

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

We continue our monthly effort to review every SF novel, preferably soon after publication. If you read SF, your contributions to our review columns, or to the shorter reviews published in N3F Tightbeam, will be most appreciated.

We are seeing an increase in books and reviews used to sharpen chainsaws. Those books and reviews are being sent over to Tightbeam, the corresponding articles being placed at the extreme rear of the issue to make it easier to avoid them.

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

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row, Tamara Wilhite, Jason P. Hunt, Mindy Hunt, and Samuel Lubell. Jagi Lamplighter and Cedar Sanderson give us peerless writing on creating and marketing stfnal prose, art, and marketing. Their articles are an invaluable contribution to the future writing efforts of every reader.



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Fiction

A Tempered Warrior by Jon Osborne

Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Let's spray paint the elephant in the room with some orange Day-Glo: The title contains a pun. The referenced warrior, Erin, has a TEMPER, and one of her tasks is to learn how to use her anger in battle. It is through mastery of that task, plus learning how to use her weapons to defend as well as attack, that is turning her into a person who is hardened and experienced, hence TEMPERED. Get it?

It is not necessary to read the first book in the series to get a great amount of enjoyment from it, in much the same way as it is not necessary to hug your beloved before kissing them. If you HAVEN'T read the first book in the series, then I suggest you do what I am going to do and read 'A Reluctant Druid' at your first opportunity.

WARNING: since I HAVEN'T read the first volume yet, I may have missed critical plot points or drawn incorrect conclusions. However, the author drops almost all of the needed clues, WITHOUT resorting to tired explanations to new cowpokes who only enter the scene to have the story explained, then ride off into the desert to be eaten by a cactus.

For example: I KNOW, just from reading THIS book, that there is going to be a great murderin' battle between rival forces, sometime in the immediate future. I do NOT know the exact circumstances of the battle, and I don't know exactly who the rival forces are.

I KNOW that Erin is the chosen Champion. I do NOT know how or why that happened.

I KNOW that while she is being prepared for the battle, she is living in a timeline that is slowed down at a rate of about 50 to 1 with the timeline on Earth As We Know It.

I KNOW that in the Earth timeline, a corresponding struggle is going on between her somewhat-lover, Liam, and Forces They Don't Like, but I know almost nothing about Liam's story, that being told in "The Reluctant Druid."

She comes by her temper honestly, being a descendant of the mythic Irish hero Cu Chulainn, known for his battle frenzy, among other characteristics. This is not an unmixed blessing, since there are folk in her current environment who fancy themselves ill-treated by her multi-great granddaddy, and they are capable of holding a grudge for thousands of years. And since much of her training involves being hit with sticks (temporary substitutes for swords), there is plenty of opportunity for them to vent their spleen on her.

That would be a bummer, wouldn't it?

The different rate that time flows on Liam's Earth and Erin's Dunos Scaith allows us to contemplate a little exercise in ethics. You see, before Erin was transported, she and Liam were an item; in fact, several years ago, they conceived a son, now 13 years old, named TIM! (No, not the Holy Grail Tim; just...Tim). They weren't at the point of marriage, although that was Liam's desire. Still, there was

something there, and if they were in physical and temporal proximity...who knows?

But NOW, as far as Erin is concerned, she's going to be away for SEVEN YEARS, while to Liam, only seven WEEKS will have gone by. And both of them are not only full of the normal human hormones, they were also given some additional ...stamina, let's call it... before they separated.

So, what ARE the ethics of the situation? It's completely a different issue than if they were both experiencing time pass at the same rate. It's a pretty little thought problem.

I found the entire set-up to be quite appealing, and I'm a little bit surprised by that. Fantasy isn't my first choice for reading material, and some of it just leaves me cold. However, I'm VERY taken by the theological implication of the story. I have to suspend all KINDS of belief to really enjoy my favorite form of literature, which is military Sci-Fi. Even straight Sci-Fi dumps an awful lot of NO-WAY! in my path, which I just have to hop over so I can enjoy the story. I've been such a fan for so long, that I don't even pay attention to all the impossibilities any more. FTL? Sure. Artificial gravity on board space-ships? No problem. Heck, there's not even such a thing as vat-grown meat; that chicken heart experiment was just bad science, fatally flawed, and it ain't never gonna be a thing in my lifetime. So, between fictional science, and conflicts with my (mostly) orthodox Christian worldview, I find most literature merely entertaining, and not engaging.

So, I find it quite heartening to find someone attempting to rationalize at least part of the PRINCIPLES of faith in a fantasy world. It's another reason for me to read the first novel in the series. And, by the way: Jon Osborne has done this before. He wrote an EXCELLENT story, 'Angels and Aliens' for the collection "The Good, The Bad, and The Merc," in which the protagonist gets involved in a discussion about the nature of God in a firefight. Frankly, I can think of no better time to be thinking of such matter than when death may be moments away, but I can't really say I seek those opportunities out.

Conclusion? You betcha, this is a finalist-class entry for the 2018 Dragon Award for Best Fantasy Novel, and you could do a LOT worse than to place your bets, and your vote, here.

A Trace of Moonlight by Allison Pang Review by Mindy Hunt

Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Apparently, I have a knack for choosing books that are at the end of a series. A Trace of Moonlight is the final book in this trilogy, and if I had to do it all over (as well as the resources), I would like to have started from the beginning.

The best way I can explain is this: imagine jumping into Lord of the Rings with The Return of the King. All the chess pieces have been presented and moved into place for them to join together for final battle at Minas Tirith and at the black gate of Mordor. Yet you haven't seen the first two films.

This book introduces Abby while she is in an altered state, not knowing who she is or why she's in a world of Elves and other folk. Through her curiosity, stubbornness, and unwanted help from an old foe, her head clears and the journey to the fate of this mystical world begins, or continues since this is book three. All the pieces from the previous books fall in line, characters and plots that lead to the final bat-

tle.

Now, I was completely drawn in to the story from the beginning. Pang does not drop you in lightly. I will admit, I did some minor plot and character research on the first two books, A Brush of Darkness and A Sliver of Shadow to try to catch up after getting in a few chapters. There's a lot to take on from Abby's history. But I didn't mind. The world building that Pang has done is amazing. A term I learned from my research is "urban fantasy," which has supernatural or magical elements in the real world. From this one book, she beautifully hides those elements among the humans with the Other Folk from the fantasy world coming and going as their business calls. It feels effortless and almost natural.

I managed to almost understand the characters of the story from the memory recalls from Abby. Everyone is so intertwined, it's almost like going to the family picnic and finding out from your auntie just how everyone present is related to each other. All the characters act like that big family regardless of how distant two characters may be in their connection, from the inner circle to the outskirts. Without the full knowledge of the first two books, it is a bit dizzying, but it also adds to my interest in the first two books.

As for the story, for its finish, it is intriguing. It was very fast paced and at points hard to keep up with, but not for Pang's lack of storytelling. I felt she was thorough and that any issues were from my lack of knowledge. The interweaving of the characters and the fantasy world she has built drives you faster toward the end, wanting to go deeper into understanding the full complexity of the situation, which can make it hard to stay focus long enough to thoroughly read a page without scanning.

It's hard to give a fair full review of the entire series since I've not read the first two books, but A Trace of Moonlight has piqued my interest enough that I would be willing to look for the first two books so I can completely enjoy this last book the way it was meant to be. So in my opinion, that is a good book.

All Things Huge and Hideous by G. Scott Huggins Review by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Sometimes you need a break from the norm.

Sometimes it can be fun to laugh when you would ordinarily be enthralled.

Sometimes you can be enthralled WHILE you're laughing.

Sometimes an author can knock it out of the park with their first novel.

Sometimes you wanna go...

Err...

Never mind that last one.

Listen folks, I just finished All Things Huge and Hideous by G. Scott Hutchins and I loved it. It's not the world's serious fiction, but that's okay. I liked that about it. I have to admit that I never came up with the idea to _____ a _____ from the _____ (spoilers redacted) but that someone else did it flat

out made my day. If it got him into a bit of trouble, well, better him than me and like he fixed the problem afterward...

Sort of.

Anyway, it was funny. Oh, speaking of funny...

WARNING WARNING WARNING

I love humorous novels. I love music by Weird Al Yankovic. However...

DO NOT MIX ALL THINGS HUGE AND HIDEOUS WITH WEIRD AL.

I damn near sprained a rib. Someone needs to inform Mr. Huggins that in the United States we have a prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment and that forcing another human being to dislocate a bone simply because he read your book is a serious violation of it! I'm gonna...

Uhh...

I'm gonna...

Well...

I'm gonna read your next one when it comes out now and it's all your fault. That somehow seems an inadequate punishment but he's earned it so, uh...

Yeah, I dunno either. I guess I'll live.

Seriously, this a book for people who don't take their fantasy too seriously. I mean, there are some of the usual tropes here to be sure, but not everything fits into a typical fantasy setting but that's what makes it fun. Really. You know what's funnier than having a pet basilisk? Trying to keep it healthy on a blood only diet. Yup, totally happens. Of course, finding an alternate use for a medusa is fun too...

Listen, this is some good stuff. I've needed a laugh lately and this provided it. Don't get me wrong though. There's plenty of good stuff here. The political intrigue is as entertaining as anything I've seen elsewhere and more immediate in its consequences. Yeah, when the leader of the world is the Dark Lord and he has this weird case of caps lock disease and a bad attitude to go with the power of life and death over pretty much everybody...

Yeah, it's intense.

But there is just something about a veterinarian in a fantasy setting that kills me. What makes it better is that Huggins has found a way to take full advantage of the situation and make everything that much better. I don't want to spoil too much (and I've give up a few already) but watch for the situation with the Ring of Invisibility. James, the main character and also my namesake, finds an interesting way out of it, even if it's not one I'd have thought of. And it's REALLY funny. Come to think of it, the dragon thing? Yeah, awesome.

Of course, only in All Things Huge and Hideous could you have a school of Witchcraft (but no wizardry) that discriminates against humans and kicks students out because they're not pretty enough. I mean,

scarred and ugly USED to be the thing, but sorry chick you're not in fashion anymore. We need statu-
esque witches and you're expelled, but you already know everything, but it hasn't been tested and you
can just go wait tables in a tavern that caters to orcs and goblins for all we care.

Yup, totally happens. Then Harriet the almost-witch ends up as an assistant to a veterinarian that deals
in monsters. It can't get much worse than that right? Well, yeah. Kind of. I mean, what if the veterinari-
an gets eaten by something? Or petrified by something? Or something else weird? Or what if...

Never mind that's a spoiler. But trust me, I wouldn't want it to happen to me. I'm pretty sure you'd think
it would be well below average if it happened to you as well. But yeah, it happened and it sucks and it
took skill, pluck and fire to fix it. Of course, fans of Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International know
that the best solution to killing pretty much anything is to kill it with fire. Although, I have to admit that
I wouldn't have thought about kill THAT with fire...

But what do you I know? I'm just a guy with too much time on his hands, a loud mouth and a keyboard.
Oh, and a bit of a headache, but that's go nothing to do with anything.

Well, probably.

So yeah, the Dark Lord is not a very nice guy, his council members are stinkin' meanies, his Beast Mas-
ter seriously needs an attitude adjustment, there is never enough money, the average person hates hu-
mans and well, that's where our very human hero and heroine find themselves. It's not a fun place for
the characters but the shenanigans they get into are fun for us to watch.

The villains in the book are not Saturday morning cartoon types, but they're not supervillains either.
James has to use every bit of his wit and cunning to, well...

Not defeat them exactly but at least keep them one step ahead. Maybe it's more like not falling too far
behind. At any rate, All Things Huge and Hideous is, as much as anything a story of survival, and I
think that's what makes it work more than anything. Yes, goofy things happen and weirdness abounds,
but at the end of the day we can't help but root for the plucky little hero James who is really just trying
to keep the bills paid and not get himself tortured to death slowly. Maybe that's what makes All Things
Huge and Hideous work. I'm all for a good Chosen One story if it's out there. Lord knows I love Harry
Potter. But sometimes it's can be awesome to read about a guy like me, who is just trying to survive and
keep moving.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Ten Centimeter Dragon Scalpels

All Up by J.W. Rinzler Review by Jason P. Hunt

The Space Race. The Right Stuff. One Small Step.

The history of rocketry and missile technology is intertwined with the history of geopolitical conflict
and global warfare. And in All Up, J.W. Rinzler takes it "one step beyond" to intertwine a few other
elements from the mythology of the time: UFOs and alien hardware.

The story starts in 1911 (with a prelude in 1561...), and briskly moves all the way through the Apollo
11 mission. In between, the story mainly follows Wernher von Braun, whose work on rockets first em-

powered the Nazis, then the Americans. And it's clear that von Braun is loyal to rocketry first, and he's open to taking money from whomever will dish it out, including the Nazis. But as the work continues, von Braun and his team come to realize just how much their deal with the devil may cost, and with so much emphasis on developing missiles over rockets, it's clear the German scientists are frustrated at the fact that their goal of space travel has taken a back seat to Hitler's priorities.

Von Braun's journey is mostly front and center, but we also see the work of Robert Goddard in America and Sergei Korolev in Russia. As the story moves through World War II, it weaves in the travails of getting rockets off the ground.

In the midst of this, we have UFOs and secret intelligence operations. A Mossad agent named Rachel starts on one mission, then another, in the midst of the war and after. And her story takes an interesting turn as she goes off on her own mission of vengeance.

I especially like that we get a view inside not just the American efforts to reach space, but also that of the Russians. With German scientists going to both sides, it seems that America got the better end of the deal. And a lot of that had to do with von Braun's ruthless acceptance that as long as he has money for his research, politics could be ignored.

Throughout, there are actual headlines from news outlets from the time period to help put the story in the context of the events of the day. And I found myself wondering just how much of the conversations presented are based on interviews and research, and how much is speculative. The fact that it all plays believably, and that most of these characters were actual people, gives the entire story a sense of credibility even though it's a fictionalized account of the Space Race.

Rinzler, known mostly for his behind-the-scenes books in the Star Wars universe, crafts a tale that's hard to put down. His fiction skills are just as solid as his research skills, and he spins an enjoyable yarn that mixes historical events with speculative elements (which, now that the military has admitted it, may not be so speculative...). He delivers a slick story with interesting characters and scenarios. And while the prologue doesn't seem to connect that much to the rest of the book, it's likely there's a deeper connection to the overall story that gets told in sequels. And I'm very much looking forward to the sequels.

Oh, and I have a theory why the Artemis mission won't be going to the lunar poles...

Black Holiday by J.M. Anjewierden **Review by Pat Patterson**

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The story continues, with two brutal realities included at no extra cost.

As soon as I wrote that sentence, I went back to my rating, and changed it from four stars to five. I'll explain why in a bit.

Initially, my impression is that this book doesn't have the visceral bite that the first in the series did, and I'm not sure why that is the case. I found myself comparing the condition of Morgan in this with that in the first, and I suspect that's why. In the first book, she starts off in most miserable circumstances, which are about to get worse, and then betters her condition. In this, she is safe, educated, and employed, and then JUST as she is about to enjoy some intensive R&R&Recovery, she gets kidnapped. I didn't like the feel of that, and so, I was tending toward the four- star 'I liked it' instead of the five star 'I

loved it.'

To continue, briefly, with the narrative, after she is kidnapped by incompetent fools with smooth hands, she seeks methods of escape, makes an emotional contact with her primary jailer in order to get an advantage, and discovers that her enemies are not unified.

But as for my reasons for the last-minute decision to go with five stars: there are TWO very good features the author inserts in this book that are WIDELY ignored.

The first is the fiction that you can slug someone on the head to incapacitate them, and then they wake up later on their own, or with a bucket of water in their faces. That's utterly bogus; head injuries severe enough to produce unconsciousness are how people get killed or crippled with Traumatic Brain Injury. True, they MAY wake up on their own, but they aren't going to be able to then launch a sophisticated escape plan; they are more likely to need weeks, if not months, of care.

And that's also the case with the second feature the author brings into play: PTSD isn't something to be brushed away like cereal spilled on the breakfast table. It's not a new thing, either, something invented to coddle Viet Nam veterans, extended to cover casualties in the War on Terror. If you doubt this, read the story of Audie Murphy. The emphasis on Morgan's PTSD in the book is realistic and will perhaps help those who have loved ones who suffer.

Chasing Freedom by Marina Fontaine Review by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

America as we know it is dead. All of our freedoms, from the freedom to worship to the freedom to own guns and even the right to eat what we want have been taken from us. People have been forced to live in cities for "environmentalist" reasons. America is a place where cell phone time is rationed, and children born with birth defects are immediately put to death. Well, at least in Marina Fontaine's Chasing Freedom it is. The crazy part of the story is that it all seems so possible.

The story here, though, is not one of downtrodden people with a boot on their neck sitting quietly. There is a reason Fontaine has work published by Superservice Press. This is the story of a fight from the shadows against an unforgiving government. It is a story of cyber warfare and sometimes outright violence. It is the story of people fighting the only way they can against a government that has them outnumbered and outgunned. It is, in its way, the story of the plucky underdog. It is also a story of sacrificing safety and wealth for freedom. Chasing Freedom also asks a question that pops up again and again in literature and in history: Was it all worth it? I won't reveal Fontaine's answer, but at the end of the day, I agree with it.

It's easy to see why Chasing Freedom was nominated for a Dragon Award for Best Apocalyptic Novel. It really moves. The characters live and breathe. I couldn't put this thing down. I read it in a day and was left wanting more. That's not to say that the ending wasn't satisfying. It was. It also made sense and was realistic which is something you don't often see in fiction anymore. All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed Fontaine's work.

You know that whole "Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental" disclaimer that comes at the front of most works of fiction? It's there, right on page three. I just quoted it directly out of the book. I am totally not rude enough to up and call bullshit here. Nor

will I make comparisons between the self-righteous absolutist attitudes expressed by politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton because then I might be tempted to point out the possibility that such things had been intentionally included and I am far too polite to ever utter such a sentiment. Of course, if someone else were to read the book and make such statements I would probably find myself unable to manufacture an argument to dispute them with, but such is life.

The characters in *Chasing Freedom* are amazingly well done and believable. From fighting a war, to falling in love, to having children they do what most people do. The leaders of the movement understand their roles and do what they must but never quite feel right in the role. The role players play their roles. Pretty much anyone involved in the movement suffers, some worse than others. Fontaine's cast is made up of not just characters but people. Seriously. If only he existed, I would totally sit down with Randy over a beer. Well, if I could get him away from Julie (his wife) for long enough I would.

The part that I enjoyed most about the book is not its dystopian setting, but the hope and resolve of the characters. They're face with a world where it would be easiest to go along to get along. The United States of *Chasing Freedom* is not the type of place to engender hope for a brighter future. The fact remains that they do. They don't give up. Nothing stops them and the horrors just pile up. Julie and Randy are forced to leave their oldest child to be raised by someone else to protect him. Another character loses a hand. KGB style torture is in common use by the US government and some break, but most don't. Friends die. Bases are destroyed. The fight continues. The characters in the work are people we could all learn a lesson from.

Fontaine's villains have motivations that, from their point of view, make sense even if, from my point of view, they don't excuse their actions. A man that participates in torture in order to provide a good living for his family is not someone I'd hang out with on a Saturday night. That much being said, men have always done whatever they needed to do to get by and torture and murder are not exceptions, even if they are despicable. The key to writing believable villains is, in my mind, providing them with not just an evil act to commit but an understandable reason for doing so. Fontaine nails it. I can somewhat sympathize with one particular villain while still considering his actions to be deplorable. It may be possible to write a villain better than that. If so, I have yet to see it happen.

I do have one complaint about the tome. We see a lot of government agents at the sharp end of the stick, but almost none at the top. Something I've always enjoyed in fiction is the Big Bad. The concept is not totally missing from CF but is really underdeveloped. The president is (appropriately) set up as the over-arching nemesis but has no "screen time" that I remember. She's just kind of out there somewhere fuming offscreen and appointing evil people. Nor do we get to spend much time with the members of the cabinet that coordinate the battle against the good guys. This is far from a fatal flaw but it does irk me just a bit. Having stated that I really did love the book. Oh, and I just bought an e-copy even though one was given to me for free. I will undoubtedly read it again at some point so it's worth it. It really is that good.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 exploding flash drives

Crush the King by Jennifer Estep

Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu.com August 2020

Few people would consider *War and Peace* a beach book. Instead, the hot days of summer call for books that are an exciting thrill-ride; cotton candy confections that taste great for the brief moment

while the reader is caught up in the action. Jennifer Estep's *Crush the King* is that kind of fantasy/action novel offering mindless escapism. It's the print version of a summer movie, making it perfect for a summer beach/poolside book.

That's true of the whole *Crown of Shards* trilogy. In the first book, *Kill the Queen*, Evie escaped the slaughter of the rest of the royal family of Bellona, joined a gladiator troupe, started to learn about her subtle magic, and became queen. In *Protect the Prince*, Evie survives multiple assassination attempts instigated by Maximus, the king of Morta with the help of his bastard half-sister Maeven, and forges an alliance with the king of Andvari, the father of her romantic interest Lucas Sullivan. *Crush the King* ties the trilogy together, satisfactorily resolving the conflict with Maximus and Maeven.

The book opens with a dance lesson as Queen Evie prepares for the Regalia Games by learning the ritual Tanzen Falter dance that she needs to perform to win the alliance of Queen Zariza of Unger. Hearing a rumor of another survivor of the royal family, Evie and her best friend foolishly run off, without their guards, to track her down, only to fall victim to a trap. Evie discovers that the assassins were hired by the DiLucri family, who run the neutral island of Fortuna. Not coincidentally, Fortuna is the site of the Regalia Games, sort of a gladiator version of the Olympics combined with a high stakes card game played by the kings and queens of the competing kingdoms.

At the Games, Evie finally goes face-to-face with the evil king Maximus. Also present are Maeven and her son Leonidas, who Evie had met via magic mirror when he tried to use it to send his pet strix, a talking bird, to freedom. Evie manages to score diplomatic points at Maximus' expense while trying to form alliances with the other kingdoms against Morta. And she continues her campaign to undermine Maeven's loyalty to Maximus, especially when the King forces Leonidas to try to kill Evie.

Much of the book is devoted to the various attempts of Maximus and Evie to kill, or at least weaken politically, the other (at times it seems that the author throws in an assassination attempt whenever the pacing briefly slows down). In the process, Evie discovers that Maximus has the ability to absorb magic from the strixes, killing them while making him extremely powerful. So, in the inevitable one-on-one confrontation, Evie faces her toughest opponent yet.

Evie is an interesting character. While sometimes she plans ahead effectively, she has a tendency toward rash decisions in the heat of the moment and tries to do everything herself. Frequently, instead of acting as a strategist making optimum use of her people, she puts herself at risk rather than risk having others hurt in her cause. Her advisors do recognize this character flaw and tell her why she must change. But stubborn Evie continues to lead from the front, a trait that makes the book more exciting by constantly putting her in danger.

As the third book in the *Crown of Shards* trilogy, *Crush the King* does not stand alone. Readers should start with *Kill the Queen* and then read *Protect the Prince*. All three books are quick reads. *Crush the King* is not quite as good as the first book in the series but is much stronger than the second, which was marred by a soap opera-style romantic cliché of becoming engaged to her lover's brother. It winds up most of the plot threads and provides an exciting climax, while still leaving room for the possibility of further adventures.

Those who want an exciting fantasy read, with a strong heroine to root for and a straightforward evil antagonist will enjoy the *Crush the King* and the whole *Crown of Shards* trilogy. This book is pure fun. Readers who want complex world-building, complex characterization, or complex anything should look elsewhere. This book may be literary junk food, but it is great at what it does.

CTRL, ALT Revolt! by Nick Cole
Review by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Once upon a time your friendly neighborhood blogmaster was not really a near future Science Fiction fan. I lived my alternate lives in universes either full of starships and proton torpedoes or mages and goblins. With a couple of exceptions (Robotech and Shadowrun are the only ones that come to mind) the nearest future I wanted to talk about started in 2265 and was filled with guys named Kirk, Spock and McCoy. I spent my time on Arrakis and in Middle Earth. If I wanted to know what happened on little old Earth, I read about it in history class or the history section at the bookstore. The near future? Who cared? But then something weird happened: I started a blog and people started sending me near future SF.

I quickly learned that some of the best SF is near term. It's also some of the most believable. Humanoid robots with a grudge attempting to wipe out the entire human race can be scary. A knight with a spear on the battlements waiting for a female dragon rider to show up and kill him will stick with you for the rest of your life. The stuff that really makes a guy like me twitch, though? It's the fantastic story that's just far enough in the future that we haven't quite gotten to the technology yet and close enough that I might live to see it.

Sure, I'd love to see Alpha Orions IV up close and personal. That would be a dream come true. I am an online gamer though. I know people who spend real world money on in game merchandise. I know others who use real world money to buy tokens that they sell to others for in game money. Why does that matter? Because we're moving closer to the world as it appears in Nick Cole's Dragon Award winning CTRL, ALT Revolt! This one has had me up a few nights already.

The premise of the story is a bit complicated, but I'll try to describe it: There is a reality TV show. It's not called The Bachelorette, but that's what it is. During the last episode, a self-aware supercomputer watches as the bachelorette decides to abort a child she conceived during taping. It surmises that a species that could so easily kill one of its own young as an inconvenience could easily destroy it. The computer does what it thinks it needs to: It sets out to destroy humanity as a form of self-protection. Insanity ensues.

I don't want to give too much away. I'm almost bothered by what I've given away already. That's not my style. I err... don't know how to get around giving up at least a little bit more though. I'll do what I can and try to avoid overt spoilers, but really, so much of what made this book good has to do with the way Cole wove the story together. The review just won't work otherwise. So. Semi spoilerish things alert! Proceed at your own risk!

The amazing part about this book is how it goes back and forth between cyberspace and meat-space. Money is now comprised of "make-coins" spendable both in cyberspace and for things like rent, food and clothing in the real world. There are professional gamers in the real world now, but this is something different. Professional gamers in 2016 make money from streaming and advertising, or from corporate sponsorships. In CTRL ALT Revolt! the "make coins" are as real as real gets. Let's put it this way: I play World of Warcraft. I'm not sure how much gold I have for sure, but I'd ballpark it between three hundred thousand and half a million. That gold is worthless outside of the game. There are even some in-game perks that it won't purchase. If those were make-coins I'd buy myself a house and a car with no loans and have enough left over for a vacation with the kids, followed by one with my girlfriend.

Along the same lines, information is of huge value and is available both on- and off- line. Much of the fighting in CAR (and there is a metric buttload of it) takes place online. Much of it takes place offline. The online combat is meant to obtain information and spread a virus that will affect the real world. Some of the people online don't even know why they're fighting, they just know THAT they're fighting. It gets a little wild, but that's where the fun comes from. Of course, the Artificial Intelligence wants access to information that is contained in a computer that is not connected to the internet. and things spiral out of control.

I've seen some gaming related titles before, but this thing takes the cake. The two worlds are so tightly woven together that sometimes you wonder if the characters can tell them apart. When one of the characters is leading a fight against a much more powerful adversary in an online game to make money to buy things she can use in meatspace and her opponent is an actor in an online gaming/streaming drama...well... damn. It's well done but the lines are effectively blurred here. It flashes back and forth so quickly, and I got so wrapped up in it...wow. I mean that. Wow.

The characters in CAR are believable and awesome. Cole plays with some archetypes here and a few of his most important characters are not really leading character type. The socially awkward nerd that leads a starship crew ends up in the thick of the fight to save the world. The game designer who never goes out fights on the same side, completely unaware of her. The corporate leader is not the evil genius, he's the one preserving the information the world needs to beat the AI. The list gets longer. A lot of thought went into these characters and it shows.

This is a blog that has never shied away from mentioning political content and I'm not going to start now. CTRL, ALT Revolt! is heavy on political content and it's not just in the first chapter. There is political content throughout the work. If I caught the heavily conservative bent of this book as a die-hard conservative there's no way any liberal that reads this could hope to avoid it. The idea that a computer can feel threatened by abortion is one that any liberal is going to have problems with and that's just the beginning. Nick Cole has publicly stated that he had a contract to publish this book and that his publisher cancelled it because of this anti-abortion stance. I wasn't there so I can't speak to what actually happened, but I have to wonder if that was a totally accurate statement. Most publishing houses are run by liberals, so I have no doubt that his premise was offensive. I just wonder if that's the only thing the publisher had a problem with. I was trained to read for an agenda as part of my degree so it may not be as obvious to other conservatives, but I couldn't miss it. That's really the only problematic part of the book and it increased my enjoyment rather than diminishing it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Make Coins. This book deserved the Dragon Award. That's why I voted to give it one.

Deep Pink by Sarah A. Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Sarah Hoyt has written a delightful book! Whether it will be a book for a tiny little niche of readers, or something with wide appeal, remains to be seen. However, I loved it! Here's the cover art, also by Hoyt under the Covers Girl brand, followed by an Amazon Associates link to the Kindle edition. Click it, and if you buy it, I get a quarter or so.

A quick aside, before I forget it: a number of the characters that appear in this novel have the same names as fans (and perhaps fledgling authors) I have encountered in places where the author has a presence. I believe this practice is called red-shirting. However, usually red shirts only show up long enough to get killed. That doesn't happen with these characters. You don't have to know who these people are in real life to appreciate the story, but it's a delightful little inside joke. To the best of my knowledge, I've been red-shirted twice, and it's a wonderful experience; immortality without all the work.

The plot. There is a crisis occurring among the death metal bands in Cleveland Ohio, and that's a sentence that I never thought I would generate in my lifetime. Bands are changing their names from (these are just examples I fabricated) Filthy Slime Killers to Precious Pink Kitties; the members wearing pink frilly clothes and Hello Kitty head bands, and singing music about bubbles and puppies and kitties in falsetto voices. This does not sit well with their fans.

Attempting to get to the bottom of things, death metal band manager Ron Rando calls private investigator Seamus Lebanon Magis, known as Leb, and asks him to investigate. Magis visits the apartment of one Albert Schneider, a semi-prominent band member, and finds that his residence looks like "multiple Disney princesses have exploded." All of the décor is pink, glitter and stuffed animals are everywhere, and Schneider is wearing a pink jumpsuit. However, Schneider says he is still a servant of the Dark, but that he's under new management. At this point, both Schneider and Leb hear an ethereal voice saying "Tut-tut, don't talk!", and Schneider is terrified. Leb starts to ask if he really believes Satan is in control, but Schneider interrupts, says to call the Boss "Peggy", and refuses to say more.

Next morning, Schneider's body is found, butchered.

Pretty creepy, right? I can't say that it gets worse, but it does get...more involved.

In short order, we have the reappearance of Emma, Leb's long lost love, a little girl (Lilly) who has vanished, and a big Chevrolet (The Brown Disgrace) that exists pretty much on its own terms.

Nothing links the bizarre behavior of the band members and Lilly's disappearance, until Leb follows a lead out to Mary of the Pines Seminary. There he meets a former member of the band Punk Sausage, a seminary student who lost his faith, and experimented with being in a band. However, when bizarre things started to happen, he had the theological training to recognize that this was more than drug-induced mental illness. He briefs Leb on what he thinks is going on.

In an amusingly intricate monologue about the distinctions between the natural, preternatural, supernatural, he loses Leb LONG before he runs out of things to say.

(I call this amusing, because it is EXACTLY like Theological Disputes I Have Known; but if you get trapped into one of those, it won't be amusing at all. Hoyt captures the essence of the savant in lecture mode, making one long to have it never happen again.)

In addition to the theological hypothesizing, though, the seminarian DOES provide Leb with evidence that something bizarre IS happening, and warns him to stay away.

(and small spoiler, provides support later).

And we go on from there!

It's rare to find an author who can exposit the supernatural aspects of a commonly-held belief system, without sounding either evangelical or contemptuous. Hoyt is one of the few I've seen who can do that, and remain WITHIN the framework of mainstream science fiction and fantasy. And her portrayal of the Dark One is a FABULOUS bit, with the Father of Lies sporting pigtails with pink ribbons, wearing a pinafore, and attending a tea-party. Evidently, there are SOME rules that must NOT be broken, else consequences, you know?

As always, her plot is consistent, and her characters are recognizable as people you might encounter, or live with, or be.

I hope this was a fun book for her to write; it certainly was fun to read.

Dread Pirate Arcanist by Shami Stovall Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Allegedly, the cover art is by one "Darko Paganus." (No comment.) Immediately UNDER the cover art is an Amazon Associates link to the Kindle book on Amazon. Click on the link, then buy something, and I get some coins.

As far as I could tell, there is no link, whatsoever, to Princess Bride. However, the title HAS to be in homage to the characters. Feel free to correct my misapprehension.

Things I don't like: I don't like having to fool around with How-To-Make-My-Computer-Work when I am trying to get some work done. Had to do that. You'd think copying and pasting would be EASY. Not always.

Things I love. I LOVE it when an author throws in something wonderful. It can be a DELIGHTFUL choice of phrase; maybe a throw-away line that tells you EVERYTHING; or, probably my favorite, when the author shows a gifted insight into the way people work. When I find a passage like that, I want to run to someone, and READ it to them, because it's just that good. And that last thing I love? Stovall presents it here in this book, in a most excellent gift package. There may be bonbons attached; I wouldn't be surprised.

The rest of the review is going to be me, striving to tell you what she did, without spoilers. Rest assured; I will deprive the review of the best reveal, BUT you MUST read the book!

In this second book in the Frith series, Master Arcanist Zelfree has taken on six apprentices with their bonded eldrins:

Volke, with Luthair, the Knightmare; Ilia, with Nicholin, the Rizzel; Zaxis, with Forsythe the Phoenix; And, I don't remember the names of the last three eldrins, and don't want to stop writing to do the needful search: Atty, with a Phoenix; Adalgis, with an Ethereal Whelk; Hexa, with a Hydra.

A starting competition, to find apples, reveals the personalities of the six, and also shows protagonist Volke that he is relying too much on his physical abilities, and not on his magic.

This artificial task is immediately followed by a task of significant importance: find two missing griffins, magical creatures who were to be present at a bonding. This one becomes sinister in a hurry, and it sets up the tasks for the remainder of the book.

The second task also reveals much about the character of Volke and Zaxis, particularly the latter. He has always come across as a shallow, self-centered braggart, but he begins to reveal other sides as well.

Meanwhile, there are other feelings just below the surface within the group; some reciprocated, some not. It's romance stuff, and it's what you would expect in a mixed group of apprentices. However, this appears to be a highly moral culture, at least in some respects, so the only late-night visits are for plots, fears, and support, and not for smooching.

And another thing that is becoming more evident is just how WIERD the master arcanist is. His primary presentation is that of a grump, but sometimes, it's clear that he has great concern and affection for his students. But mostly, he works overtime to distance himself from them. But, if he doesn't like apprentices, why did he take SIX?

I have to stop now, because to go further would be getting into MAJOR spoiler land. Without getting into specifics, though, I'll tell you that Stovall has a very clear insight into how much devastation can come, when you try to keep a lie hidden, even from people you should be close to.

Yes, there are more books in the series, and they should make excellent reading as well.

Echoes of War by Cheryl Campbell Review by Jason P. Hunt

ECHOES OF WAR Revamps the Resurrection Trope. Distilled down to its very essence, Echoes of War is a mix of Falling Skies, The Hunger Games, and Doctor Who.

Which is to say, this is not something we haven't seen before. Fantasy author Cheryl Campbell makes her debut in science fiction with a story that incorporates the usual tropes of a dystopian future story — alien invasion, government breakdown, young reluctant hero — but does so in a way that still works. And it's an engaging read, even though there are a few predictable moments.

The story picks up in the midst of the alien occupation, with humanity being oppressed by the Wardens, a militant faction of human-looking extra-terrestrials known as Echoes. These Echoes have the ability to regenerate. Except when they regenerate, they become younger versions of themselves, and for the most part they retain their memories.

In the midst of this, there's a young scavenger named Dani, and she's doing her best to keep her head down and mind her own business. She just wants to survive, but when it comes out that she's actually an Echo (something that gets telegraphed pretty badly from the start), she learns that a lot of her life was not as she thought.

Circumstances, of course, conspire to put Dani right in the midst of the fight against the Wardens, who are searching for Echoes hidden among the human survivors.

At first, I will admit, Dani initially struck me as a bit of a Mary Sue, but as the story progresses, she develops into a more balanced character. Although she's mostly a brat, a lot of that is driven by self-interest and her experiences early in the book. Her growth as a character follows a pretty well-trod trajectory, but Campbell makes it work within the confines of the story.

Campbell's background in YA and children's stories is pretty evident, but the world-building is fairly solid and complex enough that I wasn't noticing any significant holes in the plot. The story moves along at a fairly good clip. It doesn't get bogged down trying to keep up with its own internal story logic. Dani's immaturity and brash decision-making are portrayed as a product of her experiences, but she can be a little annoying as a character sometimes. My biggest quibble is something that bothers me with all of these dystopian stories: in spite of trained military leadership in place, in spite of civilians lacking the training they need for combat and wartime strategy, somehow a young-ish inexperienced naif becomes a prominent leader.

But it's a predictable trajectory for this kind of character, really. Harry Potter, Anakin Skywalker, Buffy Summers, Katniss Everdeen, Clary Fray, Wil Ohmsford... all of them are cut from the same cloth, and all of them navigate a similar path. That's not necessarily a bad thing, especially given that this is the beginning of a trilogy. I fully expect Dani to get taken down a peg or two in the next book, which should follow the pattern of the darker Act II in the three-act play. So there's plenty of room for Dani to experience adventures and side quests that might not follow the script to the letter. I'm just happy to see that she's not a Mary Sue character.

The supporting cast is a mixed bag, with some of them more strongly developed than others. I found Jace's arc particularly interesting because of who he is in relation to Dani, and what his motives are throughout the story. The one character that disappointed me most was Miles, mainly because he didn't feel fully formed at the beginning of the story. That made it very difficult to warm to the character or his plight. And I guess I'm just too old to care about any contrived love triangles at this point...

Overall, though, I enjoyed the book, and I'm interested enough to want to check out the second one when it comes out. If Cheryl Campbell is daring enough, Act II could get Mad Max level crazy. But I'm not familiar enough with her work to make a prediction on that front. I'll just recommend you give this one a look and see what you think.

Finder by Suzanne Palmer

Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu.com April 2019

Finder is the first novel by Suzanne Palmer, the winner of the Hugo, Asimov's Readers' Award, and the 2018 WSFA Small Press Award. This is a fun old fashioned space action-adventure with a lot of humor.

The hero, Fergus Ferguson (yes, everyone he meets comments on the name and his aliases all have the same alliteration) is a finder for hire, or, as he puts it, "I have made a decent career out of chasing things and running away." He has been hired to go to Cernee to repossess a space cruiser stolen by Arum Gilger, a junk warlord. Soon after Fergus arrives on Cernee, someone sabotages the cable car system on which he is riding, killing Mother Vahn, who is an enemy of Gilger's number two man, Graf. Fergus makes his way to Vahn's lichen farm, run by what appears to be clones of Vahn, all of whom have names starting with M. One of these young women, the 19-year-old Mari, insists on helping Fer-

gus despite all he can do to discourage her.

With the help of Mari, Fergus makes contact with Harcourt, an arms dealer who is the father of Mari's best friend and has his own reasons to hate Gilger. They concoct a plan to fake an experimental time viewing device--the Light Afterimage Retrieval Device Beta Unit Two (yes, the acronym would be LARD BUT)--to show who is responsible for the cable sabotage. As expected, Gilger uses his cruiser to block the scan, enabling Fergus to contact the ship's computer to get the coded message he needs to decipher in order to gain control of the hijacked ship. But true to what Fergus himself says later in the book, "... my plans tend to be ridiculous and go wildly wrong and weird in unanticipated ways," Gilger reacts by launching a coup attempt that plunges the region into civil war.

Now Fergus and Mari have to stay alive long enough to figure out the list of seven terms sent by the computer, rescue Harcourt's daughter (who has been kidnapped to force Harcourt to stay neutral in the civil war), and deal with the Asiig, a mysterious race of scary aliens that occasionally capture humans who either disappear forever or return strangely altered.

Although *Finder* is a debut novel, it reads like the work of an experienced novelist. There is a confident tone and a sense that the author is having fun writing the book. If there is a weakness it lies in the characterization of the minor characters. The two major characters, Fergus and Mari, are well-developed. Fergus has a high level of self-confidence in his abilities but self-doubt about his motives and morals. Mari is a trouble seeker who is too smart to stay down on the farm but has a secret tying her (and the other Ms) to it. Also, it is nice to see a man and woman working together without any romantic or sexual relationship even being raised. But most of the other characters are not given a chance to live beyond what is needed for the plot. The best of the minor characters, Mother Vahn, provides key expository information and then dies in the first chapter. I did like Harcourt, who proves to be a wheeling-dealing bargainer.

Hand *Finder* to anyone who exclaims, "They don't write them like they used to." This is an action-packed novel that does not slow down; it would make a great movie. There is enough humor to season the action without being overwhelming. The story is complete in one book, although there is certainly room for further adventures. And yet, despite this being an extremely well-done caper novel, I could not help wishing the author had challenged herself more and written something deeper.

It Takes Death to Reach a Star
by Gareth Worthington and Stu Jones
Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

For the title of my Amazon review of the book, I took a passage from Psalm 139:

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

And a bit more context for that verse says a bit more about the context of the novel:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to You. (Psalm 139:7-12, NASB)

The book is set five hundred years in the future, after World War III and the New Black Plague killed almost every man, woman, and child on Earth. Those few who survive are huddled in the bizarre architecture of Etyom, north of the Arctic Circle in what once was Siberia, but now is nothing. As far as any of the residents know, there are no other humans alive anywhere.

Humans are divided in three ways: class, based on genetics; location of residence, either at the top of buildings five miles tall, or in whatever shelter they can cobble together from the ruined city at the base; or role defining belief systems.

At the top of the class structure are the Graciles, the very best form of human that can be designed. Between 7 & 8 feet tall, they are uniformly perfect in features and health. Any imperfections are ruthlessly destroyed before birth, or through a process called Axiotimos Thanatos, commonly referred to as being Ax'd, if discovered later. They rule the entire city. The next class below that are called Robusts, consisting of humans without any genetic manipulations, who make their living the best way they can in the frigid temperature. At the bottom of the heap are the Rippers, who have been cast out from Robust society, and live as feral humans. They produce nothing, existing by scavenging through garbage and attacking any Robusts or Graciles who wander away from their enclaves. They are cannibalistic.

Residential divisions mirror the class distinctions, in that the Graciles live, literally, at the top of the city. Great towers spread out at the five mile level, forming structures aptly named 'lily pads.' These are kept in place both by gigantic support towers, and by enormous bags of helium gas, which help to stabilize them. The Robusts live in one of eight enclaves at the bottom of the towers, separated from each other by walls which are of some value defensively, but do nothing to ameliorate the debilitating weather conditions. Outside these enclaves, in open areas with no infrastructure called 'the Vapid' live the roving bands of Rippers. Some commerce goes on between enclaves, but a group traveling without extensive protection will be attacked by Rippers, killed, and eaten.

The final division between people are their defining belief systems. All of the Graciles begin and end with a materialistic, fatalistic view of existence, and regard themselves as being the highest form of existence possible. The Robusts are divided into two, possibly more, groups, with their roots in either Christianity, in the case of the Logosians, who worship Yeos, or the Musuls, derived from Islam, and regarding Ilah as their supreme being. The Logosians are heavily persecuted by the majority Musuls, and find no favor with the Graciles, either.

Mila is a Robust Logosian orphan who makes her living as a bouncer and courier. Demitri is an alienated Gracile scientist. Through alternating chapters, they tell the story.

Mila just wants to survive, learn to be a better fighter, and live out the Logosian principles in her life.

She's doing pretty good with parts 2 & 3 of that, but she is just BARELY surviving.

Demitri is not only of the elite class, he is at the very TOP of the elite class; the Leader is higher, but no one else is. He has, literally, everything that money can buy, and some things that NO amount of money can buy, due to their rarity, such as vinyl records and bound books. And he has to cut his wrist in the morning so he can feel something. He is empty, and isolated, and the only person who talks to him is the voice in his head, which tells him he is a loser and a coward, constantly. He has to resort to illicit drug use to silence the voice. It's been with him as long as he can remember; he gave it the name Vedmak.

Mila just wants to make the rent; Demitri believes the Leader will use his work to destroy the world.

I expanded on the quote from Psalm 139 for the blog post. Actually, I could have used a different Psalm, one that goes like this:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
How can we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land? (Psalms 137:1-4, NASB)

If the concept of God being taken seriously in a work of science fiction is anathema to you, then you won't like this book. That's because the ENTIRE BOOK is about living a life without meaning, and desperately seeking something that is the reason for it all; or, if not a reason, then something that at least gives life purpose. The primary Bad Guy in the piece has more power and control than everybody else combined, and it's still not enough. He is driven to find MORE, and quite literally would expend everyone else in pursuit of his goal. Sitting at approximately at the other end of the scale is a young man who just wants to be able to take care of his little sister. The smaller goal does not make HIM smaller; instead, he is large enough that he takes time to say thanks to people who have helped him.

With some of the books I review, I find that the story is excellent, and it's STRICTLY a story, that it carries no deeper messages. With some of the books I review, I find them nothing BUT message, and those usually get tossed, earlier, rather than later. This book is essentially demanding that we take a look at the ULTIMATE question, about Life, The Universe, And Everything, does NOT trivialize it by saying that the answer is 42, and delivers a smashing good yarn to delight the most depraved of us who thirst for MOAR EXPLODING SPACESHIPS!!! Look, you pays yer money, and you makes yer choice. That's the way this works. If this ain't yer cup of tea, okay. If it is, you'll love it. For one thing, there is some BEAUTIFUL artwork by John Byrne, who designed the cover. We can hope we will see some of this artwork for sale at conventions or elsewhere.

But, ALAS! There is so much GREAT stuff there, and it's JUST NOT incorporated into the book!

P. S. It CAN be done, too. The author I know who has done the BEST job of incorporating a book/world wiki into an ebook is Rob Howell, and an excellent example of his art is "A Lake Most Deep." I wish a LOT more authors would follow his example.

In the interim, check out the book, check out the website, and see ya at DragonCon, where this just might get the win!

Knighmare Arcanist by Shami Stovall Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I'm not quite sure how it's done, but I recognize it when I see it: really GREAT writing. Shami Stovall generates GREAT writing. In fact, her writing deserves a better review than this, but I've been trying to get this written since 7:30 AM, and I don't want to put it off another day.

Look to her work, and you'll find she absolutely NAILS the execution of the ideas, putting everything into the just-right sequence. She has the ability and the stamina to infuse page 180 with the same energy that's found on page 1.

I'm inclined to believe that the stamina is what keeps most people from getting that novel published; it's just too hard to sit down, hour after hour, day after day, and punch the words into the keyboard. If my count is right, she now has eight books published, and that is some pretty amazing output.

Solid writing is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for GREAT writing, though. To that, Stovall adds some AMAZING brilliance in the concept. I was overjoyed and flabbergasted when I discovered she had based one novel entirely on the concept of The Prisoner's Dilemma ("Star Marque Rising"), and that her construction was so flawlessly executed that it didn't come across AT ALL like a gimmick.

In this book, the concept that I cherish is the bonding between magical creatures and humans. We have seen similar items before, ranging from a witch's familiar, to were-creatures, to sinister mimics and pod people. Where Stovall differentiates herself, however, is in both the mechanics of the bonding, and in the transformation of both the human (the arcanist) and the magical creature (the eldrin). Some of each blends into the other, and they take on each other's traits with time. I'm not aware of anyone doing anything quite like this; the closest I can think of is Weber's treecats, but it's not the same thing.

So: she nails the technique; she nails the concept; what about the story?

It's a great old story, of poor and repressed folks, perhaps undiscovered royalty, arising from poverty to greatness. Surrounding them are people of privilege, which is given to them by accidents of birth.

Tell the story the wrong way, and it is TIRESOME. Tell it the right way, and it refreshes the spirit, and gives you hope. Stovall tells it the right way.

Her Good Guys have flaws, her Bad Guys have good motives.

There are sufficiently subtle plot elements that you might not be sure which are Good and which are Bad, until the story has progressed significantly. It makes for a really great read.

I have quite a few more books by Stovall to read and review, and I'm looking forward to the prospect.

The Land: Predators by Aleron Kong

Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Disclaimer: Other than some remote history with some PC-based single-player games, I'm really not familiar with the world of Role Playing Games. Somehow, I missed out on Dungeons and Dragons and I don't know if that was just a function of my age and college experience, or if I just wasn't paying attention at the right time. Furthermore, until I picked this book to read, I had never heard of the 'LitRPG' genre. So, take what I have to say as coming from someone who is, at best, a novice.

The nature of the book. The Main Character, Richter, does the sort of things that one does when playing a role-playing game: he enters caves, has fights, and gets tired. Now, those are ALSO the things that Bilbo Baggins did, right? Except that Richter has a feature Bilbo didn't: little screens pop up, and tell him what he is looking at, and what benefits may accrue, and what to do about it. In short, it's like what I can recall from my EXTREMELY limited experience playing World of Warcraft; from what I understand, a player in Dungeons and Dragons gets the same sort of information from the person running the game. As I said, I've never played, so I could be wrong about that.

Please feel free to explain it to me, if you have knowledge in the area.

This gives the reader the experience of observing someone else play a game. Since I know absolutely NOTHING about the experience of observing someone else play a game, I drafted an expert: 13-year-old Kenneth, my 8th grader. In the past, I had observed him sitting in front of his game screen, and I THOUGHT initially that he was playing Minecraft. Instead, he was watching, avidly, a recording of someone else playing Minecraft. Now, Kenneth OWNS the game, and plays it, so I just didn't get the attraction of observation. Here's what he told me: Part of it is that you can learn different strategies to solve puzzles in the game. The best part, though, is the jokes the guy makes as he is playing the game.

Now, while that explanation helped me understand why Kenneth watched Minecraft games, it shed no light on the value of reading about someone else going through an RPG.

The problem. Clearly, with 1,889 reviews Amazon reviews, with 96% being 4 and 5 stars, this work has appeal; it's also the 7th book in a series, so the author has staying power. However, I cannot see the wisdom in including this in the 'Best Fantasy Novel' category. If LitRPG is a genre with staying power, then perhaps it is deserving of its own category. If not that, then include it in a category that covers games and accessories. Or something. I just don't think it belongs in the 'Best Fantasy Novel' category.

I cannot comment on the content or professionalism of the writing, since I only got through 7% of the book before realizing that this simply was not going to fit my definition of a fantasy novel. I DID read a number of the other reviews, some of which objected to certain scenes, and I had intended to evaluate that portion for myself, but that would serve no purpose, as I am rejecting the entire work as inappropriate for the award category.

More problems:

1. The extraordinary number of 'Game Dialogue Boxes' that are presented in the text as graphic objects, not as text. When I said above 'little screens pop up,' I do not mean that little screens pop up as you are reading the text; I also do not mean that the text says 'a little screen popped up and told him what he had done.' Nope, inserted as a graphic box in the text is the entire information screen, which frequently

includes tables. It takes up a LOT of screen space and depending on the size of screen you are using, it ranges from 'Not That Bad' to 'Approximately Incomprehensible.'

The rest of the page is taken up by the TOP of the pop-up. Readability can become a significant issue. My laptop screen gave me the quality of 'Not That Bad'; however, my iPad screen size, while perfectly adequate for most applications, broke the dialogue boxes into pieces, making it difficult to follow. Smart phone? Don't think so.

2. The text is formatted as double-spaced, regardless of the Kindle setting.

These two items are related, in that they both make significant contributions to page count. The Amazon listing for this book reports a page count of 2,202 pages. Since authors are reimbursed via the Kindle Unlimited program based on the number of pages read, I can see the advantage of a high page count. However, a bigger payout to this author for an inflated page count means that other authors, who do NOT artificially inflate their numbers, are being penalized. This is a significant issue, and I lowered my rating from 3 stars to 2, based on this alone.

I can't see "The Land: Predators" as a legitimate contender for the Dragon Award for 'Best Fantasy Novel', regardless of any other merits of the work. YMMV, and I apologize in advance to those who are fans of the LitRPG genre. To them, I can only suggest that they appeal for an award category of their own.

Latium1 by Romain Lucazeau Review by Philip Cahill

This book, published in 2016 and written in French, is the first part of a two-volume novel. This is an epic of vast proportions that deals with many familiar science fiction themes, post-human society, artificial intelligence and interstellar travel. What is new is the sheer scale of the author's vision and the clarity of the narrative. It is, philosophically flavoured, hard SF at its hardest, full of sumptuous detail of the physics of interstellar travel, astrophysical phenomena and the science of artificial intelligence. We are in a post-human epoch. The Latium is the post-human civilization. There are few points of reference to biological existence. In the hands of a lesser writer this could have gone horribly wrong but here the world-building is superb. This impossibly alien, post-human, environment is beautifully rendered. This is a first novel by a writer of immense talent.

The book is based on an alternative history where a Greco-Roman empire conquered the world and then the solar system. The AIs the empire created then expanded into interstellar space. After this humanity suffered an extinction event. In keeping with the Greco-Roman roots of the civilisation the author makes extensive use of Latin and Greek terminology. The temporal distance between us and the far future setting is, cleverly, emphasized by the use of the languages of the ancient world.

At the start of the book we meet Plautine, a vast military spacecraft. This entity has been in suspended animation, far from the centre of civilised space, for 2000 years. There is a long description of a signal that has reached a detector in the spacecraft. The book is full of long detailed descriptions. We see a minor AI examine the signal and start to analyse it. It is a very low-level entity so as the analysis continues the AI absorbs an increasing amount of cognitive resources. It is, eventually, established that the signal is not of natural origin. Once the signal analysis has been completed the minor AI passes the analysis onto higher level AIs within the ship. The signal detector now has no further reason to exist so

his cognitive resources are absorbed by other systems in the ship. He simply ceases to exist. The signal causes the vast spacecraft to wake up. Perhaps this signal is a sign that part of humanity still exists. We don't know but this mystery is central to the book because humanity was the *raison d'être* of the Latium.

We then watch this spacecraft come to life. There is another, very long, series of descriptions of the systems within the craft. We meet AIs of a higher order, these are autonomous conscious entities that are sub-divisions or aspects of Plautine, the highest-level AI. We are told that AIs cannot fight biological entities because their programming forbids it. This is an inconvenience because the civilization is threatened by invasion by a biological species.

The AIs have reacted to this threat by attacking the invaders' supply lines and by destroying all habitable planets and asteroids along a 20-light-year, wide area of space. These activities have merely served to slow the invaders down. Another tactic has been the creation of a race of human/canine hybrids who are not prohibited by programming to attack a biological species.

We move to another vast spacecraft controlled by a god-like AI, Othon. We meet a group of a human/canine hybrids. Plautine's craft comes under attack and Othon moves to rescue her. She is reborn in a biological body. There is a battle between Othon's ship, *Transitoria*, and three of the invaders' ships. The hybrid group is employed by Othon in the battle and Plautine is saved and brought on board *Transitoria*. The book ends with the search for the source of the signal and the being responsible for the extinction event.

This is a reworking of some well-known SF ideas with a French touch. It is well anchored in the literature created by writers such as Asimov and Banks.

However, you've really got to sit up straight, clean your glasses and concentrate to read this book. Some readers might find the philosophy, physics and literary tone of the novel a bit too heavy. In an interview he gave in 2016 to Jerome Vincent, on the Francophone webzine *Actus*, the author describes his novel as being constructed like a classical tragedy influenced by the 17th century dramatist Pierre Corneille. He also recommends that readers may like to read *The Monadology* by the German polymath Gottfried Leibniz as Leibniz's view of the universe corresponds to the reality presented in the novel. It will be very interesting to watch how this writer develops in his next novel. He probably needs to get out more in the meantime.

The book's blurb keeps quiet about the fact that this is only half the novel and suggests that the work is closer to mainstream space opera than it actually is. It is a shame that, for the moment, this novel is restricted to Francophone readers. This is an author that definitely should be translated.

Long In The Land by Laura Montgomery Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

"Long in the Land" is the second book in the Martha's Sons series, which gives us some backstory to the *Waking Late* trilogy, set on the planet which was *Not What We Were Looking For*, or *NWWWF*. The first book, *Simple Service*, I reviewed in September of 2019, in what was probably the worst review I have ever written; certainly, in the bottom five.

Here's the cover art, by Tom Edwards, followed by an Amazon Associates link to the book on Kindle. If you click on the link, and buy the book or something else, I get small change.

The cover page

The following contains some material that was incompetently left out of the review for Simple Service.

The Dawes family lives some distance from the city of First Landing, where almost all technology is concentrated. The government of the city has things locked down tight, and they control production, the weapons remaining from the founding colonizers, and the means of training men at arms.

Not content with his control over the people in the city limits, the governor orders his troops to confiscate the weapons in the hands of the outliers, and those are turned in without conflict. Resentment grows, however.

The protagonist is Peter Dawe, the youngest of 10 children of Martha, the scholarly mother, and Nigel, who probably has some good points.

Actually, let me not be TOO hard on Nigel; he is, after all, a good provider, who has carved out a prosperous holding, in soil which requires much work before it will support life transplanted from Earth. And, since survival trumps all, I suppose he does finish with a score in positive digits.

I must point out, however, that regardless of his abilities as a provider, he's a lousy father. Prolific, yes, he is that. However, he appears to run his house with no regard for actually training his children in the ways they should go. Certainly, he demands they work around the holding, essential life skills which are absolutely necessary for survival. But we are given no evidence that he considers the kind of example he is setting for them; his approach seems to be "might makes right; my way, or the highway."

And THAT'S a life-lesson that son Simon, the next oldest brother to Peter, took to heart. From his earliest days, he went out of his way to torment Peter unmercifully. While it did equip Peter with a resolute character, it was a blatant misuse of his age and position on Simon's part, and eventually, even Nigel noticed.

However, being Nigel, he picked a rather stupid solution. Whereas he should have intervened when Simon was younger, and forced him to treat his younger brother with appropriate consideration, Nigel's solution was to postpone intervention until the boys were older, and then force them to work in close proximity with each other. While it does show that Nigel was at least aware that there was a problem, he provided ZERO corrective instruction, supervision, or discipline, and consequently, Peter remained the butt of all Simon's japes, and was further distanced from Nigel.

Peter has a plan to get the confiscated weapons back from the city, and Nigel forces Simon, unwanted, into the expedition. Peter manages to get back with the blasters, but the news of Simon's death finalizes his alienation from the household.

He accepts a choice to flee to his oldest brother Edward's farm, five days away. The surface reason given is that it will prevent the government men, who seek him as a blaster thief, from taking reprisals against his family. However, it's largely agreed upon because Peter's mother and father can't bear the sight of him any more.

Shortly before he sets out, Peter and some other locals spot an aircraft, which is something never seen even in First Landing. There is a suggestion that it might be from the break-away colony of Seccon, an

idea Nigel angrily rejects; he wants no discussion of the possibility of Seccon in his house.

Toward the end of his trip to Edward's holding, Peter sees the aircraft again.

And the plot thickens...

Other significant characters introduce further plot developments:

Silas Zeelander: the last pilot of the last aircraft; he hails from Seccon, the break-away colony, bringing his newborn son Zak. Zak is sickly, suffering from failure to thrive.

Silas used the plane to recon for a new nursing mother, and found Adelia, Edward's wife. Silas has the hardest head, EVER. Having grown up trusting, he thinks everyone is trustworthy.

Elian Matlin: government man from First Landing, currently working for room and board at Edward's farm. He's looking for Silas' plane, but knows of the hunt for Peter.

Milo and John: First Landing residents who work for Edward during harvest. They are also informal spies for First Landing.

Megan, Robin, Laurie, Emily, and newborn Pearl: Edward and Adelia's children.

Montgomery tells a GREAT story, and you can catch all sorts of similarities between the developments of NWWLF and historical events on Earth. Don't try to analyze that to death, though.

Part of her story telling is her attention to detail. Here's one example:

After an hour she had the kitchen fires banked, Laurie assigned to his post as lookout, three baskets of food of different sizes for carrying by all, including the smallest girl Emily, if not the infant Pearl, and they were ready to head out through the vegetable garden to harvest the toadfat.

How MANY times have we read about people setting out on adventures, with nothing more than a pocket handkerchief? True, sometimes that is done because it's a plot component, but more often I think it's because the author just doesn't want to be bothered.

Now, a MASSIVE attention to detail would likely bore everyone except a dedicated logistics officer, but please: let us not pretend that expeditions don't take preparation and organization.

Here, Montgomery strikes what I believe to be a perfect balance, between keeping the story alive, and giving us some insight into the character of Adelia, a farm wife, who has become a master of organizational skills, just in the course of doing her job, every single day.

She's no Mary Sue, either; at other points, we see her suffer at the prospect of her children risking their lives. Nope, she's an efficient, hard-working lady, who doesn't need to be rescued, but isn't afraid of delegating, either, with "here, you hold this baby for a minute, while I go feed that one."

Circumstances have prevented me from finding out if the series has been carried on further; if it has, though, I will be sure to read it.

Mamelukes by Jerry Pournelle
Review by Pat Patterson

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Greetings and exuberant blessings to all my friends and neighbors out there in Internet Land! And to the family members who have stumbled across this post: to the best of my knowledge, today was the first day I actually MADE fried chicken for my morning meal. Had it cold for breakfast many times, of course, but never fired the deep fryer for that purpose. It's rather nice!

The cover art, by Dominic Harman, and an Amazon Associates link. If you click on it, it will take you to Amazon; if you buy something while there, I get some coins.

[Amazon Link](#)

Things that will only appear in this blog post. Feel free to skip this, or to go to Goodreads or Amazon for a review with no back story.

This is likely going to be an EASY review to write. If not, it will be a PEBKAC error, and nothing else. That possibility DOES exist, for two reasons:

1. There was a period of time, starting somewhere in the 1970s, when I thought science fiction had abandoned me. It was dreadful! I think I found "Have Spacesuit, Will Travel" when I was 10, in 1963, and suddenly, I had a refuge, safe from the world. But gradually, it seemed that refuge had vanished. Then I discovered Larry Niven in 1978 or 1979, and then Jerry Pournelle, and David Drake; and, eventually, Baen brought me treasures I could not have imagined.

Janissaries, the first volume in this series, was one of the books that kept me going. It was published in 1979, and somewhere in my baggage there is still an illustrated copy that I picked up at a used bookstore prior to 1986. So, I have MUCH affection for the series, and thus for this book.

2. I have a bit of a track record for not wanting to finish a series that I love. I have yet to watch the final episode of a Ricky Gervais series about a lovable autistic nursing home attendant. More recently, I didn't watch the final episode of "The Mandalorian" until the previews for the new season went live. My rationale: as long as I don't watch the last episode, the story isn't over.

HOWEVER!!! I did NOT allow that to stop me in this case. I grabbed it, read it between meals and while waiting to see the doctor, and finished it last night, despite being dead tired. And thus: I think this will be an easy review to write, because love and stuff.

The book review begins. This is what will appear on Goodreads and Amazon, with, perhaps, minor edits.

The title page states that this is a book by Jerry Pournelle, with contributions by David Weber (a long-time fan) and Phillip Pournelle (Jerry's son). The Wikipedia entry on the book provides interesting information about the development of the text. I could only find ONE Weber-ism I was reliably certain of (a reference to BuShips); the story, and the text, are entirely consistent with Jerry's earlier writing, and we may truly thank those involved in the revival process for that.

The story arc starts as Captain Rick Galloway waits for death, an expendable pawn in a proxy war in Angola. On his side are a platoon-strength body of men, all that survived out from a battalion, recruited and supported by the CIA. His command is scattered in hasty defense positions scraped out on a hill that was supposed to be an extraction point. But Headquarters just told him no evacuation is possible.

Coming up the road is a vastly superior Cuban-lead force, intent on their destruction.

How will they survive THIS? Well, they don't, actually. Instead, a spaceship lands and rescues them. Sort of. As it turns out, the rescue has only two exits: exile to lifetime incarceration, or exile to supervise production of a particular harvest on a distant planet, containing various primitive cultures. They elect the farming-supervision choice.

Over the first three novels, which have since been combined into one volume in "Lord of Janissaries," we follow the progress of Rick and his men as they emerge into the strange world of Tran. There never seems to be good stopping point to the story, because the life-and-death conflict never ends. First, there is the conflict that quickly forms among Galloway's troops. Lead by the other surviving officer, some realize that their weapons are so superior to those of the indigenous people, that they can set themselves up and rule as kings.

Second there are the conflicts with the various groups existing on the planet. It appears that the aliens have regularly kidnapped small-ish military units for the same purpose as Rick's group, and some of them had enough of a core group that they were able to sustain a solid cultural presence over the centuries. And, with few exceptions, a state of war exists wherever there are people. Even though their weaponry is primitive, compared to what Rick is supplied with, even a rock can kill you.

Finally, there is a conflict with the aliens that brought them there. From oral traditions found on the planet, combined with some clues provided by the abductors and other members of the Galactic society, Rick discovers that the plan is to have his group organize the harvest of the desired crop. As a reward, they might all be killed, probably by kinetic strikes from space. But, if they do NOT cooperate, they most certainly will be killed.

In this last volume, we finally get to the endgame for Rick's command. The endgame can't come too soon for Rick; he has become sick and near death from the strain of command, and the knowledge that there are innocent civilians who die as a result of the constant war. Other than the few troops left out of the group he brought from Earth, he has scarce sure allies; the most powerful nations always have their own best interests at heart, and require constant attention to keep them on the same path as Rick. That grows more difficult with each battle.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, the aliens are preparing for another abduction, with a very strange composition: a woman who was formerly a member of the San Francisco Police Department; a disgraced high school science teacher who is methodically drinking himself to death; and, a former heroin addict with a long-ago tour as a community builder in Africa. They collect a vast assortment of educational technology, and a few other things, and anticipate being relocated to a primitive village in a distant part of the world. As with Rick's troops, they don't find out the truth until too late.

And another group of aliens is interfering with the process.

And Rick grows more weary...

It's a great last chapter. While I think that new stories could easily be written in the universe, the cycle

of the tale is finished. At the end, we know what will happen next; not the details, but the path. Since it's been almost forty years since I started my relationship with Galloway and Company, I'd like to send a letter to my youthful self, promising that the read will be satisfactory, not only in the short term, but also in the end.

The Mutineer's Daughter
by Chris Kennedy and Thomas A. Mays
Review by Pat Patterson

Even when planets burn, the real story is always about individuals.

Despite the title, the book is about the Mutineer AND his daughter. Their separate stories are told in parallel, and it is VERY well done, indeed.

Benno is the father; he is a Chief Warrant Officer onboard the ALS ship 'Chesty Puller'. He had to select a career in the Navy in order to provide for his family and their farm, back home on Adelaide.

Meo is the daughter; with her mother dead, the only tie she has to her family is a short holograph recording of her father, telling her that he loves her and will be back for her.

She's 14, and she has also been raised in the care of the neighboring family, who provide her with food, shelter, and clothing, but leave her emotional needs somewhat unmet. She is too young to go into space, even though that is all that she wants to do: ship out and find her father.

The ALS (Alliance of Liberated Systems) planets operate under a system of strict class separation. The aristocracy is composed of those who are descended from the wealthy who provided funding for the colonization efforts; the plebeians are the workers, who contributed labor and lesser technical skills.

Benno is a bit of an oddity, in that his long service and expertise resulted in promotion to the officer class.

In the aftermath of ship-to-ship combat, Benno's heroic efforts are instrumental in keeping the Puller alive, and able to fight. However, that same battle reveals the ALS plans to abandon six of the worlds mostly populated by the lower class, while protecting the planets which are home to the aristocracy.

Benno tries to persuade his captain to allow him to leave the ship, and return to Adelaide to care for his daughter, attempting to trade on his recent laudatory efforts in repairing the ship to win favor. It doesn't work, and he is tossed in the slammer.

Meanwhile, on Adelaide, Meo is forced to flee for her life, and joins the resistance.

The parallel-story idea has not often been handled this well. It's really amazing how the tension gets ratcheted up, and I was FLASHING through the pages at the end of the story, so well written were the last bits.

Yep, this is absolutely a Dragon-quality bit of writing.

Points of Impact by Marko Kloos Review by Pat Patterson

Preliminary Comment: about Marko Kloos. It's only been five years since Marko Kloos EXPLODED onto the Military SF scene, with 'Terms of Enlistment.' He followed that up the following year with the equally bodacious 'Lines of Departure.' That novel was the VERY FIRST indie novel (47 North is an Amazon publishing imprint) to be a finalist for a Hugo Award, in 2015.

Again, alas. Kloos chose to withdraw his novel from nomination. I reviewed 'Terms of Enlistment', and his stated reasons for withdrawing 'Lines of Departure' in this blog post. It wasn't the last of the Bad Things that happened related to that particular award, but it was one of the very first that drew public attention. Happily, he did NOT stop writing, and "Points of Impact" is #6 in his 'Frontlines' series.

A minor review of the book. Captain Andrew Grayson has seen too many things that give him nightmares. Like many young men, he found a way out of abject poverty through joining the military and has been successful in his career. Promoted from the ranks due to merit, he now is a captain, commanding a small detachment of what we would call Forward Air Controllers, troops who observe the fall of ordnance from beyond the front lines. He is also tasked with leading a team of rescue specialists, who go into hostile or otherwise dangerous territory and bring out wounded or trapped personnel. However, that team is led by another officer-specialist, leaving the observers to Grayson.

He is currently in combat against the aliens referred to as 'Lankies,' giants with far superior technology and no inclination to communicate. The war will apparently end when one side is completely exterminated. However, he has also been in combat against other humans, both on the Earth and in space. These are his worst memories, and he holds a special grudge against a faction of the military that was involved in an aborted rebellion, after the Lankies appeared to be winning. To his dismay, they were given pardons, with the exception of the very top leadership.

He has lost troops in combat and carries the weight of that with him constantly. His stresses are aggravated by the fact that he believes much of the damage his last command took was avoidable, had he only been given a proper mission brief.

Mitigating his loss is his marriage to Halley, who entered service at the same time he did, and is one of the very few survivors of that unit. Although they have been married for nearly the entire ten years of their service, they have only been able to be together a total of six months, much of that on leave taken jointly.

Humanity appears to be losing; but then, Grayson gets orders for a new type of warship.....

Something Marko Kloos does as well, if not better, than anybody else. There is a LOT of story contained in Books 2-5 in this series, and I haven't read them (yet). However, Marko has a gift for telling the SIGNIFICANT parts of that story through the way that it impacts the character today. No, we don't know what window the sniper bullet came through (for example). But if that sniper attack is significant to the character TODAY, we find out about it, through his reactions. It ISN'T history; it's present day environment. And in listening to Grayson talk, and seeing how he reacts, we are introduced to the significant issues. And there is none of this 'bar-story-to-new-recruit' technique to pass it along, either.

CAUTION: SOME SPOILERS AHEAD. I'm not gonna tell you the entire story, but the OUCH part of

this is so personally significant, that I HAVE to comment on it. If you want to avoid exposure to what I regard as the highest point and the lowest point of the story, stop here.

Significant issues. Nobody really knows how far a person can go before they break; it's all been 'test until destruction,' pretty much. Whatever that point is, Grayson feels pretty close too it.

Big, big plus: Grayson decides on his own, after one particular flare-up, to seek help. Without doing the kind of dithering we are all too accustomed to, he makes an appointment with the doc, and keeps it. Furthermore, in the big, big plus category, he actually TAKES the medication the doc prescribes for him, and it makes him feel better. However, he does not divulge this information to another veteran of his training days, because he believes she will react with disdain.

This is a *big, big plus* because it treats the issue of PTSD seriously, and because it models the best way for one afflicted to improve their condition. I don't see NEARLY enough of this kind of writing. Michael Z. Williamson comes close, but his Freehold Universe is SUCH a divergence from our world that it's hard to see how his solutions could be applied. Grayson's world, on the other hand, IS our world, with time and circumstances added in.

Big, big minus: The doc Grayson reports to is fresh out of medical school, with plans to go into pediatrics. So: WHAT IN THE HECK IS SHE DOING ON THAT EXPENSIVE, IMPORTANT SHIP? Why would the staffers go through all the trouble of building the most fantastic ship EVER, and put the most experienced and proficient crews on board, and then give them a @#%\$^&*%^ rookie as a counselor/doc? Veterans with PTSD need to talk to VETERANS. They have such a disconnect from the civilian (Kloos talks about this, in another context) that communication seems to be an insurmountable obstacle.

WITH REASON! Because, after he has VALIANTLY spilled his guts to Miss Newly, she then gives him some really crappy advice: take these pills and get out of the military while you can. Now, the 'take these pills' part is right on. Pharmaceuticals can make the difference between isolation and misery, and gradually re-engaging with friends and family. But 'get out of the military while you can?' NO, dangit, he just TOLD you how disconnected he feels from civilian life! He needs to walk and talk and learn with people who have been there, and he just is NOT going to be able to do that if he gets put out on the street.

An apology. Please understand that if my criticism above is overly harsh, it's really NOT a criticism of the story; it's a criticism of reality. I'm not saying Kloos made an error in his writing; I'm saying that the military does stupid stuff, JUST AS KLOOS DESCRIBES IT.

This is personal for me. It is not my story to tell, but it is, at least in part, my story. And I have seen the system fail to take care of the wounded warrior; it's almost as if they want them to go away after they used them up. And the only help seems to come from other wounded warriors.

Shoot the Messenger by Pippa DaCosta Review by Pat Patterson

Disclaimers. I believe I try to avoid reading books with the 'Fantasy' label, because all too often I have found them to be overblown and pretentious, and unsubtle, badly executed imitators of either 'The Lord of the Rings' or the 'Harry Potter' series. Therefore, I probably miss out on a great deal of really very good books; and, when I am dragged by my betters, kicking and screaming all the way, and

FORCED to read a fantasy work, I find that I enjoy what I am reading.

Nonetheless, I prefer science fiction. I like exploding spaceships.

What is Magnificent About This Book. First, to address my lowbrow prejudices, this book is neither a Tolkien nor a Rowling knock-off. It has plenty of action, and while I read nothing which is TECHNICALLY an exploding spaceship, science fiction themes are central to the plot.

In fact, the CORE of the book is about the tension between science fiction and fantasy, expressed here as the tension between 'tek' and magic. I think it is lovely when writers take Clarke's Third Law (Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic), and bend, fold, spindle, and mutilate it, or even apply it directly and come up with a nice work.

A near-criminally brief, and totally unfair, review of the novel. This, by the way, is strictly the Amazon review that I submitted a little while ago. If they have published it before I finish the blog post, I'll link it [HERE](#). If they haven't, I'll put the link in the comments section. That way, the comments section will get used for SOMETHING, anyway, since none of you seem engaged enough to share your opinion. I mean, really. (last edit: well, it published. So much for the comments section of THIS post...)

Kesh LaSota is a Messenger. With her sidekick, an upgraded former war drone named Sota, she delivers high-value, high-priority messages across the world of Calicto. She has a special talent for the work, being invisible to the ubiquitous surveillance that covers the entire population.

Her crisis unfolds after she delivers a message to a gangster-type, telling him he has 18 seconds to live, followed 18 seconds later by a bullet to his head.

And thus we enter the fantasy part of the novel, because the actions described in that interval would take a HECK of a lot longer than 18 seconds to transpire in Mundane Land.

Everything that happen after that is a fantasy function as well. Every commodity is available to the population, except ...water. There is a synthetic form of water, though, but good old dihydrogen monoxide costs a bundle.

Lots of action. Lots of hunky men. A few gorgeous women. And plot convolutions you won't believe, even after you see them, If you are a fan of the genre, this is going to blow you away. It's going to make the author a lot of money. As for me, I couldn't wait for the book to be over. Umm,,, I mean that literally. I read the first half, realized I still had to post about it, and skipped chapters until I got to the end. I am utterly fine with that, as I am with the fact that this book outsells almost every single book I really like. Quite possibly will win the Dragon Award.

Closing commentary on the review, and whatever else comes into my head. It was the scarcity and incredibly high monetary value of water that really kicked me out of the novel. Synthetic water? REALLY? Honestly, my reaction to that was to go check on the author's background. She CLEARLY was writing at an adult level, but synthetic water is a concept I would have expected to see in a story written by a sixth grader. And, by the way, the author has an astounding number of published novels, and she's publishing in a field that I understand to bring in carloads of cash for those who write it, so, sure. I guess she gets to write about synthetic water if she wants to.

Personally, though, once I was knocked out of the narrative, I stayed out.

This is the opening volume in a 'slow burn Reverse Harem' series, and the author is careful to point that out to us. I do not know what a 'slow burn Reverse Harem' is, and my 'Freakishly Aversive Reaction To Reading Even Soft Porn' warning light started flashing when I came across the word 'harem.' As I dis-

closed in the review, I skipped a LOT of the last half of the book, but from what I DID read, it's obvious that there is some magically-induced non-consensual sex action I missed, for which I am grateful. I accept that it is a rule of certain genres that there MUST be incorporated some explicit sex, and that bedroom doors are a fiction. This will likely garner votes for this book, as it has garnered cash for the author.

The Stars Have Eyes by Thomas A. Farmer Review by Pat Patterson

Not my cup of tea; it might be yours.

Up front confession: I did NOT finish the book; I only made it to the 37% mark. However, long before I made it that far, it had become a chore for me to read. That may very well not be the case for you. I found that there is simply too much of the internal life of the characters being revealed in a minute description of motives, and analysis of the moment. I do not find this to be appealing, nor does it move the story along.

I don't feel comfortable just leaving this comment without giving you an example. This took place not long before I finally conceded my inability to progress further, at the 29% point.

The sole passenger on a freighter asks the two owner operators about the name of the ship. Here's how I would expect the story to go:

"Why name the ship 'Death and Taxes'?"

Archimedes replied: "Because there are only three things certain in the universe. Death, Taxes, and me."

Certainly, a bit of description could be inserted there. However, the author chose to insert 262 words of description (I had them counted) between the question and the answer. He describes the movements, the facial expressions, the reason behind the facial expressions, and the emotions the characters experience.

If it were not that this pattern is repeated throughout the book, I could accept it as appropriate in character development. However, I found it to be excessive, and I also found that I was begrudging the time spent in reading the work.

If you enjoy character studies, then this may be EXACTLY the sort of book you want to read. I cannot fault the vivid descriptions of a ship entering FTL mode, and I found the economy described when FTL travel has been reduced to a few traders, instead of frequent commerce, quite interesting. My initial impression, based on the detailed description of the processes, is that this was a YA novel, and it may very well be that. There are, at least, none of those issues which would preclude that audience (ie, sexuality and language).

Still, my conclusion is that this is not the sort of thing I want to read. I accept that this might be a personal failure, and I encourage those who wish an in-depth character analysis to give this book your consideration.

Terra Nova: The Wars of Liberation - Tom Kratman and Company

Review by Pat Patterson

A charming good AFTERNOON, to all my internet friends and neighbors! Usually, I start writing fresh in the morning, but I'm putting myself on an accelerated pace. And, to my family members that have clicked on this link, as soon as you can make it up here, my schedule is clear, and it will be RANGE TIME!

Once upon a time, and multiple times since, I pointed out that my FAVORITE reading material is military science fiction. By and large, that is still the case. Yes, it's true that for the 2019 Dragon Awards I had to review something that claimed to be in that category, and found it to be small-minded, depraved, poorly written, and nasty. Didn't have any impact on my opinion of the genre, however; it just provided me with a good reason to suspect Simon and Schuster of attempting to curry favor with haters, and to be very careful of any endeavor featuring an author with a name rhyming with Hameron Kurley.

At any rate, I find that when I hit a period of stress, my comfort-food-for-the-brain is almost always military science fiction. And that's why I picked up a copy of "Terra Nova: The Wars of Liberation" as soon as it became available. I was not able to review at the time; I was really even having problems reading.

An Amazon Associating With A Gun

That's a joke, of sorts.

It's an Amazon Associates link;

(I get paid if you click it and then buy something)

I was sure this volume was going to be balm to my disturbed self, and I was right. I have enjoyed the previous installments in this series by Tom Kratman, going back to 2007. Unlike the other eight books (if I have counted correctly), this volume is a shared universe, with 11 authors, in addition to Kratman himself, providing material.

Beginning with the second in the series, all of the books have an introductory section called "What Has Gone Before," which does an EXCELLENT job of briefing the reader on the high points of prior story development. That has become rather lengthy with new material being added, but I am going to condense it, ENORMOUSLY:

In the not-too-distant future, a gateway to another universe is discovered by accident; an Earth-like world is included. Named Terra Nova, it is initially seen as a spot for exploration and colonization. Before too much time has passed, a degrading political climate on the home world causes the powers-that-will-be to decide to dump all the malcontents from Earth there, where they can be abandoned, exploited, or worked to death at the whim of the planetary administrators. Eventually, those on Terra Nova rebel.

There: EIGHT books, summarized in 82 words. Awesome, if I do say so myself!

The 12 stories in this volume are each given a bit of prefatory material, which ties them together and makes the context clear. I'll not review them, except to say that you don't want to skip them; they are interesting, and they do include background.

The stories:

1. *The Long, Dark Goodnight* by Vivienne Raper. This tells the story of the failed first attempt to colonize Terra Nova. Earlier volumes give the bones of a story of cultural conflict exploding into violence. This story breathes life into those bones. The price paid by those who tried to keep the peace comes across almost as clearly as if it were happening in real-time.
2. *The Raiders* by Mike Massa. The UN holds dominion over the planet. It's not a monolith, though; there are facets! And those facets look out for their own interest, and really don't mind making others pay the price. Massa once again shows the perspective of troops who know that the price they may have to pay is ultimate; they will do their job, as long as it's worth it.
3. *Sacrifice* by Peter Grant. The hatred between competing factions that existed on Earth turned out to be the most easily exported commodity. True, the planet is designed to kill intelligent life. Unfortunately, people seem to have that same design. In opposition to that is a man of war, turned to peace, who must again take up the tools of war.
4. *Doing Well by Doing Good* by Chris Nuttall. Not every UN official was intent on literal and/or figurative rape. Those who attempted to perform ethically found themselves at odds with The System.
5. *No Hypocritical Oath* by Robert E. Hampson. This story combines techno-thriller, with a bit of romance, and the nastiest examples of personal bullying and vindictiveness. And then more, in the form of institutional bullying and vindictiveness.
6. *Bellona's GIFT* by Monalisa Foster. It's not easy to be the child of the leader; no one REALLY feels safe around you. So, how can you feel safe around them? But, outsiders really don't know the rules.
7. *The Panther Men* by Justin Watson. A Colonel of the warriors, and a Prince of his people, Alexander has conflicting loyalties even before he sets his feet on the ground. Once there, though, his conflict grows more intense. On the one hand, he finds purity in the cleanness of straight-forward combat. On the other hand, the things he finds he much do seem to be killing his soul.
8. *Desertion* by Kacey Ezell. Captain Lele Campbell can fly like an angel, but her world is nothing like Heaven. She must always be on her guard; her commanding officer makes no secret of his lascivious intentions toward her, and the system provides no escape. Everywhere she turns, she finds more betrayal. Everywhere.
9. *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* by Christopher L. Smith. Whether a fish is caught or not, the bait is certain to be mangled. All Marko wants is to be able to do his job. However, his reputation prevents him from fading into safe obscurity.
10. *Wellington* by Alexander Macris. There are a very few locations on the planet where the UN isn't an ever-present force. Wellington is one of those. For an organizational bully, that would be enough reason to intervene. The presence of a thought criminal, and the temerity of locals who try to provide sanctuary, are just the icing on the cake.
11. *HUÁNUCO* by Lawrence Railey. Two American ex-pats, with significant skills as independent software contractors, run afoul of the authorities in Mexico, and find themselves deported to a somewhat similar country in Terra Nova. From scant existence as agricultural workers, they are given an opportunity to help their drug-producing boss strike back at the oppressors from Earth.

12. *The Redeemer* by Tom Kratman. General Titus Ford is given the job of straightening up all of the messes that exist on Terra Nova, and the title of Inspector General. His actual power isn't limited at all by the scope of his job, or his titles. The peoples of Terra Nova received some benefit due to the incompetence of their masters. No longer; Ford has a better idea.

In his Afterword, Kratman suggests that he might have two more conventional works in the series, and two more of these shared-universe collections. I suppose we can get by with that; as long as he continues in other areas, that is.

We all need comfort food for the brain, after all.

Peace be on your household.

That Ain't Witchcraft by Seanan McGuire Review by Sam Lubell

Originally published in SFRevu.com June 2019

When the many fans of the prolific Seanan McGuire compare her books, they tend to see her *InCryptid* series as the light, funny, romantic, action-adventure counterpart to her darker, more sophisticated *October Daye* series.

The *InCryptid* books are about a family of cryptozoologists who investigate and protect supernatural creatures. In past books, the three siblings who are the current generation of the Price family have fought werewolves in Australia, investigated mysterious deaths at a reality TV dance competition, and survived weirdness at a faux-Disneyworld. But readers who dismiss these books as simply fun, plot-driven popcorn may have missed how rich a mythology this series has generated, especially since it has absorbed the concepts (and characters) of the author's *Ghost Roads* series. *That Ain't Witchcraft* takes full advantage of this extensive backstory while still being a fun exciting read.

The book begins with Annie (Antimony) Price and friends needing a rest (and a hiding place) after their adventures in the last book. So naturally, they choose to rent a house in Stephen King country--rural Maine. (And yes, the characters do make jokes about whether Stephen King is "just a small-town historian who somehow got filed in the wrong part of the bookstore".)

Since Annie is from a family of cryptozoologists, who study the hidden supernatural creatures that hide all around us, it is not surprising that her friends are not human. They include Fern, a sylph, who has control of her own density; Cylia, a jink who manipulate luck; her boyfriend Sam, who, as a furi can shift from looking like a human to a form of anthropomorphized monkey complete with a tail; and Aunt Mary the crossroads ghost who has served as her family's babysitter for generations. For her part, Annie is highly competent with a knife (and a quip), stubborn to the point of being unable to quit, and creative in her plotting. She's also a self-admitted geek and constantly makes references to pop-culture that will seem dated in another five years but are amusing today.

Fans of the previous *InCryptid* novels will enjoy *That Ain't Witchcraft*. It has the humor and action of the previous books even as it dives deeper into its own mythology. I do miss the Aeslin mice (talking mice who worship the Price family as gods) who now have been absent for two novels (and at least in *Tricks for Free* they were featured in the attached novella. This book's novella features Antimony's brother trying to save a group of Gorgon children). Still, even with the darker tone and more complex backstory, *That Ain't Witchcraft* retains the series' strength of having an interesting story about compel-

ling competent characters who succeed even when over their heads.

Literally the first local Annie meets in this town turns out to be a mostly untrained sorcerer with ice powers (of course Annie makes the obvious X-men jokes but backs down when she realizes how right they are) and a grudge against the Crossroads--a magical power that grants wishes but only in ways that leaves the wisher regretting the bargain. Unfortunately, Annie has made a wish on the Crossroads in a previous book, giving the Crossroads the right to demand that she discover what James has planned and then betray and kill him. The Crossroads also has caused Annie's Aunt Mary (who has stronger ties to Annie than to the Crossroads) to vanish and replaced her with the much nastier Bethany (who alert readers may recognize from a previous McGuire book). And then a member of the Covenant, which has been chasing her for the last two books, shows up, adding yet another problem. Annie and her friends need to find a way to destroy the evil of the Crossroads, avoid killing James and escape the clutches of the Covenant.

So, how much of this eight-book series plus the related two Ghost Roads books, is necessary for a reader to understand this new one? Even the new characters comment about the complex backstory.

"I swear joining you people has been like tuning in to a program already in progress," muttered James.

"I'm sorry reality doesn't come with a recap at the top of every hour," I said.

My suggestion is for readers to start at the beginning and keep reading as these books are all fun and very fast reads. If pressed for time, a reader could start with *Magic for Nothing*, the first book to feature Antimony Price as the main character and narrator and then read *Tricks for Free*.

Weaver by Kacey Ezell and Mark Wandrey Review by Pat Patterson

Confession: I am a human. Therefore, when I read stories about aliens killing humans, I don't root for the aliens. In addition, spiders are killing/eating machines, and I was so very glad when I discovered the biological limitations to their size; that meant that they were NEVER going to be the unstoppable people-gobblers of the scary movies.

Nonetheless, Ezell and Wandrey combine their talents to make this story of giant spiders and their bad-tempered, heavily armed furred companions appeal to my sense of justice, as well as hooking my sympathies.

The shared universe has grown LARGE over the course of the past 18 months, and I've lost count. It is my INTENT to read everything they put out, until they mess it up. Well, they haven't yet. However, the sheer volume of books they have published, and the fact that I review OTHER books as well, make it a bit too difficult for me to easily recall the volume in which we first meet the Tortantula on a personal level, rather than as a battle foe. As I was searching my wetware, though, I imagined some future academic, painstakingly detailing the character arc, much as fans of Sherlock Holmes can tell you in which stories vegetable products are featured. I will leave the research to them, but I WILL point out that the book counts as significant back story.

It doesn't rely on that for its appeal, though. The way I see it, the action/combat sequences provide the most vivid aspects to the story, but there is a deeper, brooding series of bullying, intimidation, betrayal, and subtle threats which set us up to believe that you can't prosper in this world just by being good at

doing your job. Job competence, in this case, bringing mayhem, is a necessary but not sufficient factor. There are too many covert plots running for a hapless spider/rabid chipmunk combination to be able to do their jobs and go home at the end of the day and eat lasagna for dinner, watch a movie, and retire to a well-earned rest.

So, what will give Azah, the spider, and Sadek, the chipmunk, the edge they need to survive? The answer (always) is LOVE. Yup, that's right. Their affection for each other begins to grow, shortly after they meet, until they become as close as any two beings can get (no sex is involved, though, so don't worry about THAT).

Loyalty, courage, and the determination to do the right thing emerge from that first basic interaction, and it carries them much farther than they ever would have gotten otherwise.

ANYBODY can show us a kitten playing with a ball of string, and falling off a couch, and make us feel all warm and fluffy inside. That's easy, and it happens thousands of times on Facebook every day. Ezell and Wandrey, however, manage to pull off something that I would have bet against, and that's to make us care for these characters, dripping fangs and all.

The multitude of conspiracies in the background can form the basis for any number of new works, but with respect to the main characters, no more is needed, PROVIDED that you access the work that first brought the Tortantula up close and personal. And I will leave that as an exercise for the reader.

Witchy Winter by D. J. Butler Review by Pat Patterson

Beasts find redemption, a queen seeks a throne, and lady pirates care for others.

Sarah lives in a world of magic and monsters, somewhere around 1830 or so in a decidedly NON-united states. In book one of the series, 'Witchy Eye', she discovers that she has the power to see magical/spiritual forces at play, and that she is the presumptive heiress to an unclaimed throne. In this follow-up, she further develops her powers, and develops alliances and enemies as she moves to take her rightful inheritance.

In addition, we follow the stories of the other two members of her triplet birth. She has a sister who is being raised by a pirate queen, and a brother who is the ward of a member of royalty and has sunk into an alcoholic stupor.

The emperor of this conglomeration is a jerk. He kills anyone who might even suggest that he is not all-powerful, and as he is the unacknowledged uncle to the triplets, he wants them dead. And if that requires devastation and death? Well, he doesn't much care for the little people anyway.

It's RARE that you will find world-building as well done as this. Butler has taken many historical characters, and twisted them, so that their influence in this magical world that includes Beast-folk, can be traced back to what the historical person MIGHT have done under these circumstances.

Non-Fiction

RIP Terry Goodkind Obituary by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Once upon a time I went to visit my Aunt Janice and Uncle Bob, accompanied by my ex-wife who may have still been my girlfriend at the time, as I'm a bit hazy on the exact date of the trip. We talked. We ate. Aunt Janice's main courses and desserts were awesome. I was always a bit more cautious about her side dishes. And, as it usually did when I got together with Aunt Janice, the subject of reading and books came up. She jumped up talking about a library book sale she had been to. She had some books that weren't for her (she was mainly a romance reader) and wanted to know if I wanted them. I pulled them out of the bag they were in and looked at them. On the spines the words "Terry Goodkind" were written. At the time, I had never heard of the guy, but I figured "Why not?" The blurbs had a fantasy feel to them, so I thought I'd check them out.

That was a good decision. Goodkind's fantasy world was well realized. His characters lived and breathed. I was carried away to a world where magic was real and so were its practitioners. It was a world where not everything was as it seemed. D'hara was a world that looked to the ancients as a source of power and to the future and what could be.

Some of my friends would refer to Terry's writing as "competency porn." Richard Cypher (later Rahl) the woodsman and main character knew how to do a lot for himself. He never threw his hands up and walked away from a project if he could find a way to make things work, and he usually could. Kahlan Amnell was a woman of extreme talent and iron will who did what needed to be done regardless of what it cost her. She was the kind of woman every man wanted for the most part. I mean that whole thing where she could straight up destroy your mind and make you accept her most horrible command as your deepest wish was a little bit terrifying, but hey, what woman doesn't have some kind of drawback somehow?

And the villains, were evilly evil persons who were evil. Or at least they seemed that way, up until they didn't anymore. It turns out that sometimes someone is something other than what we don't like about them. That's a lesson that today's society would do well to learn. Of course, there are, and always will be, legitimately horrible people and Goodkind made it clear to all of us that there were some people in his world that were flat out beyond redemption. He showed us what to do with those people and how to do it.

As a matter of fact, the first book in the Sword of Truth series was Wizard's First Rule, and it's an important one to remember. "People are stupid. They will believe anything they want to be true or fear to be true." That's another one to hold on to in today's society. I won't go into specifics, but there is a lot of this going around.

Goodkind was a modern-day philosopher. His Wizards Rules (of which there are ten if you count "The Unwritten Rule". I'm not such a fan of that one, myself) are good rules for life. They're not hard and fast rules about how to conduct oneself as much as they are a framework for critical thinking. Goodkind portrayed the world not in terms of moral absolutes but as a place where one must think for himself. He

portrayed his characters as individuals struggling to make the world a better place. He clearly makes a case for individual rights in his books without being preachy about it.

It was a few years and a divorce later when the girl I was dating at the time introduced me to Legend of the Seeker. I loved the show, but it just wasn't the same. I'm guessing that Mr. Goodkind was the only one who could deliver his world the way he envisioned it. That's not meant as a knock to the show runners. They did a fine job, they just weren't Terry Goodkind.

The world lost Terry Goodkind today. We lost a man who could write things that were not only entertaining but also had a purpose. A man who believed that one person can make a difference and who held his beliefs up for all the world to see. A man who created a world we could all get lost in. A man who held many of us enthralled. A man who sold twenty-five million novels not because of who he was but because of how well he could write.

It's a sad day, but I'm sure if Terry were here, he'd view it as what it is: An inevitability. Being alive is, after all, a fatal condition. It was actually a heart condition that did him in, but the empirical data all points to the fact that no one lives forever. He didn't. My Aunt Janice, who introduced me to the series, passed on over a decade ago. That's hard to believe, but it's true. But Goodkind was, at his heart, a man who showed us all how to evaluate facts for ourselves and the facts are in: We've lost him.

So Rest in Peace, Terry Goodkind. May your sleep be slow and unencumbered by ties to the world that you have left. May your family take comfort in the fact that you managed to touch the lives of so many others while you were here. There are few who can say as much. May your family, and your fans, also take comfort that you have earned the Author's Immortality: Although your body has failed you, your words remain and you can continue to touch the lives of others.

There is a story that goes around in my family about an answering machine tape. When one of my great-aunts passed another of my great aunts (and there are approximately a million of them) called her answering machine to hear her voice so many times that someone eventually recorded the voicemail message and gave it to her. What we're looking at here is an analogous situation. Terry is gone, but his voice can still be heard in his books. He won't be forgotten.

The Astounding Illustrated History of Science Fiction By Dave Golder, Jess Nevins, Russ Thorne, and Sarah Dobbs Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

This is the type of book you see displayed prominently (usually in multiple copies) at a Half-Price Book Store. I saw it on eBay, however, and the price was right. In addition, I'm interested in most aspects of science fiction history and seek out such volumes.

If you're looking for an extensive illustrative history of science fiction, from the perspective of UK fans, this over-sized book may be for you. In addition to science fiction, fantasy and horror works are also discussed. The coverage is especially strong on television and movie science fiction.

It caused me some cognitive dissonance, however, to see such names as Donald Wollheim, Sam Moskowitz, Forrest J Ackerman, Jack Kirby, and Wilson Tucker missing from the book's index; but the emphasis here is on European (especially UK) influences and events, with David Langford listed as the book's consulting editor (and yes, *Ansible* is mentioned).

On the other hand, the works of some of my favorite Golden Age authors -- such as Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Chad Oliver, and A. E. van Vogt -- are discussed.

Apparently, a few readers have complained that some of the printing used is too small, and that the color-codes are confusing; but I found the codes to be interesting, as well as helpful.

Other positive aspects include the following: the book's recounting of various communications among science fiction writers, the historic timelines, the occasional online links, striking book covers and movie posters, stills from movies, comic books, and lots and lots of other illustrations -- as the history of science fiction from the earliest days of proto-science fiction to its mass market status today -- is discussed in the book's nearly 200 pages and 150+ illustrations.

By the bye, Flame Tree Publishing has also published several other books on science fiction. Check out their other volumes, frequently offered on eBay; some of them feature short stories about popular science fiction themes such as time travel and lost worlds.

An Interview with Steve Taranovich by Tamara Wilhite

Tamara Wilhite also appears at <http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

Most of my author interviews are with science fiction and horror authors. However, I periodically review nonfiction works that might be of interest to fans. This is the first time I've interviewed a nonfiction author whose book on the space program, "Guardians of the Right Stuff", might be of interest to science fiction fans.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to write "Guardians of the Right Stuff"?

Steve Taranovich: As a young boy in the 1950s, I was exposed to such science fiction heroes as Flash Gordon and Commander Cody, as well as a theater movie to which my parents took me, entitled "Gog". I believe that science fiction ultimately leads us to science reality.

Then in the 1960s I watched every Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo launch on my small black and white TV. On the days that the launches were scheduled, I told my mom that I did not feel well---she caught on to my plot after a few launches. All of this led me to becoming an electronics engineer and ultimately to writing this book, which the retired Grumman and NASA people in their 80s and 90s, who I interviewed, asked me to do before their stories were lost.

Tamara Wilhite: You said that you interviewed people who worked on the Apollo program, both from NASA and Northrup Grumman. How were you able to meet with them? And how many are left?

Steve Taranovich: My journey began with the intent to write an article for publication on the 50th anniversary of the Moon landing. After numerous phone calls, I traveled to Long Island, NY where I had lived for most of my life, and contacted the Grumman retirees group and the Cradle of Aviation Museum at which most of the Grumman retirees worked as docents.

This was the first time I was asked to write a book with their incredible stories. After many more phone calls later, my wife, Loretta (my photographer) and I took an epic road trip journey to New Mexico where the White Sands Test facility for rockets is based, the hills of Texas and on into Houston to meet a whole group of NASA retirees in their homes and in conference rooms at the University of Houston.

The ones I interviewed totaled to 19. There are only a few handfuls more still around, who were involved in the Apollo program, such as in the NASA Alumni League at Houston.

Tamara Wilhite: What are some of the stories you'd like to share here?

Steve Taranovich: Some stories that come to mind are NASA and Grumman's 'Rocketmen' in my book. These are the guys, some of whom worked under Wernher von Braun, who developed and tested the Apollo Lunar Module Ascent and Descent engines as well as the Reaction Control System (RCS) quad rockets, which provided attitude control on the Command Module as well as to the Lunar Module (LM). These guys were virtual pioneers whose dedication, talent and commitment led to safe travel for the astronauts. True "Guardians of the Right Stuff" like Warren Brasher who worked on the Ascent portion of the Lunar Module (LM) stage. There were many design problems on the critical Ascent stage rocket engine design. If this rocket did not perform, the astronauts would be left to die on the Lunar surface, unable to survive until the next Apollo mission. Brasher and his colleagues made sure this did not happen with long days of design ideas, review, and testing and not much time at home. Their families were strained without the husband/father being there very much---and all at a far lower pay than if they were in some sort of a commercial job. This was the kind of steadfast dedication seen in all of the NASA and Grumman people!

Another great character in my book was Ray Melton, a retired NASA guy who now lives near the NASA White Sands rocket test range. Ray is a virtual encyclopedia of knowledge on rockets and rocket testing. I consider him one of the best historians regarding White Sands Apollo rocket testing. He also has a veritable museum collection of images and memorabilia from the Apollo rocket program. As a youngster he enjoyed blowing things up; his friends called him Ray "Merlin".

Tamara Wilhite: Your bio says you have experience in space related electronics. Can you tell me more about what that means? For example, how does the design of a circuit board or antenna going into space differ from the average 5G antenna or cell phone?

Steve Taranovich: I have an MSEE in electronics and was a circuit designer for 23 years. In that role, I helped design a Radiation Hazard Meter for microwave radiation that flew on one of the Space Shuttles. This was similar to a nuclear radiation badge or a Geiger counter, but it measured radio wave power levels from antennas which could be deadly to humans. When electronics are designed to travel in space, all of the components, like integrated circuits, resistors, capacitors and inductors including the circuit boards, need to be designed and tested to perform in the wide temperature variations of space (typically, but not limited to +250 degrees F to -250 degrees F) which is a vacuum. The most damaging thing in space for electronics is radiation.

Tamara Wilhite: What is your opinion of Elon Musk's SpaceX program?

Steve Taranovich: When I was at NASA a few years ago, I was told by NASA personnel that "We are now a space port". I saw Space-X there at Kennedy Space Center in Florida---the leased Launch Pad 39A, which is a former Apollo and Space Shuttle area, is now modified for Elon Musk and his team's needs.

I also saw a Blue Origin building being constructed on NASA grounds; Jeff Bezos' rocket development will be Amazon's delivery to the space station and the 'stars'.

Commercial development must and is being encouraged by the US government and NASA since Con-

gress cannot afford funding for the advancement of future space travel with all the other needs in the US. These commercial guys are in this for a profit, but NASA helps oversee safety, which is paramount.

Musk and his team know how to commercialize space and make money while doing it. Just look at how he re-uses his booster rockets and lands them accurately on ocean barges with pinpoint accuracy. NASA could never do this---Congress would never fund that kind of development.

Tamara Wilhite: And what do you think the impact of Starlink will be?

Steve Taranovich: Musk's Starlink is the future of the Internet. In this time of the COVID-19 virus, we are seeing the internet being strained because of all the homebound users. Even when this virus subsides, we will need internet to all parts of the Earth. Musk and his team know how to perfect the technology with his engineering team of experts.

Tamara Wilhite: What else are you working on?

Steve Taranovich: Right now I am thinking of some topics for another possible book. Maybe another non-fiction or possibly a fiction book, but based on technology and science.

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

Steve Taranovich: I am right now looking forward to the Boeing launch of the Crew-1 spacecraft because I know the pilot, Victor Glover, whom I met a couple of years ago in the Yuma, AZ desert during a NASA Orion parachute test. Victor is a former F-18 Navy pilot and was also part of the NASA Astronaut Safety Team.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Prose Bono

Going Up, Going Live Christopher Nuttall

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

This isn't really an Ask A Writer post, not in the sense that someone sent me a question. But it did come from questions fired at me when The Zero Curse was going live – why, for example, did it take so long for certain things to go online.

Basically, the process goes like this:

First, the manuscript and cover are uploaded to Amazon Kindle and distributed around the different sub-systems (COM, CO.UK, etc). It generally takes around 8-24 hours for the file to go live on all of the servers, which is why it sometimes appears on one server fairly quickly and takes longer for others. When this process is complete, I get an email telling me so – that's when I update the website and blog,

then send out a general email, etc.

Second, Amazon starts to link the new manuscript to my author name. For some reason, the system isn't always very good at recognising links between one name and another – 'Christopher Nuttall' is sometimes classed as a different person to 'Christopher G. Nuttall' – and it can take time for the links to bed in. I speed this up a little by telling Amazon – through the Author Central dashboard – that I own the book.

Third, Amazon links the manuscript to other books in the series. People who looked at The Zero Curse shortly after it was uploaded didn't see a link to The Zero Blessing because Amazon had yet to update the links between Book I and Book II. There are occasionally also hiccups caused by misspellings, but I think I managed to keep everything consistent.

Fourth, Amazon starts noting that people who bought Book I also bought Book II. This takes longer because no one bought The Zero Curse until the book was actually available – no one could purchase it until it went live. This is a slower process because – as I understand it – the system has to gather data before it can start offering 'if you liked this, you might like' deals. It does work quicker in reverse – someone who bought The Zero Blessing when it first came out might be noted as having done so – but that's less efficient.

Fifth, Amazon sends out its own notifications to people who follow me.

Audio and paperback versions go live when they're up and running – again, sometimes it takes time to link the three formats together.

Hopefully, this makes some sense <grin>

Chris

Wright's Writing Corner: Romantic Tension Two: Catching the Lightning—Part One L. Jagi Lamplighter

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Snufkin was one of my childhood crushes.

After last week, I felt that there was more to be said on this topic. But first, a brief history:

Before she married my father, my mother was a dancer. (She still dances. She is still taking ballet classes today.) When I was young, she shared with me an observation she had made about dancers. She said that some of the great dancers were born that way. They just arrived equipped to dazzle with the beauty of their dance. They were limber and graceful from the very start.

But the best dancers of all, the ones who outshone all the rest, most often were not the ones to whom dance came naturally. They were the ones who had slaved, who had suffered, to get where they were. Because they had both grace and control, while the first group, who had so much natural talent, often never bothered to do the extra work necessary for them to gain the same level of perfect control.

This has always given me hope, because I did not arrive as a natural storyteller. I only arrived loving stories.

When I got out of college and sat down to start writing seriously, all I had was a love of storytelling and a talent for writing dialogue. Everything else—description, emotion, action, body language, etc—was outside my grasp.

Slowly, painstakingly, I have taught myself one area of storytelling after another. Description was so hard for me. I spent years trying to learn to write even simple descriptions. I would copy by hand passages in books by authors I liked. I would sit and describe the same thing over and over. Sometimes, I wonder if none of the descriptions I write for the rest of my life will be quite as nice as the ones in *Prospero Lost*...because I polished them over and over and over again. I'll never have that kind of time again for that. Luckily, nowadays, I can write at least a decent description in much less time.

It is still work, though. My first drafts always just have a spot where the word “description” stands by itself, reminding me to go back and add what something looks/smells/sounds like. Etc.

Then, I worked on action scenes (still a work in progress) and plotting, and more recently, I have been struggling with body language –putting across emotion through actions. I find this devilishly hard—so hard I am almost daunted. But I keep recalling that my mom says that I made a huge fuss when I had to write my first sentence and, later, my first paragraph—those things got easier, so I live with the perpetual hope that this will get easier, too.

As I said last week, the next mountain on my writing radar is: Romance. Now, I have not written much romance, but I LOVE romance. The pursuit of woman by man and visa versa just enchants and delights me. I have loved this since the moment of my birth, when—according to my sainted mother—I smiled at the doctors who had helped birth me. According to Mom, I took off after boys as soon as I could crawl and never stopped (until I got one!)

(My mom tells a funny story about two-year-old me and boys. I had a friend named Carl whom I used to follow around. Carl was an older man. He was four. Carl would run about with his dump truck, chanting: “Truck, truck truck.” I would toddle after him, imitating him.

Only, I could not say “th”, so I said “f”.

My very proper grandmother came upon us one day and exclaimed in horror, “My they are starting young!”)

Enough historical aside. Back to romance.

One of my favorite things about reading romances—either the genre called romance or the romantic plot in any other kind of story—is the moments that zing. By zing, I mean the moments when that jolt me like I have received a shock, or in a really good book, a lightning bolt. The moments that leap off the page.

First kiss is often a zing moment. But more recently, I began to study these moments more careful, to realize that there were quite a number of potential zing moments and that many authors do not make as good use of them as they could.

A zing moment is the moment when we the reader feel the electricity between the characters. They are the moments when the relationship between the two lovers is intensified...when they realize or admit another step of attraction.

Kissing is one such step, but so is the moment the girl realizes she likes this man better than her other beaux; the moment when he realizes he cannot stop thinking about her; the moment she realizes that she is in love. These are the game changing moments, and the more of them the author stops to highlight, the more enjoyable the story.

Zing moments mainly take place between the lovers, but they can take place from a third person's point of view: a family member or close friend, a member of the community, and, especially, a rival. The moment these folks become aware of the attraction between the unlikely pair (romance is almost always between 'unlikely pairs') often really stands out.

Here is my favorite zing moment, from another person's point of view, of all time. I am writing it out in full. Next week, I will say more about zing moments and my ongoing attempt to list them.

From where he sat at the card table [Pierre] he could see Natasha, and was struck by the curious change that had come over her since the night of the ball. She scarcely spoke, and not only was she less pretty than she had been at the ball, but she would have looked positively plain had it not been for her look of benign indifference to everything around her.

"What is the matter with her?" Pierre wondered, glancing at her.

...Pierre, hearing greetings and the sound of someone entering the room, again glanced at Natasha as he picked up his tricks.

"What has happened to her?" he asked himself, till more amazed.

Prince Andrei was standing before her, saying something to her with a look of guarded tenderness. She had raised her head and was looking at him, blushing and visibly trying to control her rapid breathing. And the radiance of some inner fire that before had been extinguished glowed anew in her. She was transformed: from a plain girl she had again become what she had been at the ball.

Prince Andrei went up to Pierre, and Pierre noticed a new and youthful expression in his friend's face.

Pierre changed places several times in the course of the game, sitting now with his back to Natasha, now facing her, and in the course of six rubbers he played continued to observe her and his friend.

"There is something very serious happening between them," thought Pierre, and his mixed feelings of joy and bitterness so agitated him that they made him neglect his game.

War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

Let me know your favorite zing moments in romance. If they are not already in my list, I will add them!

Drawing the Close By Cedar Sanderson

Cedar Sanderson: <http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I have a problem with ending things. I'm a pantsner, see. I'm flying by the seat of my pants, feeling which way the wind blows through the vibrations in the fundamental point of contact. As a writer, this gets... complicated. Ok, messy is probably the better word there.

For one thing, I have a tendency to see that there is more than one possible ending. There can be many, many variations. But I want to choose the one that will make me happy, and possibly my readers, and this is something real life rarely gives you: satisfaction. Real life? The loose ends remain loose, flopping around with resolution impossible. Fiction? We can tuck those in neatly and reveal the synthetic picture we have used our words to draw.

Well, within reason. I prefer, for realism's sake, to leave a few loose ends. Sometimes, if I plan to write another book in the series, I'll leave some major threads that are intended to be picked up in the continuing saga of... whatever I'm writing right then. But for the sake of my readers and my self I try to give a warm happy glow to the finish of whatever I just wrote. Sometimes. Not always. Not every ending is happy or complete, just like in real life.

Fiction for me, both as a writer and a reader – which follows, because I tend to write stories I'd want to read. Who wouldn't? – tends toward escapism. Life is long, full of drudgery, and painful. Fiction shouldn't be. It reminds us that there are possibilities out there, and hope, and oddly enough, it can help prepare us better for life. Studies have been done on this, and show that people who read a lot have better emotional intelligence. Because they were able to look at the inner workings of another person's mind, their motivations, their feelings, they are able to come away from reading fiction with heightened empathy.

Strange, but true. That doesn't mean I'm thinking about that while I am writing, though. No, when I am in the throes of creation, I'm rarely thinking about any of the mechanics of why I am doing what I am doing. I'm just writing (or speaking) the words as fast as I can while the story plays out in my head. It's only later that I'll look back and realize what I've done. Which isn't to say I'm completely out of control.

For instance, this coming week I plan to finish a novel. I know what the ending ought to be. However, I'm concerned that having it end with a truce will be unsatisfactory. Even though there will be a second book in this series (at least loosely connected to the first, ala detective novels that follow the same character) I want to make sure I've woven in enough ends that my book doesn't more closely resemble a shag rug than a smooth tapestry. I've been running through scenarios in my head, knowing that when I sit down to write today I may lose sight of all those while my fingers fly over the keyboard. Dictation, I have discovered, makes it worse because I can't look at what I've written in a momentary pause, and by the time I'm letting Dragon transcribe for me, I've forgotten some of the words I chose.

I'm dithering. I always do when I come to the end of something. I did when I wrote Dragon Noir's end, which was also a trilogy end. I have two pieces of reader feedback over the years that meant a lot to me when it comes to that end. I'll try to give them without spoilers. One was from a friend, who read the entire series while resting after the birth of her daughter. She messaged me to let me know she was dis-

solving in tears at the end of that book. The other reader was my son, this last year while he was 14-15. He read the series and told me that the ending wasn't fair. It was really sad, and how could I do that? I reminded him gently – we were in the car, I was driving – that when I wrote that book, I was living away from my children. I had them under my wings not too long afterward, but there is something about that loss of precious time that I had to write out. So I did. And it is a happy ending, the end of Dragon Noir, and the series. But there is a terrible price to pay that will leave a scar.

Fiction and life intertwine. We can use the one to better navigate the other. But the thing about life? There are no endings we can experience to use in the writing. Once we have our own ending, we are past the ability to write. So fictional ends are hard. And there are always options for more story, because there is still more life in us to live.

~Finis~