think of how that makes you feel. Okay. Ready? Let's go on.

Now, there's another part of this story I left out. My friend works in an office, but he has always wanted to do more. When he graduated from college, he wanted to serve in the army or as a police officer. He wanted to do a job that mattered. He applied many places. Each time, he was turned down due to ill health.

That was nearly twenty years ago. His health has improved. Recently, he discovered that he might qualify to become a firefighter. This is the kind of work he could excel at—active work helping people with truly important things.

To make this change work, it would help a great deal if he could take some paramedic classes. This will be difficult for him, of course, because taking classes while working is always a strain.

When word first came about the B of A settlement, he looked online to find out how much he might be getting. The top payment for someone in his category was: \$125,000!

Even though he knew this was probably an exaggeration, my friend spend an evening daydreaming of what he might do if he received the entire \$125,000. He could quit his job, pay off his debts, and take the classes! He could be free of his current life entirely! He could be the man he wished to be.

Eventually, however, he discovered that this was not the amount people in his position would receive—and the fears of receiving only \$300 began.

Now, think of how different the story I told above would have felt if I had told you: He held the envelope, expecting, hoping, that it would contain \$125,000. All his hopes for the future, all his dreams, lay in this one check. He ripped the envelope open. It contained a check for \$6000.

Instead of a miraculous triumph, that same \$6000 now feels like a crushing defeat.

That's The Trick.

So next time you sit down to write a story, just take a few minutes to think how best to lead the reader up before he goes down. Pick where you want to go, then put the something that is directly contrary to that idea in before you get there.

It is amazing how quickly and easily this brightens up a story. Almost like adding garlic or chocolate to dish of food (though hopefully not both at the same time. )

## Wright's Writing Corner: The Foil! by L. Jagi Lamplighter

The Foil: Use other characters to showcase the strengths of your main characters and to show how they are extraordinary.

The best example of the idea of a “foil”—in fact the place that the term comes from—is Hal from Shakespeare's King Henry IV Part One. In what is probably my single favorite speech from Shakespeare, Hal says:

Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,  
That, when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.  
If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work;  
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.  
So, when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised,  
By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;  
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I'll so offend, to make offence a skill;  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

For those of you who are not Shakespeare literate, this basically says: I'll pretend to be bad, so that when I turn out to be good, I'll be all the more wondered at. Everyone will be much more amazed and impressed than if I had been good all along.

Bad Hal of the Past is what makes Good Hal of the Future look so impressive. He is performing The Trick—the technique of making something more surprising by raising expectations of the opposite. In this case, he first inspires dread in his future subjects and then proves to be a very good king, which they notice and appreciate more than if he had been a good lad the whole time.

Or at least that is his hope.

In this case, Hal was his own foil over time. Normally, however, a foil is one character bringing to the fore the strengths or weaknesses of another character. This technique can be done two ways.

The first way is to have the “foil” characters act one way so that the character being showcased stands out. If everyone is dumb, then the one smart guy stands out. If everyone is corrupt, the one man with virtue stands out. It can be done subtly, too. If everyone is intelligent but not a genius, the genius character who has all the wonderful breakthroughs can still stand out.

The degree of emphasis depends upon the result the author wishes to achieve. A smart character often looks smarter against the background of fairly intelligent sidekicks and an intelligent villain than against a group of goofy yokels.

The second way is to have the “foil” characters comment on the main character directly. The observations of the secondary characters can tell us a great deal about the main character.

A good example of this is the movie *Nausicaa and the Valley of the Wind* (which is one of my top three favorite movies.) *Nausicaa* takes place in an alternate world with gigantic insects and poisonous jungles. Princess *Nausicaa* is a brave and spunky young woman who wants the neighboring kingdoms to live in peace. She is devoted to peace but is not afraid to fight whenever it is needed.

*Nausicaa*'s spirit and courage is emphasized by the reactions of the down-to-earth working men of her kingdom (which is a small valley kept fresh and away from the poison of the jungle by a constant wind.) For example, in one scene, Princess *Nausicaa* is in an air vehicle trying to help folks in a second damaged plane. The two planes are over the Toxic Jungle. The men driving the second plane cannot hear her. In order to save them, *Nausicaa* takes off the breather mask and shouts out instructions. Her people exclaim in awe, amazed that she would take off her mask.

The reaction of these secondary characters communicates to the viewer very quickly both that the air in this place is poisonous and that *Nausicaa* is extraordinarily brave to be willing to endure it in order to help them. These men are used throughout the film, helping the viewer see what a courageous and wonderful person *Nausicaa* is.

The technique is used almost in reverse in the story/movie *Cold Comfort Farm* (another of my top three favorite movies). In this story, an ordinary young woman, *Flora Post*, goes to stay with relatives on their cursed farm. Someone else, arriving at this gloomy place, might be daunted, but *Miss Post* merely asks cheerily, “Why doesn't Cousin *Amos* just sell this and buy a farm that doesn't have a curse on it?”

Because *Flora* is so normal, the eccentric qualities of her relatives on the farm are doubly emphasized. Her calm modern outlook acts as the foil, making the many quirky and bizarre characters vastly more entertaining.

The technique can be used through work. It can also be used in short doses. Any character can offer an opinion about any other character, in order to bring out qualities that might otherwise not be emphasized. As human beings, we are often interested in seeing one person through another person's eyes. The Foil provides a way to clarify differences between characters, as well as an easy way to emphasize qualities about a character that the reader might not have noticed.

This is particularly true the juicy tidbit being shared introduces qualities about the character being discussed that might be new to the reader. Having someone have a different opinion of a given character

than the reader has been shown so far can be quite refreshing.

Is Guido big and strong? An older relative who remembers him as a baby and still thinks of him as young and vulnerable reveals a whole new aspect. Is Sarah mean to all? A character who knows her backstory can explain about how she was such a cheerful child, before she lost her family in that flood.

Or, going the other way, is Tara kind to everyone? Maybe another character doubts her good intentions, accusing her of sinister motives. (This would reveal new aspects of both characters involved, even if the claims were not true.)

People love gossip (whether or not they should.) Getting Joe the Fry Cook's opinion of Jessica, who comes to his diner every day, is like hearing the latest gossip. It is a chance to let the readers feel as if they are being let in on secrets not everyone knows—what Joe thinks of Jessica, what Jessica thinks of Thom down in accounting, etc..

To sum up, characters react to each other the way real people do. Taking advantage of these reactions can bring additional depth and clarity to any story. They can be used to emphasize unusual characteristics, to make a character stand out from the crowd, or to showcase aspects of the character that the reader has not yet seen.

If you take advantage of The Foil and showcase your characters in this fashion—using the reactions of other character to help them stand out “like bright metal on a sullen ground,”—your final story, like Prince Hall, will be all the “more wonder'd at.”

## Interviews

### An Interview of Writer and Writing Instructor Hank Quense by Tamara Wilhite

Hank Quense is a prolific author. He's written everything from writer's guides to planning novels to a series of fantasy stories. I had the opportunity to interview this science fiction, fantasy and nonfiction writer.

Tamara Wilhite: Your bio says you're an award winning author. What awards have you won?

Hank Quense: I've won two small, not-so-prestigious awards over time. The first was for “Tales from Gundarland”. Readers Favorite gave an award in 2010. “Falstaff's Big Gamble” won a silver medal from Wise Bear Media in 2013.

Tamara Wilhite: Your best-selling works are probably the Gundarland Stories, a humorous fantasy series. Can you tell me more about them?

Hank Quense: Gundarland is a fantasy land I invented for my characters to romp around in. It's populated by elves, dwarfs, half-pints (halflings), trolls, humans and yuks. This last are similar to orcs but aren't as friendly. Gundarland is located in a parallel universe only a short wormhole jump from our universe. It's the setting for a number of my novels.

Tamara Wilhite: Your works are a sharp contrast to the grim-dark trend in fantasy and science fiction. What do you think is driving that trend in the genres?

Hank Quense: I don't know the answer to that question. I do know from own reading, that are few authors who write humorous and satiric genre fiction. Most of the stories are quite serious and often-times bloody. The few authors I know who write humor and satire are Tom Holt, Chris Moore and Mark Cain. I'm sure I'm omitting some others.

Tamara Wilhite: You were inspired by "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" and other humorous sci-fi. How has that affected your writing?

Hank Quense: I read the Hitchhikers Guide when I was just starting to write stories and I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to write about. Once I read the Douglas Adams masterpiece, I said to myself, "That's it! I want to write humorous and satiric scifi." Later on, I added fantasy to the list after discovering Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels

Tamara Wilhite: How did "Catch-22" influence your writing?

Hank Quense: Catch-22 is a masterpiece of satire. It taught me what happens when an author goes all out to skewer a target. I love the structure of the novel. It starts out 90% humor/satire and 10% horror. In the middle of the novel it's 50-50 and at the end it's 10% humor/satire and 90% horror. I've used this structure a few times in my own works when the story calls for a radical change over time.

Tamara Wilhite: Do you consider fiction writing or teaching other writers how to write and market to be your day job?

Hank Quense: Right now, my fiction writing is limited to editing old stories with a view to re-publishing them in an anthology or two. The bulk of my current workload is focused on developing lectures to be given live and as Udemy courses. I've been writing for 20 plus years. During that time, I've gained a lot of experience on what to do and even more importantly, what not to do. I want to share my experiences in ways that will smooth the journey of new fiction writers and inexperienced self-publishing authors. My primary objective is to put the scam artists out of business by exposing their tricks. And yes, this implies I've been burned once or twice by these scammers

Tamara Wilhite: Do you know of any writers inspired by your own "Fiction Writing Workshop for Kids" or your fictional works?

Hank Quense: I don't know of any writers inspired by my fictional works. However, the kids' workshop is a different story. A number of years ago, a vice-principal in a middle school asked me to talk to her seventh graders. Rather than talk about my books, I decided to show the students how I go about creating a story. So, I put together a talk that gave them the initial story idea: "Your pet has super powers and has to use those powers to protect his family or save the world." The kids loved the idea of creating such a story. Next, I distributed a set of sheets with text boxes on them. There were three sheets, one for the character development, one for the plot and one for the setting. For each text box, I explained what they had to do and gave them five minutes or so to write down ideas before talking about the next box. The text boxes triggered the kids' imaginations and they often filled the text box and turned over the sheet to keep writing on the back. Once the text boxes were finished, I explained that stories are made up of scenes. I gave them an outline with six scenes in it and told them what text boxes to use to write each scene. Writing out the story was an exercise they had to do on their own

(due to the limitations of class periods.). I'm sure most of the students forgot about writing the story as soon as the class was over, but each time I give these lectures, a small number of students really get excited to learn how to write a story. I'm sure I motivated those kids to write more stories. As an aside, I'm giving the pet story lecture in a local school this February. I'll be talking to three classes of seventh graders.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you working on now?

Hank Quense: I'm putting together a workshop on how to write satire. That's for a write group I belong to. Once it's finished, it will morph into a live lecture and a Udemy course. I'm also working on the anthology mentioned above.

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Hank Quense: Other than to say thanks for the interview, no, I don't have anything to add.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for your time.

## An Interview with Screen and Ghost writer Charlie John by Tamara Wilhite

I reached out to Charlie John, a screen writer and ghost writer specializing in novel to screen adaptations for fantasy and science fiction works. I asked him about his work and for advice for writers who may want to create a screenplay based on their short stories or novels.

Tamara Wilhite: What are the demographics of people who hire you to create scifi and fantasy screenplays? How many are authors hoping to shop a script, and how many are theaters or producers who want to put a work on the screen?

Charlie John: My work has been primarily for independent producers who buy the motion picture rights to novels, develop them, and then market them to the industry. I love the personality types that are drawn to this type of work. They're real go-getters who know how to take initiative, trudge through adversity (with a smile), and find creative ways to make big things happen. I have worked directly with a select few authors over the last few years. People like Dakota Banks and her *Mortal Path* series. The market for motion picture production has changed radically and anything is possible now, so I've invested some time into getting on board early with projects that are doing something totally new, are fascinating, and have a lot of depth in terms of their story world and characters.

Tamara Wilhite: What makes one novel easier than another to translate to a screenplay?

Charlie John: I go through my entire screenwriting process on all of my adaptations, so it's sort of a long hard journey regardless. But it definitely helps when a talented author has written their story in a way that naturally feeds the things I look for in my work. A motion picture audience wants to know, "What are we moving toward and why should I care?" So right from the start I'm looking for storytelling tools that I can give the audience as access points to invest themselves personally in the story's events as they're playing out.

The *Nostradamus Mission* was probably my hardest to date. Not because it didn't have good storytell-

ing tools. The author had done a great job with that. The challenge was that it was conceived and written so deep that there was no way to tell the whole story in a feature film as it was written in the novel.

And it was aiming for a wider audience than the novel had. Sean Stone brought it to me. Sean grew up inside the workings of major motion picture production, so he has a strong instinct for recognizing, not just what is going to engage audiences, but also what it will look like making that happen with production boots on the ground and how that will translate to the editing room and ultimately up on a big screen. The novel had a lot of serious gravity, which I liked. But the movie was supposed to be a big budget summer blockbuster, so I looked for moments of levity and changed some of the specific conspiracy theories to nameless, faceless composites that everyone could enjoy rooting against.

I've adapted some novels that had almost everything I needed just sitting there in the novel like low hanging fruit. I ghost wrote one from an Australian novelist who has had several things turned into independent films and miniseries. Having had novels adapted and presented to audiences already, she had a knack for including things she knew would be audience pleasers. That was probably the easiest. But I'm not sure how easy or hard the novel is to adapt really has much to do with how many audience members are going to embrace the motion picture product adapted from it. Something interesting that we haven't seen in movies and series before tends to rule the day, however hard my job is adapting it.

Tamara Wilhite: What advice would you have for writers who may want their work to end up on screen one day?

Charlie John: I would say think in terms of visuals, which most talented writers do naturally. Visual events that give information and move the scene forward are going to have high odds of ending up in the screenplay. Sounds that move the scene forward will have high odds of being written, shot, and edited into the final product. Motion pictures have an entire soundscape that is unique to the art form and most people have their experience of movies and series enriched by it without ever giving it a single thought.

Multiple possible outcomes are big access points for a motion picture audience to engage in your unfolding story – for the scenes and for the larger story. New assets that come in and make one or another outcome seem momentarily more likely to prevail can keep an audience riveted. This includes burdens that hinder competing possible outcomes.

Motion picture audiences eat up metaphoric ticking clocks. If you can give the audience a framework for seeing that we are moving toward payoffs - large and small - they're going to be more likely to be on board, rooting for their preferred outcomes.

Having said all that, I think being true to the characters and story world of your novel is always the most important thing an author can focus on. Make something that feels genuine and it will have its best shot at making it to wider audiences in other forms.

Tamara Wilhite: Has the rise of Netflix, Apple TV and Amazon streaming video increased demand for screenwriting services like yours?

Charlie John: Yes! There are so many more places for producers to go with a project than back in the late 1990s when I started learning the motion picture business in Hollywood. I mean places where a meeting can lead to instant funding and a project going into pre-production. On the other hand, independent producers who used to have specific paths to production and distribution are now finding the



entire matrix has changed and there might not be a place for them at all at the new production pipeline table. It really is the best of times and the worst of times for this business.

Another thing I've seen change is that many, many more projects are going through all of development and pre-production before getting a distribution deal or even formal funding. There are producers out there raising funds from special interest groups and angel investors to keep the project moving forward and generating good energy around it until someone in the industry takes notice and funds principal photography, post-production and distribution. But it doesn't even stop there. In this modern era of motion pictures, there are quality movies made every year that never come into contact with a household name movie company. Production costs are down, marketing opportunities are up, and distribution is within reach for almost anyone.

Tamara Wilhite: Do you have any idea what percentage of written screenplays actually hit the screen in some form?

Charlie John: The percentage is so tiny that it isn't even worth thinking about. It's much more productive to focus on, how can *this particular project* find its way forward. That usually involves a tenacious producer who really believes in the project and is determined to see it get shot and distributed, however demoralizing the setbacks along the way. The mathematical odds are still terrible, but more previously unheard-of players are entering the scene every year than ever before in history.

Tamara Wilhite: What do you know about the process that's almost the reverse of yours, writers getting jobs writing novelizations of movies?

Charlie John: I'm actually doing that now with an original script I wrote that has won a lot of admirers among producers, agents and managers but hasn't found a spot in anyone's annual slate thus far. I think it's easier to stay true to your original work doing it that way, because a novel is so much more accommodating than a motion picture. If you've managed to bring your vision to fruition in a genuine way within the confines of a motion picture script, the only difference in the novel is that you're going to be able to elaborate and include things that you didn't have the luxury of doing in the screenplay.

If a writer wanted to do that professionally, I would imagine it would be an entrepreneurial thing, where the writer would adapt the project on spec and put it out there for the world to consume. Everyone I know in the 'business of the business' can rattle off the names of five or ten scripts they've read that they love and feel strongly should be presented to consumers in some form. There is definitely the material out there.

Tamara Wilhite: I know you're a ghost writer. Can you talk about what you've personally written? Or what you're working on now?

Charlie John: That subject has gotten me in a lot of trouble, lol. I'll start talking with a new producer and almost accidentally mention a project I worked on, then they'll call the producer on the previous project to ask about my work. That's when I get a strongly worded phone call, email, or letter reminding me that someone else has been out there claiming credit for the work and I signed a contract agreeing to let them do that and not claim credit in any way for myself. Fortunately, they usually give me a good recommendation to the new producer before turning to me with the rebuke. There is one writer/producer who takes leftover footage from other movies that got edited out of the final product and fashions that footage into a new script that can be shot on a low budget. (This is heavy special effects stuff and massive logistical footage that is extremely expensive to get.) He has contractual obligations that

prevent him from structuring my writing any other way. He's a great guy who would be happy to talk me up more than I probably deserve (and he does in more broad terms). But he doesn't have the wiggle room to talk specifics about things we've worked on together.

But nothing I'm working on right now is ghost writing. We're teeing up a few different novel adaptations that look promising. I'm adapting my script *'Point Conception'* to novel form. And I'm developing a live music show for a theater in Branson, Missouri. There are always more projects on the back burner at any given time, but these are the ones at the forefront for me right now.

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Charlie John: Thank you, Tamara! It's always a pleasure talking with you!

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for your time.