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SPARTAGUS

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We've seen this before, in science fiction. It was Stephen King's MacGuffin in *The Stand*, the source of evil in *I Am Legend*, Dustin Hoffman's nemesis in *Outbreak*, Gwyneth Paltrow's in *Contagion*, the doom of our species in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. *Ansible* reminds us of *The Satan Bug*. In real life, hardly anyone alive has seen it, at least not unless they're centenarians and recall the Spanish flu of 1918. But we're seeing it, now.

Coronavirus. COVID-19. Isolation. Death out there on the surface of anything, and in the clasp – the mere presence – of other people. We hide behind masks and rubber gloves. We keep a six-foot distance. Above all, *we do not touch*. It's the old cry of the misfit: the more solitary you are, the safer you are.

This is the greatest *sudden* social upheaval of our lifetimes. Everything is closed. Stores are closed. Theatres and restaurants are closed. Beach access roads are closed – but the Atlantic Ocean is still open, and its beaches. When I drive about, I still see beachgoers crossing the barriers on access roads to the sands. Restaurants that recklessly remain open still have diners clustering at table. Why? Because the governor of Florida is a fucking idiot. Despite the success reported elsewhere in slowing the virus by shutting down commerce, potentially saving thousands of lives, he refused – until Trump changed his mind on April 1. But the fool exempted churches from his order. Psychopathically zealous preachers yet command crowded church services, despite the danger. It's as if that anencephalic spring breaker we saw boast that no virus would keep him from partying had risen to some sort of moral papacy.

Still, there is general good will – a sense that we're all in this together. The efforts of some to sew surgical masks for the medicos, to feed first responders, to help the homeless are inspiring. Even government, at some level, seems to be rising to Covid-19's terrible challenge. Andrew Cuomo's competent, informed, humane, no-bullshit daily briefing has become a ritual. Contrast the New York governor's brainpower and calm to Trump's floundering, literally laughable government by whim. His call for a premature reopening of the country – ostensibly because he loves Easter, actually for the economy's sake – is heard with horror by men like Dr. Randy Katz and Dr. Anthony Fauci, who know better. He promotes hydroxychloroquine without proof of its value, putting at risk those who really need the drug by creating a false demand where there should not be any demand. He's not just a distraction; Trump is an active menace.

Every night, NBC's Lester Holt comes close to tears, reporting the news, keeping us informed. I wish there was something positive *I* could do. But what can any of us do, but shelter in place, stay solitary in body but public-spirited in mind – wash our hands, and endure.



Speaking of Dr. Fauci, new hero to lovers of truth and sanity everywhere, my favorite ex-Senator (who should run again for office) **Al Franken** recently mentioned him in a column called "The President is Crazy". On the topic of Trump's incomprehensible COVID-19 briefings, he says

And so, we have this spectacle now – three, four, five times a week. What will Trump do today? Take credit for some positive development? Of course. Blow up at a "nasty" reporter? Good chance. Give out a piece of dangerously irresponsible information? You bet.

What will Dr. Tony Fauci do when this idiot suggests that it would be a beautiful thing for Americans to pack the pews on Easter Sunday? Oh, he just did that? Even though that would be just cuckoo?

But what will Dr. Fauci do the next time? Or the next? Flinch? Roll his eyes? Tactfully correct the president? I beg you, Mr. President. Keep Dr. Fauci! Yes, it's just a matter of time

before you put him in an untenable position and his measured, diplomatic response will set you off because you are a lunatic. And you will want to fire him because you will be in an uncontrollable rage. That's going to happen, because it always happens, and because you are completely unhinged.

Three cheers for Franken, Dr. Fauci and Governor Cuomo. Truth is not yet totally dead in the United States.

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And speaking of Governor Cuomo, check out Jon Katz's *Bedlam Farm Journal* piece on "The Cuomo Bros vs. Donald Trump". Here's a few relevant sections.

Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York seems to understand something that no other politician or political candidate up against President Trump has yet grasped. You can't fight a Reality TV Presidency with an argument, you have to fight it with another reality show, a newer and better one.

And you have to fight it by showing a better way, not just promising it or arguing about it.

In essence, you undercut Trump by being the very opposite of him on television every single day when so many people are paying attention. You do not do this by attacking him or quarreling with him. It's entertainment, stupid, fighting and offending is his specialty, it is most people's weakness. You try to show what government, at its best, can do.

... Cuomo has also done some fusion – politics, disaster, family, and television. Because of the virus and the havoc it's wreaking in New York City and much of the rest of the country, he suddenly has a vast audience.

Until now, nobody could compete with President Trump when it came to television and media attention.

Cuomo is besting him, breaking through the Trump-wall. He is perhaps Trump's worst nightmare, a potential opponent who understands government, sports, politics, *and* television. Someone who can take out his human side, polish it like precious silver, and show it off.

He has been waiting for this moment all of his political life. He is telling us – showing us – how the government is supposed to work when there is this much trouble.

... Part of Trump's great success is that he has convinced the very people who need a leader the most that he is their salvation.

And many people now think that Governor Cuomo is *their* salvation. This crisis will go on for a long time, everyone involved shall be revealed.

Call your mom, Cuomo said during a press conference last week, but don't let her in your house now, he cautioned in one press conference. Love your mother from a distance. Stay home and cook your family a nice Sunday dinner, he suggested in another.

Cuomo projects the idea that he will do anything, anything – even pull the right levers in government – to go to bat for his citizens, especially the embattled elderly right now. He always talks about the little guy at the bottom of the pile and how to protect them.

We can't let anybody die, he says, we can't write anybody off. His eloquent plea to save every life, including the sick and the elderly, shined as one of the high points in the history of great leadership.

The wolves were already beginning to call for the blood of the vulnerable, save the economy first. *Most of these people are going to die anyway.*

I won't give up on anybody, Cuomo promised and talked like he meant it. The President said more people died from the flu than the coronavirus that day. It wasn't true.

As an older person at risk, I might be biased, but apart from that, it was a beautiful message Cuomo gave, leadership at its very best.

There is a lot at stake in these culture wars, as the Corona Reality TV Battle suggests.

What do we want a President to be? What do we want our country to be? What do we want our government to be? We will all have some answers in a few weeks.

I think President Trump ought to be grateful that Andrew Cuomo decided not to run for President this year.

... This virus will re-shape our political system in one way or the other, and whatever the outcome, our popular culture may decide those important questions about our country.

But I wonder a bit when Cuomo says he isn't interested in running. Politics is clearly in his blood. And I found out that the Democratic National Convention can nominate anyone they wish to nominate.

I really can't tell if this is just another part of the show.



One last steal, this one from *The New York Times*. It presents a horrible prediction of our post-COVID future.

Covid-19: A Look Back From 2025

In which the coronavirus has changed almost everything.

By Bret L. Stephens

Jan. 19, 2025

When Covid-19 first emerged as a health crisis in China five years ago, [observers noted](#) that authoritarian regimes — with their hostility toward whistle-blowers, their manipulation of data, their fear of the free flow of information — facilitate the spread of disease.

Within a few months, it became clear that the flip side of that proposition was also true: Disease facilitates the spread of authoritarianism.

In Hungary, the [virus was the pretext](#) for Prime Minister Viktor Orban to establish a dictatorship on the model of Vladimir Putin's Russia. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte used the pandemic to issue [shoot-to-kill orders](#) against political protesters. In Israel, the government's decision to [use cellphone data to track the movements of infected](#) individuals quickly became a model and alibi for other states to pick up the practice, with no scruples about the data they collected.

It didn't stop there. The pandemic provided a ready-made excuse for democratic governments around the world to obstruct opposition parties, ban public assemblies, suppress voting, quarantine cities, close borders, limit trade, strong-arm businesses, impose travel restrictions and censor hostile media outlets in the name of combating "false information."

Remarkably, the tactics met with comparatively little resistance, partly because they were advertised as only temporary, and partly because the concerns of civil libertarians paled next to calls to "flatten the curve." But as the lockdowns of 2020 were extended from spring to summer and then to early fall, a process of normalization began to take hold.

In the U.S., Joe Biden accepted the Democratic nomination from his Delaware home after it became clear that holding a convention would pose unacceptable health risks. Effectively barred from campaigning by restrictions on public rallies (as well as fear among his aides that the 77-year old nominee might contract the virus), he sought to mount a virtual campaign against an incumbent who wielded the emergency powers of government to aid his re-election. Donald Trump handily won again in November.

As civil liberties receded, big government grew. [Unprecedented unemployment](#) meant unprecedented increases in Medicaid rolls, jobless benefits, housing assistance and food stamps. It was left to Trump to preside over an expansion of the welfare state the likes of which Bernie Sanders could only have dreamed about a year earlier.

Nor did things change much after the lockdowns were lifted, as people remained reluctant to venture into restaurants, shops and planes — and less able to afford them. Millions

of business failures and personal bankruptcies translated to tens of millions of loan and mortgage delinquencies, which in turn caused a financial crisis. Dozens of banks had to be nationalized outright, while the government took stakes in every industry it rescued. By the time a safe vaccine was finally available, the damage had been done.

The developing world experienced the crisis far more severely. “Flattening the curve” made little sense in countries whose medical systems were already overwhelmed and under-equipped long before Covid-19 came around. Stay-at-home and social distancing orders were treated as a cruel and unenforceable joke in densely populated cities like Lagos, Cairo, Jakarta and São Paulo. People faced with hunger if they didn’t get to their jobs were prepared to take their chances with the coronavirus.

The result was a frightful fatality rate, not-much mitigated by the fact that poorer countries have younger populations. Then there were effects of the global depression on the world’s most vulnerable economies. The destruction of the maquiladora industries in Mexico quickly led to the abrupt collapse of state authority along the border, a vacuum immediately filled by the cartels. By 2023 Trump had finally built his wall, backed by bipartisan congressional support.

At the outset of the crisis it may have seemed that progressive parties stood to benefit politically. The opposite proved true.

Environmental concerns seemed like idle luxuries when gas was cheap and CO2 emissions plummeted along with economic activity. Demands for gun control and criminal-sentencing reform fell flat in the face of increasing levels of crime. Trump’s repeated calls for getting America “back to work” resonated with rural and suburban voters, who thought they had less to fear from the virus and tended to measure personal risk differently than urban elites.

A bellicose spirit also took hold. Economically damaged regimes — China, Russia and Iran especially — looked to offset domestic discontents with foreign adventures. Military enlistments rose everywhere, partly as a form of employment, partly out of a sense of fear. Among the paradoxes of the Covid-19 crisis was that it brought the world together as never before in a common experience of lockdowns and self-isolations — while fragmenting it as never before into wary states and nervous neighbors.

Not everything was bleak. Adults read more books, paid closer attention to their spouses and children, called their aging parents more often, made more careful choices with their money, thought more deeply about what they really wanted in life. In time, that kind of spiritual deepening will surely pay its own dividends.

For now, however, America awaits the inauguration of its 46th president, Michael Richard Pence.

Well. Maybe so – but there are other extrapolations and other possibilities. What will happen to our intra-ethnic relations? Will the present spotty prejudice against Orientals grow due to the ignorant belief that they imported this virus? Do people recognize Trump’s attempt to peddle pills of questionable value, or at least promote them, as the scam it is?

Will Trump’s total inability to handle the crisis find realization in the minds of Red State voters, or is their fealty to Fox News and the orange orc so strong that they’ll ignore his obvious culpability? They see him as an avatar of the Second Coming if not the Lord Jesus Jr. himself. Is the antipathy Trump’s engendered among educated suburbanites wide enough to offset that witless faith?

Did the utterly obscene idiocy of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy first firing, then insulting the captain of the *Theodore Roosevelt*, to the utter disgust of his crew, prove the repellant childishness and paranoia permeating this entire administration? Have we at last had enough? Will the virus wave pass over us quickly enough to be effectively forgotten by November?

Does anyone care about those kids in the cages??

You tell me. I'm voting blue. No matter who. And there is reason, however arcane, to hope ...

How amazing the pre-dawn skies in the northern hemisphere as April dawns. Mars, Jupiter and Saturn cluster in the southeast sky, and we have a comet to look for. The appearance of Comet Atlas, hopefully visible in our skies this May, is a great event ... for many reasons. As Fred Chappell told us writing students in 1973, you know what a comet predicts ... *the fall of a king*.

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Back in present-day SF ... Latest word on NASFiC, scheduled for Columbus in late August, is that it's still on. Updates at the website, <http://columbus2020nasfic.org>. But the virus has forced cancellation of several huge comics conventions this year, and may foretell the end of large fan conventions of any sort. Here's part of what Davis Read had to say at **CVR.com**: "With the justifiable closure of these conventions due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it's unclear how much we really need these super conventions. We've already started to see a trend of major studios skipping them. Marvel and Sony opted out of these events for the past couple years, and it's not a stretch to say they might reconsider attending in the future.

"As digital media has expanded, the convention model has become more and more antiquated. Today, companies can draw the same amount of hype with an online trailer release and press conference as they used to by premiering a trailer at Comic Con -- and the online trailer is a lot less hassle. It also allows studios to control how much gets out about their upcoming releases, lets them limit press access and saves them the embarrassment of a poor fan reaction at a live show."

Does this gloomy prospectus include Dragon*Con? How could it not?

So: the professional conventions may be dead. What about the fannish ones?

Worldcon goes virtual: Possibly the noblest sacrifice to the well-being of the SF community has come down from the hierarchy of the New Zealand Worldcon. With the virus amok, and Perth's Swancon already canceled, they're opting for a **virtual** Worldcon, something which has never been tried before.

Questions abound. One imagines the change will open up panel appearances to everyone in the field, not just attendees at the convention. (I volunteer!) How will the awards be handled? Will the TM-on-site simply read off the nominees and winners, foregoing acceptance speeches? What about the art show -- and its sales? An auction under these circumstances seems impossible. Will the masquerade consist of cosplayers sending in GIFs of their presentations?

Onetime DUFF delegate and fine friend Norman Cates worked very hard for his bid, and looked forward to seeing the SF community gather in his bailiwick. SFdom, primed by *The Lord of the Rings*, novels and films, was hot for the chance to see Wellington and Environs, and to see George R.R. Martin exercise his chops as Toastmaster. The disappointment is deep, but the convention's action is noble, and I look forward to seeing what Norman & Co. come up with.

Updated info at <https://conzealand.nz/>.

Speaking of **DUFF** and delays, 2020 winner Erin Underwood's trip downunder has been put off until 2021, a sensible precaution; I don't know where the Aussie NatCon will be next year, but as a former delegate, I'm certain Erin will enjoy the living hey out of it. Make sure to climb Hanging Rock, Erin! Miranda's waiting!

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Our own **plans for late summer** are, of course, also uncertain. We want to leave for the U.K. on August 30, visit Edinburgh, Paris and of course London, see the Louvre, Versailles, and maybe Loch Ness and the beaches at Normandy. Will any of this be possible?

Right now, nobody knows. Like everybody else, we wash our hands and wash our hands and wash our hands and wait.

In the meantime ...

I am seriously thinking of basing **my next fanzine, *Challenger*** no. 43, around the person and career of Theodore Sturgeon. Some questions: (1) Has a genzine (a fanzine for general distribution) done such a tribute, and if so, where can I get a copy and/or contact the editor? (2) What would followers of Mr. Sturgeon want to see in such a publication? (3) Assuming the idea floats, would anyone care to contribute? Preliminary deadline mid-August, as I'd like to produce the zine before Rosy and I leave for the U.K. on August 30 (virus permitting).

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As of this writing, ten thousand Americans have died from COVID-19. Among the ones we all know ...

Bill Withers. I played "Lovely Day" in tribute.

Tom Dempsey. I was surprised at how young he was – 24 – when he kicked the 63-yard field goal that blew the walls off Tulane Stadium in 1970. Just that single act put his half-size kicking shoe into the Football Hall of Fame and etched his name into the Book of the World.

Lee Fiero. She played the bereaved mother of the devoured boy in *Jaws*. In her honor, I went out and slapped the police chief.

And among the people who have the thing but are surviving ...

Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson. It took hair to be the first celebrities to admit to testing positive. Glad they're OK.

Pink. Hot young pop star – the anti-Britney Spears – kicking COVID's ass.

Prince Charles. I feel like I've grown up with this guy. He's apparently recovering, and hooray I say.

And among the many who passed away without benefit of COVID-19:

James Drury. Starred in *The Virginian* TV show – and had a small role in *Forbidden Planet*.

Honor Blackman. Cathy Gale. *Pussy Galore.* Thanks, great lady, for getting me through my adolescence.

LOC HOMEWARD, ANGEL

Dale Speirs Calgary, Alberta

Canada went into lockdown mode a week before the USA did. I'm retired with independent income, so it isn't as bad for me as others. Canada normally has 27,000 unemployed applying for benefits per week. Last week 500,000 applied, which smashes all records since the Great Depression.

The next issue of my zine *Opuntia* will have some interesting photos and reports of the effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in Calgary.

I suspect the statistics you quoted, which came from China, will not be as bad for Canada. China doesn't have much of a health care system. Thank God and Tommy Douglas (the founder of Canada's universal health care system and Kiefer Sutherland's grandfather) that Canada has much better health care.

No kidding. Canada is the envy of your fat foolish neighbor to the south.

On March 19, I went to my doctor for a regular prescription renewal, normally for 100 days, but he gave me a 300-day supply. I'm relatively healthy at age 64 [*youngster!*] and he didn't want me back in the waiting room until after the pandemic is over.

All club meetings were banned by the Ministry of Health, which put a tremendous crimp in my social life. I'm not a blogger and I consider the phrase "social media" to be an oxymoron. I can keep busy at home but even so I try to get out of the house every day for a walk.

I'm going through a huge number of old-time radio shows, available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org (Old Time Radio Researchers) and pulp magazines as free pdfs from www.archive.org.

The panic will blow over sooner than we think. Remember that the doomsayers were wrong about SARS, Ebola, H1N1 influenza, and swine flu.

[On *Spartacus* no. 36:]

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I have seen so much about reminiscences of the late Mike Resnick, especially from Rob Sawyer. I am sad to say that while I enjoyed some of Mike's fiction, I never had the chance to meet him, and I feel I am poorer for that. I don't think Mike ever made it up to Toronto for a convention or reading, so I won't take all the blame. Losing Steve Stiles was worse, especially seeing he died mere days after being told he had months left. Not fair. He may have been the last of us who actually got to win the silver rocket. If I had the cash, I'd forward some funds to those GoFundMe drives.

Trump is impeached, big deal. The vote in the Republican Senate was a foregone conclusion, and in reaction, he's gotten far, far worse. He doesn't have the God-given brain cells to understand the emergency behind the COVID-19 coronavirus, thinking it a Democrat hoax. The world believes the greatest threat to world order and peace is Dolt 45. The Dems don't encourage me, with Klobuchar, Buttigieg and Warren having dropped out. Once again, our choice is between old, white men. I am hoping that the Democrat candidate - don't care who it is - will take on a female candidate for VP.

Liz! Liz! Liz!

In our own Republican enclave, known as Alberta, they are challenging the idea of climate change and even pollution levels, seeing how much the province relies on oil and gas sales. A popular sticker these days in Alberta is a cartoon of Greta Thunberg, being forcefully violated from behind by a typical Albertan. Disgraceful, and not surprising at all. Greta as Time's Person of the Year is a great choice for me, and laughable in Alberta.

Kids in cages, indeed. Their numbers continue to swell, and some "Christians" say that helping these poor souls is akin to aiding Communists. Christ wept. A lot of us do, too. There is legislation to accelerate this programme, too. The world weeps, and wonders aloud at Trump's endless cruelty.

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Just for reference, I don't think it was the Democrats who sold ad time [*for an atheist association*] during any of the debate broadcasts – that's all network.

And just how many movies *aren't* "trivial diversions"? I grant that there are some with pointed (and poignant) messages but I'd call that the small minority. And I'd argue that it is at least possible to make just as pointed a message in a Marvel Universe film as it would be in an animated film or anything else. Just depends on the plotline.

I refer you to my remarks about Max von Sydow and **The Virgin Spring** – and also **Rashomon** – last issue. What is possible in film is, of course, not always realized, and I agree with Scorsese that MU flicks don't attain a level beyond trivial. Of course, that's just fine; who can stand **The Seventh Seal** on a Saturday matinee?

The *Saints'* eternal motto is "Wait till next year"? Where do they get off stealing a copyrighted *Dodger* phrase?

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Very nice tribute to Mike Resnick, whom I knew only by reputation. Because of all the respect I saw outpouring from fandom, I made a contribution to the GoFundMe. [*That's just like you, one of the great men of the South. The Southern Fandom Press Alliance, people, was – in 1961 – his idea!*] Also, I share your lament for Steve Stiles. I did not know him either, but I've admired his work since returning to fandom.

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With the untimely leave=takings of Mike Resnick and Steve Stiles, two of the brighter stars of our shared firmament have gone cold and dark, and we must strain towards the light which remains in the wake of their departures. A blessing remains in the work they have left behind, the glorious creations which endure and cast fragments of their brilliance into the lives of all they have touched. These fragments remind us that the creative souls who share a brief moment with us can live on forever in the captured joy of their creations, and in the stories told by their loved ones who remain, guardians of their memories and their legacies. That is the happy task which falls to us in their absence, and I hope to hear many such tales from those who knew these men best...

WAHF: Gary Brown, Jeff Copeland

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Escaping, for a moment, the damned virus...

I am seriously thinking of basing my next fanzine, *Challenger* no. 43, around the person and career of Theodore Sturgeon. Some questions: (1) Has a genzine (a fanzine for general distribution) done such a tribute, and if so, where can I get a copy and/or contact the editor? (2) What would followers of Mr. Sturgeon want to see in such a publication? (3) Assuming the idea floats, would anyone care to contribute? Preliminary deadline mid-August, as I'd like to produce the zine before Rosy and I leave for the U.K. on August 30 (virus permitting).

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Joe Green's latest book through Greenhouse Scribes is an historical, *Down Freedom River*, with a beautiful design by Rose-Marie. I have special reasons for recommending it as *ahem* the novel is dedicated to me.

The book is based on the Republic of Freedom, a colony established in Florida by escaped slaves – a true story. Says Joe in his Author's Introduction: "Not many people are aware that in the year of 1816 a Negro republic, composed primarily of escaped slaves and their children, existed in what is now the state of Florida. ... It had about a thousand citizens. ... For a time this republic controlled traffic on the Apalachicola River, in that day an important artery of

commerce that provided shipping by water to inland destinations in central Georgia and the territory of Alabama.” You can guess on the Republic’s ultimate fate.

Or better still, read about it! I scanned the novel in manuscript. Is good stuff! Check it out on Amazon.

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Hugo Nominations: After watching the live broadcast of the Hugo Award nominees, I am once again aghast that the New Zealand Worldcon has been forced by circumstance to go virtual. Because the show was beautifully done – and I imagine the con itself would have been the same. Well, perhaps Here’s a lament I imagine most of my fellow Boomers can agree with – *I don’t know these people!*

Well, I know a couple of them – and some of the nominees are indeed familiar to me. I have *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang, so I can read his two nominees. There’s a copy of *Gideon the Ninth* in the house. I read *Journey Planet* all the time, and have seen the two nominated episodes of *Watchmen*, the scary but confusing film by Jordan Peele, *Us*, and its fellow nominees, *Avengers:Endgame* and *Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker*. But it’s not like the Retro-Hugos for 1945, also announced on April 7 – all those names are familiar, and all those names are titans. A chance to vote for Edgar Rice Burroughs, “The Children’s Hour” and “Killozer!” – that’s an SFnal dream.

In the meantime, let’s see if I can scrounge up enough dough to buy the other novel nominees.

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A last word, and it has to be on the virus. Those who have not seen it should hit YouTube at once and hear Queen Elizabeth’s short speech on COVID-19. She invoked her family’s World War II spirit and in simple, direct terms urged **faith** on her people ... in themselves. Wonderful stuff. It reminded me of the last lines of the play we put on in high school, *The Diary of Anne Frank*: “Before we have lived in fear. Now we may live in Hope.”

God Save the Queen, and thee and I as well, gentle reader.

