

Tightbeam 309

June 2020



Lady Mage — Magic Moon
By Angela K. Scott

Tightbeam 309

June 2020

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Cedar Sanderson’s reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/ and its culinary extension.

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Table of Contents

Art

- Front Cover ... Lady Mage — Magic Moon ... Angela K. Scott.
- 5 ... UFO ... Jose Sanchez
- 11 ... Dragon Bust ... Angela K. Scott
- 19 ... An Eye Is Always Watching ... Jose K. Sanchez
- 24 ... Fairy Dancer ... Angela K. Scott
- Back Cover ... Onward Transit ... Jose Sanchez

Letters of Comment

- 4 ... Lloyd Penney

Anime

- 5 ... Jingo-san no Yome ... Jessi Silver

Comics

- 6 ... Invincible Iron Man #1 ... Chris Nuttall

Novels

- 8 ... The Boogeyman by Tom Rogneby ... Pat Patterson
- 11 ... Working Vacation by Tom Rogneby ... Pat Patterson
- 10 ... They Promised Me the Gun Wasn't Loaded by James Alan Gardner ... Sam Lubell
- 10 ... P.A.W.S. by Debbie Manber Kupfer ... Jim McCoy
- 12 ... Taming Shadows by Fiona Skye ... Jim McCoy
- 14 ... Shrivvers: The Substrate Wars 3 by Jeb Kinnison ... Jim McCoy
- 15 ... The Martian by Andy Weir ... Jim McCoy
- 17 ... Chanur's Venture and Yvgenie by C. J. Cherryh ... Tom Feller
- 18 ... Tales of the Screaming and Mad by Dee Calhoun ... Will Mayo
- 18 ... Daniel Coldstar: The Relic War by Stel Pavlou ... Anita Barrios
- 18 ... Daniel Coldstar: The Betrayer by Stel Pavlou ... Anita Barrios

Interviews

- 20 ... Jon Del Arroz ... Tamara Wilhite
- 22 ... Lou Antonelli ... Tamara Wilhite

Shorter Works

- 23 ... Berlin Is Never Berlin, Eyes of the Forest, Byzantine ... Reviews by Robert Hullender

Writers

- 25 ... Edgar Allen Poe by Kenneth Silverman ... Will Mayo .
- 26 ... Born to be Posthumous by Mark Dery ... Will Mayo

Food of Famous Authors

- 26 ... Stryder Dancewolf's Apple Chicken ... Cedar Sanderson

SerCon

- 29 ... Fritz Leiber, Jr. Bio-Bibliography ... Jon Swartz

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Letter of Comment

Dear Neffers:

Like so many days past, we're inside in self-isolation, and we still have lots to do. I was getting ready to respond to issue 307 of Tightbeam, and issue 308 appeared, so I will tackle both.

307... Just before the pandemic, I contacted my local library about book forwarding from other branches, but before they could give me the information, they asked if I was a card-carrying library patron. I said I was, I gave them my name and card number, and they informed me that my card had expired, and they couldn't give me the info I required until I came in to renew my card. And then, the pandemic came along, and made these points moot. I will renew my card when the pandemic is done, and there is so much I would like to access through the library's internet portal..., but I can't for my card is expired, etc., etc.

My references to Amazing Stories reminds me that coming up on June 12-14 online is AmazingCon 2020. We'll try to create a virtual convention at www.amazingstories.com and on Zoom, with possible streaming to Facebook. I am among the hundred or more online guests, and I have yet to see what my schedule will be like. Keep looking for information from Amazing Stories, editor-in-chief Ira Nayman, and publisher Steve Davidson.

Well, we did have most of our tables lined up for 2020, but the pandemic hit, so...most of our tables are now reset for the same time next year, including Anime North, and one is postponed until late summer. We are also in negotiations with two more shows that may have to be cancelled until next year. 2020 is truly the year where nothing happened.

Thank you, Jon, for something on everyone's good luck charm, Harry Stubbs. Hal used to come up Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal for SF conventions, and when Hal arrived, we knew it would be a good weekend, and we were rarely wrong. I see a Toronto convention from slightly before my time, Alpha Draconis, and that may have been when he was one of our GoHs.

308... I rarely comment on books, but I must disagree with Christopher Nuttall on Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*. I was working for an architectural firm when I found this book in the book exchange of the company's lunch room. I took it home to read, and fell in love with it, and so did my wife Yvonne. We got the subsequent books, and met Lev at our last Worldcon in Reno, Nevada, where, IIRC, he received the 2011 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. I might have seen the beginning of a new fandom there, as there was a Fillory party we attended, and Lev, who is bald, was having a difficult time keeping the Campbell Award tiara on his head. Loved the books, but I found the resulting series dull and slow.

Not much for me in the second issue...looks like it was just as well I commented on both here. Thanks for these, and looks like I am well in advance for the next issue. Thanks, George and Jon, and see you next issue.

Yours,

Lloyd Penney

Anime

Jingai-san no Yome
Review by JessiSilver

Married to a monster – and loving it!
Streaming: Crunchyroll
Episodes: 12
Source: Manga

Review: Tomari is a typical teenage boy who finds himself in a very unique situation; he's selected from among his peers to become the spouse of a giant fluffy creature called Kanenogi-san. It isn't long before he realizes that his situation actually isn't all that unique and that he's one of several classmates who get to play house with a decidedly non-human partner. They all attempt to navigate married life with partners who are anything but typical.

I imagine that the quick summary in the above paragraph prompts one of a couple different responses – alternately intrigue or disgust at the vaguely uncomfortable, strange premise. I put myself in the former camp; I've been going down my massive list of half-watched anime lately, attempting to finish things off so I feel just a little less guilty watching new anime, and this was, strangely enough, one of the first series that came to mind as something I wanted to pick back up and finish. I recalled being very intrigued by the why's and how's of the oddball pairings that cropped up within the first batch of episodes, but figured the short length would provide few if any answers.



I was mostly correct in that assumption, but what this goofy series lacks in coherent explanations, it offsets with copious moments of warm fuzzies between the characters. I'll should be clear, though; the romantic feelings of these boys (deemed the "wives" in their relationships) toward their supernatural spouses might read as a bit creepy to some viewers. Kanenogi-san and the other objects of the human boys' affections are definitely non-human in form and appear somewhat ageless. I imagine that there would likely be a lot of content to unpack and/or tiptoe around if this were anything but a short-form series with 3 minute episodes. As it is, though, I found myself feeling giddy at all the ways in which the characters managed to fret over their relationships and their ability to communicate with their beloved creatures.

One thing I did really love about the series is that the male cast members all seem extremely earnest. However abnormal a situation they're in, they reach a place of emotional normalcy seemingly very quickly. They also seem fully committed to managing their relationships and being partners to their



UFO by Jose Sanchez

spouses. These traits would be charming in any situation, but come across as especially sweet considering the odd hurdles they're expected to traverse in order to be with entities that often can't speak to them directly. I'm definitely a fan of male characters on the sweeter, kinder end of the spectrum.

This series establishes more mysteries than it's willing to solve, but as a brief snapshot of an idea, I found it to be fairly charming. That said, some of the content can certainly read as off-putting, so proceed with caution if the idea of marriage to non-human creatures is a squick for you.

Pros: Very cute and very brief. The boys seem very committed to their relationships.

Cons: Presents more questions than it answers. The nature of the relationships may be off-putting to some viewers.

Grade: B-

Comics

Invincible Iron Man #1 Review by Chris Nuttall

TL:DR – A bland story that is largely unremarkable.

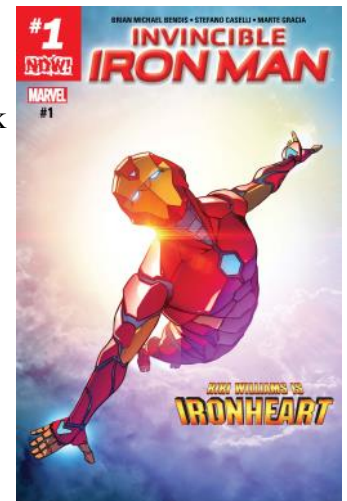
The problem with Marvel's current push to 'diversify' its roster of comic book heroes with 'characters of colour' and different genders is that it is, too often, a gimmick. Attention is paid to the skin colour and gender of the characters, like modern filmmakers are more interested in special FX, rather than developing the characters as fully independent beings in their own right. Indeed, as more focus is placed on 'diversity,' everything else is steadily frozen out.

This has produced some odd characters. James Rhodes (War Machine) is a developed character, but one who dates back to the days before 'diversity' became an issue. (One may also argue this is true of Luke Cage.) By contrast, Black Panther is little more than racial pandering that is often strikingly racist – and not always in the direction you might expect. Of all the newer characters, the only one who really stands out as a being is Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel). The others simply lack – pardon the expression – colour.

[An interesting exception to this is Alex Wilder of Runaways, although technically he was a villain. Still, he was a developed character who could easily handle a redemption arc.]

Why does this happen? To paraphrase Heinlein, writers are writing 'diversity' characters – not characters who happen to be diverse.

And now we have a young black teenage girl taking the role of Iron Man.



Her first issue – I understand this isn't her first appearance, but I haven't read the other comics – is surprisingly bland. The story features Riri Williams taking her homemade suit of armour out for a test drive against a mutant supervillain, interposed with flashbacks to her early life as a genius and tragedy when her father is gunned down in a drive-by shooting that leaves her covered in blood. And it ends with the introduction of a computer module with the recorded personality of Tony Stark.

There's very little meat here, which is part of the problem. On one hand, her background is remarkably decent (Marvel was obviously trying to avoid controversy); on the other hand, there's seemingly little room for conflict. A warning about the dangers of allowing Riri to get bored, from a psychologist, is barely mentioned, even though this should provide fodder for interesting stories. There simply isn't the room, in the first issue, to develop her properly. Ms. Marvel does a far better job.

It would be churlish to complain about Riri being a teenage genius who puts a battlesuit together in the garage. Marvel has quite a few characters who fit that description; Tony Stark, Peter Parker, Reed Richards, etc. If Riri is unrealistic, then so too are those iconic characters. (Mind you, this also raises the question of why she couldn't invent something that would make her and her family rich.)

The problem here is so fundamental that it took me several days to put my finger on it. Riri is Tony (Toni?) Stark, only black, female and teenage. In appearance, they couldn't be more dissimilar; in personality and abilities, they're very much alike. The Marvel Universe has (apparently) lost one Iron Man, only to gain another. (Not to mention the Stark personality matrix whatever.) It's possible that her personality will grow in different directions as she moves into her superhero career, but I tend to doubt it when the comic echoes the original so closely.

If you consider War Machine, you'll see he actually compliments Iron Man. Tony Stark is a 'genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist;' James Rhodes is a soldier, with different skills and training that make the team stronger. This is best shown, in my opinion, in Iron Man II, when Rhodes unhesitatingly takes command and Stark follows his lead. Rhodes isn't Tony Stark and the setting is all the stronger for it.

In some ways, this is true of Kamala Khan too. Although Kamala adopted the mantle of the 'missing' Captain Marvel, whom she adored, she is a very different person. She blazes her own path right from the start, forging a different personality. Her powers are different, her sense of the world around her is different ... she's different. And the series does not sugar-coat the problems that growing up in an ethnic minority household can cause for both Kamala and her brother.

The problem with reboots in general is that you have to appeal to both the old fans, who will provide the original customer base, and your prospective new fans. This isn't easy – and while updating one's characters is a way to do it, you run the risk of alienating the old fans. And while it is very tempting to scream RACIST or SEXIST or whatever whenever anyone objects to a black Iron Man or a Muslim Ms. Marvel or female Ghostbusters, it merely buries the true issue – that the rebooted version is so different that the original and the reboot might as well be completely separate.

That was an issue with the rebooted Battlestar Galactica. None of the rebooted characters bears

much resemblance to the old characters (and a number of completely new ones have been added) while the background story has changed completely. Fans of the old series were largely disappointed because the series was, in the end, Battlestar in name only. And while I think the new series had many great moments, it lacked the easy charm of the original and ran straight off the rails in season three. What does racism or sexism or whatever have to do with this?

(And, remarkably for its day, the original Battlestar had two black male characters (and earned a NAACP nomination for *Fire In Space*). Save for a single Asian woman, there are no non-white leads in the reboot.)

A rebooted character must live up to the original. IDW's rebooted MASK features a race-bent Matt Tracker. This isn't a bad thing. But what is a bad thing is that there is very little of the original Matt in the reboot. The confident proto-Bruce Wayne (right down to the 'rich idiot with no day job' secret ID) has been replaced by a unsure team leader, someone who simply isn't qualified (yet) to serve. His skin colour doesn't matter. His personality does.

In this case, with *Invincible Iron Man*, everything has changed, but everything remains the same. As such, the comic is instantly forgettable and a serious disappointment to everyone who was hoping that Riri Williams would develop a voice of her own.

Novels

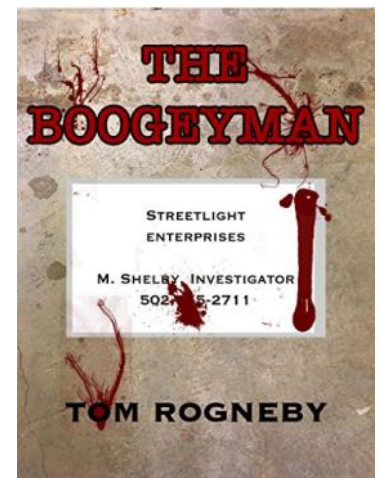
The Boogeyman by Tom Rogneby
Review by Pat Patterson

This ain't DaddyBear and the Minivandians, but they are at the very least distant cousins. Members of DaddyBear's crew, if dropped into a story in the BoogeyMan world, would recognize the core values of loyalty, importance of family ties, and the hard work needed to get ahead. And the weird. Maybe a different kind of weird.

Book One, *The Boogeyman*, could almost pass for a Bogart movie. There are tiny bits of supernatural in the story, but nothing that is essential to the plot. Martyn Shelby, the protagonist, is the proverbial tough guy investigator with a heart of gold, fists of oak, and a face that would remind you not to spend any more nights face down in the gutter. That's all normal stuff, right, for the tough guy private eye? Could be Cagney, Falk, but definitely not Hercule Poirot or Nero Wolfe.

There is ONE skewed angle, maybe two: Absolutely skewed is Aunt Sarah, a sort of family guardian/baby-sitter, who poses as a mark to draw in a junkie so she can drain him. When Martin happens on the scene taking place outside his lawyer's office, he shoos the pusher home, and catches up with Aunt Sarah over coffee. It's a nice, domestic scene.

But the 'maybe two skewed angles' pops up here. Marty got a phone call in the middle of the night to rescue four teens who vanished from a drive-in movie. His lawyer tells him there may be federal involvement. But: it happens too fast for normal investigative work. As in, there has to be surveillance, of SOMETHING going on, and that all fits in well with the story..



It's a flat-foot, gum-shoe kind of story, except that he married his lady and loves her, instead of incessantly flirting with the dames. I hope we get LOTS more. Please?

Working Vacation by Tom Rogneby
Review by Pat Patterson

Book Two contains two short stories. The first, "The Devil Drinks Sweet Tea," is back story, the second, "Working Vacation," is a contemporary incident.

"The Devil Drinks Sweet Tea." I love back-story. I think I'd rather read back-story without the main event than the main event itself. Except for the Silmarillion. Tried that a few times, just couldn't tolerate it.

Here, we see Martin as a young lad of 16 who is spending the summer with his grandparents, while his mother and father enjoy the touristy flesh-pots of Florida. And, as is the case with any number of Southern grandmothers, Grandma is working Grandpa and Martin to death in the yard, while she cleans the house. You can't understand the degree of frugality and self-sufficiency people like this strove for, unless you contemplate that they grew up in the South in the terrible years following the Great Depression. You throw NOTHING away; you buy NOTHING that you can make or do without. You eat the food you raise, and you do not doubt; you make do. And there is little time for foolishness such as radio; instead, you sit out on the porch in the evenings, and carry on long conversations while the ladies shuck peas, and the men smoke. And almost without fail, the center of community action and involvement is the local church: Sunday School, Sunday morning service, all day singing and dinner on the grounds, evening prayers. Then, throughout the week, there are other opportunities.

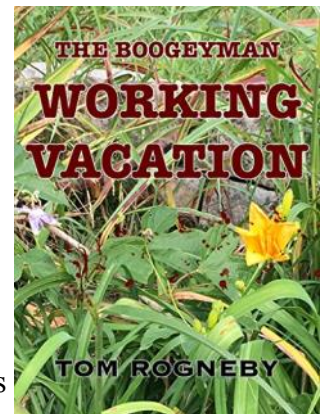
And that's why, when the Devil tries to break through Grandma's flower bed, he encounters a mighty warrior who stops him in his tracks. (My grandmother was very similar.) At some point, I feel certain we will discover how the devil recognizes young Martin, and calls him by the name "Boogeyman."

The second story, "Working Vacation," is set in the present day, just a few years after the events of "The Boogeyman." I'm going to shout this next part:

WE ALL NEED MORE STORIES LIKE THIS!

We need them because they include paranormal events that are merely things that happen, so you don't know until you get to the end whether they have anything to do with the mystery at all. I think this is a wonderful use of magic/supernatural events. There is no point in resorting to burning floop roots at midnight, when the same thing can be accomplished by just asking the waitress at the all-night diner.

In this case, Marty gets dragged away from his delicious breakfast of shrimp and grits, because a Very Important Person is missing, and many people will be disturbed unless he is found soon. (Note: you might be able to recognize the Very Important Person from the description, but I didn't. It doesn't matter.) The plot INCLUDES some paranormal elements, but it's really a straight-up detective story.

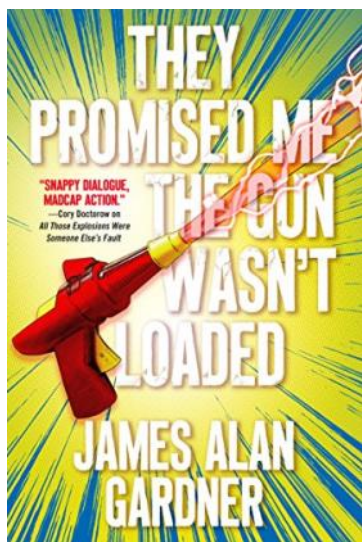


It reads fast, and it reads fun!

They Promised Me the Gun Wasn't Loaded

by James Alan Gardner

Reviewed By Sam Lubell



They Promised Me the Gun Wasn't Loaded is the sequel to All Those Explosions Were Someone Else's Fault. In this universe the superrich can pay to be transformed into immortal vampires, werewolves, and other Darklings. In a reaction, the Light has empowered regular people to be Sparks, essentially superheroes. But, not all Sparks are heroes. Some are supergenius inventors who lose sight of the greater good while others are anti-heroes who ignore the law in pursuit of their own ends.

Unlike the first book, which focused on four roommates who become Sparks, this book focuses on only one of the four, Jools. Before Jools gained superpowers as the Spark called Ninety-Nine, she was a screw-up on academic probation for being more interested in drinking and hockey than school. Now she has the power to equal the best human at anything. She's the equal of the smartest, the strongest, the fastest etc. She also has mental access to the equivalent of Wikipedia. And she discovers in this book that she also has Mad Genius inventing skills. But this does not change her personality except that she notes she is doing something stupid when she goes ahead and does it anyway.

In this book, Jools allows herself to become a pawn of a Darkling for a single action (in return for her agreeing to break a link between one of her roommates and a different Darkling). As a result, she winds up a captive of Robin Hood (or rather a Spark that has assumed that identity) and his Merry Men. Once they discover she has powers too, she is forced to join them in a raid to capture a Mad Genius weapon, under a new identity. (One of the powers of Sparks is that when they wear a mask, no one (and no technology) can discover their true identity.)

The book has lots of action and good characterization especially when Jools starts worrying about becoming a Mad Genius. I think it works better than the first book because the author was focused on just one character (instead of four co-equal leads) and the world-building had already been established.

P.A.W.S. by Debbie Manber Kupfer

Review by Jim McCoy

I've always said that good Young Adult literature can — and should — be enjoyed by adults. Once again, I was proven right *buffs fingernails on shirt* by Debbie Manber Kupfer's P.A.W.S. a coming of age/finding one's self story starring a young girl named Miri who inherits a charm from her Omama (grandmother) that allows her to transform herself into a cat. Along the way she faces many and massive changes to her life as well as threats from an outside force and the sudden reappearance of a family member she had never thought she'd see again. Oh, and this is just the first book in the series. I'd bet the rest of them are going to be crazy.



Manber Kupfer treats us to a story of a hidden world, one where shapeshifting is common and functioning magic is not unusual. One where werewolves exist and have the choice to be good or evil. It is a milieu where some inherit their shape-shifting ability in the form of charms passed down since time immemorial and others have to study and work to learn the magic necessary to change forms. Nothing is as it seems to outsiders - and not always to insiders either.

Miri receives her charm from her Omama but she does not at first realize that her powers actually exist. Even upon realizing that she can shift forms into a cat she does not realize that other powers come along with the gift. She suffers through trying to learn about her power and thence herself throughout the book. This, along with the struggle against an evil werewolf named Alistair, forms the two main problems of the book, but the desire of Miri to learn more about herself is where this book really shines.

P.A.W.S. is a story about a teen-age girl trying to find her place in the world. It feels real mainly because it's a struggle we can all identify with. At some point in time pretty much every human being has to figure out who they are and what they want. Miri is no exception. She flounders a bit but that's okay because we all do. She has to deal with some problems with bullying as well. That's something that many of us, including myself, have dealt with as well. Miri finds herself in many situations that hit hard, not because of their unusual nature but because I've been there and done that. This is a little girl that I have a lot in common with.

The flip side of that is that she gets to do things that those of us who actually exist can only dream about. What would it be like to change into a cat, to be able to change into a cat and scamper away from trouble? If I could sense and project the emotions of others what would/could I use that for? If I could have chucked my humdrum existence and entered into a magical world, I'd do it in a minute. Miri is a bit more hesitant but it's easier to say that I'd change my whole life in a minute than it would be to actually do it.

Miri is, in some ways, the kind of person we all wish we could be. When one of her former classmates shows up at P.A.W.S. Miri manages to get along with the girl and try to get along with her. When a long lost relative shows up, one that Miri feels abandoned by, she does her best to comfort them as they are recovering from their wounds and get to know them. I got the feeling that Miri could very easily have been a very bitter young girl. It's not hard to picture her rejecting people and crawling into a shell. The fact that she does not do so is a credit to her. The fact that this works in the story is a credit to Manber Kupfer. Forgiveness is something I've been struggling with. I could take a lesson here.

P.A.W.S.'s main antagonist is also easy to understand. Alistair is a flat out criminal who covets power for its own sake. He surrounds himself with others who wish to serve him to gain power themselves. Added to that is the power of mind-control. He can literally force people to do things



Dragon Bust by Angela K. Scott

against their will, or prevent them from doing things that they want to do, simply by telling them not to. This isn't just a form of intimidation. They are completely unable to resist. This adds a bit of a horror element to what is otherwise a work of urban fantasy but the more the merrier... and it adds to the story which is important. If you don't hate Alistair by the time you've finished the book then don't ask me why because I can't help you.

He treats the titular organization with hostility because they are a threat to expose and defeat him. He is every inch the conniving, manipulative bastard that men like Hitler, Lenin and Stalin were. He's just not as successful. Then again, he spends the entire story trying to gather more power to himself. He may be on his way. If you want to know how successful he is, I guess you'll have to read the book. It's worth your time.

All that being said, this is not a perfect book. A bit more description would go a long way. The majority of the book takes place in the P.A.W.S. compound but I never really got a good grasp on what it was supposed to look like. This is a story that is very similar in some ways to the Harry Potter saga but it doesn't quite rise to that level and one of the reasons is a lack of imagery. Harry's first view of Hogwarts was epic. Miri's first view of P.A.W.S. is kind of ho hum. This doesn't ruin the story but it does keep it from reaching its full potential. That much being said, this is still a solid story and well worth the time I took to read it. I'll be contacting Mrs. Manber Kupfer shortly and inquiring as to how I can get hold of the sequel.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Charms

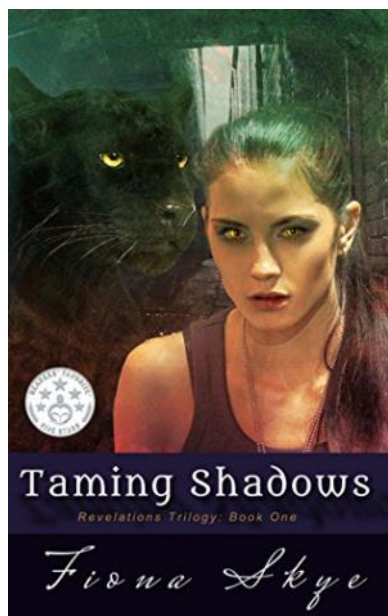
Taming Shadows by Fiona Skye Review by Jim McCoy

Imagine, if you will, a world where the Preternatural existed. In this world it had always been hidden. Now further imagine that something occurred which forced its acknowledge. The world became aware of things that it had scoffed at only a day previously. What would it take to make that happen? What would the effects of simply acknowledging the existence of something that had always been mocked be? What if not everything was known about and brought forward? What if the still-unknown wanted to stay unknown? What if Fiona Skye wrote a book named

Taming Shadows and explored these same topics. Well, she did and I enjoyed it.

The Revelations (as they're known) were put forth after a massive confrontation was caught on tape. Our heroine, Riley O'Rourke got caught up in some bad stuff and it made the news. Instead of calling the Men In Black she decided to let the world know about her (she's a were-jaguar) and others like her. She stops hiding what she is. I know I don't usually do spoilers but this all happens in the prologue so I figure it's okay this time. Riley's entire life and the lives of everyone on Earth all change in mere minutes.

What makes Taming Shadows enjoyable is that it's not a novel built on a grand scale. The story focuses very tightly on the life of Riley. We see her day to day, her love interest, and her improved lifestyle. She gets her own talk show and the big house and expensive car to go with it, but there's more than that. We see her dealing with the regular and mundane



and with the Preternatural in much the same fashion. For Riley, her exceptional nature is a fact of life that must be dealt with but that doesn't keep her from being her. All this despite the fact that she never asked to be a Critter and was changed without her consent.

The world that Skye builds is impressive. There is an entire hierarchy of Preternatural beings. One of Riley's intimates is the Duke of Tucson. Another owns a bar that caters to the Preternatural. Along the way she meets more people. Skye did well here because we learn about the way Riley's world works as Riley does. Sometimes with new fantasy worlds things can be a bit disconcerting, but Skye pulled it off. She gets enough details in to make things make sense and keep us interesting without slowing the plot down and boring us all to death. Kudos to her. Surprises abound and I won't reveal too much. One does wonder if Skye may have read a bit of Jim Butcher however.

Riley is simultaneously near the bottom (as are all the Critters/were-creatures) and near the top (being friends with the local nobility.) She ends up stuck in the middle of a fight between factions that she never knew existed and spends as much time worrying about what effect it will have on her livelihood as she does wondering whether she will survive it. She still has a young woman's natural appetites and she is not afraid to assuage them when she can and if she falls in love easily, well... It works for the plot.

I've remarked before on my love for a strong female protagonist and Riley certainly is one of those. She can scrap with the best of them. She has the personal courage to reveal an entirely new world to the rest of humanity. She goes toe to toe with some seriously scary stuff and the details of how she got Changed... I'll leave that for the book but it's not something anyone would come through unscathed, physically or emotionally. Having said that much though, she's not always sure of what comes next. She doubts her choices and doesn't always know what she should do. In short, she feels more human than most other characters that I've read. Skye really does a good job selling her protagonist. Not only do I feel like I could hang out with Riley and friends, I feel like I already have.

That's actually a really good thing and it's something that gets overlooked by many other writers. The Duke of Tucson, aka Onyx, is a vampire that's been around for several millennia. He makes sense though. Onyx is not the wantonly cruel Count Dracula, but neither is he some Stephanie Meyers spawned sparkly wimp. Riley's boyfriend is a cop. He's not some insufferable hardcore stereotype. Nor is he a superheroic ass-stomper. He's a man with a job and a woman that he cares about. Skye's supporting cast is well thought out and written.

Skye put some research into this book and it shows. I've been avoiding about what though. Suffice it to say that she seems to have done some reading of non-standard sources but it works. Some of what's in the book is trope based, but the roots are in folklore. If some old superstitions weren't really superstitions in a world where the existence the Preternatural were hidden that makes sense, especially if those old superstitions regard protection against the undead.

My one complaint about the books involves the villains. There are two groups of them and their motivations are a bit unclear. I mean, on one hand their motivation seems obvious, but maybe too obvious. Riley gets suckered in right on cue but I wonder... I don't want to give up too much. Let's just say that one of the two groups could have prevented the entire problem by remaining out of the picture and didn't. Given the fact that their intervention drives Riley into the arms of their opposition and creates a problem they would have been better off to avoid, it

seems a bit pointless. Then again, no one is perfect and maybe they knew more than I knew they knew or something. That much being said, I really did like this book and look forward to the sequels. It's book one of a trilogy.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 claws

Shrivers: The Substrate Wars 3
by Jeb Kinnison
Review by Jim McCoy

Dammit Jeb Kinnison you made me break my "OH SHIT" button. Badly. Where am I supposed to find another one this time of year? It's all your fault. Seriously. And honestly, have you ever ridden public transportation? Have you ever missed your stop and had to do extra walking on tired feet because you couldn't wait to see what was next? Your latest book, Shrivers: The Substrate Wars 3 had me hanging on every word. It's hard to watch out of a window to see how close I am to my stop when my nose is stuck in an e-reader.

SIGH

Seriously folks, this is a good one. Fans of the site (both of you) will remember that I have reviewed both of the first two books in the series, The Red Queen and Nemo's World and enjoyed them both but this is easily the best of the three. Once again we see the fight against Big Government and a crackdown on the dirty little guy, this time on an existential level. It's not even about a human government anymore. This one is all about the fight of humanity to survive against a force that is regulating the substrate. If you don't know what the substrate is, it's because you haven't read the first two books and that is a mistake you need to fix quickly. The links are listed below.



As a fan of Science Fiction and Fantasy, one of my favorite things is an epic plot and an existential threat. Kinnison got both of those into this book in spades. The Red Queen was about a renegade group of students rebelling against oppression. That's good stuff. Nemo's World was about setting up a government and what to do with dangerous criminals. It was a lot of fun as well. This one is not just bigger than either, it's bigger than both put together. The impressive part about the whole thing is really about how well Kinnison humanizes it though.

The previous cast of characters is all still here and they're all doing their thing. Some are perhaps a bit older, wiser and more mature but things tend to work that way in real life so that's hardly surprising. What is incredibly surprising is the inclusion of a young girl on whom the fate of the entire human race depends. Whether she is up to the challenge or not... well... read the book. I don't do spoilers. I will say that she gets put into her position because she is a unique young lady and that the decision is not made by a human being. Humans have friends among those who would try to kill them. And that's one of the things that I really, really enjoyed about this book.

Look, I'm okay with a cardboard villain if it fits the story. Battle: Los Angeles was a good movie that pretty much went "The bad guys are here to steal water and they're going to kill us all to

get it," and left things at that. This book is not that way. Kinnison's villains are every bit as much motivated as they are dangerous and they have very clear motivations that MAKE SENSE. I get the fact that alien reasoning may not always be obvious to a human mind, especially given the fact the motivations of a person from another human culture can be opaque at times. Still, the enemy, known as the First because they were the first culture to discover the substrate, is looking to perpetuate their own existence against anyone they see as a threat. New species are, to them, a threat to take up the space they need to live. The Shrivvers that Kinnison named his book after are their method of doing so. Nuclear annihilation awaits those that aren't unique and impressive enough.

I have to admit that I was a bit skeptical about the ability of anyone to wipe out an enemy that has access to the substrate when I first read about it. That lasted until I had read a little further. It turns out that there is a fairly simple way to mess with a computer program (a virus) and that a society who has had access to the substrate for billions of years is better at using it than we would be. Go figure. It works here though because it's so familiar. I had missed the possibility but the reasoning was sound and it made the story easy to follow.

This tome cooks from beginning to end. It just doesn't let up. Problems come up and are solved just in time to set up the next round of problems. I wonder if perhaps Kinnison didn't run out of mountains to drop on his character and decide to start using meteors instead. After all, they're plentiful and require less lift. Things go from bad to worse to OH SHIT and pretty much stay there until the last page or two when my least favorite character shows up. I don't know why Cliff Hanger is such a popular guy but I'd like to break all of his teeth. Then again, at least this means we'll be getting another sequel and that's a good thing.

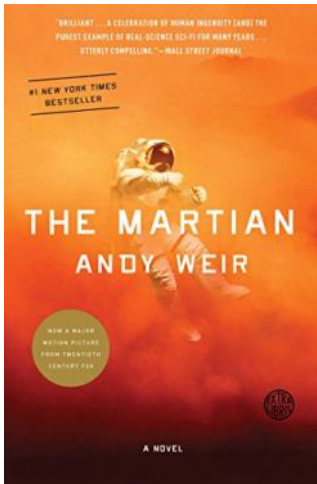
The politics of the story drift a bit in the work as well. At first it was a plucky bunch of kids rebelling against an overreaching government. Then it was those kids a few years later finding a way to turn things into a government in which everyone has a say. Those were impressive. But now things are shifting a bit. Control of the substrate is control over the future of humanity and its use is restricted to just a few people who are planning to pass that control on to their children. This has potential to lead to a government even more repressive than the one they overthrew. So far they haven't gone down that road but the possibility to do so is certainly there. If Kinnison will steer his series away from that eventuality. If he does so it will be interesting to see how he pulls it off. So I'm waiting (im)patiently for the sequel to see what comes next.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Micro Black Holes

The Martian by Andy Weir **Review by Jim McCoy**

I've always loved tales of being marooned. Being marooned in space just makes them better. In fact, the very first review (and second post as the first one was a "Welcome to My Blog" post) was of Ryk Spoor's *Castaway Planet*. So when I heard about Andy Weir's work *The Martian* I knew I had to check it out. Unfortunately, I was running a book review blog and I was busy trying to keep up with submissions (and I only have one left. Please send me more books to review) so I couldn't get to it right away. I wish I had because this thing rocks.

I have a dirty secret to admit to: I was a bit worried about this one. I had heard all of the praise



of the book for its scientific accuracy and I was afraid that it was going to turn into more of a scientific tract than a novel. Seriously. I know nerds. I AM a nerd. I was really afraid that I was going to end up bored to tears reading detailed instructions about how to grow things and find water on Mars. I mean, I'm a nerd but I'm a history nerd. Seriously, buy me a drink sometime and I'll tell you all about why *The Patriot* and *The Last Samurai* may be entertaining but they SUCK from a history perspective. Whatever you do though, don't let me tell the story about the guy I know who thought that *Apocalypse Now* was based on a true story. Fortunately, I refused to take council of my fears and I read it anyway. This is a good thing because this is a book that absolutely refuses to get bogged down in details to the detriment of story.

What else works is that although the science is there, it's not dreary. (Warning: There are some spoilers for the rest of this paragraph. Some of you may want to skip it.) It's just somewhat simplified and not expounded on to the point of insanity. Seriously. There are some orbital calculations made, but we're not expected to sit through them. It's just stated that they've been done and some basics given. We know that the ship will use some gravity to do thus and so but we're not expected to do the Calculus ourselves. The steps necessary to grow food on Mars are gone through in less than excruciating detail, except for the fact that I couldn't keep myself from picturing the smell anyway, and it just seems so real. We're talking about something that doesn't just sound plausible, it sounds possible.

I'm a total fan of Space Opera with its FTL travel and space battles but *The Martian* gives us something that classic Space Opera doesn't: A feeling that this could happen in our lifetimes. A feeling of "Wow, I see what he did there." Don't get me wrong. I know the feeling of the hyperdrive not kicking in on a ship that has done the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs. I cringe when the dilythium crystals crack. This isn't that though. This is "Wow. That method would work now. I can see how you could do that now that you've explained it. I just don't know how you'd deal with the smell.

I need to get a hard copy of *The Martian* (I read it on my Nook) so that I can hit people with it when they say that Hard Science Fiction is boring or that the characters are cardboard. Weir not only got his science right he made his characters into people. This guy has a gift. I actually cared whether Mark would make it out alive or not. I found myself rooting for him. I got a chuckle out of some of the things he did and other times I agonized with him. At least once I remember being taken back to a project on my car and how well it DIDN'T go. I got a chuckle out of that one and it happened because of the realism of a situation in the book.

The other members of the crew are well drawn too and so is the team at NASA. The boss is a bit of an over-officious prick but who hasn't had a boss like that at some point? At the same time, he acts like a prick because he is worried about all of the astronauts and not just the one that is stranded. It's totally understandable even while it's infuriating.

The odd part about castaway stories for me is that I like them. One of my favorite things to see in any story is a good villain. Whether it's Queen Takhisis and her followers in *The Dragonlance Chronicles* or Khan Noonian Singh in *Star Trek* it's always good to have someone to root against as well as someone to root for. In this type of a novel, nature has to stand in for the villain and it works here. Mars is an evil bastard every step of the way. From lack of an atmosphere to the opening dust storm to lack of water it stands in Mark's way every time he tries to

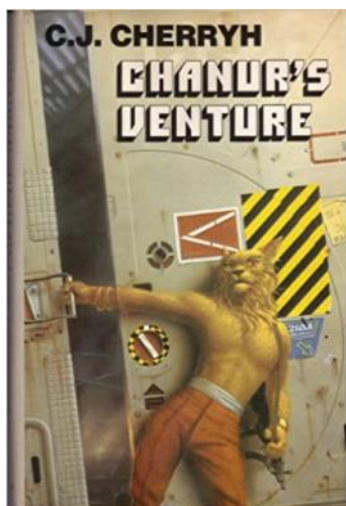
accomplish something. I know the malevolence isn't intentional. Mars may be named after the god of war but it's not actually sentient. That much having been said, it feels malevolent to Mark and therefore to us.

In his afterword Weir mentioned that he wanted all of the problems experienced by his characters would be predicated by their own decisions. Having read the book I can see what he's talking about. There is a dust storm at the beginning of the book that results in Mark being stranded. He can't do anything about that. After that though, everything happens according to this one principle. Nothing happens without cause. Weir repeatedly introduces problems to the plot but they all make sense. There are no Hand of God moments. Things happen in a logical manner without being predictable.

The one problem I had with the book is that it needs an epilogue. I wanted to know what happened after the end of the story. I'm not talking about anything Tolkien-esque, just a few pages to let us now what happened at the completion of the mission. I get this feeling a lot at the end of novels about people who have been marooned. The only time I've seen it done is in *Castaway* with Tom Hanks. But maybe that's just me. What was there was awesome.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 stranded probes

Chanur's Venture and Yvgenie by C.J. Cherryh— Reviews by Tom Feller

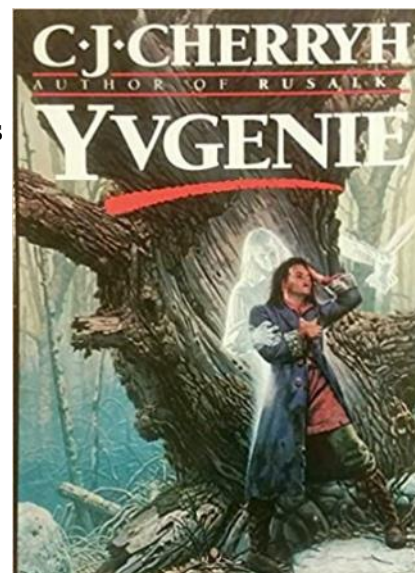


I had not read any books in the author's Chanur series prior to this one. The name refers to a clan of the lion-like Hani species, which is a spacefaring one. The main point of view character in this novel, the sequel to the Hugo-nominated *The Pride of Chanur*, is Pyanfar Chanur, who is captain of *The Pride*, a merchant vessel. In the Hani culture, commerce is considered a female occupation, although one of the many rules of her species that Pyanfar has broken is having her husband Khym on board. Males are normally never allowed to leave the Hani home world, and all the other crewmembers of *The Pride* are female. At the neutral space station Meetpoint two years after the events of the first book, she encounters Goldtooth, a member of the Mahendo'sat species. He persuades her to accept custody of Tully, a human from the author's Union/Alliance series, and he becomes a kind of Maguffin, an object that drives the novel's action. Two other species with an interest in Tully are the Knnn, methane-breathers whose motivations oxygen-breathers have difficulty understanding, and the rat-like Kif, who are opposed to contact with humans.

I would say that I made a mistake in jumping into the middle of this series. Not only does the author assume a familiarity with the series, but the plot is so fast moving that I never developed any empathy for any of the characters. I would categorize it as one of the stories for which I can admire the world-building and alien development, but left me emotionally unsatisfied. The story ends in a cliff hanger that is continued in *The Kif Strike Back*, but I do not intend to bother seeking it or any of the other books in the series out.

Now if *Chanur's Venture* was too fast paced, the opposite charge could be made against *Yvgenie*, a fantasy based on Russian folklore. It is set in a forest north of Kiev in a pre-industrial

time, where a family consisting of a father, a mother, and a fifteen year old daughter lives. The mother, Eveshka, is a female wizard, as is the daughter Ilyana. The father, Pyetr, is an ordinary man. "Uncle" Sasha, actually a friend of the family and also a wizard, lives nearby. Ilyana is not only an only child, but she has no friends to play with. However, when she was five years old, she met a boy ghost who appears to be her own age. The ghost reappears every spring and disappears in the summer and ages at the same rate as Ilyana. She keeps the ghost's existence a secret until she turns fifteen. When the parents meet the ghost, they realize that he is the spirit of Kavi Chernevog, a wizard with whom Eveshka has a history. The title character does not make his appearance until about 100 pages into the story. He is Yvgenie Pavlovitch, the son of a Russian noble who is trying to escape from his father in the company of a young woman who turns out to be Pyetr's daughter with the wife of another man. Kavi tries to possess the young man, and the tension is derived from the reader wondering not only who is going to be alive at the end but who ends up with whom. The novel ends rather abruptly and is not really satisfying.



This is the third book in a trilogy, but I had no trouble understanding what was going on. Having read the Harry Potter books, I did not care for Cherryh's magic system. Basically people are born wizards and only have to learn to refrain from using their magic powers. They do not have to learn spells, the properties of potions, etc. They only have to make a wish and it happens, although not necessarily in the way they expect.

Tales Of The Screaming And Mad
by Dee Calhoun
Review by Will Mayo

Here, with such fine dark tales as ghosts, vampires, werewolves that are somehow beyond werewolves and at least one tale called "The Net" with a Lovecraftian plot that has none of Lovecraft's cumbersome prose, "Screaming Mad" Dee Calhoun, lead singer of such heavy metal rock and roll bands as Spiral Grove and Iron Man, entertains you and scares you with equal measure. Take these tales in hand and read and you will not be disappointed. Five stars for the lord of darkness.

Daniel Coldstar: The Relic War by Stel Pavlou
Review by Anita Barrios

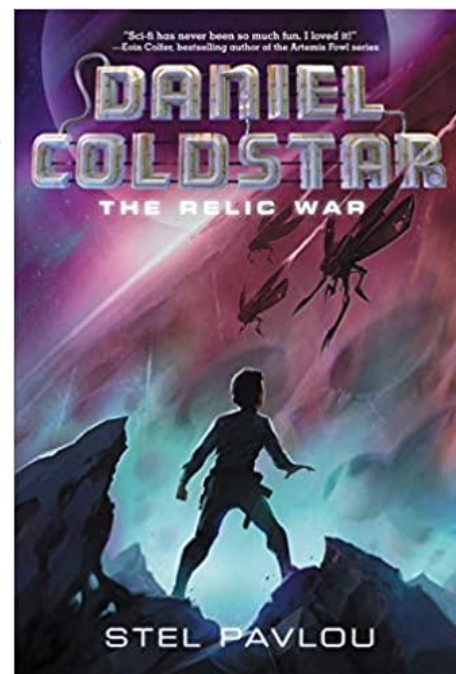
My 14-year-old son loved this one! We had to request it from another library via "Interlibrary loan," but it was well worth the wait.

Setting: The year is 4182, somewhere in outer space. When we meet Daniel, his mind has been wiped and he's plopped back into his bunk. While all the grubs (other kids) around him recognize him, he has no idea who he is or how he got to this forsaken mining shaft. He re-meets Nails, a good friend who has, well, nails growing where hair should, and Blink, a steadfast friend. The children are forced to mine for lost relics of an advanced civilization in the rock for the Overseers, a race of horrible, hideous creatures who make the boys disappear for the small-

est infraction of their arbitrary rules. It has the feel of a Nazi concentration work camp, with the kids forced to mine every day with large animals called Trabasours, a sort of triceratops / ankylosaurus mix with bad tempers and clubs on their tails that are used to whale away at the rock. After sifting through the rubble, the boys are given only meager rations, wear tattered rags and sleep stacked in barracks. Escape is a distant dream, pushed out of their minds by the horrible prospect of being thrown in the pit.

But then Daniel actually finds a relic. It attaches itself to his chest. He can't get it off. But it also protects him, shielding him from the Overseer who tries to take it off. With it protecting him, Daniel launches on a mad-cap escape from the mine to the surface and beyond as a stowaway on a Truth Seeker vessel where he learns the grubs are but pawns in a game of intergalactic war.

Can he convince the Truth Seekers to save his friends? Or will they believe the lies and the mis-truths of the evil Sinja, who will do anything to win this war -- including kidnapping and weaving children into their evil plot -- once and for all.



Daniel Coldstar 2: The Betrayer by Stel Pavlou Review by Anita Barrios

Woo-hoo! It's here!

Summer is here, the kids are out of school, and I'm having a ball reviewing science-fiction and fantasy books from now until the start of Fall semester. Some will be continuations of books I've already reviewed, like today's. Other will be complete, whole series I've read over the COVID social distancing / reduce the curve isolation period.

Even if your library isn't open, and doesn't have a Summer Reading Program for your kiddos (many have cancelled due to COVID closures and reopening restrictions) this year, they can and should read up a storm of books that interest them over the summer. As a parent, you can help prevent the Summer Slide (no, it's not a good thing) by promoting reading to your child or children.



An Eye Is Always Watching by Jose Sanchez

And a great way to do that is to slide high-interest, fun books under their noses (or load them on their Kindles or phone apps) and just make them available to fill the gaps of summer-induced boredom.

All year I review other types of high-interest books, and books for teachers to consider using in their ELA and Social Studies curriculum, but summer's time for pure sci-fi/fantasy fun!

I'm so excited to finally post my first Summer Reads review! I've been holding onto this one for months, just dying to talk it up!

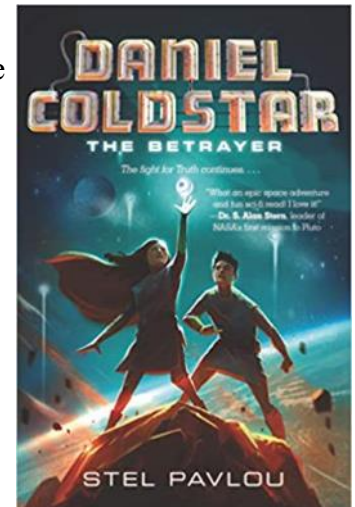
Daniel has lost the Book of Planets to the Sinja. They're using it to foment war, and nothing the Truth Seekers do to defuse escalating conflicts on several planets seems to work. There's conflicts brewing in places where there should be none, and the Sinja know how to defeat Truth Seeker forces, and they're always, always, one step ahead of the Truth Seekers.

Until Daniel gets a tip about a downed starship named the Coldstar, and he investigates it -- with Alice the Hammertail, his trababsaur from the relic mine, and a little pinguino-form robot, Jasper, Daniel finds out nothing about himself, as he had hoped. Instead, he rescues several hundred kids, kidnapped kids, grubs like he had been in the relic mine, before he escaped. They're about to be delivered to the Sinja. With help from his fellow Truth Seeker Ionica and Nails and Astrid, they set up a trap to figure out who sent him the tip.

I'm not going to reveal any more. Just know, Daniel and Ionica set in motion events that help them understand how the Sinja have been one step ahead of the Truth Seekers the entire time. In the final showdown between Daniel and the Sinja, Blink Darkada, the betrayer from Book 1 and Daniel's bestest grub friend from the relic mine, makes an appearance -- and redeems himself. And finally Daniel and the Truth Seekers know how to stop the Sinja dead in their tracks.

We (my now 15-year-old son and I) really enjoyed this one, possibly more than Book 1. It didn't feel as rushed at the end, and the story -- even though it's a second in an ongoing series -- felt satisfying, as several plot points from Book 1 came full circle. It still left lots of questions unanswered and we can't wait to read number 3!

Daniel Coldstar 2: The Betrayer by Stel Pavlou



Interviews

An Interview with Jon Del Arroz
by Tamara Wilhite

I first interviewed Jon Del Arroz for Liberty Island Magazine when his Christian science fiction (not an oxymoron) novel "Justified: The Saga of the Nano Templar" hit Amazon in the fall of 2019. This Hispanic science fiction author seems to be juggling multiple projects at once at any given time. And that's why I've come back to interview him for N3F.

Tamara Wilhite: Flying Sparks came out at the end of 2019. Spectacular Comics hit Amazon in March, 2020. What led you to dedicate so much time to comics?

Jon Del Arroz: I've always wanted to write comics. Once it started being a moneymaker for me,

I just went for it. My goal is to come out with a monthly comic just like big publishers do, a measure for a real professional, so far I've been succeeding. I've been able to knock out at least an issue of a comic per month since late 2018. Very proud of all the work we've done.

Tamara Wilhite: You haven't stopped writing science fiction. "Colony Launch" gets released April 22, 2020. Is this a new series? Or does it tie into anything else you've written?

Jon Del Arroz: It is standalone, but it's also set in the world of The Stars Entwined -- which I'll be writing most of my sci-fi in this world going forward. I've built this universe out so much there's a lot of great sci-fi to tell.

Tamara Wilhite: What is it about?

Jon Del Arroz: Launching a colony.

It's funny, I get this question a lot, and yes that's my flippant answer, but when there's a big government bureaucracy, trying to move 10,000 people out of Earth's jurisdiction is not such an easy task. There's a lot to navigate and prepare for. That's where our characters find themselves -- with our main protagonist, Antony Lemkin, heading up the expedition as a form of war protest. It's got a lot of cool character perspectives who are all so different.

Tamara Wilhite: You've put out quite a bit of steampunk. I believe "For Steam and Country" is up to five books now. How is that project going?

Jon Del Arroz: It keeps selling. I always thought my sci-fi would outsell my steampunk because it's such a niche genre, but the Von Monocle series keeps performing so amazingly. I've got about 1/2 a short story collection set in the world which I write the shorts periodically for my Patreon subscribers, and then I'll tackle the next main book, Attack of the Nightmen, sometime this year.

Tamara Wilhite: "Clockwork Dancer Issue 1" looks like another steampunk work. Is that comic part of the Rislandia Steampunk universe?

Jon Del Arroz: As much as it'd be better marketing to keep everything in one universe, no. I always strive to do something different each time I make a new work. I wanted to do steampunk because I've got a steampunk following, but I set this in 1890 Victorian England. It's a wild ride with a lot of cool historical context. Very different than the Von Monocle books.

Tamara Wilhite: What else are you working on? For example, will there be a fourth book in the Nano Templar series or a sequel to "The Stars Entwined"?

Jon Del Arroz: The Stars Entwined's sequel is already drafted, I'm in my editing phase about 50% done on that front. Its title is The Stars Asunder. I might finish the trilogy of this before moving to something else, not sure. I'll have to look at sales and see where things are at for all series.

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

Jon Del Arroz: 2020 is going to be the best year yet. The stories keep getting better. We're hav-

ing so much fun, which is what sci-fi is all about. I think it's really going to show and hope folk will be along for the ride!

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for your time.

An Interview with Louis Antonelli by Tamara Wilhite

Louis Antonelli's science fiction bibliography is dominated by short stories. He's had stories published in *RevolutionSF*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Sci-Phi Journal*, *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and the *Planetary Anthology* series. He's arguably a writer in his day job, too, running the *Clarksville Times*.

Tamara Wilhite: You seem to have had the greatest success with short stories. You've published several stories a year for more than a decade. How many anthologies have you had short stories published in?

Louis Antonelli: Goodness, I've lost count. At least a dozen.

Tamara Wilhite: Are most of your works science fiction, horror, or modern fantasy?

Louis Antonelli: Actually my most common genre is alternate history.

Tamara Wilhite: How does your experience as a reporter influence your writing?

Louis Antonelli: It's helped with the simple process of writing grammatical English. I've never had a story rejected because it was poorly written. It also helps keep my prose tight and fast-paced.

Tamara Wilhite: Greek mythology seems to be another influence. What else has influenced your writing?

Louis Antonelli: Living in Texas. It's a broad canvass and has a lot of interesting quirks to take advantage of.

Tamara Wilhite: I noticed that a local paper referred to your entering a local race as a viable candidacy. What led you to run for the District 4 seat as a Libertarian?

Louis Antonelli: I'm so sick of the Democratic Party I'd like to see if we could make the Libertarians the second party instead. The country would be a lot better for it.

Tamara Wilhite: Aside from running a newspaper and running for office, what are you currently working on?

Louis Antonelli: Good grief, that's enough!

Tamara Wilhite: Do you think you'll ever write a full-length novel or create an anthology of just your own work?

Louis Antonelli: I've written one novel, "Another Girl, Another Planet". It was a finalist for the Dragon Award in Alternate History in 2017. I've had four collections published - "Fantastic Texas", "Texas and Other Planets", "The Clock Struck None", and "In the Shadow of the Cross".

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

Louis Antonelli: The best thing I've ever written remains my dedication to "Another Girl, Another Planet": "For Patricia: The only time I am ever at a loss for words is when I try to describe how much you mean to me."

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Poetry

Will Mayo's Review Of Robert L. Penick's Exit Stage Left

We have here an excellent book of verse by Robert L. Penick who explores love, death, and the loss and gain of life better than most books by others this reviewer has seen. Notable poems include "Riddle" in which he talks about mailing his box of secrets (no one should be without one) to Madagascar and back, "What To Do When The Night Is Done With You" in which he discusses just what is to be done with those fields on a moonless night, and "boneyard" where he explores the aftermath of death where "Eternity waits/as quiet as a cloud." Suggestion: Go ahead and buy this book and explore all its many verses. You'll be glad you did. You'll find it available at www.slipstreampress.org.

Short Stories

Berlin Is Never Berlin by Marko Kloos

Review by Robert Hullender

Published on May 6, 2020 by Tor.com

Well-Paced Tension and Action with a Heart of Gold.

(Superhero; Wild Cards) Babysitting/bodyguarding a group of rich kids should be easy money, especially for a tough joker-ace like Khan—provided he doesn't end up killing them himself.

You need to at least understand the premise of the Wildcards series to make any sense out of this story.

Pro: Kahn is there to protect Natalie, so when she gets kidnapped, he has to do everything he can to get her back. He's got substantial powers, but he's got weaknesses too, not least of which is that his human side is vulnerable.

The best part of the story is the tension, but the pacing is worth a mention too. When a story is tense all the time it gets exhausting, but the author does a great job of giving us breaks, which serves to make the tense moments even more powerful.

Khan himself is a great character, and the more we get to know him, the better we like him. He grumbles about the kids and their music, but they do a few things to earn his respect (like Eli telling him about the watch), and by the end, it's clear he's built some affection for them.

I also liked the way the German police (including the aces) weren't portrayed as evil or incompetent. Their behavior was more-or-less realistic, given the circumstances. Even the mobsters' behavior makes sense according to their lights; there are no cardboard villains in this story.

On a minor note, in our reality, the Flakturm in the Berlin Zoo was demolished in 1947, but it was a real place.

The choice of names is amusing. "Scuderi" means "shield bearer" whereas "Kahn" essentially means "king," which is an ironic choice, if deliberate, since their roles are the reverse of that. Fledermaus means "bat" in German and Überschall means "supersonic," which are both spot-on.

Con: As a practical matter, I think a guy who was half-tiger would be hopelessly unbalanced.

And a very small nit: Chicago is seven hours behind Berlin, not ahead.

Eyes of the Forest, by Ray Nayler
Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction issue 05-06|20
Review by Robert Hullender

Plenty of excitement in a beautiful, deadly setting.

(SF Adventure) To become a Wayfarer, Sedef needs to master the dangers of the forest on her planet, which kills anything that doesn't glow. And she has to survive an emergency run, seven hours each way, alone.



Fairy Dancer
by Angela K Scott

Pro: To a degree, this is a coming of age story, but the most outstanding thing about it is the tension, in one scene after another. In light of that, the pacing is extraordinary, as the tension lightens up just enough to insert flashbacks that fill us in on what we need to know about the dangers of the forest. It never descends to infodumps; everything it tells us is something we wanted to know.

Sedef's desire to become a Wayfarer and be accepted as one is very strong. It comes through most of her thoughts and actions. But when the situation is desperate, she doesn't think, she just acts, and that, more than anything, shows us that she's achieved her goal.

The icing on the cake is when Mauled by Mistake tells her she'll get a given name. It's going to be something like "Ran naked in the dark" but it shows that she's made it.

Con: I'm not sure I believe you could have an ecosystem where there were lots of scavengers but no predators. It's also hard to believe the entire planet is covered by this forest.

Byzantine, by Holly Messinger
Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction issue 05-06|20
Review by Robert Hullender

A delightfully complex tale at the end of an era.

(Historical Fantasy) In 1453, just before the fall of Constantinople, a slave boy secretly learns from a djinn and looks for a way out.

Pro: Although the ifrit is the narrator, Iosef is the actual protagonist; he's the one with plans and goals, after all; the ifrit merely tells us what went down.

It very nice the way our understanding of Iosef changes across the story. We first meet him as a victim, being sexually abused by a callous master. Only later, when Iosef couples with the ifrit (in a less-physical way) do we learn that he actually enjoys his trysts with his master. That, in fact, he actually controls his master's behavior. The ifrit calls him a narcissist and a psychopath, and it should know.

Iosef seeks knowledge more than anything else, as we see in the scene where he bargains with the ifrit for understanding of the physicians scrolls in exchange for the lives of some of the mercenaries who'd come to steal the man's books. At every step, Iosef takes steps to increase his knowledge, and his whole goal in finding a way to enslave the ifrit is to use it to find things out.

The ifrit doesn't exactly have goals—it experiences the future as mostly determined—but it has a blind spot with respect to its own future (something it admits to Iosef early on), and that enables him to trap it. It enjoys its time with him, and even at the end, it's a little regretful about feeding on him.

The Fall of Constantinople is one of the “Great Hinges of History,” although probably more symbolically than practically, given how far the city had declined by then. Just as the fall of Rome in 476 can be considered the start of the Middle Ages, the fall of Constantinople a thousand years later can be considered the end, and both are endlessly fascinating.

Con: There are a few anachronisms. For example, the story has Iosef and physician making Greek Fire, but the formula for that had been lost for 200 years by the time the city fell.

Writers

Edgar A. Poe: Mournful And Neverending Remembrance
By Kenneth Silverman
Review by Will Mayo

This as another remarkable read, one regarding the life of Edgar Allan Poe. A man orphaned in infancy, raised in a straitlaced family and then abandoning its comforts, he devoted the majority of his life to literature (a disreputable career in his foster father's eyes). Too, he will perhaps be most remembered as one of the most death haunted writers in a death haunted time in my country's history, spending his life crafting poems and stories on the very edge of life and death. (Indeed, an early poem he created in his life, "Al Aaraf," gave new life to the borderland between heaven and hell.) Romantically and sexually conflicted and spending most of his years lashing out at better known and more financially secure writers, he then died a long, slow death after his wife Virginia passed away (a slow suicide, as his translator Charles Baudelaire might put it, Baudelaire himself being no stranger to the troubles of the mind and heart), but his work remains. A horror story here. A mystery well told there. A poem over there. Yes, we will long cherish the memory of dear Mr. Poe. That is for sure.

Born To Be Posthumous:
The Eccentric Life And Mysterious Genius Of Edward Gorey
By Mark Dery
Review by Will Mayo

Edward Gorey. Who hasn't wondered at the strange man with his long, dangling white beard, his fur coats in the summertime, his library of twenty thousand books and all his cats not to mention his love and raves of the ballet? Author of weird soundless comics, perhaps to be defined as surrealist novels, depicting strange creatures in Victorian drawing rooms, children meeting all manner of bad ends and men on a journey that can only end in mystery, Gorey has been the subject of inquiry for decades on end. Moviemakers have sought inspiration in his craft as have novelists and many have wondered at the nature of this strange man's sexuality though he spent in his life alone with his rooms full of books and a house equally full of cats.

Mark Dery here tells the man's story from birth to a death at the start of our century here and unravels some of the mystery in rumors of a gay rendezvous but to Gorey's followers (and they are legion) he will perhaps remain a subject of their interest and fascination for the remainder of the strange times that we call our own. Mr. Gorey. There was just no one like him.

Food of Famous Writers

Stryder Dancwolffe's Apple Chicken
Cooking by Cedar Sanderson

Firstly, thank you to my readers for their patience, I'm afraid that my schedule is going to remain loose for a while as I'm focusing more on school than the blog. But I have to keep cooking, so cooking with a dual purpose is good!

Stryder Dancwolffe gave me a rough sketch of a recipe and I have done my best to color it in while keeping it close to her intent. It's a fairly easy meal and I've chosen to keep it low-carb in her honor.



While you are prepping, be sure to pick up one (or more!) of Stryder's books. She and I had a fun moment a few years ago where we both re-released stories titled Snow Angel with similar themes. For a longer, deliciously creepy tale, Build-A-Universe is her latest. If you enjoy psychologically astute stories with a deep human tenderness and understanding, you might like her work, but it's not always straightforward and what it seems at first...

Unlike this recipe, which is unexceptionable.

Apple Chicken

Ingredients

3 granny smith apples, peeled, cored, and sliced thin

- 4 chicken breast filets (Ours were about half a breast)
- 1/4 c butter in sections
- 1 small onion chopped
- 1 c heavy cream
- 1 c sherry or white wine
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1-2 tsp dried thyme (a few sprigs if you have fresh)
- One whole cauliflower head
- 1/4 c butter
- 2-3 tbsp grated parmesan
- 1-2 tbsp cream
- salt and pepper to taste



Frying apples in butter in my 12" cast iron skillet

Instructions

In 1-2 tbsp butter, fry the apples until soft. Preheat the oven to 350 deg F. Have a small baking dish (I used a 8x8 pan) ready. When the apples are softened, put them in the backing dish and put it in the oven.

Heat another section of the butter in the pan, then brown the chicken on both sides, seasoning it with the salt, pepper, and thyme. It will not be cooked through, that's ok, you will be putting it in the oven with the apples to finish cooking.

With the final aliquot of butter, fry the onions until they are translucent, then put them on the chicken and back in the oven with that pan.

In the skillet on top of the stove, deglaze the pan with the wine, when it starts to boil whisk in the cream. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Keep at a low boil, stirring occasionally, until this thickens.

While the sauce is boiling down, put the cauliflower in a covered container with a bit of water in the bottom and microwave for 10-13 minutes on high, until it is fork-tender. Drain, cut out

the central stalk, and mash. Add the butter, cream, cheese, and season to taste.

When the sauce is thickened, remove the chicken and apples from the oven. Serve them on a bed of mashed cauliflower with sauce poured over the top. Sprinkle with finely chopped chives or wild onions for color and flavor.

Browning the chicken. Finishing it in the oven meant it was really tender and juicy. Mashed Cauliflower really isn't like potatoes, but it's good as itself. This is a meal full of umami.

Overall this is a rich, subtly-flavored meal. It was very filling, even without much in the way of carbs (I didn't count. I know the apples contribute some). The apples remained slightly toothsome rather than going all mushy which is why Stryder recommends Granny Smith apples for this meal. The chicken was so juicy, breasts can cook up dry and this was swimming in sauce and butter and more butter... LOL

I was worried about the color, but the wild onions really helped with that. Fortunately, this is like so many other dishes, better tasting than looking. The apples and onions make me think this would pair equally well with pork. I'd add a hearty dollop of mustard (the grainy brown kind) and mustard seeds to the sauce. But then again, I tinker with most recipes! Hopefully this will inspire you to read a new book and try fruits with your meats.



Sercon

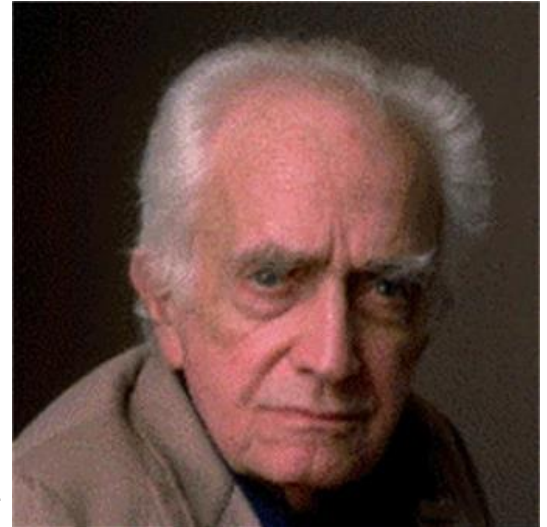
Fritz Leiber, Jr. Bio-Bibliography

By

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

N3F Historian

Fritz Reuter Leiber, Jr. (December 24, 1910 – September 5, 1992) was a writer of science fiction (SF), fantasy (F), and horror (H). He was also an actor, a chess player, a playwright, and a champion fencer. He was the only child of the Shakespearean actor and theatrical manager Fritz Leiber (1882 - 1949) and his wife, actress Virginia Bronson Leiber (1885 – 1970).



While primarily a professional SF/F/H writer, Leiber, Jr. had a long and close relationship with SF fandom. He was a member of the Hyborian Legion and of LASFS, an attendee at Centracon, and a contributor to the fanzines Vorpall Glass and Amra. He was also one of the leaders of the “Chicago: 1959” Worldcon bid. In addition, he acted in a fannish fantasy film by Unicorn Productions and helped compose at least one fannish musical.

As a professional writer, his first genre sale was to the popular fantasy magazine *Unknown* – edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. -- and he later contributed to the Lovecraft mythos. Leiber’s most famous creations probably were his sword and sorcery characters Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser who were featured in his Lankhmar stories.

Principal Works

Conjure Wife (originally appeared in *Unknown Worlds*, 1943)
 Gather, Darkness! (serialized in *Astounding*, 1943)
 Destiny Times Three (1945) (reprinted 1952 as *Galaxy Novel # 28*)
 The Sinful Ones (1953)
 The Green Millennium (1953)
 The Big Time (expanded, 1961 -- from a version serialized in *Galaxy*, 1958)
 The Night of the Long Knives (*Amazing*, 1960)
 The Silver Eggheads (1961) [shorter version published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1959]
 The Wanderer (1964)
 Tarzan and the Valley of Gold (1966) [novelization of a screenplay]
 A Specter Is Haunting Texas (1969)
 You're All Alone (1972) [first book edition, includes two shorter works]
 Our Lady of Darkness (1977)
 Rime Isle (1977) [collection, composed of “The Frost Monstreme” and “Rime Isle”]

The Change War (1978)
 Sonnets to Jonquil and All (1978)
 Bazzarr of the Bizarre (1978)
 Ship of Shadows (1979)
 Riches and Power (1982)
 The Ghost Light (1984)
 The Knight and Knave of Swords (1988)
 Gummitch and Friends (1992)
 The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich (published posthumously, 1997)

Awards/GoH Appearances/Other Honors

Leiber won the Hugo Award six times: the 1958 Best Novel or Novelette Hugo, the 1965 Best Novel Hugo, the 1968 Best Novelette Hugo, the 1970 Best Novella Hugo, the 1971 Best Novella Hugo, and the 1976 Best Short Story Hugo. He was nominated eight more times.

He was nominated for ten Nebula Awards, winning three times (1968, 1971, and 1976).

He also won three Locus Awards (1975, 1985, 2011), and was nominated for the Award fifteen times.

1951 -- Nolacon
 1961 -- Baycon Westercon
 1966 -- Knight of St. Fantony
 1967 -- Forry Award
 1969 -- Count Dracula Society (Literature)
 1975 -- World Fantasy Award
 1976 -- World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award
 1978 -- GoH World Fantasy Convention
 1979 -- Seacon '79
 1980 -- Orycon '80
 1981 -- Balrog Award, SFWA Grand Master Award
 1983 -- Moscon V
 1985 -- Locus Award (Collection)
 1988 -- Bram Stoker Award
 1989 -- Minicon 24
 1992 -- Rhinocon 2
 2011 -- Posthumous GoH at FOGcon 1
 2019 -- Retro Hugo Award for Best Novel

The November, 1959 issue of Fantastic Science Fiction Stories consisted of five new stories by Leiber.

In 1962, Chicon presented a special committee award to him and Hoffman Electronic Corporation for the use of SF in advertisements.

In 1981, he was honored by being named a lifetime Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

Special Issue of F&SF

The July, 1969, issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* was a Special Fritz Leiber Issue. The issue featured a cover painting of Leiber by genre artist Ed Emsh, a novella, “Ship of Shadows,” by Leiber, a profile of Leiber by Judith Merrill, and a Leiber bibliography by Al Lewis. In addition, the issue had contributions from Tony Morphet, Harlan Ellison, Con Pederson, Doris Pitkin Buck, Barry N. Malzberg, and Isaac Asimov.

Personal Life

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Chicago in 1932, Leiber attended the Episcopal General Theological Seminary (1932 - 1933), and then served as an Episcopal minister until a personal crisis over his lack of faith sent him back to graduate school – and then to stage acting – following his parents’ example.

After an unsuccessful stint as an actor, however, Leiber returned to school, where he met his future wife: Jonquil Stephens. They married in 1936 and went to live with his parents in Hollywood -- where he tried acting in movies. He and Jonquil had their son Justin in 1938. Justin himself later became a SF writer, as well as an academic. He died in 2006.

In the last year of his life, Fritz Leiber married his second wife, Margo Skinner, a journalist and poet with whom he had been friends for many years. His first wife, Jonquil, had died in 1969.

Critical Comments

Author/critic Judith Merrill once wrote: “One way or another, Leiber keeps sorting out the various elements of his assorted lives, using Shakespeare, sex, chess, science and the supernatural, politics and pacifism, alcohol, Hollywood, Academe, Church, Stage, and the publishing world, to cultivate his cunningly fashioned demons and daemons of the world of today, using them in new modes when he can, in old ones when he must.”

Genre author/editor August Derleth wrote: “This swift-moving novel (*Gather, Darkness!*) is a compound of science-fiction and the orthodox weird, with emphasis on the former; it moves so rapidly that, once begun, the book will be difficult to put aside until the last page has been read.”

Fellow author and genre critic Damon Knight, in reviewing Leiber’s *Conjure Wife*, wrote that it was “easily the most frightening and (necessarily) the most thoroughly convincing of all horror stories.” It has been the inspiration for at least three films: *Weird Woman* (1944), starring Lon Chaney, Jr.; *Night of the Eagle* [aka *Burn, Witch, Burn!* with screenplay by Richard Matheson and Chuck Beaumont] (1962); and *Witches’ Brew* with Lana Turner [aka *Which Witch is Which?*] (1980).

In James Gunn’s 1988 reference work, critic and compiler of a Leiber bibliography, Chris Morgan, wrote: “There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ Leiber story; like his novels, his short fiction has been immensely varied. . . .”

Fellow genre author Poul Anderson called Leiber’s book, *Night’s Black Agents* (Arkham House, 1947) as “a lot of the best science fiction and fantasy in the business.”

Some Concluding Comments

Leiber left some papers to The University of Houston where they form the “Fritz Leiber Science Fiction & Fantasy Convention Flyers & Programs.”

He worked as associate editor of Science Digest from 1945 to 1956.

Leiber rhymes with “fiber,” not “believer.”

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Note: In addition to the above, several Internet sites were consulted.



Onward Transit
By Jose Sanchez