

The **N3F**  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor  
February 2021

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# Editorial

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# Fiction

The Bone Shard Daughter by Andrea Stewart

Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu ([www.sfrevu.com](http://www.sfrevu.com))

The Bone Shard Daughter is a multiple viewpoint debut fantasy novel that, while not Young Adult (YA) itself, should appeal to those who enjoy YA themes of building an identity for themselves.

The novel has three main viewpoint characters and two minor viewpoint characters. Fortunately, each chapter identifies the character and their location. The book opens with Lin, the daughter of the emperor, struggling with missing memories. The emperor keeps control of the empire by taking a bit of bone from all his subjects, which he uses to power constructs that serve as his spies and enforcers. The emperor refuses to name Lin or her rival Bayan as heir but refuses to train Lin until she regains her memory. Instead, he doles out keys to rooms in the palace as prizes in a contest between the two potential heirs. Recognizing the emperor is slowly losing control of the empire, Lin resolves to steal and copy the remaining keys, learn bone shard magic by herself, and seize control of constructs and, ultimately, the empire.

Jovis is a smuggler searching for his lost love, Emahla, who mysteriously vanished some years ago. His only clue is a boat with a blue sail. On the run from both the Empire and the Ioph Carn crime family (who paid for his boat), he agrees to smuggle children away from the Empire before the soldiers can collect their bone shards. In the course of his adventures he gains a strange pet who can talk and then starts developing superpowers.

The third and least interesting (in my opinion) character is Phalue, the daughter and heir of the governor of Nephilanu Island. She is in love with Ranami, a commoner who is always pushing Phalue to better herself, but who does not want to be a governor's wife. Ranami has become involved with the Shardless, rebels against the Empire and wants Phalue to help. It is worth noting that while Jovis' chapters and Lin's chapters are in the first person, Phalue's chapters are in the third person.

The minor viewpoint characters, who only get a few chapters, are Ranami and Sand, a woman with no memory who has been brainwashed to stay on the island of Maila and pick mangos.

Normally, in a novel with multiple main characters, they join forces before the end. That does not happen here. Of the three main characters, only one meets the other two (at different times). One of the minor characters never meets any of the major ones. Of course, as this is the start of a series, they may meet up in a later book.

A frequent panel discussion at conventions is why so much of fantasy written for democratic Americans deals with royalty and accepts royal rulers as a good thing. Here, much of The Bone Shard Daughter is driven by a rebellion against royalty, and Lin herself rebels against her father deciding he is no longer ruling effectively and that she could do a better job (although it can be argued that the replacement of royal rulers by their children is not a rejection of royalty).

The author cleverly writes little cliffhangers at the end of many chapters right before switching to another viewpoint character to make readers want to keep reading. There are also a few twists; one that I

saw coming, but another caught me off guard (and I am still not completely convinced I was wrong). The bone shard magic is a major aspect of the Lin plotline but stays in the background for most of the rest of the book. Jovis' mysterious powers are only partially explained, but more information about the source pops up near the ending of the book so I am confident that this will be addressed in a future volume.

While the writing overall is very strong, with few of the flaws common to first novels (perhaps because the author published over a dozen stories first), I did feel that the plotline of the daughter of the emperor and the plotline of the daughter of the governor became too similar, especially near the end of the book. However, the characters are very different. Lin is much more determined while Phalue is more spoiled and flighty. Jovis has a certain element of world-weariness and is unsure whether to keep searching for his love or if it is too late.

This book is not marketed as YA, but the Lin and Phalue plotlines will appeal to fans of YA, as both characters deal with questions of identity, struggle against powerful fathers, and have to decide what to do with their lives.

I highly recommend *The Bone Shard Daughter* to anyone who likes fantasy with interesting characters and unusual magic. I look forward to future volumes in this series.

## Escaping Infinity by Richard Paolinelli

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I keep hearing that modern SF/F is simply a recycling of old tropes. "There is nothing new under the sun" I keep hearing, "And you should not concern yourself with trying to be original. Just try to tell a good story." It is a point I keep trying to refute while getting back to my current WIPs which are a coming-of-age story, a post-apocalyptic rebellion and an alien invasion. Ummm.... At any rate, I'm not here to talk about my work, I'm here to talk about Richard Paolinelli's *Escaping Infinity*. And speaking of tropes, it involves one of my favorites. It's the story of our heroes becoming trapped in a maze (or in this case, hotel) and forced to find their way out. It echoes back to the stories of the Minotaur and the Labyrinth from Greek myth, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The Royale" and Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *The Death Gate Cycle*. This is one of the most popular tropes in SF/F for a reason: It's a hell of a lot of fun. And *Escaping Infinity* delivers.

I don't do spoilers, but I will say that there are enough surprises in this book to keep things moving. At one point, I actually had to check the page count to make sure the book wasn't going to end where I thought it was. It didn't. The feeling was there though, right up until reality smacked our MC right in his face. Paolinelli seems to live by the theory of "If things get too easy on your characters, drop a mountain on them." Things never get boring. You can never take a minute off. And quite frankly, if you're parked in your cab at two in the morning and reading this, you're not going to get the nap you were planning on. Errr.... Don't ask how I know that.

As is often the case in these types of stories, the *Infinity Hotel* itself sounds like a place I'd love to visit. The amenities are apparently awesome. I don't even gamble and I want to see the casino. The park seems really nice... for the most part anyway. The staff certainly seems like a friendly group of people. It's a bit bigger than what I would expect for a hotel, but this is science fiction, right?

In many ways, this reads as two separate novels. One made up of the prologue and the last eighty or so pages, and one made up of everything in between. That's okay though. The transition from prologue to chapter one is a bit rough, but they often are. What comes between is a story that is sometimes awesome, sometimes wrenching and quite often surprising.

Peter Childress, our main character, is beset on all sides with questions he has to answer. Should he stay knowing that he will be happy in this fake place? Can he run away without his friend Charlie? How do you find an exit to a hotel with no doors? Should he keep fighting or give up? Who can I trust, if anyone? How big is this place? Why is it here? The more questions he asks, the deeper the mystery gets. The deeper the mystery gets, the further we get drawn in.

Probably the biggest question Paolinelli asks (and answers without getting preachy) is this: Who is responsible to clean up a massive mess after someone messes up? Is it the person who commits the act or is it his government? Should a person do what they can to make up for the fact that they have committed a horrible sin, or should "society" be responsible for it? This isn't the question of "Who watches the watchmen?" It's the question of "I screwed up. Should I atone for it or should everyone else?" It's an interesting question and one that needs to be answered. For what it's worth, I think he comes up with the right answer. Of course, we don't all have the resources available to Paolinelli's ship captain, but the point remains valid.

Equally as important is another question: Is it more important to do what's right or to follow society's rules? This is a question I've seen asked over and over again in fiction from Star Trek (Prime Directive anyone?) to Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (Should I give this heroin addict a medicine to cure his addiction or let him suffer and possibly die because it's not approved by the proper government agency?) Once again, I find myself agreeing with Paolinelli's answer. This is a lesson that many of us may need to take to heart in the coming months as the conversation over taking our rights away continues.

I know I mentioned ST:TNG episode "The Royale" earlier and the comparison fits in a lot of ways. Something I want to make clear here though is that this is not a carbon copy. The premise is very similar but the cast of characters and the solution to the puzzle are not even close to each other. Paolinelli does this his own way.

Having read and enjoyed Escaping Infinity though, I can't help but think that this should have been a series. There is enough story crammed into the last eighty-ish pages to fill at least two novels. I'm serious when I say that. I mean, obviously he would need to add a lot more detail to turn eighty pages into like five or six hundred, but he has the talent to do it. Don't get me wrong. I really enjoyed the ending. I just wish it had been a lot longer because there is a lot there.

While I'm kvetching, I also ran across one part of the book that kind of threw me for a bit. I don't want to spoil to me much, but Peter had a need to uhh... set a trap at one point. The way he did it seemed to be well thought out and researched but honestly, where did Peter get this knowledge? The Infinity has no cell service or internet connection so that's right out. I found this part a bit puzzling.

I know I'm being that guy here but if you've ever met a person who can build this kind of stuff, then you know they've spent a lifetime accumulating the knowledge. Childress is just like "Oh, that'll work." I found myself scratching my head a bit here. Still and all though, I suppose it was plot-necessary and the rule of cool DOES apply here. And oh yes, it was cool. All in all, though, the story was very entertaining and if I ended up wanting more that says good things about it.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Missed Naps

Famished: The Gentleman Ghouls Omnibus by Ivan Ewert

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I'll be the first to admit that I should read more horror. As part of the generation that grew up on A Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the 13th. I should love it, but I just don't read it that much. That may very well be about to change though and it's all because of Ivan Ewert's Famished: The Gentleman Ghouls Omnibus. Don't read this one right before bedtime kiddies!

Seriously, Ewert nailed the setting for this. The perfect horror setting is one that's close enough to the real world as to be indistinguishable on the surface yet is terrifyingly different underneath. Ewert got that to perfection. The first book starts with what appears to be a normal Christmas Eve dinner. Unknown to Gordon Velander, our main character, it is anything but. It's not until after Gordon goes to Christmas Eve Mass that he finds out that there is something wrong. It's not until a few chapters later that he realizes what it is.

Which leads me to my next point. Ewert manages to get us totally immersed in his world without infodumping. That couldn't have been easy. We're given whatever information we need at the moment without having it all force fed to us quickly. Part of the reason this is possible is because Gordon begins the story unaware of what lies beyond and what part he plays in it. Part of it is just good writing. Admittedly, there is a lot of overlap between the two, but that's how I see it anyway.

The story is thoroughly entertaining, but I can't quite grow to love Gordon. He's sort of an anti-hero. (Minor spoilers ahead. Sorry, can't figure out a way to avoid them) The people Gordon is fighting against are cannibals, although they would be disgusted to hear someone call them that. They use torture and kidnapping to get what they want. In a way, you could argue that they poison Gordon to bring him to The Farm, which is the name and primary setting of book one. They're not nice people and it is very easy to root against them. Lord knows I did. I mean, we're talking about people who farm other human beings for food a la the Creepies in William W. Johnstones' The Ashes series.

The Gentleman Ghouls make a smart, crafty, tough opponent and I've always loved books with a strong enemy. Seriously, GI Joe was fun as a kid, but no one wants to read about a dumbass enemy like Cobra Commander in their forties. Ewert has delivered in spades. The Ghouls know their stuff and use it to the best possible effect. Gordon's only real advantages tend to be his guts, his brains and to a certain extent the element of surprise. Gordon holds the initiative and can call the shots and they still almost beat him repeatedly. This isn't a Saturday morning cartoon. There is real suspense here.

Ewert's backstory for the Ghouls is awesome as well. The guy has done enough historical research to have picked a group that everyone knows existed but whose eventual outcome is unknown to history. This gives him a good way to root the group in the modern-day United States while adding deep roots and not giving anyone a reason to be suspicious that there is anything untoward going on. This could not have been easy to do but he pulls it off with aplomb. I won't say who, but this is a historical group that I have often wondered about myself. They're just popular enough that people will get the reference. Granted, I'm a nerd with a history degree but this makes me happy.

Gordon on the other hand is not always such a nice guy himself. He consorts with demons. He tortures people. He does whatever is necessary to achieve his goals, uses whatever means he can find but there are some steps he takes that I don't necessarily approve of. I'm not saying this makes him a terrible person. Drastic times call for drastic measures and he's fighting against cannibals. I'm just saying he's a

little more morally ambiguous than some other heroes I've read. In a way, that's almost a good thing. No one is perfect and Gordon certainly is not.

On the other hand, you would never mistake Gordon for a hardcore anti-hero in the mold of Thomas Covenant who is often wantonly cruel and has to be forced to save the world. Gordon has his good side as well. He fights hard to find and protect his mother. He tries to save his girlfriend and fails, but at least manages to show her that he respects her in the only way she would understand. even that was a little weird though. He's a complicated guy and I respect that about him.

The demons in the books have a very, well, demonic feel to them. The delight in death and destruction as well as the pleasures of the flesh. They do whatever they want and answer only to each other. They show no sense of responsibility whatsoever. I like these demons, by which I actually mean that I hate them.

Ewert has a gift for description. Some of the scenes in this book make my stomach turn. In and of itself that's no surprise in a horror setting but I've seldom seen it done so well. There is one scene in particular where a description of a demon, emerging from someplace uhh... unique makes my skin crawl. This is a good thing though, because my skin NEEDED to crawl there. It's horror. It needs to make you uncomfortable and it needs to do it the right way. Ewert succeeded in that.

This is the part where I mention any drawbacks to the works but at the end of the day, I really couldn't find any. These things just work. The characters are believable. The plot movies. The setting is eerie. Gordon's motivations are believable as are those of his adversaries. Ewert has done a phenomenal job.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Cutlets

### Fish Tails by Sheri S. Tepper

#### Review by Sam Lubell

Originally published in SFRevu ([www.sfrevu.com](http://www.sfrevu.com))

There is something about writers near the end of their careers that causes them to try to link up their previous work into one tidy package. Asimov linked his Robots and Foundation series; Terry Brooks connected his Word and Void series set in the present day with his high fantasy Shannara series; and by the end of his career Heinlein had his characters jump into fictional universes owned by others as well as his own. So, after 34 novels, it is not completely surprising that Sheri S. Tepper would do a crossover. Fish Tails, the third book in the trilogy started with A Plague of Angels, has guest appearances by three characters from her three True Games trilogies –Mavin Manyshaped from The Song of Mavin Manyshaped, Silkhands from the original True Games trilogy, and Jinian from the Jinian Footseer trilogy. Although those trilogies were fantasy novels, Fish Tails is science fiction.

Fish Tails is set on a far future Earth, long after the Big Kill wiped out most of the population. Plagues and ganger violence has destroyed most of the cities and technology survives mostly in isolated enclaves, the Edges, and the distant lands of Tingawa. Fish Tails opens with Abasio, a former gang leader and wanderer, Xulai, a Tingawa princess, and their talking horse Blue traveling in a wagon with their twin babies, the first sea children designed to survive underwater (and yes, they do indeed have the fish tails of the title).

The group is on a mission to warn people that the waters are rising and the Earth will completely be covered with water in just a few generations. They are looking for people willing to have their genes



transformed so they can bear sea children of their own. But they have to be careful to avoid Lorpists who insist that people should not deviate from its traditional shape, and even attack people who have accidentally cut off a finger. Abasio and Xulai's story intersects with that of young Needly and her grandma who come from the extremely misogynist Hench Valley. Although just 10, Needly is a super-intelligent, super competent girl who proves very helpful in the book's adventures.

Throughout the book, Abasio has dreams of a place called Lom, which was settled by people from Earth. His dreams feature Silkhands, Jinian, and a six legged, six armed galactic officer nicknamed Fix-it. But the crossover characters do not appear on Earth until very late in the novel. Much of the book is episodic, as the characters encounter various people who help or hinder their quest (the farm boy Willum who joins them manages to do both) and there is no real villain character. Gradually, a plot emerges as a griffin kidnaps Needly and Willum to force the adults to develop a way for her species to survive the rising waters.

Tepper is known for having strong environmental and feminist themes in her novels, which in a few books seemed to overwhelm the story. This preaching does occasionally pop up here, especially with Grandma's lectures to Needly about the monkey-brain people and many conversations about bao, a concept from the True Game books that is a combination of a conscience with the ability to predict the results of one's actions. Many of the themes in *Fish Tails* may seem overly familiar to frequent Tepper readers, but they still work here since this is a career capstone book. Ironically, the cause of the rising waters in this book is not global warming or anything done directly by man, but the result of galactic manipulation and world-spirits that could not possibly have been foreseen by even responsible humans.

Although characters from three of Tepper's early trilogies appear, for most of the book they are present only in Abasio's dreams. When they do appear in person, they are mostly passive plot devices. I find it hard to believe that the Mavin Manyshaped of the earlier books, when given a whole new world to explore, would not fly off to look around and I was disappointed that Jinian had no philosophical conversation with Xulai. So, a reader of *Fish Tails* does not need to have read the other books; however, this book is a direct continuation of *The Waters Rising*, so readers do need to read that one first. An author's note summarizing the previous books appears at the end of *Fish Tails*, instead of at the beginning, which would have been more useful. The book is also long; at 700 pages this single book is longer than the collected original True Game trilogy.

Sheri S. Tepper died in 2016, and this was her last novel, a fitting conclusion to a noble career. Not only does it tie into characters from her first few books, it returns to her frequent themes of feminism, environmentalism, extinction, and bao. Tepper is a message writer who requires the reader to think and consider what she has to say. Yes, in some cases *Fish Tails* seems to repeat things she has said earlier, but the book can be considered as the final summing up chapter of the philosophical treatise that is Tepper's work.

Obviously, *Fish Tails* is not the place to start reading Tepper, but those who have enjoyed previous books of hers, even those who gave up on her when a novel turned too polemical, should read this whole trilogy of *A Plague of Angels*, *The Waters Rising*, and *Fish Tails*. It would also help to have read the three True Game trilogies (which are all much shorter than this book.)

## A Fistful of Credits edited by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I have to admit to being a bad boy. I had heard a lot about the Four Horsemen Universe, but I hadn't tried it. This is a bad thing for a guy like me. I love military SF. I love stories about mercenaries. I freaking love mecha combat and I can't get enough of plucky little humanity stories. It was obvious that I needed an in to this universe and so I jumped at the chance to get a copy of A Fistful of Credits, an anthology edited by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey. I figured to be thoroughly entertained and to learn about this awesome universe. I wasn't disappointed on either count. This anthology really rocks. I'll get to each story in a bit, but I wanted to share a few thoughts on the anthology overall first.

Each story starts with notes about the author. I find this to be excellent. I love indie authors but I haven't had time to read them all. The information about each author, what other things they've had written and published and where to find them was awesome. I'm not promising to read them all (I, like most of you, have limited resources of both time and money) but I'll definitely get to a few at least. So good work there. Chuck Gannon's preface is pretty awesome too, as it provides a gateway for those of us (yup, guilty) who haven't had a chance to read the stories previously. I really wish I hadn't need it, but I did.

I also want to get into the organization of the anthology for just a second. The first story is called "The First Alpha" by Mark Wandrey. I'll get to a review of the story itself in a second, but for now I want to express a bit of frustration. This is an anthology set in the Four Horsemen Universe. The premise of the entire series is that humanity has been introduced to a wider universe full of aliens and can only survive by selling their services as mercenaries. When I opened this ebook I wanted to walk face first into a kick-ass mercenary story. I wanted a battlefield with bodies and explosions. What I got was a crime thriller. It's a good story (more on that next paragraph) but I really don't think that it was the right tale to kick off the anthology with. I was a bit disappointed here because it wasn't what I was expecting. Overall, it didn't really detract from my overall enjoyment of the collection all that much, but it was a bit jarring. Other than that, things seemed to flow smoothly, but honestly if I were to read AFoC again, I'd probably skip this one and come back to it.'

"The First Alpha" by Mark Wandrey was a look into life on Earth in the Four Horsemen Universe (4HU). Things on humanity's home planet are not good. People are broke to the point where most of them can't afford a simple breakfast out. Crime is rampant and infrastructure is crumbling. Our "hero" is a guy named Zeke. He's sneaky. He's resourceful. He's got a plan. This was an entertaining story with a surprise ending that I never saw coming but that made sense once I read it. Overall, I really enjoyed it once I got past the fact that it wasn't a merc story.

"Breach of Contract" by Terry Mixon is a detective story. It gives us an insight into the workings of law and justice in the 4HU and it really rocks. Of course, I'm partial to story featuring ass-kicking attractive women, but this one has plenty of action and just enough back story to hold everything together without bogging the story down into long reminiscences that would make it drag. The tech is awesome. The search for vengeance is fun and the daring of our heroes Jackie and Anton make "Breach of Contract" a winner.

The business end of the merc business meets good old-fashioned ass-kickery in Jason Cordova's "Paint the Sky." It's the story of Mulbah Luo, who buys a mercenary company and finds out that there's more to running it than just having some gear. He ends up leading his men in the field and learning a few les-

sons along the way. The character arc is amazing. The action is a ton of fun. And this is the type of story I was looking forward to when I cracked this book. There's a bit of a surprise at the end of this one too. I really had a good time following the mercs into the field on their first assignment under a new owner.

Dude. Dude, dude, dude, dude, dude. I loved "Surf and Turf" by Jon Osborne. The only problem I had with this story comes in the introduction. Despite the fact that there is at least one other story in AFoC that includes a tag about an upcoming novel, this one does not. Our main character is Bjorn Tovesson III and he's the reluctant commander of a mercenary unit. He's got an amazing back-story and he's a lot of fun to hang out with. He kicks ass, drinks hard and really does care about his troops and the people they're protecting. In short, he is way too cool of a character to be wasted on only having a short story. The story itself is awesome. The combat is gripping. There's a flirty attractive waitress. The villains are sentient crabs with shell mounted weaponry. "Surf and Turf" drips with awesome. NOW WHERE IS MY NOVEL?!?!?!?!?! (Please?)

"Stand on It," by Kevin Ikenberry takes a tried-and-true trope and makes it amazing. This is the story of a mercenary unit who ends up with more of a challenge than they bargained for – and a missing member to boot. Don't you just hate it when the employer lies about what the mercs are going to be facing and hangs them out to dry? I don't. I mean, I would if I were one of the characters in "Stand on It," but from the point of view of the reader it rocks. I see that Kevin is already signed for a novel in the 4HU. I'm looking forward to it.

You know what's really fun? Enemies that are pretty much invincible but that need to be beaten or we're all gonna die. Seriously. I love it when the Big Bad shows up ripping shit to pieces and the heroes have to save us all, only they NEED MORE POWER. "Lost and Found" but Jon Del Arroz delivers my favorite premise and it just make my day. The solution to the problem is one that I probably would not have come up with, but it makes sense, and it works – barely. The ironic part is that it's not more power that gets the job done. I'll be reading more Jon Del Arroz as soon as I can.

"Gilded Cage" by Kacey Ezell is a story of drug addiction and enslavement. It is aptly named as our heroine, Dr. Susan Aloh, trades her drug addicted lifestyle for a life as a pet to an alien. It's a fun story about a woman who learns to love.

Chris Woods gives us an epic in adventure in "Legends." You can't beat a bunch of mercs in a bar telling war stories, especially when one of them is about to retire and his nickname is "The Legend." This one was over way too soon. It was a great time. Sergeant Martin Quincy is really a bad ass, despite the fact that he really never wanted to be a merc. This hits a lot of the quintessential themes in merc stories. I had a lot of fun with it.

Doug Dandridge brings us "With the Eagles" a story of a merc company battling on a poisonous planet. The dual threats (the enemy and the native flora and fauna of the planet) keep this one suspenseful. We never know what's coming next and neither do the mercs. With the enemy being a fearsome Besquith and a hostage to recover things heat up quickly. This one was a lot of fun.

PP Corcoran's "Dead or Alive" brings us the story of Nikki Sinclair, a Peacekeeper and daughter, and the owner of Sinclair's Scorpions mercenary company in search of a criminal. Nikki is deadly and armed with a M1911 pistol. I'm a huge fan of that much firepower, especially in a world dominated by laser pistols. I just find something satisfying about a weapon that goes BLAM instead of pew. The fact that she gets a couple of friends and tears up the inside of a space station in CASPer power armor is pretty bad ass too.

Christopher Nutall's "Hide and Seek," is a story about a conflict between Allen Jermaine, a security officer aboard a ship and the government of the planet his ship is orbiting which wants to snatch one of his passengers. It fits very well with my attitude toward government and their greedy, imperious, right violating ways. I had a bad case of the screw yous while reading about these damned government agents. I was all up in arms. Good job, Christopher Nutall. You tell it like it is and make the right guy the hero. (HINT: It's not the government.)

"Information Overload" by Charity Ayres is the story of a crew just trying to survive after their ship was sabotaged. Her captain, Janna McCloud, is resourceful and focused and works her tail off to save her crew. Seriously. She does a lot of the work herself. This isn't exactly normal for a captain (unless this is ST:TOS and there's an away mission DERP, DERP, DERP) but it makes sense in the context of the story. She manages to overcome betrayal and get on with her mission. She's a member of the Information Guild, but she gets things done as well as any merc in the book. I like this chick.

"Enough" by Chris Kennedy is probably the best story in AFoC It's the story of a betrayed group of mercs being hunted to extinction by humanity's oldest foe. It kicks large amounts of ass. Since I just mentioned ST: TOS, I should probably bring up another reference: The Kobayashi Maru, only this time there's no way to cheat the way Kirk did. No-win scenarios suck, and when you're pursued by a force that has a massive numerical superiority and has accepted a contract that can only be fulfilled by killing every member of your unit things get desperate, especially when your commander gets offed in the first paragraph. (No, I don't do spoilers. But if it happens on the FIRST PAGE it's not a spoiler.) Captain, cum Colonel Dan Walker doesn't give up on his people or their survival. He does fall for one rather obvious ploy, but maybe he was just tired. And he does what he needs to in the end, regardless of the risk to himself. I really loved this story.

Brad Torgersen was the victim of one of the earliest reviews on this blog. I love Brad's work and his entry (also the final entry of the A Fistful of Credits), "CASPer's Ghost," did not disappoint. When Blue Platoon hits the surface of Echo Tango 11, the fecal matter hits the rotary air impeller. They're seeking a deposit of F11 (the compound that powers spaceflight) and everything goes haywire. Torgersen makes a habit out of dropping surprises in this one and I don't want to spoil it. I'll just say that this "CASPer's Ghost" cooks with grease and it freaking rocked.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Massive Paydays. Honestly, if the first two stories in the anthology had been like the fourth and fifth it probably would have been closer to 4.75 or maybe 5.0. Leading the anthology off with two non-mercenary stories detracted from my enjoyment of the anthology as a whole.

## Galen's Way by Richard Paolinelli Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

From the Dragon Award nominated author of Escaping Infinity, as well as the author of When the gods Fell, we have Galen's Way.

A KIDNAPPED PRINCESS.

THE ANDROMEDA GALAXY'S MOST FEARED MERCENARY.

AN EVIL EMPIRE ABOUT TO BE BORN.

The Princess Rhiannon of Salacia has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom on the fortress planet Nammu. Galen Dwyn, the most feared mercenary in the Andromeda Galaxy has been hired to rescue her and bring her home.

But even as his rescue mission succeeds, Galen will soon find himself on the run with the Princess. Caught in the middle of a web of political intrigue, even as he begins to fall for the Princess, he will have to use every ounce of his skill and cunning to keep them both alive as forces from several planets seek them out.

For her love, he will stand alone against the forces looking to establish a new, and very evil, empire.

Galen will look to keep her safe and bring the budding empire to a halt before it can gain a foothold in the galaxy. He will choose to do so the only way he knows how.

Galen's Way.

Dragon Award finalist Richard Paolinelli takes us on a grand adventure in this Space Opera offering set in the first book of the Starquest Saga. Set in the 4th age of Dragon Award winner John C. Wright's Starquest universe that will feature several books by Paolinelli, Wright, and other authors in the months and years to come.

Just to make that clear, yes, Richard is writing in a John C. Wright universe.

Galen's Way is very much what Star Wars used to be, only with more of the interstellar scheming of Dune.

Here and there, you can see how there are early Star Wars influences sprinkled throughout the book. There's a Totally Not a Death Star ... that makes more sense than the actual Death Star. There's a back-water planet that everyone wants to get away from, and uses it to bolster the local economy by acting as an interstellar dead drop for criminals -- which explains the economy of Tatooine, and Mos Eisley.

However, this is a long time from now, in a galaxy very far away. Because we don't have an Earth anymore. It's quite gone.

Overall, this was a fun book. Despite being set in a John C Wright universe, and being written by Richard, it was not as deep or as involved as Infinity or When the Gods Fell. It's odd. When compared to Richard's other books, it almost feels like a comic book-- but better than anything by Alan Moore or Neil Gaiman.

And going through the book, there are great bits of world building and technology. And you know what? It was just plain fun.

Let's make this ... 4/5? Maybe a low 5/5. It it helps, it's better than any other attempt I've read lately to join the ranks of space opera.

In Plain Sight by Dan Willis  
Review by Pat Patterson  
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The hard-boiled detective is soft-boiled, plus some magic to even things up (bonus included!)  
I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program.

I was born about 20 - 30 years too late to ride the crest of the hard-bitten detective wave. "The Maltese Falcon" movie was released in 1941, and "The Big Sleep" in 1946. When "The Big Chill" came out in 1983, I kept waiting for Marlowe or Spade to appear, only to realize after an hour or so that I had the wrong genre entirely.

However, I have spent many a gleeful hour reading Hammett and Chandler and have often regretted that there isn't MORE coming from those authors, what with them being dead. Dan Willis fits the bill quite nicely, as far as I'm concerned. While the audiences of 1930 - 1950 might have rioted over the addition of magic to blondes and .45s, I find it PERFECTLY acceptable today. In fact, Larry Correia, among others, has explored this territory somewhat, so perhaps other authors will as well, and revive this bit of American pulp excitement.

If you introduce magic into the picture, you have to also create limitations, or else you get a boring world in which Superman exists without Kryptonite. That's accomplished here by having Alex Lockerby's magic generated by the burning of paper upon which special art has been drawn, following very specific patterns, and in some cases, requiring special additions to the ink. While he is able to dash off some simple runes quickly, such as a rune to mend the runs in silk stockings, more sophisticated actions require quite a lot of preparation, as well as a specific skill set. Alex has inherited the ability to make these work, as well as a certain number of proven runes he can replicate, but there is much that he does not know.

The story is set in 1933, with some small modifications to the 1933 we experienced in our timeline. To the best of my recollection, there are no changes that affect the story, other than the presence of magic itself.

The case begins when Alex is called to the scene of a mysterious death by a friend on the police force. Cops don't like Alex's type, since their techniques are expensive, and they intrude on the cop jurisdiction. However, when Alex can produce results, he does get grudging respect. As it happens, in this case, Alex uses his five senses to label this crime as a murder, then employs his art to prove it.

It is primarily the five senses, and a pretty good brain, that Alex employs throughout. The writer has to set up scenes in which the limitations of magic are a factor, and those are done very well. As in the case of the best of the old-time crime stories, sometimes the case turns on the stupidity of the criminal, or an error based on something other than pure evil intent.

The Many Deaths of Joe Buckley  
by Assorted Baen Authors & Barflies

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

The back story, the death scenes, and a great cause to support!

It was quite a few years ago that I began to notice that something STRANGE was happening in the Baen Universe. I kept coming across a familiar name, across more than one series. And then, in Ringo's stories of alien centaurs invading, there was a particularly irritating Persona Data Assistant, given the same name as the character: Buckley.

Wasn't sure if it was real, at first, but when I researched through the books, I found out: yes, it WAS true. Baen authors were killing a character named Joe Buckley, over and over and over again. I'm not going to tell you WHY, because that would be a spoiler; I will say that it became enough of a giggle to me, that in early 2013, I asked a question in the Baen discussion forum:

"Do you have to get permission to kill Joe Buckley, or can anyone do it?"

Many, many comments down-thread someone posted a suggestion, and to the best of my knowledge, it was the first time it was ever seriously proposed that ALL the Buckley Deaths be gathered together in a single anthology. And that's what we have here. It contains a lethal alphabet, mayhem arranged to the structure of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," more forms of murder than most people could imagine. But then, most people don't write science fiction.

In addition to the death scenes, you will find valuable commentary by many of the authors, and that includes (GASP) a commentary by the dead man himself, Joe Buckley!

Now, since this was published on Veterans' Day, 2014, Buckley has been killed quite a few more times. Whether we will ever get "The Many MORE Deaths of Joe Buckley," I do not know. But, buy this book, for two reasons:

1. It is great fun!
2. ALL of the proceeds from the sale of this collection will go to two charities: Operation Baen Bulk, which sends books, ereaders, and other supplies to our men and women in uniform, and ReadAssist, which allows disabled readers free access to Baen ebooks.

How often can you enjoy mayhem that also brings good escapist literature to the troops and to the disabled? GO FOR IT!

Man-Kzin Wars XIII by Larry Niven

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

If I have done my math approximately correctly, it's been about 30 years since the publication of the very first Kzin story, "The Warriors." And it has been five years since the most recent volume of "The Man-Kzin War" was published. This 13th volume came out six years ago. The occasion for my review is that I recently discovered that after this INTERMINABLE wait, we are going to get volume 15 sometime in February! Scream and leap, Kzin fans, scream and leap! Because Brad Torgersen his own self has one coming up in Volume XV!!!

Some familiar names in this volume, and some new. The challenge is always to find something new to contribute to a body of work this comprehensive, WITHOUT utterly breaking faith with established storylines.

MISUNDERSTANDING, by Hal Colebatch and Jessica Q. Fox. This story is a HOOT! It takes a line from Niven's original story and expands on it. It's about those bizarre aliens who thought they could travel in time! Don't be ridiculous; NO ONE can travel in time!

TWO TYPES OF TEETH, by Jane Lindskold. Carnivore teeth tear and cut; herbivore teeth clip and grind. But humans have two kinds of teeth. What does it mean, to have a sentient species not limited to just one thing? A Kzin prisoner of war must grapple with that difficult concept.

PICK OF THE LITTER, by Charles E. Gannon. A very lengthy selection, this could easily have been three separate stories. (But you get them all, for one low price!) At the beginning of the wars, you had the administrators of the Golden Age on Earth, who wished to exclude violence from human existence. You also had the ARM, who were a bit more cynical, but also far more ruthless. Then, you had the humans at Alpha Centauri, who were too involved in making a place to live to be tied up in ethical conundrums. Everybody has an agenda, and the one place those coincide is that there is a need to capture a viable Kzinti kit. After THAT point, however, the interests diverge wildly. Gannon looks closely at the effect this will have on the infant Kzin, growing to adulthood.

TOMCAT TACTICS, also by Charles E. Gannon. Long-term thinking, paranoia, and a few other human factors result in some very long-term plans being made. But that takes time that the humans don't have, when the cats invade Wonderland. Prep NOW; plan...later? Is that even possible?

AT THE GATES, by Alex Hernandez. I believe this is THE deepest-digging story of the collection, in that references go back to the Angel's Pencil, yet the action is from much later in the Wars. A community of Kzin and Humans live in hiding near Kzin-controlled space. They believe they are safe, until their warning systems tell them of a Kzin warship entering their system.

ZENO'S ROULETTE, David Bartell. Yes, it's a Kzin story, but it's also a math story. And maybe not every game has a winner, although there must always be a loser when the stakes are this high.

BOUND FOR THE PROMISED LAND, Alex Hernandez. A Kzin Telepath, worn out from years of service, discovers multiple atrocities being perpetrated by humans on Kzin. And the ONLY place he can go for help? It's the humans, naturally.



Methuselah's Children by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

The evil days come for the Howard Families. Luckily, Lazarus Long is on the case.

It is roughly a century after the events depicted in *Revolt in 2100*. The world is ruled by the Federation, under the Covenant (basically, a version of the US Constitution). However, all is not well. The Howard Families, a group of humans who have been literally bred for long life (the oldest in the group is over two hundred years old), made the mistake of revealing their existence to the rest of the human race. Convinced, incorrectly, that the Howards have a secret to long life – a secret that they are apparently unwilling to share – greedy and desperate men whip up a storm of public feeling against the immortals. Their complete destruction is apparently at hand.

Lazarus Long, the oldest Howard, finds himself in an uneasy alliance with Slayton Ford, the planetary administrator. Ford, once convinced that there is no secret, covertly assists the Howards to steal a starship and flee across the interstellar void; the Howards leave, reluctantly, because the only alternative is being ripped apart for a secret that simply doesn't exist.

This might be enough adventure for one book – Heinlein does a good job of showing how Ford is forced into a position where he must commit a horrific crime or stand aside and watch someone else do it – but the story doesn't end there. Travelling across the stars, accompanied by Ford (who deserted his post when it became clear that he was on the verge of being deposed), the Howards stumble across two very different alien civilisations. The first, a seemingly harmless planet of religious aliens, is dominated by very real (and unseen) gods; the second, a planet of advanced telepaths, is ruled by a race that improved itself beyond belief ... and, quite kindly, offers to do the same for the human settlers. Horrified, perhaps convinced that home is best, the settlers fly back to Earth ...

... And discover that a frantic research project has discovered the secret of eternal life after all! (The government dared not admit that there was no secret, after it had drummed up support for a campaign against the Howards.) Amused, the Howards trade the secret of FTL to Earth and are reintegrated into society. Lazarus, suspecting that Earth has no place for him, promptly starts making plans to go out again.

I've often figured that one of the reasons Heinlein remains popular is that his characters are recognisably human, even when his technology is a mixture of strikingly advanced and surprisingly primitive. This is true of both the personal – Lazarus is not that alien for a man in his third century – and the social. Heinlein shows us just how easy it is to whip up support against a despised and envied minority, from politicians who seek to gain advantage to men who simply don't want to die early. (This was the original motive behind the Howard Foundation.) The desperate desire not to die drives people to do horrific acts in the hope it will save themselves.

This creates a trap, as Heinlein shows, for politicians who might otherwise be quite reasonable. Ford knows that trying to drag the secret out of the Howards is pointless, but if he tries to tell his people that he'll be lynched. He finds himself torn between exterminating the Howards, and copping the blame for destroying the 'secret,' or letting someone else do it; he even talks himself into believing that a quick extermination will be the kindest solution, as it will save the Howards from being tortured to death.

And the hell of it is that he might be right. Some problems simply don't have solutions; Ford's administration runs aground on simple bad luck, rather than incompetence.

The Howards themselves, for all of their great age, are also recognisably human. When faced with a sudden and seemingly all-encompassing threat, they respond in a number of different ways; some try to argue for their rights, some try to stick their heads in the sand, some even propose a racial war between long-lives and short-lives. However, it is clear that they lack the mentality to fight; they scrabble over trivial points until it is far too late, debating the value of spilled milk when there is no way they can put the genie back in the bottle. They also react with a certain amount of fear towards Lazarus Long, regarding him as a sheep might regard a sheepdog protecting him from the wolves. The problem, of course, is that – to the sheep – a sheepdog looks very much like the wolf. I don't fully hold with the sheep/sheepdog/wolf hierarchy, but there is a lot of truth in it.

They are also afraid of death, something which is true of just about everyone in the novel (with the possible exception of Lazarus Long.) Ford even admits that, if there was a secret, he would have torn the Howards apart to get it. What humans will do to avoid death is, in some ways, the driving question of the novel; the early Howards are bred for long life, the government throws everything it can into a research program to prolong lives, Mary decides to give up her individuality and join an alien hive-mind rather than die as a human. And yet, it is clear that long-life isn't an unmixed blessing. Lazarus himself admits that his mind is slowly starting to crack under the strain of living for so long.

Heinlein shows us many things that would be recognisable today, for better or worse. His outline of the events that led to the First Prophet and the establishment of the Theocracy bears a disturbing amount of resemblance to events on college and university campuses today. (This was something he would address in more detail in *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*.) The dangers of mob rule and media manipulation are made clear, long before Obama and Trump used social media to speak to the masses. It is quite possible to think that the First Prophet got a boost from the chaos of excessive liberalism – just as Pompey eventually became de facto dictator of Rome – and, unlike Pompey, he didn't stop cracking down when the immediate problem was removed.

On a smaller level, the characters themselves read a little oddly. In Lazarus Long's case, it is somewhat justified; he's over two centuries old and reads like a man who stepped out of the past and into the future. There is a considerable amount of values dissonance; on one hand, he has no compunctions about stealing what he needs, but on the other he has a number of recognisably sexist attitudes. (He gets better in later books.) Ford is very much a ruthless and practical man, caught up in a crisis that is not of his making and defies conventional solutions. Mary, honestly, is very much a foolish woman without a gram of sense ... and while this might be understandable in a teenage girl, she is supposed to be old enough to know better.

Surprisingly, for a book written in serial form in 1941 – and later turned into a novel in 1958 – it also manages to include an observation on race that, once again, proves that Heinlein was no racist:

“The Negro hated and envied the white man as long as the white man enjoyed privileges forbidden the Negro by reason of colour. This was a sane, normal reaction. When discrimination was removed, the problem solved itself and cultural assimilation took place.”

The idea that African-Americans might resent WASPs – let alone that they might have a good reason to feel resentment – would have been revolutionary in its day. Heinlein was looking forward to the day when colour barriers were nothing more than a distant memory, a day that has yet to materialise (in

some ways, because people on both sides don't want them to materialise, something that clicks with the book). However, this is not a solution to the crisis:

“There is a similar tendency on the part of the short-lived to envy the long-lived. We assumed that this expected reaction would be of no social importance in most people once it was made clear that we owe our peculiarity to our genes – no fault nor virtue of our own, just good luck in our ancestry. This was mere wishful thinking [SNIP] what actually happened was this: we showed our short-lived cousins the greatest boon it is possible for a man to imagine ... then we told them it could never be theirs.

This faced them with an unsolvable dilemma. They have rejected the unbearable facts, they refuse to believe us. Their envy now turns to hate, with an emotional conviction that we are depriving them of their rights ... deliberately, maliciously. That rising hate has now swelled into a flood which threatens the welfare and even the lives of all our revealed brethren ... and which is potentially as dangerous to the rest of us. The danger is very great and very pressing.”

What does one do when faced with an insolvable problem? Ford – and Heinlein – point out that there are simply no halfway solutions that might be accepted. The idea of Howards donating sperm to short-lives might work, in theory, but it would simply spark off another crisis. Not everyone wants to be faced with a choice between raising children who aren't theirs and condemning their biological children to short lives. People with an inferiority complex, people who feel they have been treated unfairly, can do dangerous things. If Harry Potter's Wizarding World was to be declared real tomorrow, how many of us would wind up like Petunia Dursley?

A decent writer might get a single story out of this crisis. Heinlein told us several, combining pulp fiction with genuine literature ... and tossed out a number of interesting ideas along the way. His technological predictions range from excellent to poor – he describes a device that functions a little like a TIVO, with a commercial-skip function – but his socio-political predictions ring uncomfortably true today. Let us hope that the rest of his story does not come to pass.

Overall, Methuselah's Children reads a little clunky these days – because of the blending of pulp and literature, combined with poor technological predictions, but it remains a decent read and a cautionary tale against mob rule and those who would exploit it.

## One Jump Ahead by Mark L. Van Name

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

About 12 years ago, Mark L. Van Name appeared onto the military science fiction field with this book, and we all stood around and were amazed.

Keith Laumer developed the idea of the self-aware war machine in his BOLO series, but each one of those behemoths was really only seen once, in a short story. What Van Name has done is different; commencing with this book, the self-aware war machine is a space assault shuttle named Lobo who is a PERMANENT character. Furthermore, Lobo becomes a companion, and a friend, to the human Jon Moore.

The backstory is obviously well established; it's just not revealed, except one teasing bit at a time. The single characteristic that separates Jon from the rest of humanity is revealed in a little throw-away re

counting of a series of conversations he has with a washing machine.

Yep, that's right. Jon can talk to washing machines. Jon can talk to ANY machines, as it turns out. And how that happened involves mysterious circumstances, torture, a missing sister, and banked-up rage.

The story includes some nice passive-aggressive banter between Lobo and Jon, and the core of their relationship has definite elements of humor without being slapstick. Both are serious people, and they take advantage of every occasion where the opposition does not treat them seriously enough.

The important points to remember are these: Both Jon and Lobo are lethal; both have been programmed by others and by their past behavior, and they both are highly motivated to seek justice for the wrongs done to them. And, they are suckers for little lost kittens, regardless of species.

**Penance by Paula Richey**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

What can I say about Penance that I haven't already said about the rest of Silver Empire's Heroes Unleashed universe?

Quite a bit, actually. Much to my surprise.

The Story.

The "Prime" (The HUU's version of someone with powers) in this case is Penance Copper. At 17, she's been on the streets for most of her life. She's been raised by a street thug named Acid her entire life. Then the day comes that Acid asks her to take out a local hero named Justice.

That's the last straw.

Unfortunately, this last mission from Acid leads Penance in the middle of an interstellar invasion by Kail-- a supply sergeant from another planet. His men need food and they need water. And the nearest planet to raid? Earth. And they have a place full of food and water. It's called a football stadium, and there's a game on, so there are plenty of hostages.

And Penance is the only one who can get inside.

Hilarity ensues.

This story was just so well told, I breeze through more than half of it in a single night. Good plotting, action, and character. It's all well put together.

The Characters

Penance is interesting. Because she's the Artful Dodger with superpowers, working for Fagan-as-super-villain. She's a character that has to think about using her superpowers--like used her electromagnetic powers and abilities to copy anything with an RFID chip (electronic keys, alarm system codes), or her plasma abilities to cook microwave popcorn in her hand. Also, the ability to shock someone back to life, something I want more electricity-based heroes to do (I think Endgame may have been one of the

few times someone tried it). Paula even highlights how Penance can have these powers without cooking herself.

She's also stronger than the average bear (a literal bear). And she's Southern...By the time we get a quarter of the way through the book, Penance sounds and looks like Rogue, with additional powers that feel like "What if Jubilee was useful."

And yet, Penance isn't so overpowered that she overcomes anything that gets in her way. At least four times in the book she gets her ass kicked fairly thoroughly--once by simple science.

With Kail, our alien, it's interesting that his story could be easily summed up as "the quartermaster needed some lousy supplies," but boy, does that spiral. Seeing things through his eyes tells the reader more about his planet, his culture, and him, more easily than a chapter-long data-dump on societies. And the culture clash is as effective as Crocodile Dundee, if sometimes less funny.

Not to mention that limiting the POV to these two main characters highlights just how much one knows about the other, that even the other isn't aware of about themselves....

Yes, I think that sentence made sense. Honest.

And I like that Kail, as supply sergeant, makes his own clothing. And bookshelves.

And the nicest thing? Kail even thinks like an alien.

## The World Building

Separating out the world building from the characters and the story required a crowbar in this instance. There are no data dumps here. There are no exposition paragraphs. There isn't even a chapter where Kail regales Penance with the exact nature of their cultural and societal differences.

And it's unnecessary. Paula Richey spent the entire book worldbuilding. It's shown in almost every interaction between the two, and their actions.

If David Weber could do this in his novels, they'd be at least 20% shorter.

The impressive thing is that Penance created and explained an entire alien civilization with stopping to spell out how it worked. And it works like Ming the Merciless learned to make an entire generation put themselves in debt, and be in chains forever. I didn't know he was a Democrat. Paula does a great job of making and unrepentant SOB you just want to see have a stake rammed through his heart.

And, at the same time, Penance spells out a lot of life on the streets for Heroes Unleashed. Every time I expect them to go bigger, they manage to do a lot with very little. Paula manages to take one element and write a good chunk of the book around it.

There are also at least two threads that tie Penance back to the original Heroes Fall book.

Not to mention that I enjoyed having the alien invasion spun by the Men in Black as "he's a new supervillain. Nothing to see here." Seriously, if John Ringo did the politics of superpowers, this would be the series he lifted it from.

Not to mention that Paula has a grasp of technology no one points out. For example "your invisibility

suit is nice, but what happens if it's really dusty?"

What's the politics?

There is only one way there is a political angle to this novel. Penance is reading a Bible throughout, because she's trying to learn about this Jesus person. I think that along will turn off certain readers. And we all know some of them, don't we?

Imagine if "Christian Fiction" only started having conversations about Jesus at natural points in the story.... like if an alien asked questions.

Penance was just plain fun. I can usually tell what writing tricks are executed when "This is the data dump. This is act one finale. This is how the slip in backstory." Not here. It's all smooth and effortless and makes writing look easy. Why couldn't I have written like this when I started.

And yes, this is labeled "YA." How? Why? Aside from the age of the characters, I can't really tell you. It's not like anything in the rest of the HUU has had egregious violence, or sex, or foul language. (And nothing has been as bad as the icicle in Die Hard 2, not even John Wick's pencil.) And, as one reviewer said of Narnia, "This is too good for children."

Anyway this book is fun, it's awesome, and you should buy it. Links are below.

Publisher link: <https://silverempire.org/product/penance/ref/274>

## Revolt in 2100 by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Imagine a United States dominated by a theocratic fundamentalist Christian dictatorship, where men are brainwashed and women are sold as slaves, where the poor are ground under while the rich clergy live in luxury, where freedom is a dream and free expression almost impossible ...

The Handmaid's Tale? Who said anything about The Handmaid's Tale? I'm talking about Robert A. Heinlein's Revolt in 2100, which predates The Handmaid's Tale by thirty-two years. (The three short stories that make up the book were actually written before and then edited and expanded for the novel.) I have no way to know for sure, but – given the similarities – it's quite possible that Revolt in 2100 inspired The Handmaid's Tale, although it should be noted that the former is far less harrowing than the latter.

Revolt in 2100 is, as noted above, three stories. The first – 'If This Goes On' covers the revolution against the theocratic regime; the second – 'Coventry' – features a man who feels he doesn't fit in to the post-theocratic state; the third – 'Misfit' – features a genius and one of the first asteroid settlement stories in SF history. (Oddly, Misfit is very definitely the misfit of the book.) Revolt in 2100 is tied into Heinlein's future history, which is why it is sometimes paired with Methuselah's Children. The latter takes place in the same universe, a few decades down the line.

The hero of If This Goes On is John Lyle – a young and strikingly naive junior officer in the army of the Prophet. Originally devout, Lyle rapidly starts to question his faith in his superiors – if not in the faith – when he falls in love with Sister Judith, one of the Prophet's Virgins. Lyle rapidly discovers, as does Judith herself, that she is expected to sexually service the man ... and, when she refuses to do it

the first time, she is confined to quarters for a brainwashing session intended to make her see the light. (Judith herself was apparently not told what was expected of her earlier.) Lyle finds himself drifting into the resistance against the Prophet and, eventually, playing a crucial role in the eventual overthrow of the government. The book wryly notes that the Prophet is killed by his ‘virgins’ when they finally realise that help is on the way.

It’s a curious story, both helped and hindered by its first-person format. The viewpoint remains firmly with Lyle at all times, which allows Heinlein to speed matters along (and puts him in the cockpit of revolution) but also leaves us with an impression of our hero as very naive. (This wasn’t helped by the limitations of the censors, at the time; Atwood had far more freedom to be explicit.) His companions, Zeb

Jones and Sister Magdalene, are far more understanding of their situation than the hero. At the same time, one may appreciate Lyle’s slow shift from brainwashed officer to independent-minded man; he may have realised that the Prophet is a fake, but it takes him longer to shrug off all his conditioning. This is actually quite realistic and forms a major theme of the book. There are moments of sly humour – the rebels write propaganda that, on the face of it, favours the regime, but its readers will not see it that way – and moments of ‘culture shock’ when Lyle discovers just what freedom means.

The romances in the story are somewhat less believable, unsurprising given – again – the limitations imposed on Heinlein. Judith herself is very much a cipher, a girl whose role in the plot is mainly to kick it off and, after her escape from the country, is written out of the story completely. (She finds another lover and sends Lyle an apologetic letter saying so.) It’s hard to see the Lyle-Judith pairing as anything more than a combination of hormones and desperation; Heinlein was right, I think, to portray it as doomed to fail. The later match between Zeb and Magdalene (Maggie) is doomed too, at least in part because – as Maggie says – they are both dominant partners. Quite what this says about the Lyle-Maggie relationship (they are married late in the story) is open to interpretation.

Heinlein does use the ‘Damsel in Distress’ trope to kick off the story, and Judith is hardly a developed character (although she does show considerable bravery when she refuses to service the Prophet), but Maggie is far more capable. *If This Goes On* will never win any prizes for female empowerment – although one of the reasons Maggie joined the rebellion is because of the treatment of women – but it is better than most books of its time. It also showcased a surprising number of diverse groups cooperating to bring down the regime, ranging from Catholics and Mormons to freemasons and freethinkers. None of these groups are portrayed as evil.

The book also showcases the effects of living in a de facto police state. Spies are everywhere, so you don’t know who to trust – and, of course, some men make a living by spying on their enemies. No one has any chance to vent, which means that the behaviour of some of the rebels – freed of social constraints – is a little bit weird. Lyle is, in some ways, the mildest case; Maggie is quite augmentative, perhaps in response to being trapped in the harem (look what happened to Judith), while Zeb is both a freethinker and quite dominating in his own way, at one point threatening to warm Maggie’s pants if she doesn’t behave herself. A person may be removed from a bad environment, but they run the risk of bringing that bad environment with them.

And it also dwells on a problem that be-devilled the US in Iraq, 2004. An entire population has been subjected to decades of propaganda. If you give them the franchise ... what next? Will they vote the former oppressors back into power? Or will they vote for someone worse? The book offers no good answers: one rebel psychologist proposes a program of counter-brainwashing, much to the horror of some of the older men. The proposal is rejected, probably for the best, but it is a question Heinlein skirted. How do you keep people from mindlessly returning to the old regime? Or something worse?

Coventry, set roughly fifty years after the first story, offers an answer. The New United States is bound together by the Covenant, a set of agreements on how society is to function; those who refuse to live under the agreements are offered a flat choice between mental conditioning and being sent to live outside the NUS. The 'hero' of the story, a man called David MacKinnon who is on trial for assault, chooses to leave rather than have his mind forcibly changed. Expecting a freethinker's paradise, MacKinnon discovers – to his horror – that the world outside the barrier is a nightmare. Stumbling across a plot by the outsiders to break into the NUS – and with a new appreciation of his former society – MacKinnon risks his life to save it.

In some ways, Coventry speaks to me in a manner the previous story does not. A person simply does not appreciate his homeland until he spends some time outside it (I lived for two years in Malaysia) and comes to see how the things he takes for granted aren't universal. The hero was shaped and moulded by his society, his mind driven by a set of unfounded assumptions about how the world worked ... it was a shock, to him, to discover that certain rights are not universal. Those who choose to shun the rule of law cannot call on its protection – or expect to be tolerated by everyone else. There are some lessons that modern-day politicians should learn here. It also makes it clear just how dangerous the lack of a social safety valve can be. People need to be allowed to vent.

One may argue that the story is a little cheapened by the discovery, at the end, that the plot against the NUS is well known to its intelligence service, who chose to allow some aspects of it to go ahead. (Shades of the later Culture novels, perhaps.) But that isn't the point of the story. Coventry is the story of a man who didn't understand what he had, who learned better ... and was lucky enough to survive his mistake.

There is less to say about Misfit, really; it is nothing more than a tale of a super-genius finding a niche. I liked it, but it doesn't speak to me. But Heinlein's afterword is well worth reading, both for its insights into the nature of religious dictatorships (and his reluctance to write a story that would have detailed the First Prophet's rise to power) and an accidental prophecy for how Donald Trump would win the White House in 2016. It's worth repeating one quote:

“It is a truism that almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so, and will follow it by suppressing opposition, subverting all education to seize early the minds of the young, and by killing, locking up, or driving underground all heretics. This is equally true whether the faith is Communism or Holy Rollerism; indeed, it is the bounden duty of the faithful to do so. The custodians of the True Faith cannot logically admit tolerance of heresy to be a virtue.”

These words are as true now as they were in 1953. Faiths – and I don't just include religions in this set – will try to seize control of the levers of power, then turn them against their opponents. Socialists, Communists and Social Justice Warriors are as dangerous, in this regard, as radical Christians and Muslims. Even if they are not so, they need to be aware of the prospect of someone else doing it instead. This leads to a number of regrettable, but subjectively necessary situations. The Israelis will not take the boot off the Palestinian neck any time soon because they believe that the alternative is being crushed themselves – and the hell of it is that human history tells us they are right (current events in South Africa are a salient lesson in the dangers of giving up one's liberties – and defences – in the hope of peace and security). If one must choose between being the bully or the bullied, it is safer to be the bully. This is heartless, but true.

Heinlein does offer a solution. We need a set of universal standards, of rules and laws that apply to eve-



ryone – and are enforced, without fear or favour. We need – pardon the expression – a common code of conduct. This is a thorny subject these days, as many people will be quick to demand exceptions and present excuses for bad behaviour (a point Atwood made in *The Handmaid's Tale*), but it is a nettle that must be grasped. Multiculturalism is not the way forward, but a demonstration of political cowardice, a refusal to stand up to bullies of all stripes. Those who refuse to live by society's rules have no right to live in a just society.

*Revolt in 2100* is not the most polished of Heinlein's novels. The three stories have their limits – the first-person format of the first makes it harder to grasp the sheer horror of the theocratic state, while the narration of the second is very dialectic – yet they have important lessons for modern-day readers. They lack the harrowing nature of *The Handmaid's Tale* – and even some of the Culture novels – but this makes their morals easier to grasp and, I think, for people to share. The world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is so alien to most people that it might as well be fantasy; the world of *If This Goes On* is a recognisable, but warped version of America. One might well use *Revolt in 2100* as the masculine counterpoint to *The Handmaid's Tale*. It makes similar points, while men will find it easier to share Lyle's point of view.

Once again, Heinlein laid the groundwork for others to follow. And, as such, the three stories that make up *Revolt in 2100* are well worth a read.

## Shadow Lands by Lloyd Behm II

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Clickbait: A Bad Moment and A Good Moment

Here's the Bad Moment: I'm on page 14, and I think: "There is no way possible he can maintain this level of hilarity & action throughout the book. He's going to HAVE to fail, somewhere." And I was wrong about that.

Here's the Good Moment: The story line comes to what very well could be the end of the book, and I look down at the progress meter, and I discover I've only completed 80% of the book. LOTS more reading yet to go!

Jesse Salazar is a non-Catholic clergy in a denomination that refers to the clergy as Father. Don't get confused, because one of his buddies IS a Catholic priest, so he's a Father as well. (Actually, not much chance of getting them confused.)

He's also a former Marine who ran into some Really Bad Stuff while deployed, as in, monsters who eat people, and so on. However, he rather wanted a change, so he refused the first employment offer by QMG (Quentin Morris Group). His career plans changed after monsters ate his wife. Now, he's the straight-talking Priest With A Machine Gun, who can kick doors, as well as call on divine aid, to bring supernatural creatures back in line.

"In line" means, not bothering the civilians. It's only when a vampire, werewolf, what have you, lets their behavior get out of control that QMG gets called in. Otherwise, it's a live-and-let-be-undead kind of world.

After punching out a co-worker in the first scene (the aforementioned 14 pages), Salazar is ordered to take a vacation and relax. Since the alternative is to get down-checked by the mental health unit, he agrees to take some time off. As far as the relaxing goes, however, it's just not going to happen; he, along with some people in his general vicinity, get dragged out of our world into the dreary Shadow Land, where monsters have free reign.

Salazar forms an action team out of the people he meets, which include the Catholic priest, some other people, and especially a mysterious woman with an interesting back story.

So, that's the bones of the story. It is enough to make an interesting read, regardless of the treatment. However, what Behm does with it is hilarious. He tosses in multiple references to Monty Python and other cultural explosions, such as *The Big Lebowski* and *Sponge Bob Squarepants*. I voluntarily withdrew from the cultural stream a couple of decades ago, but he uses references even I mostly get. (There are a couple of cartoon characters I couldn't identify, but I knew there was SOMETHING there.)

There is plenty of shoot-em-up action going on to please those of us who like to blow things up, and there is also a bit of a mystery/puzzle to be solved along the way. What there ISN'T, is grinding weepy emo time, with sad children watching mothers be eaten in front of them, or those dipstick moves that the guy with too many initials makes, where the best character are doomed from the start. And THAT is a relief. Once I realized it wasn't going to be THAT kind of a book, I relaxed into the pure enjoyment of reading about people shooting dragons with the Ma Deuce, the M2 .50 caliber machine gum:

WHAM. WHAM. WHAM.

I love it.

More to come, evidently, so in the interim, sit back and relax. Father Salazar is on the job!

## Seven Surrenders by Ada Palmer

### Review by Sam Lubell

Originally published in SFRevu ([www.sfrevu.com](http://www.sfrevu.com))

The first book in this series, *Too Like the Lightning*, was a Hugo Award finalist and winner of the 2018 Compton Cook award for best first novel awarded by the Baltimore Science Fiction Society. In my review of the first book, I predicted that Palmer would become an important voice in science fiction. So far, she's making good progress on that.

*Seven Surrenders* is really the second half of *Too Like the Lightning*. Palmer wrote the two as a single book that the publisher, Tor, later divided into two. For this reason, more than most sequels, this continuation will be totally incomprehensible to those who have not read the first book--and even those who have should review that book before jumping into this one.

Summing up the plot of this book is extremely difficult as most of it revolves around revealing the truth behind the mysteries and secrets introduced in the first book. Unfortunately, the first few chapters appear to be fragmented in a way better suited for the middle of a novel (which this admittedly originally was) as a collection of unrelated incidents, religious discussions, and flashbacks.

The book opens, after a quick note about censorship, with a chapter about his kidnapping narrated by Sniper, not Mycroft Canner who narrates the rest of the book. Then the book jumps to a discussion

among the world's political leaders about the investigation into the Black Sakura Seven-Ten list and the secret assassinations performed by the Saneer bash (family) which serves to remind readers of some of the events of the first book. Then there is an elaborate religious discussion when Carlyle Foster is tricked into visiting Madame's brothel/secret religious order only to learn that Dominic is now Carlyle's sensayer (a sort of combination religious advisor/psychiatrist). Dominic uses 18th-century religious philosophy to expose and shatter Carlyle's religious beliefs to convince Carlyle to help Dominic take control of Bridger, the child who can work miracles.

A flashback shows Mycroft's trial for murdering the Mardi bash, revealing that he was saved through the intervention of JEDD Mason, then a child, who recognized that Mycroft was not able to do evil for evil's sake so was essentially benign. After Dominic captures Saladin, Mycroft's lover and partner in killing, Caesar forces Mycroft to admit that Apollo had predicted an inevitable war and was trying to launch it ahead of time so that its severity would be reduced. This was the true reason why Mycroft murdered the Mardi bash, leading to Mycroft becoming a Servicer, a servant to the political leaders, JEDD Mason, and the Saneer bash.

The true virtue of the book is not the extremely complex plot, but the wonderful 18th-century style narrative voice. At some points, Mycroft, an extremely unreliable narrator, admits that he has been concealing the true sex of some of the characters. At other points, Mycroft speaks directly to the reader. "So I raced, and watched, and dispatched a silent prayer too... You may if you wish to aid us, pray as well, reader. The Hand that weaves Providence knows everything from creation to infinity, and takes account of the future when He plans the past; if prayer has any power to sway Fate then, even though, from your perspective, Carlyle was either saved or not saved long ago, it could still be your prayer, now, as you read, that swayed the Judge."

The world of Seven Surrenders is set in our future but a future with strong links to the 18th-century. The author, Ada Palmer, is a Professor of Early Modern European History at the University of Chicago and is also affiliated with its Classics Department and Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies. This series draws on all these aspects of her academic career.

A key feature of the book is that in this future, Madam has rediscovered the power of femininity and sex paired with religion to control others in a gender neutral world since people have not developed their resistance to these tactics through persistent exposure. Ironically, by trying the political leaders to herself, she also ties them to each other, postponing the conflict Apollo foresaw. But not all corruption stems from Madam's attempts to rule the rulers. The Sensayers have been corrupted by Julia Doria-Pamphili's campaign against the Mitsubishi family and the Cousins Feedback Bureau has been rigged.

This complex book really needs a list of all the characters (especially as some have multiple names), their Hives, and their bashes.

Like *Too Like the Lightning*, *Seven Surrenders* is an extremely difficult book. It is simultaneously political, philosophical, historical, and religious. There's little traditional action, most of the conflict takes place through conversations and through exposures of the truth. Readers who accept the challenge posed by this book will find themselves with a book that can affect how they think about the future, present, and past. This is not a beach book, but a rich and highly sophisticated novel that calls for repeated re-readings. Just make sure to read *Too Like the Lightning* first.

Sixth Column by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Heinlein's *Old Shame* isn't as shameful as it could have been.

It is a curious fact that, when the groundless charge that 'Robert A. Heinlein was a racist' is brought up, *Sixth Column* is barely mentioned, even though it is – on the surface – far more incriminating than the later Farnham's *Freehold*. It certainly appears to provide more evidence for the charge. And yet, it is hard to be sure how much of the core idea behind the book is Heinlein's. He wrote from an outline sketched out by John Campbell – who apparently was a racist, or at the very least a believer that white civilisation was the best in the world – and it isn't clear how much of the plot belongs to Heinlein himself. Indeed, in his later years, Heinlein himself apparently regarded the book as an old shame – and it is far less well known than Farnham's *Freehold*.

*Sixth Column*, in many ways, fits into two literary traditions. One, which was on the decline in the 1930s, was the 'invasion literature' genre. These stories tended to show a country being invaded by its foes and crushed underfoot – *The Battle of Dorking* is a good and short example – and often served as a clarion call for bigger and better military expenditure. And the other, which Campbell himself practically founded, was the development of super-technology and the boundless promise of science. *Sixth Column* was not the first to match the two together – *Danger* provides an example of a book speculating on how advanced technology would change the face of war; *The Unparalleled Invasion* touches on biological warfare – but it is certainly, at least in my experience, the most imaginative of them.

The plot starts immediately after Washington is nuked (or at least destroyed) and the United States is invaded and occupied by the Pan-Asians. However, all is not lost. A tiny team of scientists and military men have survived, hidden away in an underground research lab. And they have just stumbled upon a technology that might just allow the United States to regain its freedom, if they can survive long enough to develop and deploy it. It can do everything from influence and kill people based on their racial heritage to transmute dross into gold or turn a wall to dust. Naturally, the leader of the band decides to remain underground until they can take back their country.

But they cannot remain completely isolated, because there's only six of them. They need to establish bases across the occupied country and that isn't easy, because the occupiers are cracking down on everything ... apart from religion. The *Sixth Column* – the term is a reference to the largely non-existent Fifth Column of the Spanish Civil War – therefore develops a fake religion, backed by their superior technology, and uses its temples as recruiting grounds for the insurgency. And, when the time comes, they rise up against the occupiers and take back their country. It is a testament to Heinlein's skill, even as a relatively young writer, that he manages to keep the tension rising even after the new technology is finally deployed.

Heinlein was not, when he wrote *Sixth Column*, the writer he would one day become. It has many of the flaws displayed by a new writer, one who has managed to break into the publishing world but has not yet managed to smooth out his work. And yet, it also shows very clear signs of the greatness Heinlein would achieve. The premise may be ludicrous and the technology so fantastical that it might as well be magic, but *Sixth Column* works better than it should. Heinlein makes it work, at least in part, by never taking his eyes off the people in the story. He does not rely on super-technology to carry the tale.

Indeed, he was very aware of its limits. The proposals for an immediate offensive, once the first generation of projectors have been developed, get shot down for very sound reasons. A mere superiority in weapons, as a number of colonial armies discovered over the years, is no guarantee of victory. The Pan-Asians could easily afford to trade millions of men for each of the Sixth Columnists and call it a bargain. No, the technology has to be carefully developed, then exploited.

He also gives a nod to the sort of tensions that can develop in such a confined space, with a looming threat constantly hanging over their shoulders. The leader worries about his ability to do the job, while his men want to take the offensive or flee ... and a scientist has delusions of grandeur combined with hints of madness that eventually crack his mind. He also worries about introducing women to the hidden research lab, concerned about what impact it might have on the men. (It may sound sexist, but it is a reasonable concern; Heinlein was anticipating the issues caused by the presence of women on naval ships in the modern day.)

Outside the lab, Heinlein paints a grim picture of a population under enemy occupation. I don't know how much Heinlein knew about the Nazi occupation of Europe – Sixth Column was written in 1940, although it includes references to the Holocaust – but the occupied country feels very much like Nazi Europe, with a side order of the Japanese occupation of China. American culture is steadily being destroyed; everyone is registered, written English is banned, schools are closed, men who can't find employment in an approved occupation are shunted off to work camps, saying the wrong thing to an occupier can get you killed ... it isn't a pretty sight. Heinlein doesn't mention rape outright, but it's clear that it happens too; Imperial Japan's soldiers were notorious for raping Chinese women. And yet – oddly – the atrocities committed by the Pan-Asians are not as bad as the ones Imperial Japan would commit in the Second World War. Heinlein underestimated just how far Imperial Japan was prepared to go as the noose steadily tightened around its neck.

Indeed, for all the talk of Pan-Asians, it's fairly obvious that the invaders are pretty much Japanese. Heinlein would have been aware of Japanese atrocities in China and transferring them to America wouldn't have been a stretch. The Pan-Asians are a curious mix of accurate observations on Japan's (at the time) highly militaristic and honourable (by their lights) culture and stereotypes. The urge to save face at all costs, for example, is mingled with an observation – by one of the good guys – that beardless Japanese find bearded men a little overwhelming. I'm fairly sure that isn't actually true. Heinlein seems to have been aware that many of the invaders were human too, but also products of a very different society and therefore could not be expected to think like Americans. But then, as he also notes, humans the world over are unnerved by the unknown.

What saves the book from a cluster of tissue-thin racial stereotypes is the presence of an Asian-American as a hero, one whose entire family has been wiped out for daring to leave Japan. I don't know how the Imperial Japanese responded to Japanese who fled Japan and immigrated to America, but they might well have considered them traitors. Heinlein makes it clear, in many ways, that this American is a hero, an attitude that not many Americans of that time would have liked.

The book is also quite quiet on other races, although it is possible to construct a case proving that both Jeff Thomas and Sergeant Scheer are black, or at least ambiguously brown. But this may make a great deal of sense. A man as observant as Heinlein would have known that the black population of 1940s America wouldn't feel free, whatever their legal status. As Tom Kratman points out, in the afterword to the Baen edition, the black population might side with the invaders. And why not? The chance to get a little of one's own back is one that has seduced many people in far better circumstances. This would probably not have worked out very well for them, no matter who won, but it wouldn't be the first time that someone let the urge for revenge overpower reason. Hell, it might even be the rational choice.

Heinlein also touches on an issue that would have been politically important in 1940, the need to keep in touch with the world. Historically, both China and Japan sought to shut the door to the outside world, burning their ships and killing foreigners who landed on their shores. It brought them nothing, but disaster: internally, they stagnated; externally, more powerful nations eventually came to their lands and crushed them with vastly superior military power. America also tried to stay away from the outside world, after 1918, and paid a steep price for it. In the book, the isolation was far stronger and the sudden outbreak of war – with a vastly superior enemy – proved disastrous.

In the end, *Sixth Column* is a very mixed bag. It has its moments of greatness – and its defence of non-white Americans who happen to be American – but it also has problems left behind – or inserted – by Campbell. It draws a veil over some aspects of the occupation – it is not as mindlessly awful as some of the more recent books, when the rules about what you can and can't put into a story were relaxed – and makes other aspects all too clear. One can see the great writer Heinlein would become shining through its pages, but one can also see the limitations that held him back for much of his professional career. It also doesn't have the sense of scale, of events taking place on a vast field, that might be more than justified by the plot.

And yet, for all it can be used as evidence against him, much of *Sixth Column* is based on reality. Imperial Japan did indeed commit vast atrocities against conquered populations, while treating their own population as little more than insects. Indeed, the Pan-Asians who commit suicide for their failures in *Sixth Column* have their genesis in the Japanese civil servants who had to commit hara-kiri – ritual suicide – after failing to keep Commodore Perry from landing in Japan. And the imperial governments of both Japan and China did everything in their power to save face, right up to and including lying to their superiors in a manner that would not be bettered until Saddam's Iraq. If one goes by the number of American carriers the Japanese reported sunk, even as the USAF began pounding Japan from the air, the entire USN would have been wiped out several times over. Perhaps one of the reasons this book is not dragged up and used to smear Heinlein's name is that anyone who did so would have to deny or minimise real-life atrocities.

At base, *Sixth Column* is an interesting read, but – compared to Heinlein's later works – very limited, even unsatisfying. And yet, as I have said, in it you can see the man Heinlein would become.

### Starman Jones by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

It is, of course, impossible to be sure, but I do wonder if *Starman Jones* influenced *Star Wars*.

Not the plot, of course, but the relationship between the three leads. Luke, Han and Leia have a great deal in common with Max Jones, Sam Anderson and Eldreth 'Ellie' Coburn; the naive farmboy, the lovable rogue and the somewhat spoilt princess. It's easy to look at *Starman Jones* and see traits that would eventually flourish in *Star Wars*, although – as I will discuss later – most characters in the book are recognisable and familiar stereotypes. Indeed, it's quite possible that Heinlein's *Starman Jones* inspired a number of later SF books, including *The Seafort Saga* (young officer finds himself in command of a starship) and *The War Against the Chtorr* (humans wage war against an alien ecology). As always, SF owes a huge debt to Heinlein.

The basic plot is quite simple. Teenage Max Jones, a farmer living with his mother, is aghast to discover that he has a new stepfather who plans to sell the farm and keep the money. After a brief confrontation, Max runs away – taking his uncle’s old collection of spacer books with him. His uncle promised to nominate him for the guild of navigators – the only way to join is to be nominated by a family member – and going to space seems the best way to escape both his uncle and an increasingly crowded and stratified Earth. His escape takes on more urgency when he meets Sam Anderson, who tells him that there’s a good chance the farm can’t be sold without Max’s agreement. His stepfather will be looking for him the moment the penny drops. Sam is nice, it seems, but he robs Max of his books while Max sleeps.

Reaching the guildhall, Max is horrified to discover that his uncle forgot to nominate him after all and, without connections, he will never be a spacer. Outside, he runs into Sam again, who has a suggestion. They buy forged papers and board a starship as ordinary crewmen, with the ultimate aim of jumping ship on a distant colony. Max, reluctantly, agrees ... and, through a series of misadventures (and some behind-the-scenes manipulations from Ellie), finds himself rising in the ranks until, after the senior officers are killed, finds himself taking command of the ship while she is lost in space and bringing her safely home. Upon return, the guild tacitly forgives him (and Sam, who died on the voyage) and Max ends the book resolving to fix the problem that puts birth and family connections ahead of merit.

Starman Jones is not an adventure story in the classic sense, although there is a great deal of adventure. It is the story of a naive young man being tossed into an unfamiliar situation and being forced to master it. Max’s growth as a character comes from his slow rise in the ranks, each one allowing him to learn new skills before moving to the next. Max sees himself as unchanging, but we see him changing. Starman Jones is about maturity, about accepting responsibility for one’s actions and consequences. The book remains popular because, at base, human nature doesn’t change.

Max is contrasted to Sam, who is very much a slippery rogue with a multiple-choice past (it’s revealed at the end that he served in the Imperial Marines, only to accidentally desert midway through his career). Sam’s first approach to any situation is to figure out how to exploit it for his own benefit, although – unlike some people I’ve met – Sam has an understanding of just how far he can go without crossing the line. (He takes control of the ship’s still, for example, but is careful not to let semi-unauthorised drinking get out of hand.) Sam’s good nature softens the character a little, although Heinlein doesn’t let us forget that Sam is a rogue even though he isn’t a bad guy. Max prospers, perhaps, because he is honest enough to confess to the impersonation when he’s caught out, something Sam is reluctant to do. The cynic in me wonders if this really would work out so well in the real world.

Max is also tempted by Ellie, a beautiful girl from a social class so far above him that she might as well be in orbit. Ellie is so ridiculously privileged that she literally has no conception of how lucky she is, or just how much harm her ‘helpful’ interventions could do Max in the long run. She doesn’t appear to have any malice in her, but ... she can do a great deal of harm without it. I’m not one for listening when someone tells me to ‘check my privilege,’ but Ellie really does need to check hers.

And yet, Ellie is a more complex character than she seems. She even admits as much to Max, when they are both trapped and facing imminent death; she’s smarter than she lets on, because it’s safer for a girl not to appear too smart. (Given that she’s an heiress whose most likely fate is being married off to someone her father chooses, this may actually be true.) Her existence has been used as an excuse to attack the book, which is a classic case of ‘interrogating the text from the wrong perspective.’ Heinlein, writing for teenage boys, wanted them to know that teenage girls weren’t airheads, that someone who acted dumb might have good reason to pretend to be dumb. And that, to some extent, they were victims

of their environment. Ellie would be a very different character these days, but I doubt she would be quite as likable.

The secondary characters are fleshed out just enough to make them familiar. The Captain is a classic kindly old man, losing his faculties without being willing to admit it; Simes, the resentful astrogator, is not up to the job, knows he's not up to the job and hates Max for threatening his position. We've all met someone like Simes, someone who owes his position to connections rather than dumb luck, someone who is more interested in covering his ass than doing his job, someone who tries to push us down because he fears what we might do if given a chance. Simes is, in his own way, as universal as Harry Potter's Umbridge. And we all hate him.

It's interesting to note that most of the characters get what they deserve, although Heinlein doesn't make it too specific. Max gets to be a spacer, with the prospect of a more formal command in his future; Sam gets a hero's death, with the slate wiped clean; Ellie gets to marry the man she wants, rather than someone her father picks. The Captain, on the other hand, chooses suicide rather than live with his failure; Simes is killed during a desperate bid to cover up his role in the disaster. And Max's mother and stepfather, we are told, vanished after taking their share of the money, with Max wryly reflecting that his mother will probably put her shiftless husband to work. (Although a man willing to threaten a teenage boy he barely knows with a belting probably won't have any qualms about beating his wife either.) Heinlein tries to show us, I think, that virtue is rewarded. The cynic in me disagrees.

Heinlein's vision of the future, as always, is a mixed bag. Socially, Earth is now a very rigid structure (although it still has room for some family farms) and moving up the ladder is very difficult. (Probably one of the reasons Ellie is so unaware of the realities of life.) Technically, it reads oddly: the starship is both ultra-advanced and very primitive, the guild using logbooks and chart tables rather than computers to navigate (although I suppose one could argue that the guild has a vested interest in preventing the development of anything that might threaten its power.) They have monorails and mag-trains, yet also horse-powered ploughs. And yet, there is enough familiar in the world for us to understand it. Technology does not seem to have changed the world.

On a wider scale, Heinlein is quick to force us to challenge our assumptions. It would not be easy to play Robinson Crusoe and set up a colony in uncharted space, something he would later touch upon in his deconstruction of survivalist fantasies in Farnham's Freehold. The world they land on might not be quite as unpleasant as some of the worlds Heinlein would show us in Methuselah's Children, but it is still unrelentingly hostile to human life. They rapidly discover that trying to get back home is safer than staying on a world that wants to kill them.

The concept of a guild being a good thing is also deconstructed, brutally, in a manner that could easily be related to everything from unions to HR diversity quotas. Unions and suchlike are good ideas, as long as they don't get out of control; they often turn sour when forced to cope with new technology or an influx of talented newcomers, losing sight of what is important as long-established members fight for their positions. The starship is stuck with Simes because Simes is a member of the guild, while the far more talented Max is locked out through not being a member of the guild.

This is a valid point that has even greater relevance in our day. Fundamentally, it does not matter if the person holding a job is white or black, male or female, straight or gay or anything else that can be used to draw a line between two different people. The only thing that matters is can they do the job? Losing sight of that leads, eventually, to absurdity and complete loss of respect. Most people regard Human Resources as the enemy now, with good reason. Heinlein was making the same point that Nick Cole would make later, in *Safe Space Suit*, without the personal jabs that spoil the story's point.



Indeed, it also raises another question. It's easy to condemn Max for making bad judgements, at least at the start, and committing criminal acts ... but what choice does he have? The world is stacked against him, unfairly; he is sentenced to remain where he is, forever, simply for not having the right connections. Why should he feel any respect for a fundamentally unfair society? And why should he honour its laws when it is self-evidently true that they do not work? This society fails on a personal level, because it punishes Max for an accident of birth, but it also fails on a more general level when it allows incompetents into high places ... also because of an accident of birth. But then, this is true of our society too; promotion on the grounds of anything but merit is fundamentally wrong and, frankly, dangerous.

Overall, Starman Jones remains one of the most significant of Heinlein's works; a loveable and relatable protagonist, a supporting cast that feels real even though a number are little more than stereotypes, a clean read (there is no sex in the book) and a realistic – and small – victory, with the promise of more to come. It was, and remains, highly recommended.

## This Fallen World by Christopher Woods

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

According to my notes, I reviewed the initial section of this book on February 13, 2016, which I find a trifle confusing, since Amazon says that version came out in November of 2016. Prescient preview? I doubt it. At any rate, THIS release is composed of three sections, only the first of which I have seen before.

More material in the same world? That makes me HAPPY! Cannot say that loudly enough: A HAPPY READING EXPERIENCE!!!!!!

There's just something wonderful about having heroes who give away apples and thwart evil people and the occasional demon. I got that in the first dose, but doses two and three are: FABULOUS!!!!!! (Please hear that as if it were being said in an EXTREMELY over-the-top voice)

The world isn't really fallen, as much as it was driven to its knees, kicked in the head, and then stomped. Foolish corporate officials forgot that the purpose was to make money and strove for direct power. First, they took over the governments, then they fought each other into paste and rubble. As they collapsed, they developed greater weapons, including the ability to imprint the personalities of previously stored individuals on willing (or unwilling) subjects.

Part 1: This Fallen World. Matthew Kade is one of those subjects, and at first, he looks like a mildly benevolent tough guy. He does jobs for people who need special help, and it's through this process, in a slow reveal, that we discover that if he isn't a superhero, he'll do until one comes along. The issue: he was in the process of getting a personality imprinted, when a bomb blasts the machine into dumping ALL of the personalities into him. It's tough to be a man in the post-apocalyptic age, but it's tougher to be a hundred men at the same time.

All of the action takes place in a city, sometime after civilization comes to an end. What order exists comes at the hands of Warlords, each of whom rules a small section of the city by a force of arms. Some of them are really nasty, while others are just taking care of business.

Matthew was hired to rescue the daughter of a rich man, one who lives in a building instead of on the

street. She was taken from a Caravan, which is a shocking breach of protocol. That's good news and bad news for Matthew; the good news is that the rogue nature of the operation means that he can rely on at least passive support from Warlords who were damaged in the raid; the bad news is that anyone willing to take such a risk must have the power to be able to get away with it, or at least think they do.

Part 2: Broken City. There are some groups which are not utterly enmeshed in the rivalries of the various Warlord factions. NONE of them are counseling, art history, or literature majors, though; this is grit under the nails' territory. One such group is the Society of the Sword, who act as a sort of roving bad-guy smasher; another is the Farmers, who bring almost all of the food into the city; and a third is under the leadership of Dynamo, who supplies whatever electric power is available. Nobody messes with any of them; not with the Swords, because they are instantly lethal; not with the Farmers, because they will sho-nuff let you starve; and not with Dynamo, because a little bit of electricity can make a huge difference in your life.

There is one other faction less well known: The Mardins. They live under the city in the maintenance tunnels and have an agreement with the above-grounders: they will keep the water and sewage flowing, and in exchange, nobody goes onto their turf. But now, someone has violated the terms of that agreement, and is killing members of their community. From a prior relationship established with Theresa, head of the Society of the Sword (definitely NOT the Empress Theresa!), they are referred to Matthew for a solution to their problem. To do this, he must get the assistance of others, as well as relying on the expertise of some of his alter-egos. That's how we get a detective story as a bonus, and while it may not be pleasant for those involved, I loved it. We also get to find out about Matthew's love life, but not obnoxiously so; it's all very PG-13.

Part 3: Seeds. The Corporate Wars went on so long that they sucked a LOT of people into the battles. And, as is usually the case, some families paid more than others. Zebadiah Pratt is paying a great deal, as the emerging leader of a farming community outside the city. He served in the military, as did his two brothers; however, he came home reasonably alive. His family's story makes a pretty good illustration of the truth that casualties of war are not limited to the dead.

This section provides the origin story for the Farmers faction and fills out much that was missing in the origins of the Corporate Wars.

As a pleasant side benefit, a few people who are contributors to the swampy morass that is military science fiction make their appearance, not always in human form. In fact, one is depicted as a fat, lazy little pony, who gets put out to stud. Makes me wonder how THAT was arranged...

Highly recommended.

## Thought Criminal by Michael Reichenwald

Review by Tamara Wilhite

<http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

What if the hive mind could infect you and control you? What if those in power use the threat of the virus to control even those who are not infected? Especially if you're a Thought Criminal ...

In "Thought Criminal" by Michael Reichenwald, a small group struggles to maintain even the concept of individuality and free will in the face of an ever-more powerful hive mind. They struggle to even connect with each other when every aspect of the system is suspect – including other people. That makes "Thought Criminal" a post-Singularity dystopian novel, though it has its strengths and weaknesses.

## The Strengths of “Thought Criminal”

Thought Criminal is a short but intense dystopian post-Singularity story. The author delivers a fully realized story in less than 200 pages, where others would stretch it out twice as long.

This book gets points for having a strong scientific foundation for the nanotech and biology involved in taking cybernetics to an involuntary hive mind connection. Furthermore, you don't have to have a background in nanotech or neurology to understand the explanations conveyed in accessible conversations. That's in contrast to many high-tech scifi novels that rely on data dumps to convey information, and you're left researching what it means ...

I like how the author identifies flaws in the system, noting that such things always exist no matter how complex it is. Even when it is a complex AI system that can control what people literally think.

## The Flaws of the Book “Thought Criminal”

There is a certain degree of elitism in the book. Every character is a professor, a doctor or a researcher. At no point do we even see a ranch owner or house cleaner, though the main character stays at multiple rentals, much less talk to them. We don't even meet his minor daughter, who wouldn't yet be a member of the intelligentsia.

## Observations about “Thought Criminal”

The hive mind initially relies on a “virus” to spread to those who wouldn't voluntarily accept the biotech-nanites that hijack higher logic functions. The social control methods in the name of controlling the virus are incredibly apt in a “post-COVID” world. Forget face masks, and wear a full hood with oxygen tank. Let's control people and the flow of information by preventing face-to-face meetings of more than two people unless in the same family.

Those who question the nature of the virus or the oppressive restrictions in the name of controlling it are considered crazy and taken in for “treatment”. You're not released until you agree. This parallels real world examples whether lockdown measures to control a virus based on hyperbolic disease models was politicization of science, only to be called crazy virus deniers. Or how billions were thrown into poverty while education and healthcare were disrupted, as while asking about the cost-benefit ratio gets you called selfish or even a murderer by privileged elites who work from home and rely on everyone else to work in the real world. That makes “Thought Criminal” an apt commentary on post-COVID politics as well as a post-Singularity dystopia.

The Chinese Sesame Credit system has been implemented in this dystopian novel. Your status as a subversive limits your ability to enter Smart Cities or find work. As a banned researcher, you aren't allowed to work in anything theoretical though piecework may be allowed. And everyone checks “the system” for your status automatically, because all hiring and payments are processed by the same system. It is hard to manage funds outside of the official network, though it isn't completely impossible.

## Summary

I give “Thought Criminal” by Michael Reichenwald four stars. It has a great concept and decent delivery, though it is thin on character development and characters in general.

Too Like the Lightning by Ada Palmer  
Review by Sam Lubell  
Originally published in SFRevu ([www.sfrevu.com](http://www.sfrevu.com))

Too Like the Lightning by Ada Palmer, the first book in the four volume Terra Ignota series, is a very difficult, but rewarding, read. The book is incredibly polished, especially for a first novel. It won the 2017 Compton Crook Award for best first novel. Based on this book, I predict Palmer will become an important voice in science fiction.

Palmer has created a very complex 25th century society with as many connections to the world of the 18th century as it has to our 21st. The political situation, treatment of gender, attitudes toward religion, philosophy, and ways criminals are punished are all complexly different from those of today. The narration is written in the style of the 18th century, occasionally lapses into script format, and in a few spots even speaks directly to (and argues with) the reader. Moreover, the narrator, a convicted criminal made into a servant, keeps secrets from the other characters and even the reader; I am still not really sure of his full allegiances.

In this 25th century, countries have been replaced by nonphysical groupings called hives, all of which have different governing structures. The government is run by an Emperor and a Senate which represents the hives. Instead of nuclear families, households, called bashes, have multiple adults and children belonging to the same hive (although children can change hives when they grow up). Gender distinctions are officially taboo and most characters are referred to as "they"; however, the narrator does assign gender for some characters to match physical appearance. Religion has been outlawed and no group discussion of religion is allowed without the presence of a sensayer, who teaches about all religions and philosophies and lead people to develop their own beliefs without favoring one.

The plot is just as complicated as the setting. The narrator, Mycroft Canner, is at the Saneer-Weeksbooth household when Carlyle Foster, their new sensayer, comes for an appointment and accidentally discovers that Bridger, a thirteen year old child, has seemingly divine power, a secret kept by Mycroft and Thisbe Saneer. Carlyle convinces them that his theological training would be helpful for a child with the powers of a god. Meanwhile, Martin Guildbreaker, an investigator for the Emperor, has visited the same house because a newspaper's politically important list of the top 10 important people had mysteriously vanished from the newspaper and reappeared in their house.

So the book is part mystery, part politics, and part theology/philosophy. As Martin and his team investigate the Saneer-Weeksbooths, Carlyle and Thisbe investigate the investigators. In the process, the reader learns several secrets of the Empire including an effort by one family's head to place their adopted children into prominent positions with the other hives, a religious cult worshipping a living human, a secret brothel frequented by heads of all the hives, and a murderous conspiracy.

The book does have a few weak points. Mycroft seems implausibly well-connected and present at a lot of meeting of different groups of leaders. Some of this is explained, such as faking a romance with Thisbe to justify his frequent visits to help with Bridger and being questioned about a device from his criminal days that may have been used in the theft. Also, since this is the first book in a four-book series, much of the novel lays out the complex setting and nothing is really answered or resolved. The combination of a complicated background and plot along with frequent use of philosophy/theology plus the quirks of the 18th century narration (and the fact that many characters are referred to by different names by different groups) may put off some readers who find this too much work. The book badly needs a list of characters and their names and hives.

Readers who love complexity in their fiction, who want to be immersed in a well-designed world will find *Too Like the Lightning* well worth the challenge. The narrative voice here is different from any other science fiction set in the future.

This novel is not suitable for a reader who wants action/adventure or light entertainment. But readers who want a future that feels very different from the present and who enjoy a good puzzle will enjoy reading and re-reading this. If the other books are as good as this one, *Terra Ignota* could end up one of the truly great works of speculative literature.

Highly recommended.

**The Year's Best Science Fiction Vol. 1:  
The Saga Anthology of Science Fiction 2020**  
Edited by Jonathan Strahan  
Review by Sam Lubell  
Originally published in SFRevu ([www.sfrevu.com](http://www.sfrevu.com))

Short stories do not get anywhere near the attention (or pay) that novels receive. Yet a well-done short story can be as satisfactory a reading experience as a full book. This collection, the start of a new series of Year's Best, has twenty-eight well-chosen stories from 2019 that will entertain anyone who loves short science fiction.

This 600+ page book is dedicated to Gardner Dozois, whose death in 2018 not only was an enormous tragedy to his friends and family but also to the whole science fiction community. Gardner had edited *The Year's Best Science Fiction* since 1984, ultimately producing thirty-five annual collections.

Strahan's *Year's Best Science Fiction* does not continue Gardner's numbering and is published by Saga Press, not St. Martin's Press, but it does continue Gardner's tradition of summarizing the year in science fiction publishing including listing a great number of novels (despite the author's admitting to only having a limited amount of time to keep up with novel-length work).

Of course, Strahan, an experienced editor himself, does more than copy Gardner. Strahan has edited thirteen volumes of his previous *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* series as well as many other original and reprint anthologies. He has been a Hugo finalist ten times and serves as Reviews Editor for *Locus*. The twenty-eight stories here show the enormous breadth of his reading. Almost all the tales in *Year's Best Science Fiction* come from different sources; he only uses five twice and none more than that.

Some of my favorite stories in this volume include:

"The Bookstore at the End of America" by Charlie Jane Anders that features a bookstore with entrances from both the independent (and liberal) country of California and the conservative and religious nation of America, which causes problems when these two nations go to war against each other.

"It's 2059, and the Rich Kids Are Still Winning" by Ted Chiang; a fictional essay set in a world where the Gene Equality Project genetically enhanced the intelligence of 500 low-income children only to find that just a few achieved the same success as children of the rich despite having the same enhancements. This shows how the U.S. is not a society that rewards ability.

"As the Last I May Know" by S.L. Huang has a society where the key to the military's ultimate mass-killing weapon is implanted in a young girl so that the nation's ruler, before he can access the weapon, must kill the girl with his own hands. This ensures that the weapon would only be used as a last resort and that the ruler cannot simply order a mass slaughter without ever confronting a victim.

"A Catalog of Storms" shows a town where a few people gain the power to name storms and control them.

"Now Wait for This Week" by Alice Sola Kim is an interesting riff off the Groundhog's Day theme with time continuously resetting itself for a week. What makes this interesting is the voice since it is told from the point of view of the roommate of the rich girl caught in the time loop, not the looper herself.

"The Work of Wolves" by Tegan Moore is convincingly narrated by a dog whose intelligence has been greatly increased for search and rescue operations.

"Emergency Skin" by N.K. Jemisin is about a servant of the descendants of the wealthy elite who fled Earth right before the environmental catastrophe they assume would destroy an overcrowded planet. But on a mission to Earth, the servant discovers the truth, much to the annoyance of the implanted intelligence programmed with the attitudes of the Founders that is narrating the story.

"At the Fall" by Alec Nevala-Lee is a survival story about an artificially created cephalopod designed to explore undersea vents but who has been abandoned, along with her sisters, by humanity.

"Secret Stories of Doors" by Sofia Rhei has the flavor of a combination of Kafka with Orwell as a worker who is secretly inserting fake stories into the World Encyclopaedia, is contacted by a secret society.

"This Is Not the Way Home" by Greg Egan has a couple win a lottery to honeymoon on the actual moon only to become stranded when Earth mysteriously ceases all communications.

It is interesting to note how the field of science fiction has become so broad, and the personal taste of editors can differ so much, that there is little overlap among the stories in The Year's Best Science Fiction and other "Best" anthologies also covering 2019. Five stories overlap with Neil Clarke's Best Science Fiction of the Year and a different five overlap Diana Gabaldon's The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2020.

Readers of science fiction short stories who are seeking a replacement for Gardner's Year's Best will find Strahan's volume a worthy successor. People who don't routinely read all the science fiction magazines, original anthologies, and other sources (even The New York Times) will find this volume a great way to catch up on the short science fiction world.

# Non-Fiction

## These Are the Voyages: A Trip Worth Taking

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.tv>

To say that Gene Roddenberry's career was complicated would be underselling it a bit.

In what could very well be one of the most comprehensive documentary works about Roddenberry, Marc Cushman's *These Are The Voyages* series takes the reader on a deep dive behind the scenes into what could only be a television story: the rise of *Star Trek* as a cultural phenomenon at the same time its creator was diminished and pushed aside.

These are the second set of tomes, each concentrating on the time in Roddenberry's career between the end of *Star Trek*'s original run on television all the way up through the production of the first motion picture. Along the way, we meet *Questor*, the many faces of Dylan Hunt, and more.

*These Are the Voyages: Gene Roddenberry and Star Trek in the 1970s, Volume 1*  
by Marc Cushman

In this first volume, we get a look at the immediate aftermath following the cancellation of *Star Trek*, the toll it took on Roddenberry and the cast. Through an impressive amount of research and documentation, Cushman has assembled the chronology starting with the beginning of reruns. Through the course of a couple of years, the series became a sleeper hit, gaining more fans and sparking interest in a revival. As Roddenberry was realizing what kind of sleeping giant had been awakened, he was also dealing with the fact that while *Star Trek* was gaining in popularity and spawning merchandise and convention frenzy, Paramount was reluctant to revive the show because they felt it would damage the profits from the syndication of the original seventy-nine episodes.

While the studio was dithering on whether or not to produce more *Star Trek* after having killed it in the first place, Roddenberry continued to work on other projects, trying to escape the "science fiction writer" label he now carried. What followed was a series of productions that never quite got off the ground or weren't well received. Roddenberry seemed to be a one-hit wonder. *Pretty Maids All in a Row* was a clear departure for him. *Genesis II* had potential but was spoiled by the network — and Roddenberry's continued battles with studio and network executives. Ultimately, it was always his downfall. And from the documents and interviews compiled by Cushman, it's clear that neither Paramount nor NBC ever really understood what to do with *Star Trek* or any other of Roddenberry's series ideas.

It's interesting to note that Roddenberry attempted to produce a new version of *Tarzan*, with the usual creative clashes with powers-that-be. In the midst of this, Filmation managed to convince him to go in for an animated version of *Star Trek*. This volume goes into quite a bit of detail on the development of the series with D.C. Fontana back on board as story editor and many writers from the original series crafting new stories — and from the outset, the Filmation crew made every effort to make this the fourth season of the original show, with the return of the original cast, absent Walter Koenig. Along the way, Roddenberry created *The Questor Tapes*, which was also the victim of network meddling — so much so that the series concept hardly matched the pilot.

The positive press and audience response to the animated show, combined with the expanding fanzines and conventions, paved the way for Star Trek's return later, but it was still a long road to get there.

**These Are the Voyages:  
Gene Roddenberry and Star Trek in the 1970s,  
Volume 2 by Marc Cushman  
Review by Jason P. Hunt  
<http://SciFi4Me.tv>**

The second volume of the set covers the years 1975-1977, with details on the back and forth between Roddenberry, Paramount, NBC, and a lot of people who (again) didn't quite understand what they had on their hands.

Following the growth in popularity of Star Trek in syndication, boosted by the relative success of the animated series, Paramount had finally decided that it was time to develop new Trek. Only they couldn't make up their minds if they wanted a new series with the original crew, a new series with a new crew, a series of TV movies that might spin off into a new series, or a feature film.

As Roddenberry was writing (and fighting) on Star Trek, the studio was constantly changing direction. Eventually, they settled on a TV movie, but then that became the now-famous Phase II, which didn't happen because after having spent a great deal of money to build sets for the new show, they did a one-eighty and decided (thanks, in part, to Star Wars) to make a feature film after all. The first half of the book deals with the many changes of direction with regard to format and the seemingly endless search for the perfect script with which to re-launch Star Trek. Everyone had different ideas as to what would work.

In the meantime, we catch up with the cast and their battles (only some successful) with typecasting. Only Shatner and Nimoy were really able to pull away from Kirk and Spock to keep their careers going. And Roddenberry was working on other ideas at the time as well, developing Spectre and Battle-ground: Earth, what eventually ended up on the screen as Earth: Final Conflict after Roddenberry's passing.

Then back to Phase II and the development of scripts, set construction, and casting. Seeing Persis Khambatta is bittersweet because of the tragedy of her death, but it's fun to see her in a uniform from the original series.

**These Are the Voyages:  
Gene Roddenberry and Star Trek in the 1970s, Volume 3  
by Marc Cushman  
Review by Jason P. Hunt  
<http://SciFi4Me.tv>**

Once Paramount finally decided to make Star Trek: The Motion Picture, you would think that would be the end of the beginning, and everyone goes sailing off into the sunset of a successful film franchise.

Well, in a word... no.

The script was constantly changing, so much so that pages were time-stamped to the minute when they



were changed so everyone knew which was the latest revision. It wasn't helped at all by the fact that Roddenberry and Harold Livingston were in a battle for control of the script. The cast made the best of it, and director Robert Wise was said to be the professional gentleman on set. But the movie was already over budget before cameras ever started rolling, because the Phase II work was included in the ledger.

Add to that, a visual effects shop that spent a ton of money and had nothing to show for it, thus creating a post-production bottleneck, plus meddling from the studio, plus Roddenberry getting sidelined on his own production... the hits just came one after the other. Honestly, it's a wonder this film was delivered to the theaters at all. And it wasn't finished, either. No final sound mix, some of the visual effects were incomplete, and the title sequence was made up of placeholder cards. It wasn't until the Director's Edition was released in 2001 that we got to see what it should have looked like in 1979.

Overall, it's an impressive body of work. Cushman and his team have clearly done their homework, scouring hundreds (perhaps thousands) of documents, letters, memos, newspaper clippings, as well as going through old interviews as well as conducting new ones for these books.

The insights into the production of the various shows, from the animated series to the various projects that never quite got off the ground, offers us a glimpse of the battles that Roddenberry had with the studios at every turn. And it's clear that some of the problems he faced were of his own making.

Roddenberry is not presented as the perfect Great Bird of the Galaxy by any stretch of the imagination, and that actually lends more credibility to this historical narrative. While Roddenberry tried to put a good face on the circumstances, there are times when it's clear that Star Trek was both albatross and golden goose. (Well, it made money for somebody...)

Even though you sort of know how it ends, the journey to get there makes for — dare I say it? — fascinating reading. I lost count of how many times I found myself shaking my head at the machinations and office politics at play. And after reading these books, I'm convinced more than ever that no matter who's in charge of Star Trek at Paramount, they've never understood it. While Roddenberry's vision was essentially unsustainable and had to grow into something more than its creator, it was the creative teams who made these productions go as far as they did.

The sad part of it all is the toll it took on Roddenberry, both physically and emotionally. Star Trek was the girlfriend, then ex-girlfriend, who still worked in the office. It served to typecast not only the actors, but the creator. And as the studios pushed Roddenberry out to the point where his involvement was pretty much in name only, one wonders what Star Trek would have been like had he been able to maintain control of the property longer. Would it have been as good? Would it have survived this long?

This set of books is a must have for any die-hard Star Trek fan. Even for the casual fans, it's a glimpse into a world that doesn't much exist anymore. The historical aspects alone make it well worth the time.

# Literary Criticism

## What makes Urban fantasy?

by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

[EDIT: I've been corrected. Anita Blake took place in Saint Louis. Which tells you exactly how little of an impression it made]

What makes Urban fantasy?

If you said "It's Fantasy in a city, duh" you'd be right.

Then where's the city?

You see, one of the things I've always taken into account when writing my UF novels is that the city is a character. Like the Enterprise in Star Trek, the city itself plays a significant part in the story. It was one of my big problems with Anita Blake novels -- before they became porn-- I never got a sense that the city was a part of the story. The novels took place in Seattle Saint Louis, but they felt like they could have taken place anywhere. The same with Larry Correia's Monster Hunters or Carrie Vaughn's Kitty Norville series.

They felt like modern fantasy, but not necessarily urban fantasy.

For example, when I think of a sense of place, Correia's Monster Hunters live in a southern compound. There are forests. There are swamps. There aren't many cities, except in Monster Hunter: Legion, where he trashes Las Vegas, and sections of Siege that took place in Russia. With Carrie Vaughn, Kitty Norville's town could be any town with a radio station on one end, and wilderness on the other... even though it's supposed to be Denver, nothing felt that distinct. My memory may be failing me, but to be honest, if there were distinct elements of each city, they left no impression with me at all.

At the very start of Urban Fantasy, Fred Saberhagen set Dracula in Chicago. Saberhagen's Old Friend of the Family ended with a vampire throwdown, on top of the frozen river running through the city. For Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden, Chicago is deeply relevant for the setting, especially in his most recent novel, Battle Ground.

On the other end of the scale, Urban Fantasy makes the setting seriously matter.

Correia's Grimnoir series makes each city feel distinct, especially as he trashes it.

Despite the fact that she's often listed under romance, Sherrilyn Kenyon's Dark Hunters world usually did a fairly good job capturing the setting of New Orleans and getting a feel for the city as a whole-- from the atmosphere to the accents.

John Ringo did much the same for Monster Hunter Memoirs, both in New Orleans and the other cities his hero Chad was stationed.

Russell Newquist's War Demons gave me a good sense of Georgia--up to and including a final fight in a football stadium.

Even in fictional cities like Silver Empire's superhero novels, each city has a unique tone and feel to it. Morgan Newquist does a great job in building her Serenity city--which feels very corporate, with put-on sophistication that reminds me of Manhattan elitists. Kai Wai Cheah's Hollow City vividly reminds me of San Francisco culture with Chicago corruption. It was much the same in Kim Harrison's Hollows series -- she's altered the world so much that I have not idea how much of her Cincinnati is real and how much is fictional, but it is distinct.

This was very much my own thought process when I wrote Saint Tommy NYPD or Love at First Bite. And they're both less "New York City" novels as they are local neighborhood novels. New York City is made up of local areas that are as distinct from each other as cities are from one another. With Love at First Bite, Manhattan vampire bars feel different than fighting vampires in a Queens cemetery, which feels different than working around San Francisco (even before San Francisco streets turned to feces and needles). The vampire bar near Mount Sinai isn't the bar near Alphabet city.

For Saint Tommy, he doesn't have to deal with mafiosi or a heavy street gang presence, because they're in different neighborhoods... except for MS-13, which is closing in on several fronts. Heck, even the tactics of fighting in each neighborhood is different. In Brooklyn, you can launch an armed ambush by hiding armies down side streets. In King's Point, individual homes have their own personal docks. When I wrote the books, I was certain that committing a crime in broad daylight would earn the perp a good stomping by a passerby, then move along. (... since then, my faith in the ornery average New Yorker has been massively shaken) In later books, I make use of local geography and sites that you don't have in any tour book.

Of course, I have a car chase that requires not only knowing traffic patterns, but also ways around them.

In fact, that's part of what gives many of the above UF novels their feel--the city has an overall feel, and each neighborhood has their own feel. A major plot point of Battle Ground involved a fae army walking into the wrong part of Chicago, as well as local architecture being tactically useful... even Chicago pizza is a plot element. No two parts of Kim Harrison's Cincinnati are alike, but the overall feel of the city is consistent. Monster Hunter Legion could only have taken place in Las Vegas for multiple reasons. The same with Fred Saberhagen and Chicago.

So, TLDR: in Urban Fantasy, the city should be a part of the story, a player in its own right, with its own feel and own distinct areas. Otherwise, it's contemporary fantasy. Don't get me wrong, all but one of the authors mentioned here have written great books. But are they urban fantasy?

I'll make you a challenge. Read any of my UF to get a feel for what I mean, then read the others. Then tell me if I'm wrong.\*\*

# Prose Bono

## Formatting Dialogue

By Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SupersiveSF.com>

Recently, nearly ever manuscript I have seen has poorly formatted dialogue, but this did not used to be the case. I am not sure what has changed.

Dialogue formatting etiquette is important for two reasons:

- 1) Reader expectations – if you go against the rules for formatting dialogue, the reader will not understand who is speaking.
- 2) Ease of reading – these rules make it easier on the reader. This is not something we should willingly sacrifice.

To this end, I will do my best to lay out the rules for how paragraphs and dialogue go together, so as to make them a bit easier to grasp.

### Each New Speaker Gets A New Paragraph

First rule is: Each new speaker gets a new paragraph. Yes, I realize that I just said that above, but this is so important, I thought it was worth it to mention it twice.

This means two things.

- 1) In proper English grammar, you can never do this:

“Hi,” said George. He turned to Pete, who said, “Let’s go out.”

In this example, two people, George and Pete, both speak in the same paragraph. This is incorrect, and it will confuse your reader.

I don’t see that very often, but I often see this, which is much, much worse:

George ran down the hill. “Hi!” waved Pete.

Don’t do this. Please. You will drive your readers crazy. Because according to proper dialogue etiquette both George just said hi, as dialogue following an action like that is said by the person doing the action. So what is Pete doing there?

It should read:

George ran down the hill.  
“Hi!” waved Pete.

In other words, any prose in the same paragraph as dialogue should be about or from the point of view of the person speaking.

2) For some reason, I keep seeing is something like this.

George ran down the hill.  
“Hi!” Pete waved back.

Only, for some reason, I discover as I read on that the author thinks George is the one talking.

If you have dialogue and then someone acts after it, in English, that means that person who acts in that same paragraph is doing the talking. If that person is not the person who you intend to have doing the talking, put that sentence in the next paragraph!

So, this should look like:

George ran down the hill  
“Hi!”  
Pete waved back.

Or

George ran down the hill. “Hi!”  
Pete waved back.

White Space Is Your Friend!

One thing we did not have time to cover in this class was ping-pong dialogue, which is a shame because then we would have gone over how white space on the page helps rest the reader’s eyes and makes it easier for them to read.

Readers love dialogue. It is easy to read and easy to see.

If you bury your dialogue inside a mountain of regular narration, it is like shooting yourself in the foot.

You are losing the benefits of dialogue, and you are probably annoying your reader for absolutely no reason.

Here is an example:

The rain fell steadily upon the windowsill. The day was gray and cold. “Do we have any movies we haven’t watched?” ask Frieda. But no one answered. That made her feel worse than before.

The rule of thumb is...every single time there is dialogue, one trailing quotation mark should always be at the outside of the paragraph.

The rain fell steadily upon the windowsill. The day was gray and cold.  
“Do we have any movies we haven’t watched?” ask Frieda.  
But no one answered. That made her feel worse than before.

So you can have this:

Rick ran down the road. “Where did he go?”

Or this:

“Where did he go?” Rick ran down the road.

Or this:

“Where did he go?” Rick ran down the road. “Have you seen him?”

Or this:

Rick ran down the road.  
“Where did he go?” he called.

Or this:

Rick ran down the road. He called, “Where did he go?”

Or even this:

“Where did he go?” Rick ran down the road. “Did you see him?” He paused and then turned right. “I can’t find him anywhere?”

But don’t do this:

Rick ran down the road. “Where did he go?” he called.

If you bury the dialogue you are taking always all the advantages that come from dialogue.

Also, if you have a line of dialogue, and then a long paragraph that doesn’t have much to do with the dialogue, put the rest in its own paragraph, regardless of who is speaking.

So:

“Let’s look in here.” Lucy went into the spare room and peered around. She searched behind the desk and under the chair, but these were not good hiding places. She looked behind the door and under the rug, but she would be obvious in there. Finally, she opened the wardrobe and peered into the dark fur coats. Should she hide in here? It was never wise to lock yourself into a wardrobe.

Should be:

“Let’s look in here.”

Lucy went into the spare room and peered around. She searched behind the desk and under the chair, but these were not good hiding places. She looked behind the door and under the rug, but she would be obvious in there. Finally, she opened the wardrobe and peered into the dark fur coats. Should she hide in here? It was never wise to lock yourself into a wardrobe.

## Mindspeech

Mind speech...mental speech, telepathy, psychic conversations—whatever you want to call it—is not put between “ ”. Quotation marks mean that the speech is out loud and other people in the room can hear it.

Silent speech is usually indicated by putting the dialogue in italics.

*Who is there?* asked Sally.

“It’s me,” Sam said aloud.

## Sum up

So, again, every single time there is dialogue in your story the following should be true:

1) There is a quotation mark on the outside of the paragraph, either at the beginning, or at the end, or both.

In other words:

“Hi,” he called.

He called, “Hi!”

“Hi,” he called, “How are you?”

But never:

He called, “Hi!” He waved.

2) Every speaker gets a new paragraph.

“Hi,” said George.

He turned to Pete, who said, “Let’s go out.”

Or, even better:

“Hi,” said George. He turned to Pete.

“Let’s go out,” said Pete.

But never:

“Hi,” said George. He turned to Pete, who said, “Let’s go out.”

3) The primary person acting in the paragraph with the dialogue should be the speaker. If the person acting is not the speaker, begin a new paragraph.

So:

George ran down the hill.

“Hi!”

Pete waved back.

Or:

George ran down the hill. “Hi!”

Pete waved back.

But not:

George ran down the hill

“Hi!” Pete waved back. (where George is the speaker.)

Hope that makes the matter clearer! If not, let me know!

**Writing a Classic**  
**by Cedar Sanderson**  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

We've had discussions over the years about what a classic is, and isn't, and can there really be 'instant classics?' (spoiler: no, absolutely not, that's an oxymoron) I'm not so presumptuous as to think I could write a classic. I'm also fairly sure that most classics were not written to be classic. It's something ineffable that endures, this quality of a classic. Something that appeals to the generations, and...

Ok, it's not that much of a mystery. Simply said, classics are books that are read throughout the years. I'd argue that true classics are read voluntarily. Sadly, most young people are force-fed books they are told are classics, and thereby develop a deep-seated loathing for them. For all reading. Because while they are being told 'you must read this' they are also told, with an elevated nose and a sniff, 'oh, that book is trash. Sheer trash!'

You saw that, didn't you? Maybe heard it, too.

And that's how you write a classic. You tap into the shared human experience. Connecting with characters written long before you were born and being able to empathize with them, to have an almost alien landscape of a world that no longer exists in our time come alive in your mind again? That's classic.

Shelves of modern fiction, in this case, the very loosely organized SFF section.

I started thinking about this not because I was at the used bookstore and finding myself much more drawn to the 'antique' book section (I'm a purist, by the way. Antique here means over a century old. Vintage is anything over 25 years old. So, mid 1990s is vintage... gah! No!). I bypassed the modern fiction, as I am reading for pleasure almost exclusively on ebooks and headed right for the classics. The books loved and treasured through the years. Now, here's the thing. Not all old books are classics. I own a copy of Ruskin's lectures, Crown of Wild Olive and Sesame and Lilies which still has uncut



pages. Given the condition of the book, it was bought, shelved, and never read at all. It came to me in a box of books that had come from a long-retired schoolteacher (I also have her teaching certificates). My mom and I, going through the box, were curious and looked up Ruskin, who seems to have been a bit of a bad lot...

This book was safely on a shelf for a very long time, and it's almost pristine for its age. One of several uncut pages in this book.

Now, the books I bought at the bookstore were intended to be read. Especially the Kipling. I came up with three of a set of Kipling, but I didn't care they were missing volumes. Kipling's travel memoirs are going to be fun to read. The collection of American folklore will be research material. The crime stories collected and edited by Dorothy Sayers are a scholar's-eye look at a favorite genre. The book of A. Conan Doyle not-Sherlock stories will be a refreshing change from the inimitable (and classic, yes) detective. The book of Robert Service's poetry, with commentary by himself written in 1914, while he was living in Paris under the shadow of the Great War. I bought the books I chose for their utility to me, but in naming them off here, I think you'll agree I have rather pedestrian taste. Popular books, in their era. Popular still, albeit less so, because they appeal to that human nature in us all, who wants to read about people. Ruskin's lofty concepts have gone a century unblemished. The ex-library Kiplings seen below, withdrawn from a college library, have not escaped unscathed. They were read, all right! The new books (to me) are lying below the other Kiplings on a shelf. This is not all my Kipling – my son organized these shelves by color when we were moving the library recently and they have not been put back in order yet.

Am I going to consciously try to write a classic? No. Like the Robert Service poem I read at the intro of my Friday livestream, I'm writing to keep Hunger and Thirst and Cold at bay. I'm not trying to keep myself alive in a garret in Paris, as he was. He says, in the comment following the poem (The Bohemian), that he'd sold some of his 'rubbish' and was going on the town to celebrate with wine and food. That's what I want to do. Sell my work. Go out for dinner with my Beloved. I'm not trying to leave some sort of moralistic legacy, like Ruskin was.

My book's pages will be cut, at least. In this era of ebooks? What will become classics? There will be classics, I don't doubt it. And in an era where Print on Demand becomes the way to get print, books in paper will speak volumes for their scarcity. Perhaps in a hundred years someone will stand in a bookstore holding one of my books in their hand thinking that if it was put on paper, in a paperless era, it must be something special.

Or perhaps not. My paperbacks are more likely to fall apart from being read, long before that descendant appears.

### Wright's Writing Corner: Dickens' Trick

by L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Next in our series of articles fleshing out the points on my Writing Tips.

Dickens' Trick: Using action in description: "There is not just a kettle on the fire, it is boiling over." "Horses at the cab stands are steaming in the cold and stamping. When people enter a room, they are sneezing or hiding something in their pockets."

Hmm...this one is hard to write about because, while I love this idea, this tip is here to remind me to try it, not because I have mastered it.

So, this installment will be short.

The issue is that a scene is more interesting if something active is going on. The more active an action, the more dramatic and attention-drawing. A room with a kettle sitting on the counter is not as active as a room with a kettle on the fire. A room with a kettle on the fire is not as active as a room with a kettle boiling over.

I have not mastered this yet, but I have learned a related lesson. Scenes only come alive if there are two things going on at once. One trick for doing this in a scene that is mainly conversation is to have some kind of unrelated physical action going on at the same time—travel, a meal, cleaning, something. The dialogue can then be balanced by intriguing physical behaviors: walking too fast, stopping to tie a shoe, spreading arms to catch one's balance on a rickety rock. The juxtaposition between the conversation and the effort to complete whatever the physical task is adds to the tension and drama of the scene.

I have another personal rule that is a bit like: "There is not just a kettle on the fire, it is boiling over." But this would not apply to most books. I will share it with you, nonetheless:

If it can be done with magic, use magic.

When I was a kid, I always hated the fact that I would read fantasy books, and there would be almost no magic in them. Oh, they would talk about magic. They would hint at magic. One or two magical things might even happen. The rest, however, was just an ordinary story. Occasionally, there might be a fight scene with some magic flying, but that was about it.

For the Prospero books I established the rule that if I could think of a way the characters could accomplish a thing using magic, they would use magic. If there was a choice between walking to the corner store for milk or teleporting there...well, who would walk if they could teleport, I ask you?

After all, why do we read fantasies, if not to be dazzled by fantastic things?

So, to conclude, when you write a scene where a character walks into a room, do not settle for something mundane, such as a kettle on the fire. Instead, make it a magic cauldron that is boiling over so vigorously that the colored smoke pouring from its bubbling surface is changing the knickknacks on the mantelpiece into birds.

~Finis~