

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

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FINIS ...

Editorial

Happy Summer! I hope you are all well. I present for your reading pleasure reviews of almost two dozen novels, some thoughts on your own writing approaches, and an educational interview.



The N3F Review of Books is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 and is distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. In most issues superb proofreading support was provided by Jean Lamb. Most of our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Some of them link from their reviews on the internet to Amazon. If you buy at Amazon.com via their web pages, they get a modest financial reward. Some of us also write novels. Our lead reviewers are:

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Alabaster Noon by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

Review by Pat Patterson

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

This review was delayed for a couple of days because I didn't want to finish it. My reasons were NOT because it was unpleasant to read, or made me feel unpleasant feelings, such as fear, shame, guilt, and remorse. Nope; it was because this is the LAST book in the Omega Wars line, and I didn't want it to end.

I consoled myself with the fact that there are at least nine books in the Standalone category in the Four Horsemen Universe, and the demented authors are, in addition to being profligate, are also highly prolific. Therefore, I have every reason to believe that MOAR IS ON THE WAY!!!

However, as a founding member of the Gamma Phi Iota fraternity of reviewers (God Fearing Independents), I DO have other sources, and expect to return to exploiting them over the next short period until the Dragon Nominees will be announced. At that point, I am going to be busting it to get as many of THOSE reviewed as is possible.

Another great cover by Brenda Mihalko and Ricky Ryan: A Flatar on a Tortantula Is. In. Your. HOUSE!!! and is coming to eat you up.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN ARE MAD AS HE%%, AND THEY AREN'T GONNA TAKE IT ANY-MORE! Unless the other side wins, in which case, it looks like they will take whatever they can get. And, based on their recent attempt to stomp on the wicked, wicked General Peepo, they may want to look at their alternatives.

The wicked, wicked General Peepo has long since crossed the line past "plays well with others," and it seems to be something that aggravates her peers. Of course, she doesn't think she HAS any peers, which is certainly part of the problem. However, ordinary betrayal wasn't enough for her, and she made the move into sabotage, back-shooting, and soliciting undesirable allies. There are hints that she has reasons of her own, beyond being the mistress of all she sees, but strangely, that comforts no one.

Meanwhile, the ravaged fleet of Horsemen and associates limps through hyperspace, back to the safety of secret base New Warsaw. Except, somehow, New Warsaw isn't a secret base anymore. And it is fortunate indeed that all trips (special methods excepted) through hyperspace ALWAYS take exactly 170 hours, because the fleet that punished the humans is right behind them. So, limping isn't EXACTLY a problem. At least while they are in hyperspace. When they emerge...

Wow. When they emerge. You know, when you have a single safe place in the universe, and everything depends on that, you need a special person in charge. A person who can make the tough decisions, and get them implemented, and listen to new data, and make the hard decisions. That's right, you need a WARRIOR!!!

Umm. No. You don't. What you need is a MANAGER! A person who can shuffle electrons and papers and actually understand what the message of Power Point presentations is SUPPOSED to be, without suffering the indignity of sitting through Power Point presentations. Gee. I wonder if there is a manager in charge at New Warsaw?

Wow, again, for when they emerge. Because there is NOTHING faster than hyperspace! So, the first

New Warsaw will hear of the nasty ugly conditions that now exist will be when the damaged fleet shows up, with the bad guys shortly behind them. Uh-oh! They are DOOMED!

Unless...wasn't there something about the Fae being able to mind-talk? (Did I read THAT book?)

One of my favorite parts of the saga of the Four Horsemen is that the authors have NOT chosen to make the leaders stay miserable all the time, in order to write dramatic stories. (I don't like comic books, for that reason; Superman and Lois NEED each other!) However, the vilest, wickedest thing that the wicked, wicked General Peepo did was to put a sleeper agent into the Winged Hussars, and at a MOST inopportune moment, order that agent to shoot Alexis Cromwell in the back. Not only does this remove the most effective commander from the battle, and demoralize the troops, it also crushes the heart right out of Nigel Shirazi, commander of Asbaran Solutions. And with that, the strongest factor keeping him from becoming a monomaniacal genocide endorser just...vanishes. And he considers how he will cleanse the universe.

I hate it when they crush the heart of a hero.

This is NOT! NOT a spoiler! Although Alabaster Noon is the final installment of the Omega War, it is NOT the end of the 4HU. True, many/most of the plot lines are nicely resolved. That's good for me, because I HATE not knowing who shot JR for a long time. There are, however, promises made in public that the story will continue, and there is a bodacious amount of material in the book for the future to be built on.

Nicely done, people. Nicely done indeed!

Between Home and Ruin by Karl Gallagher Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com>

In his sequel to Storm Between the Stars, Karl Gallagher turns up the intrigue and the action. The result is a story that is both a natural development from its predecessor and yet completely different.

The story

The Azure Tarn is back on the water world of Corwynt, this time carrying a delegation from Fiera, hoping to reach a peaceful accord with the Censorate. The first part of the story focuses on the Fieran delegation trying to convince the Censorate to leave them alone rather than launching an invasion. While the negotiations go on, Marcus Landry spends time with Wynny, searching for a permanent place for the Fieran Embassy, while also cementing their relationship as husband and wife.

As one might expect, the negotiations don't go well and end when the Censorate issues an ultimatum that amounts to a demand for full surrender. Given the much greater military might of the interstellar empire, the Fierans briefly consider it before fleeing for home to prepare for war. In the process, Marcus and Wynny are separated, with Marcus being forced to fly back on the Azure Tarn and Wynny stranded at her home on Corwynt.

From there we are led into an intrigue of secret societies and murder as Wynny tries to recover Bibles and other books left by the Fierans in their retreat as well as solve a murder.

At the same time, the Fierans and the Censorate both prepare for war, pitting the two very different societies against each other. The Fierans turn their free market towards building warships and converting every other ship possible into a missile platform, including the Azure Tarn. The Censorials on the other hand, while possessing much more weaponry, thanks to being able to call on the resources of several worlds, are hampered by layers upon layers of bureaucracy and a lack of experience in actually fighting a war.

The characters

Wynny is the standout character in this book. While before she was little more than a love interest for Marcus, in this we see that she is possessed of a great deal of intelligence and determination as she goes about trying to solve a murder and navigate Corwynt's underworld of secret societies. She also struggles with coming to understand the faith of her husband Marcus and the consequences it has, not just for society as a whole, but for believers in general.

Marcus also shines even brighter than in *Storm*, growing as a leader in several ways, stepping into various roles such as speaker, negotiator, and even gunner, all while worrying about Wynny back on her world.

There is even a priest, Father Murphy, sent as part of the delegation to try and learn if there is a Pope outside of the Bubble. He's the picture of a down-to-earth Irish priest, willing to teach and break or rule or two and being very aware of the typical human failings.

We also get more familiar with Bridge Yeager, Corwynt's Governor and the one who insists on the raising of a fleet to invade and subdue Fiera, believing the existence of any free world to be a threat to the Censorate. He isn't just a simple villain though as throughout, as we see numerous examples of him caring about his men, though at the end of the day, his main concern is crushing what he sees as a rebellion waiting to happen.

The world

Gallagher again gets to flex a lot of muscle here, especially in the way Wynny's part of the story revolves around a theological dispute that arises during a brief sermon given by Father Murphy. I won't spoil it at all other than to say the dispute is both funny and somewhat sad because it's all too plausible.

The Censorate is also explored more as we learn just how limited they are due to the strict control of information. Even Yeager can't get directly to his boss. He has to piece together transportation bit by bit because even experienced spacers know only a small amount of the empire's territory. The military preparations also reveal that the Censorate has been approximately the same size for a long time as only a handful of officers in the fleet the governor puts together have seen any battle at all, let alone an all-out war.

The author also gets to show off his engineering background, particularly during the battle. He clearly enjoyed planning out the tactics and the weaponry, putting them together in such a way that the battle for Fiera is one that is believably not one-sided.

The politics

Given that the protagonists are obviously free market individualists and the Censorate is a brutal dictatorship that censors even the year and is willing to launch an invasion fleet to impose its will on a

peaceful world, the politics of the book are pretty clear. Not that all collective action is viewed as an evil, far from it. However, when it is enforced from the top down, it becomes something that Orwell warned us about.

Why read it?

If you enjoyed Gallagher's *Storm Between the Stars*, you will definitely want to delve into *Between Home and Ruin*. The sequel fleshes out the characters more, explores the competing philosophies exceedingly well and ups the stakes in every way. Main characters are tormented by separation from each other while fighting for their lives against the Censorate, although in very different ways.

In short, Karl Gallagher doesn't just break the sequel curse, he shatters it, grinds the pieces into dust and launches them into hyperspace never to be seen again.

The Colchis Job by Kal Spriggs Review by Pat Patterson

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

There is a bit of (alleged) wisdom about the enemy of my enemy being my friend. I can accept that in certain circumstances; it's that sort of political necessity that allowed Roosevelt and Churchill to join forces with Stalin to defeat Hitler.

HOWEVER, just because it's true in certain limited applications, don't make the mistake of extrapolating beyond appropriate limits. Certainly, don't make that mistake if you are running a country, or a merc team.

Actually, don't make that mistake if you are a reader, either. The reason that thought occurs to me, is because I don't like the protagonist in 'The Colchis Job.'

Here's a quote that I used to define my opinion. Situation: he gives his general fix-it guy a nuclear device, in a delicate/unstable state, and tells him to weaponize it:

"I'll need to rig some kind of timer or something..."

"Whatever." I waved a hand. "Make it work." I wasn't really a details kind of guy.

Spriggs, Kal. *The Colchis Job* (Four Horsemen Tales Book 3) . Seventh Seal Press. Kindle Edition.

Okay, I don't like this guy. I don't find his response charming, or devil-may-care, or any of those interesting quirky things. It happens I have WORKED for bosses like this, and they were always bad for the team, bad for the mission, bad for the company. They wanted what they wanted, immediately, and if you DARED to point out to them that what they were asking for was impossible, they blamed you for that.

I liked the BOOK, though. It's AT LEAST a semi-good plot, in part because the author imposes crippling circumstances on the mercs: extreme limits on CASPERS and other weapons tech. The one ultra-super-duper invulnerable unstoppable weapons suit they have consumes power at such a rate that it only has about 20 minutes of combat action time available. Most things have to happen with ingenuity, not brute force.

Also, those 'enemies-of-my-enemies' that I referenced are some pretty dastardly enemies. One of them is an evil stepfather (literally). Another is a Mad Scientist, out to rule the universe with proscribed tech. If the Galactics discover that, they will not only kill him, they will bomb Earth back into the Stone Age. And there are a few other Lesser Evils out there, in the form of...nah, not gonna tell you that.

If you like gonzo humor, as I do, you'll appreciate the dialogue. My favorite involves the field generated when the ElectroMagnetic Onanger (ELMO) is fired. Get too close, and it will kill ya, but from a bit further away, it's survivable for biological units, even if the EMP zaps some suit systems.

One of the BEST aspects of the 4HU is that it's NOT the same story, told over and over, from the same perspective. While common elements remain, such as CASPers and the potential for Galactic threat, the story is not bound by a requirement to always include the same characters. That makes this an INCREDIBLY spacious playground, which can't help but benefit the reader. The fact that this particular story holds DEFINITE potential for further development multiplies the effect, Let's see: does that make this literary kudzu?

Dirty Deeds by Mark Wandrey

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Fifty-three year ago, I took my first outside-the-yard job: shining shoes in a barber shop. It was a great job for a kid in the 8th grade. On some days, with tips, I could make as much as \$3 - \$4 per day, at a time when a shine cost a quarter. Since I liked work a LOT more than I liked the pit of a school I attended, I also performed there a lot better than I did at school, and my mama made me quit, when I started bringing home Fs on my report card.

It was my first lesson about jobs, even if I didn't know it was a lesson:
“There are LOTS of reasons why people quit jobs.”

Since that stint shining shoes, I've had 35 other jobs (list available by request) and learned other lessons about people and places they work. The shortest job I ever worked was four hours, working for a janitorial service. The longest job I had was my last, which I worked until I retired. Here's are some corollaries to the first lesson:

“Lots of people start, but not that many last.”

“The people that DO last, learn. People who don't learn, don't stay.”

And, in the case of Abe Murdock, the job is mercenary. He did that job for 60 years, and he learned. That's significant, because a PRIMARY exit path for people who didn't learn was death from unnatural causes. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Murdock knew all there was about being a merc, but that's the way I'd bet, if the occasion ever came up. In his time with various merc units, in assorted roles, he saw a LOT of people who just weren't cut out for the job. In some cases, they were able to quit, and go do something else. Too often, though, their separation package included asphyxiation or penetrating trauma or any one of the many, many ways for a person to terminate in a hostile universe. He didn't come through it without his own set of scars, but he learned from every engagement, and became just a little bit tougher and harder to kill, a little bit harder to push around, and a lot more likely to accept the hand he was dealt when there were no other options.

That's why, when he is declared dead after being missing for six months following a (lost) battle in

space, he doesn't whine, scream, pound on doors until his case is HEARD! ...or any of the other things that would be futile. Instead, he calls in some favors, gets a new stake, and heads for a retirement planet, where he can sit on his front porch with a cool glass of tea and rock.

Nobody REALLY thinks that's going to be the way it develops, do they?

For reasons apparent to people who aren't Murdock, his retirement planet of Valais has become the equivalent of a Wild West town where bad guys are stealing water rights, or grazing rights, or mining rights, or whatever, and are trying to drive off the sodbusters, sheep farmers, or non-violent small business owners. It's not Murdock against the entire universe, fortunately. I'm not sure that would have changed his plans, but the fact that there are some other retired mercs in town gives him some options.

He exercises them.

And there are twists, and plot-thickening. Read it and see if you don't agree!

Personally, as an old guy, I like this kind of story. I don't claim to be a Murdock, but I'd be a part of his crew. YMMV.

The Door into Summer by Robert Heinlein Review by Chris Nuttall

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

“Back” is for emergencies; the future is better than the past. Despite the crepehangers, romanticists, and anti-intellectuals, the world steadily grows better because the human mind, applying itself to environment, makes it better. With hands...with tools...with horse sense and science and engineering.

Most of these long-haired belittlers can't drive a nail nor use a slide rule. I'd like to invite them into Dr. Twitchell's cage and ship them back to the twelfth century—then let them enjoy it.

The Door Into Summer is one of those books that would be good, although not great, if it wasn't badly let down by a single plot element. What makes this particularly annoying, at least to me, is that the element in question, which I will discuss below, is completely unnecessary to the plot. Heinlein could have left it out and the plot, insofar as there is a plot, would not have suffered at all.

Daniel Boone Davis is an engineer and inventor who went into business with his partner, Miles Gentry and his fiancée, secretary Belle Darkin, to produce a number of automated devices to assist with housework and a number of other tedious chores. Unluckily for him, Belle is a consummate manipulator, and she deceives Dan into surrendering enough of his stock to give her and Miles a chance to take control of the company. Shocked and dismayed, Dan (and Pete, his tomcat) goes on a drinking binge and, midway through a drunken night, decides to go into suspended animation – cold sleep – so he can wake up in a better time. He thinks he's all set once arrangements have been made to take Pete with him.

Once he sobers up, however, Dan tries to fight back, starting by giving his stock to Ricky, Miles's stepdaughter (who has had a precocious crush on Dan for years) and then going to confront Miles and Belle. Unfortunately for Dan, Belle gets the drop on him, and he finds himself committed to cold sleep anyway. The next thing he knows, it's the year 2000 and everything is different. Dan, a skilled engineer and genius in his time, is barely even qualified to run a garbage disposal system. He eventually discovers, in a desperate bid to trace Miles, Belle and Ricky, that Miles is long dead (probably killed by

Belle), that Ricky has vanished and that Belle has become a washed-up hag. The scheme to make money off Dan's invention failed, as the prototype went missing the same night Dan was committed to cold sleep. But Dan sees signs of its existence everywhere.

Eventually, he discovers – to his bemusement – that the person who developed the prototype was called 'DB Davis.' Him, in other words. A friend of Dan's points him towards a time travel machine, developed by a lone unsung genius. The inventor cannot promise if Dan will go forwards or backwards, but Dan puts the pieces together and reasons that he will go back ... because he's already gone back. He goes back in time to 1970, patents his machine (ahead of his past self) and steals the original prototype once his past self has been taken off to cold sleep. He then meets Ricky, gives her his stock and suggests she goes into cold sleep herself once she's twenty, allowing them to meet as adults. Ricky asks if he will marry her if she does and Dan says yes.

He goes back into cold sleep (again) and greets Ricky when she emerges from cold sleep, marries her ... and they live happily ever after, using technology to improve the human condition.

I found this book a little boring when I read it as a child, at least partly because it wasn't the 'person goes back in time to meddle' plotline. I preferred books like *The Guns of the South* or *Axis of Time* to *The Door into Summer* or *Lest Darkness Fall*, I preferred books that featured a certain degree of action and adventure. It was never on my reread list. As an adult, I can both appreciate the cleverness of the time loop – and what Heinlein got right and wrong about the future – and cringe at the inappropriateness, if not creepiness, of the romance.

Dan himself is very much the idealised engineer, produced years before Dilbert. He's a very straight-forward man, searching constantly for engineering solutions to problems; he's a firm believer, like Heinlein himself, in better living through technology. He has a somewhat stereotypical view of women's work – which wouldn't have been uncommon in Heinlein's era – but he redeems himself through an awareness that housekeeping is real work. Indeed, his dream is to free women from a lifetime of repetitive drudgery. He calls it – and not without reason – the Second Emancipation Proclamation. One may regard this as mildly sexist, but it was revolutionary for its time.

But Dan is also unwary, in the sense he assumes that everyone is a decent person. He doesn't realise that Miles is dissatisfied, nor that Belle isn't what she seems; he acknowledges, ruefully, that they should have asked a few more questions when someone with her apparent qualifications came to work for their small company. He also ignores quite a few signs that married life is not going to be comfortable, starting with both Pete and Ricky showing complete apathy to Belle. I can't help wondering if Heinlein got conned at some point and he turned it into a story.

There's less that can be said about the other characters. Miles, like Dan, allows himself to be seduced and manipulated by Belle. He's a weak man and a poor stepfather. (I wonder if Heinlein had a bad experience with stepparents too, as *Starman Jones* and *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* also include poor stepparents, while both *The Door into Summer* and *Citizen of the Galaxy* feature stepdaughters turning on their stepfathers.) We really don't see enough of Ricky to get a real sense of her as a person, which weakens the character quite badly. And Pete is a cat. Heinlein's love for cats is on full display within this tome.

Heinlein's presentation of future technology is both interesting and completely wrong. He did not, for example, predict either the computer or the microcircuit. His version of 2000, therefore, is very much the past's tomorrow, the story of a world where you can navigate a spaceship by slide rule and fix a balky space drive with a wrench. It follows a linear progression from Heinlein's era, but takes no ac-

count of game-changing technologies that were in their infancy when Heinlein put pen to paper. And yet, in some ways, the advanced technologies of the alternate future have had less effect on society than ours. Dan openly admits that there is a long way to go.

But this is all part and parcel of the better living through technology attitude. Dan is openly scornful of those who try to retard technological development – see the quote above – and he’s right. Technology has made life better for millions of people. Heinlein may have got a lot of details wrong, but he was right about that. Our problems can be solved by technology – and the problems created by the technology can be solved by more technology. The future is bright and full of promise.

I’m actually reminded of the time when Emma Watson, who was being interviewed about her role in the remake of *Beauty and the Beast*, asked what Belle did all day. And the answer would be cooking, cleaning, sewing and all the other tasks that women had to do in the days before dishwashers, microwaves, vacuum cleaners and mass-produced clothing. Belle would have been expected to keep house for her widowed father, not dance and sing around the village every day. Her world is one so alien to ours that we don’t comprehend just how much work she would have had to do every day. Technology liberates!

That said, there is an aspect to the plot that cannot be overlooked. And it is one that is not easy to discuss.

It isn’t uncommon for a growing child, of either gender, to have a precocious crush on someone older. Dan does not do anything to encourage Ricky’s crush on him before he takes the cold sleep; he assumes, perhaps correctly, that Ricky will grow out of it well before she reaches adulthood. However, after taking the cold sleep, Dan develops a certain degree of obsession with Ricky which comes across as more than a little creepy. On one hand, Ricky may be the only person from his past still alive (or at least the only one he has any interest in seeing again); on the other, the Ricky in his mind is still a child. He did not, at that point, meet the adult Ricky. And then, when he goes back in time, he makes arrangements for the grown-up Ricky to follow him into the future, where they can get married. But she is the one to ask him to marry her.

There’s nothing illegal here, as far as I can tell. They’re both adults when they get married; it struck me, the second time I read the book, that there is nothing keeping Ricky from thinking better of the arrangement as she grows older and eventually backing out altogether. It isn’t as if she doesn’t have plenty of time for second thoughts. And yet, I find it creepy. It lets the book down, to the point where I find myself thinking less of Dan. And Heinlein, because there is no need for the subplot. It might have worked better, perhaps, if they’d met again in the future without prearranging everything.

But apart from that, *The Door into Summer* is a remarkably ingenious book. The time travel aspect, and how it leads to a stable time loop, works very well. Dan may come across as slightly condescending – sexist, by our standards – but he genuinely realises that women have a hard time of it and wants to help them. (Personally, I’d like one of his machines. It would be better than a vacuum cleaner.) And yet, it has not aged well. The technological development is poor, by our standards, and then there is the creepy romance.

There are times when it is easy to forget that Heinlein came from a very different age, with different standards. He wrote books that were, by the standards of his time, fantastically progressive and liberal. But *The Door into Summer* is one of the books that makes it impossible to forget.

Doorways in the Sand by Roger Zelazny
Review by Heath Row
<http://n3f.org>

The Worcester (Mass.) Public Library's Science Fiction Book Club chose this title for its July selection. While I didn't finish reading the book before the online discussion mid-month, I was able to join the group for an hour-long conversation about the title—and subsequently finished reading the book, inspired by the banter and analysis. You can learn more about future selections for the book club at <https://www.mywpl.org/?q=article/virtual-book-clubs>.

Originally serialized in three issues of Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact—June, July, and August 1975—Zelazny's *Doorways in the Sand* was later collected and released in hardcover and paperback by Harper & Row and Avon. It's a relatively slim read, as well as light and breezy, and the surreal, occasionally silly nature of the text reminded me that Zelazny was part of the New Wave. (No wonder!) In fact, at times, the novel also reminded me of books such as the delightfully countercultural trio of Chester Anderson's *The Butterfly Kid*, Michael Kurland's *The Unicorn Girl*, and T.A. Waters's *The Probability Pad*.

The book is an odd read. Most chapters open with a bit of a bang, almost a cliffhanger, and then back up to detail how the characters reached that point—and what happened since the previous chapter. That slightly elliptical or circular approach to the narrative slightly betrays the initial serialization of the story—I can only imagine how the story read with a month in between installations!—and takes a while to get used to.

The primary focus of the novel is somewhat similar to Hal Clement's 1950 novel *Needle*, approaching the concept from a different point of view and resulting in a very different vibe. But the most interesting aspects of the book involve the protagonist's proto-parkour on the rooftops of various academic buildings; his almost-never-ending career as a student—in which he continues changing majors, never quite completing the requirements of any given degree—the social role that alcohol plays in enhancing communication, openness, and honesty; and the concept of the Kula, a Melanesian exchange system in which neighboring people exchange cultural artifacts as a symbol of their social interconnection and mutual obligations.

Occasionally confusing and convoluted, *Doorways in the Sand* is a rollicking read, and Zelazny's use of language is at times playful, often literary, and sometimes pretty opaque. More serious readers might be put off by the book's light-hearted nature. But it's not a hard read, and the fun of the book is adequate payoff for any confusion or consternation—or stylistic frustration. (Besides, fans of Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, with Occasional Music* will appreciate the anthropomorphic aliens that play a role in the storyline.)

While not an important novel, *Doorways in the Sand* is an enjoyable read, and might serve as a bit of a palate cleanser in the midst of more serious, heady fare.

The Dream of the Iron Dragon by Rob Kroese
Review by Neo Victorian
<https://upstreamreviews.com>

A starship holds a secret weapon that may save humanity from extinction. An accident sends it back in time 1300 years. But these humans will keep fighting!

The story

In the 23rd century, humanity has been hunted to the verge of extinction by an alien race. When an exploratory ship accidentally travels back in time to Viking-age Scandinavia, the human race is given a second chance. Thankfully, the crew has the skills, the dedication and the grit to do what has to be done to keep hope alive.

Traveling by horse and ship and foot, trying to learn about Viking life and politics, and fighting for their lives, the crew of the Andrea Luhman will do what it takes to survive, and stop the future extinction of humanity.

Eventually, the chief engineer figures all the options are closed.

Except to build a new ship...

The characters

Kroese is a master of characterization. The crew of the Andrea Luhman are living, breathing individuals, and their backgrounds are woven seamlessly into the story.

Humanity's rivals, the Cho-ta'an, are skillfully built up as characters and people, with plausible language, customs and culture.

The Vikings are...real. The author has obviously done a lot of work and study to get the details of his Vikings right (they're Norwegian, by the way, and really don't like the Danes). Viking weapons, tactics, ships, social organization and customs all seem solid, and fit together to make a holistic picture of the society the 23rd century spacers find themselves dropped into.

The world

The future world, of star travel and the conflict with the Cho-ta'an, is very interesting in its details, especially how humanity has responded to the existential threat it faces.

The past world, of the Vikings, is brilliantly detailed and realized. It seems so natural, after a few pages the reader feels right at home, running around with Vikings.

The politics

To focus on the Vikings again—the politics of the time period, as King Harald attempts to consolidate Norway under his rule, is an important part of the story and determines many of the actions the crew is able to take. There's an undercurrent of localism and libertarianism here, freedom-loving people and villages resisting the offers of "protection."

We also get a glimpse of Cho-ta'an politics, and it ends up being a vital part of the events that lead to the situation the crew finds itself in.

Content warning

There is violence and death, but it's done with discretion. Probably not for very young children, but it's not their kind of story.

Who is it for?

People who like classic science fiction, good stories, and great characters. Even if you're not into "hard" SF, this book is simply a well-told tale of humans, their struggles and triumphs.

So, anybody who likes a good novel.

Why read it?

The book reminds me of Niven and Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*, which those with some knowledge of classic science fiction will recognize as high praise. But Kroese's work is not derivative in any way, instead it's original, well-written and it satisfies. A book so entertaining one is glad it's the first in a five-book series.

Electric Castles: A Book of Urban Legends by Cliff Burns Reviewed by Robert Runte Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>

Cliff Burns has been writing professionally for over thirty years and self-publishing through his Black Dog Press before self-publishing was even a thing. He has a modest but dedicated fan base for both his writing and his blog, *Beautiful Desolation*, in which he regularly rages at the universe in informed and articulate rants. His latest story collection, *Electric Castles* is typical Burns and is as good a place as any to introduce yourself to his work.

Two cautions: First, don't let the subtitle put you off. Burns often skirts the boundary between Canadian literature and horror so I confess, "*A Book of Urban Legends*" drew me in, because if you wanted a literary take on urban myths, Burns would be the guy to write it. This is not that book, however, and "urban legends" gives entirely the wrong impression.

Second, the book opens with my least favorite story of the collection, an unfortunate choice which, if one could find his book in bookstores, might elicit an 'meh' and the volume returned to the shelf. "Restitution" is a short take on Dr. Phil-type reality TV shows, with perhaps a gender switch on an old theme, but—nothing much to see here.

Once past this unremarkable entry, however, one quickly becomes immersed in a series of oddly engaging, compelling, and relatable stories. There is an undercurrent of satire that prevents any of these from becoming too depressing to read, but they all address human frailty and sometimes really awful people behaving very badly indeed. In contrast to "Restitution", for example, "More Real Than TV" is an original and very dark satire of reality TV gone too far, an actor too easily cast as the bad guy and

unleashed on an unsuspecting neighbourhood. Similarly questionable is the narrator of “Stations”, recounting his misdeeds as he fell into drug addiction and his newfound determination to turn his life around. . . only, the reader cannot help wondering if he doth protest his renewed innocence a bit too much. My favourites of these bad-people-doing-terrible-things stories is “The Curious Mr. Cavendish”, a quiet little gem in which a couple of low-life criminals choose the wrong—oh, so very wrong—house for a home invasion. It definitely crosses over into Edwardian horror but manages to remain mildly amusing and still say something serious about how seniors can become stuck in their aging, declining neighbourhoods.

Other stories feature flawed or broken protagonists who are nevertheless sympathetic. “The Lure of Ancient Places” immerses the reader in the final breakup of a marriage as each spouse takes turns complaining to the reader about the unreasonableness of the other’s demands, the unwillingness of the other to even make the effort anymore. There but for the grace of God and compromise go you and I. Or take “Coping”, the opposite story of a completely unsuitable couple considering getting back together in a moment of stress and weakness. Or “Family Day”, my favourite of these stories of ordinary people, in which a single mom drags her teen and preteen through Kingsmere mall. There isn’t a parent anywhere who won’t relate to that one, but with an ending that provides a remarkably satisfying emotional punch.

Less satisfying is the ending to “Magic Man”, both because the reader gets there a good deal sooner than our viewpoint character and because I am uneasy about the ambiguous moral. I’m okay with my take-away from the story, but I’m nervous that others could read it differently, and that would definitely raise questions for the story’s acceptability. But then, maybe raising questions is the point.

In his afterword, Burns states his own personal favorite is “The New Neighbors”, a tiny surreal story that may indeed become one of his signature pieces—for good or ill. Burns’ brain frequently steps out of the box into some parallel universe which may appeal to poets and speculative fiction fans, but less so to the more literal-minded.

Finally, I have to mention “The Toxic Cinema of Alain Marchant”, a scathing satire of Quebec cinema and the CanLit establishment, as an excellent illustration of the passionate, opinionated column Burns writes regularly on his blog, only in this instance with made-up examples.

Overall, Cliff Burns is the definitive illustration of the difference between a writer independently publishing and vanity self-publishing. The writing here is clever, thought-provoking, and easily on a par with anything else in the CanLit section of any major bookstore. Burns deserves to be more widely known than he is, though it would be tough to find a Canadian author with a more dedicated fan-base. Recommended.

From the Ashes of a Dead World by Shane Gries

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Today though, we honor Shane Gries. Shane originally enlisted in the Army National Guard in 1989, before going Regular Army in 1994 when he was commissioned as an O-1 after attending college on a ROTC scholarship. He's served Stateside, in Germany, Korea, Afghanistan and Australia. He is a bird colonel (O-6) Infantry officer who has been awarded the Expert Infantryman Badge, the Basic Parachutist Badge, the Ranger Tab and a Bronze Star. Right now he's doing diplomatic duty as the US Army Attaché at Canberra, Australia. He has gotten to play with some really cool toys in his time in. He's

worked with the M113A2 Bradley APC and the M2A2 Bradley IFV, as well as a boatload of communications and small arms.

He's got a wife, two kids and no pets. His kids are grown now. He's been a lifelong fan of SF/F and dreamt of writing since he was a kid. He's planning to write full time after he retires, and I think he's off to a great start.)

Ya know, it's been a LOOOONG time since I read a book all the way through at one sitting. Before I met the ex-wife, I used to do it all the time. It became a norm for the release of new Battletech novels. (So did going to work tired the next day, but I was working in a grocery store, soooo... yeah.) I'm not sure what the last time I did it was, but it would've been sometime between when I met Nicole in 2002 and when I married her in 2004. That is, until this weekend. I went through Shane Gries's *From the Ashes of a Dead World* in like three or four hours on my day off. I only stopped once and that was to use the bathroom. Honestly, I'm kind of bitter that I had to stop that long, seeing as I only had thirty pages left, but...

Ah well. No system is perfect.

But *From the Ashes of a Dead World* comes pretty close. It took me a bit to warm up to it, but that's normal for an author I haven't read before. He has his own style and that's a good thing, but it just wasn't one I was used to. Once I knocked the first ten pages or so down though, I was off and running. I just couldn't put it down.

Remember Star Wars? Like the movie actually named Star Wars. The kids like to call it "Episode IV," but us old school types know better. It was the first episode, whether you young whippersn...

AHEM

Anyway, imagine a story starting like that only it was written by someone who had spent a lifetime studying military tactics and went on for long enough to REALLY get you sucked in. That's how *FTAOADW* starts. Like, we're in the fight pretty much off rip. The action lets up about the time that Amazon asks you to review the book because you've finished it. Along the way, we get our heroes, our villains and our outright monsters and that's all just in the first few chapters.

I like the way Gries sets up his society. It makes sense. The military exists to defend a society that doesn't always do the right thing. Some of the decisions made by the nobles in the book (The Interstellar Protectorate is a constitutional monarchy) quite honestly deserve infamy preceded by a tail-kicking but that makes sense. Every society has its entitled class and members of the entitled class always want more than what they have coming. That's whether the individual's attitude of entitlement comes from being born a noble or from collecting welfare. A belief in the right to take from others to maintain oneself is part of the human condition.

So, quite frankly, is the overweening sense of ambition seen in some other members of the society. The chief villain of the piece is a real piece of work, but in a way I'm glad to see him. There's nothing I enjoy so much as an evil villain to hate on, and Gries has done his work there. Of course, his ambition brings him into conflict with other ambitious people and there is conflict. There are actually several conflicts.

There's more to it than that though. Many of the people (and a lot of the military) are solidly good

people. Many of them sacrifice more than they should be asked to. That, unfortunately, is probably the most common condition among members of the military that I've come across in my study of military history. The fact that so many answer the call so readily is what makes them worth celebrating. It's not spoiling too much to say that many of the military types in Ashes don't make it. War causes casualties.

Combat in Ashes goes from deep space to dirtside. It's all well thought out and easy to follow. Gries's description of deep space combat is less technical than some others, but for those of us who don't do orbital mechanics as a hobby that's a good thing. His description of a fighter squadron sounds a lot like any workplace I've been in that has long term employees, although a bit rougher than some. That's to be expected though, because it IS the military. Gallows humor and a bit of irreverence are common among people who risk their lives and are around death a lot. The only setting where you might find more dark humor than in a military unit is in an emergency room staff and the reasons for such aren't that dissimilar.

Really my only complaint about Ashes is that it's a little too short, I would've preferred just a bit more to the story but that's not the worst thing ever. I mean, Gries left me wanting more and I guess that's how it's supposed to work. I still think that maybe the denouement (LOOK EVERYBODY!! I USED A SCHOOL WORD!!!) was a bit more rushed than it needed to be and there could have been just a touch more suspense in spots. Then again, it's not like I ever got bored and I've already purchased the next installment in the series, so it should be fairly obvious that the story wasn't killed by brevity. Maybe I've just read too many David Weber novels and gotten too used to nine-thousand-word infodumps. Possibly.

And I guess one of the reasons that I'm so looking forward to reading the next one (after I finish reading the other two books for my event) is that it was so short. There are an absolute buttload of things I'm still wondering about. Granted, a lot of what I'm wondering about is what comes next, but there are still holes in the backstory that can be answered in further books. I guess it's too soon to call for a pre-quel series, so I won't. I'm totally not saying Gries should write about the rise of the Interstellar Protectorate or how the war that brought it down got started. I'm just saying I'd buy it if he did. I'd probably even review it here. But, like, no pressure and I'll sit down now.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Pursuing Spaceships

Hollow City by Kai Wai Cheah

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Hollow City (Song of Karma, book 1), by Kai Wai Cheah is part of Silver Empire's superhero universe line. While it's been discussed in terms of this version of the Punisher, while this may end up as a Punisher origin story, our hero is way, WAY too sane to be Frank Castle.

The vibe as you read the novel is more Michael Connelly doing a noir superhero novel, with gun porn that outdoes Larry Correia. (No, I'm not exaggerating, and you did not misread that. Gun porn that would make Larry Correia blush).

The story

Adam Song is the superhero Amp. As former Marine Recon, when Adam's powers kicked in,

he joined the Halo city Police department SWAT team. As a door-kicker attached to a team dedicated to taking down super villains, he has a relatively high kill rate: six kills in six years.

During a raid, Adam kills a dirt bag who has it coming. Unfortunately, the dead idiot is the son of a local gang lord. Now Adam has a bounty on his head. The politicians are throwing him under the bus. The cops are abandoning him. And now Adam's family is under threat.

When a man is left to his own devices to save his family, the criminals are going to wish that Adam still had a badge to keep him in check.

The characters

Publicly, Adam Song seems to have the powers of Marvel's Bullseye — he always hits what he aims for, with preternatural reaction time. That's what everyone else thinks, too. But it goes beyond that, and he has a very simple, straightforward approach to handling everything — it's handled by the book. I love the byplay between what the public thinks he can do, what he says he can do, and what he actually can do. It's the usual conflict of the civilian mindset versus the mindset of people who actually get shot at with some regularity.

Why, yes, Cheah has spent time in the military. Why do you ask?

And then there's our hero's family... I await someone to bitch about Kai Wai Cheah using "Asian stereotypes" as he writes his novel in his native Singapore. Heh.

There are a bunch of cute bits as well. They're not SWAT teams, but STAR teams (Resident Evil, anyone?). The investigator is Herbert Franks (cute Cheah. Very cute). Cheah also has bullet storm haiku... no, I'm NOT kidding.

The world

Imagine if Baen did a superhero novel and it was one-part Connelly, one-part Correia. You've got smart police tactics by a superpowered former soldier as part of a SWAT team, but you also have the problems of the politics of "Primes" (they're not superheroes or mutants, they're Primes). It becomes an interesting mix of politics, powers and police.

When I reference Michael Connelly, most people should think of his hero, Harry Bosch (yes, now an Amazon Prime show). And the police department in Halo City is very much like the corrupt, politics-ridden (but I repeat myself) legal system of Bosch's LA. It helps with the noir feel of the novel, as it constantly refers to Halo City as the Hollow City, dark, soulless and corrupt....

You know, Chicago.

(Okay, if you're looking for a direct parallel, it's probably if San Francisco were run by Chicago politicians, down to the demographics, and "Grand Park" instead of SF's Grant Park.)

Once again, as with the first book in the series, (Morgon Newquist's Heroes United) it's a superhero world that feels very real. Screwups are not tolerated, leaving a realistic feel to the narration — such as referring to an egomaniac "hero" who was going to livestream an arrest... so the criminal set a trap and put three rounds in the sucker's face. Stupidity is its own death penalty. The politics are realistic enough to make me want to strangle the politicians — even down to having a Black Lives Matter gro

up that's against Primes. And I love the line "Politics is never personal until it happens to you," I may need to steal it.

And the tactics are solid. The guns are detailed and make sense given the use of force required. The fact that Adam has three guns, as well as a taser, is one of the better carry policies I've seen of a hero in a novel for some time.

The politics

The politics here are very much based in the world. But see if you can take these elements and stitch together a left or right-wing viewpoint. I dare you.

Politicians are bastards

Guns are good, especially if you know what you're doing with them.

Family is important.

Our hero is a cop, and the other cops aren't the source of all evil.

Capewatch has nothing do with BLM. Honest.

Content warning

Gunplay. Lots of gunplay. If there was a language problem, I didn't notice.

Who is it for?

If Harry Bosch were an Asian superhero, and Michael Connelly had a sense of humor, this is the book you'd end up with — a Superhero Baen novel. If you enjoy anything put out by Baen, or Harry Bosch, or Astro City, or Jon Bernthal's portrayal of the Punisher in Daredevil, you're probably going to enjoy this one.

My only problem? There is a bit of a cliffhanger. But then again, it did say book 1. For some reason, it does NOT piss me off anywhere near as much as others have.

I wholeheartedly recommend this one.

Why read it?

It's just plain brilliant. These are the superheroes we need. And I think we've done enough penance with Marvel's comic book output in the last decade that we deserve Adam Song and the rest of the Heroes Unleashed.

Hussar by Declan Finn
Review by Jim McCoy
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So, how's that promotion to Lieutenant feel, Mr. Nolan. Are you enjoying yourself some time with your feet up and some paperwork in your hand? How does it feel to be in an office and have no one trying to kill you for a change? Well...

Uhh...

He wouldn't know.

See, Lieutenant Tommy Nolan is the main character in Declan Finn's Hussar, the eighth book in the Saint Tommy, NYPD series and he's having a rough...

Uhh...

Day?

Week?

Month?

Year?

Li...

Yeah, that works.

Our boy Tommy is having a rough life. That's actually rather common among saints. They sometimes have to fight the Lord's battles for him and, well, battles sometimes get messy. His wife, children, friends, church and home have all been assaulted. Then, just when he gets promoted to the land of headaches and a sedentary lifestyle everything goes to Hell, again.

I mean that literally. Tommy fights demons, cultists and other assorted weird Satan spawned monsters. His weapons are his wits, his charisms (gifts given by God to saints), his gear and his God. Tommy is the kind that won't give up no matter what because he knows he's right.

Speaking as a Christian man myself (albeit Protestant versus Tommy and Declan's Catholic) I find that to be the best part of these stories. You don't have to be a Christian to love Tommy Nolan, but you do have to respect a person who has faith and acts accordingly. Tommy puts himself on the line and does what is necessary because he believes in something higher than himself. He knows that he is a tool in the hand of God and he's okay with that. It's a lesson I'm still learning but one that I'm trying to embrace.

Seriously, Tommy vs. Most of Society is like Sonny Corleone versus Michael Corleone in Godfather II. Michael enlists to serve in World War II because he believes in the United States as something larger than his own life. Santino disagrees. He tells Michael he's stupid.

From a crook's point of view, he's probably right. From the point of view of a person who believes in a higher calling, he's dead wrong. The fact that he can't see why is a character flaw. Tommy has his flaws, but lack of belief in something bigger than himself is not one of them.

Tommy's family joins him on parts of this little adventure to save the world in unexpected ways. They do a good job of it. He has a hard time dealing with parts of it, but it works given what has come before. I'd almost consider the essence of what happens to have been inevitable even if I couldn't have predicted the exact details. When you raise a child a certain way a given outcome should be expected.

And yet...

There is one scene in *Hussar* that kind of got my goat. I don't believe Declan has any children and it kind of shows. At one point in the story, and I don't want to say too much here, Tommy and his son Jeremy get into an argument about things and stuff. Tommy gets a bit angry. What Finn missed was the pride and above all, the fear that Tommy would have felt here. Many times as a parent, the anger you're expressing comes from fear for your child. It kind of threw me for a second.

I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd be mad too. I'd be fuming. It's just that it's more complicated than that.

Other than that one scene though, *Hussar* is a rollicking good time. The action sequences in the book are fast paced and entertaining. Tommy's knack of finding a way through however he needs to shows up again. He needs it. Finn keeps finding different beasts from mythology to throw at his protagonist and they're all legitimate threats. I don't think Tommy has ever had a walkover fight in his life.

One battle in *Hussar* comes to mind. Tommy's method of winning the fight was something that I never could have attempted. It had consequences after the fight that he didn't anticipate, but hey, nobody's perfect. It actually did my historian's heart well to read that part of the book. And anyway, it helps keep the atmosphere of this series going in the same direction it has. I've always considered Saint Tommy, NYPD to be an urban fantasy series, but it certainly does have elements of horror to it. That one brawl certainly brings that feeling back around again.

The return of an old enemy recast in a new light is a lot of fun as well. I love it when an author can turn a villain into a sympathetic character and make me believe it. What Finn managed here was similar to what Suzanne Collins achieved in the *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* with Coriolanus Snow. I was really impressed.

Hussar, just like the rest of the series, is a weird mix of today's headlines mixed with fiction and that makes it even more interesting. When an author of fiction can throw in things like the current crisis along the southern border of the US with church burnings in Europe then mix in a Texas Ranger (law enforcement, not baseball) and cross it with golem armor, the Spear of Destiny and a necromancer and (this is key) make it all MAKE SENSE, you know you've got something good in your hands.

Although I did love this book, I'd recommend starting at the beginning if you're new to the series. *Hussar* is eight books in and there's a lot of backstory that it would be helpful to know. Yes, I am saying that the story might be a bit hard to follow if you're just starting out. That's okay though, you'll love the first seven too.

All in all, I'd call *Hussar* a worthy descendant of the first seven books in this series and that's saying a lot. I work between fifty-five and seventy hours a week and I always (eventually) make time for a new Saint Tommy novel when it hits. That's not counting the time I spend on my other geeky habits. I also

get free books on a regular basis from people who want reviews. If I make a point of buying an author's new book and reading it, you know it's worth your time. I've read and reviewed every Saint Tommy book so far and I plan on doing the same with the next one. Once it actually comes out. Not that I'd like, you know, urge you all to start a letter writing campaign to get the next one published soon or anything. That would be mean. And if you do, don't tell him it was my idea. But I really want to see if...

Ahhh..

Nevermind

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Holy Water loaded Super Soakers

Nephilim: Corruption by Ann Lewis

Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com>

Ever speculate on what exactly the Nephilim in Genesis were? There have been a lot of ideas on that, but Ann Lewis gives us one of the most interesting takes on the subject I've ever seen in *Nephilim: Corruption*.

The story

Before history was written, there were the Nephilim of the bible—half human, half demon. There were also the Emunim, half-human, half-angel. The Emunim were taken off planet for their safety and that of humans. The Nephilim also went to another planet.

Taking place in the current day, the Emunim Princess Tasia has been kidnapped. Dakhar, the greatest warrior of Emunim rushes to her rescue, following her kidnappers through space... to their lost homeworld of Earth. A number of humans are involved when Dakhar quickly catches up with the captors' ship, boarding it in an attempt to rescue the princess. She is sent off ship in an escape pod and found by some local humans (of New Jersey) who care for the strange girl who appeared out of nowhere.

The action moves swiftly as the humans try to figure out how to help Tasia while Dakhar and the villainous Nephilim race to find her. In the major conflict between the two forces, the depths of depravity that had been planned create a sense of urgency for her escape.

Throughout the entire story, Lewis does a masterful job of weaving in many subplots, from Dakhar's secrets to the Emunim King and his struggles with anger, to betrayal among the royal court, Lewis provides more than enough meat to keep the reader turning pages.

If someone wanted to show genuine fantasy intrigue, read this, not that other series that just wrapped on HBO.

The characters

There are a lot of characters in this book. Normally when a story has more than a handful of important, named characters, they tend to be very one-dimensional and forgettable, then murdered by George RR Martin. Lewis, though, has managed to craft many multidimensional characters, most with their own arcs and struggles to overcome. She pulled it off for the protagonists and antagonists alike. A lesser author would also make the Emunim the perfectly holy counterpoint to the perfect corrupt Nephilim. Fortunately, Lewis is not a lesser author. While the Nephilim are indeed perfectly corrupt, the Emunim are

more complicated. King Marish, in the wake of his daughter's kidnapping struggles with anger, going so far as to use his power to rip a tree out of the ground. Even the humans struggle to believe when confronted with a literal angel.

Dakhar has the most complicated and essential arc of all, though. While he is a dedicated warrior, and a loyal servant of the crown, he also harbors a secret, one that threatens to destroy him and even the royal family. The best part of the arc is the way it wraps up. Let's just say Christian readers will be very pleased.

Saul, the son of the primary antagonist Jahir, also has some solid character development. He knows what his father is doing is evil, yet also wants to please him. That leads to him participating both in the plot to kidnap Tasia and the effort to rescue her.

The world

Again, the attention to the worlds created here is second to none. Lewis crafts a believable culture that is both alien and familiar for the Emunim. Their society is highly hierarchical and bound by a great many rules and traditions. Anyone who remembers a hint of history will draw parallels with medieval Europe. Yet, there is a distinctly Middle Eastern influence in the way they dress, reflecting that it's the region of the world they first came from.

Their technology, while highly advanced doesn't quite cross the realm into magic. What is interesting is that their tech is biologically based. Components of plants perform similar functions as various aspects of our mechanical technology.

The interactions between the various humans and the Emunim are handled in a believable way, with Rick and others being so skeptical of the very human looking Tasia that she has to telepathically share her memories with them in order to convince them that she is a stranded space princess.

The politics

There aren't a lot of explicit politics in this book. Religion, on the other hand, plays a major role. Among the humans: Rick is a fairly run of the mill Catholic, Lynn is a typical atheist, not quite willing to believe her own eyes even when she sees a literal angel, an angel that regularly communicates the ruler of the Emunim.

There is a great deal in Nephilim: Corruption about the dangers of doing evil that good might come of it. It's the idea that such a thing is possible that leads Jahir astray and almost leads to Dakhar's destruction as well.

Content warning

There is a fair amount of violence, some it graphic. Towards the end of the book there is one scene of a narrowly averted rape.

Who is it for?

Anyone mid-teen and above so long as they enjoy a good story with heavy sci-fi and fantasy elements.

Why read it?

Nephilim: Corruption has been billed as Dune meets Stars Wars and I couldn't agree more. It has the sense of swashbuckling adventure of the latter with all the intricate detail and intrigue of the former. With high class world building, an unusually well-developed list of main and even secondary characters, it would be hard to recommend Lewis' work more strongly.

Penance by Paula Richey & Thomas Plutarch Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

What can I say about Penance that I haven't already said about 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 breezed 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 Fagin-as-super-villain. She's a character that has to think about using her superpowers—like using 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

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 and thought processes throughout the novel.

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. Paula does a great job of making him an 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?"

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.

Why read it?

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 they 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 is this different from the others? 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 in the entire series 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.

Phantoms of Ruthae by Stormy and Jason MacDonald Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Did you love Scooby Doo as a kid? I loved Scooby Doo as a kid. I loved the gang coming into town, finding something they didn’t expect and figuring out what it was. I loved the running, the hiding, the constant threat of danger. I loved the risks. I loved the danger. But then I grew up a bit and realized that, while the concept of the Scoobster was, and always will be, awesome, the danger needed to be a bit more real and simply removing a mask wasn’t always enough to solve a problem. I wanted MORE danger. I wanted some fighting. I wanted...

Something I thought I was never going to get.

Enter Stormy and Jason MacDonald and their new book Phantoms of Ruthaer. Ok, so PoR isn’t quite as goofy as Scooby was. That’s okay. I’m not as goofy as I was as a nine-year-old either. I think. Well, probably. Maybe? I mean...

Uhhh...

Look, I’m just the reviewer. This isn’t about me, okay? STOP LAUGHING!!!

Or sumfin’...

is when an author goes into a character’s backstory, and it has nothing to do with what I’m witnessing happening in the book. That’s not the case here. Everything has relevance to the story we’re reading and helps to move it forward.

The thing that makes Phantoms better than Scooby Doo is that the action sequences are far more intense and the consequences of them are real. This is a story that you can feel in your gut. When the blood starts to fly and things start to do, you’ll say my my,

Or sumfin'.

I've reviewed books by McDonald and McDonald before, and they've always given me epic battle scenes. They always hit the mark between too technical (seriously, read *The Chronicles of Amber* if you've never fenced and tell me how easy it is to follow the sword fights) and some of the no-detail stuff I have read in other places. They give you enough details to be able to follow along and make it easy enough to be exciting. That's what makes it fun to read.

I was watching *The Curse of Oak Island: Digging Deeper* recently and they interviewed Kevin Burns, the creator of the show and he said something that was both profound and totally unsurprising: Any story is about the people in it, the FAMILY in it. That's really the feeling you get from the Damage, Inc. crew. There are no blood ties between them, but they're closer than a lot of blood families are. These are people who have been through the ringer together and they're ready to go again. They want to go again. It's the feeling you get at a gaming table with your buddies. Everyone wants to do their part. Everyone expects everyone else to do their parts. But it's not just that. It's that you knew everyone else WILL do their part.

And that's what makes a story like *Phantoms* work. This is a family and they're here to take things apart if that's what they need to do to accomplish their mission. Damage, Inc. is a good name for them. It's not like they MEAN to damage things, it's just that sometimes a character's gotta do what a character's gotta do.

All goofiness aside, *Phantoms* is an intense ride. There is a lot of action here and the one time it really lets up I found myself swept into laughing hysterically, and I mean that literally. Have you ever had that moment when everything around you was terrifying and then something that's really only a little bit funny happens and you're laughing so hard that you almost give yourself a concussion? Yeah, that was me. I didn't know a book could do that to you. I got a similar feeling while watching *Saving Private Ryan* at the theater. That was sights and sounds and a book is just words and imagination. Well, maybe not JUST but you get what I'm saying...

Yeah, I'm going with "totally immersive experience" because I read that in an interview with a game developer once and not only is it an accurate description, it sounds cool too. So now you can officially say you read something cool on my blog. Hold on...

You are reading this... Right? Anyway...

There was something in the acknowledgements (I think) about how *Phantoms* started out as a ghost story set in a fantasy setting. I think I screwed that quote up, but that was the gist of it. The point is that it's easy to see in retrospect. The fog, the mysterious disappearances, it just makes sense that it started out as a ghost story. The thing is it's so much more than that.

Phantoms is a story that just keeps on giving. There is a lot going on. The backstories of the characters are well thought out and actually apply to what is going on in the story.

Of course it wouldn't be a good Scooby Doo story if there wasn't a hidden villain. It's not really a spoiler to say that there is one here because it's obvious from the beginning that the team isn't sure who or what they're fighting. All they know is that something is killing people and there is fog. Lots and lots of fog that only comes at night. It's spooky and scary and part of that immersive experience that I wrote about earlier. There's actually a bit of overlap here, as I wouldn't be surprised to see *Phantoms* reviewed on a horror blog.

Being the nice guy that I am, I'm not going to mention the fact that my boy Jasper wasn't in this book. That would be a low blow, especially as this is an awesome book without him. I'm not in the least bitter or pouty at all. Really, I'm not. I'm totally over it.

Bottom Line 4.95 out of 5 Fog Banks It would be five, but they left Jasper out.

The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel by L. Jagi Lamplighter Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

You might remember last month that Upstream reviewed the Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin, in which a magical girl ended up at a magical school, collected nearly a dozen magical friends, joined a fraternity, investigated a mystery, saw an omen that heralds the doom of worlds, headed off an attack by an army of dozens of mind-controlled students, saved the entire campus, and provided support for a battle that involved the dragon that used to be Professor Moriarty...

Not bad for the first week, huh?

No. Sorry, my mistake.

It's not bad for the first five days of school.

Take that, Harry Potter.

How do I know that book one was the first week? Because book two opens only a few hours after the end of book 1, and states she's only been there five days.

If the books get any more dense, we're going to have to call Rachel Griffin "Jack Bauer."

The story

In spy novels, most people will cite John LeCarre, usually for good reason. As far as I'm concerned, his crowning achievement were his George Smiley novels. The middle book of his Carla trilogy was called The Honorable Schoolboy— book 1, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, ended with the discovery of a mole in MI6, and his unmasking. Much of the second book is "walking back the cat" — going through the mole's history and discovering exactly what havoc he hath wrought upon the spy service during his period working for the other team. Much of The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel proceeds forward in a similar manner. Book one was so dense, and the implications from them so vast, we essentially need an after action report just to get a good idea of the fallout.

In fact, the first 100 pages of The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel handles: recapping the first book, reintroducing the characters, walks back the cat on the enemies from book 1, as well as sets up the conflict going forward. Not bad, huh?

So, if you think that the first book ended a little abruptly, without any follow through, there's a good reason for that. It would have added another 50-100 pages.

But don't worry, there is enough solid data here that you can read these books back-to-back without it being a problem. How do I know that? Because I have three other people I convinced to read these

books who did just that.

Anyway, for those of you who fear the repetitive nature of YA books ... no. Not at all. There is nothing repeated here. In fact, this one continues to wrap up plot threads left over from the first books — there actually were plot threads dangling, but I didn't realize it with all the screaming, chaos, and running about in the grand shootout in the finale. I'm almost afraid to see how the series will end.... answer: in fire, probably.

The plot wraps up a lot of plot threads from book 1. And there's a lot to wrap up: the raven that heralds the doom of worlds; the Outsiders from other worlds; the "Lightbringer," the villains behind Moriarty of book one; the one behind THAT threat; her relationship status; the story behind Rachel's father and his work as an agent ... there's an awful lot kicking around.

And this review hasn't even touched all of the new various and sundry plot elements kicking around.

The characters

If you've ever read a book where you're convinced that the author has entire biographies on every character—even if it's a janitor that has two lines in the entire novel—you have an idea of how Lamplighter builds her novels.

In *The Raven*, *the Elf*, and *Rachel*, you see more sides to people we've already seen. Whether it's the magical prince of Australia, or the Artful Dodger and his pet dragon, or even Vladimir von Dread (I'm almost certain that his family crest reads DREAD IS BAVARIA. BAVARIA IS DREAD, but I haven't asked yet). It is a vast and colorful crew, and I suspect we're going to see more of their own backstories as time goes on.

The world

Good God, I think you need a degree in classical literature, a minor in mythology, and be in on the jokes of three different languages and five different cultures in order to get all of the little hints and nods and such in the novels. But that's a general observation, not specific to this book.

Now, I've seen that Jagi doesn't like having her book compared to *Harry Potter*. I know. It's not fair to JK Rowling. But I've given book 1 to other people. And they read only 10% into *Unexpected Enlightenment* and decided that it was a deeper and richer world than *Potter*. And the farther in we go, the deeper everything is. Or maybe it just shows us how shallow *Potter* was and we never realized it. There are no johnny one-note characters here. Everyone has different emotions and moods and personalities. Hell, I think Rachel went through more emotions over the course of any five pages of *The Raven*, *the Elf*, and *Rachel* than the entire body of *Hogwarts* in 7 novels. That may be unfair, but I don't think so.

The politics

It's Christian, which seems to be a one-party characteristic lately. How Christian? Aslan is a recurring character.

Content warning

If you pay very close attention, squint one eye and tilt your head, it is suggested that mind control was used for the abuse of a student. I'd still say that this book is YA.

Shadow War by William Lehman

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Today, we're honoring William Lehman. He has twenty years in the US Navy and another twenty as a civilian employee of the Navy. That's forty years in public service if you're keeping score at home. He started out his lifetime of service as a Sonar Technician, Submarines. Of course, he can't tell me where he was deployed because he was in subs, and he was never in the places where he was, never did any of the things that he did and was given awards for reasons that have been redacted because the stuff he got them for never occurred.

Or sumfin'.

Those awards include the Navy Expeditionary Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, the Arctic Service Medal and a Navy Commendation as well as "some other stuff." He once circumnavigated the globe in ten minutes while surfaced at the North Pole, except that he didn't because he was never there.

Capisce?

He served on the USS McKee, the USS Alabama (g) and the USS Florida (g), as well as the Trident refit facility where he was seconded to Base Security for the duration of Desert Storm and finished up as the Work Programs Director for Naval Brig Bangor. He can't tell me about any of the fun toys he played with because those don't exist, either.

He is married to Kitiara Lehman and his kids, Michael and Amanda, are both grown. He also has three grandchildren, Scarlet, Lillian and Gracie-Ray. Oh, and at some point, he found time to dual class into policeman, serving with the Bremerton PD concurrent with his service both in the USN and as a Navy civilian.)

Okay, so there are some things that Jimbo just doesn't do, like ever. Or at least since I was twelve and picked up a copy of L. Ron Hubbard's Death Quest. Stop laughing! It's a good book when you're twelve!

Anyway, having read through the sixth book in the series FIRST, I then had to go back and read the first five. It was expensive (when your allowance in a dollar a week, a five-dollar paperback takes a LONG time to get) and half of what was in the books was spoiled because I came in after they had been published. Nope, never gonna do that again.

Well, until I get a request from a vet to accept an Advance Reader's Copy of his book that'll be out sometime soon. Uhh...

He's a vet, right? SO you kind of have to, because vet on Memorial Day, and offering to read the first one might work but uh...

Yeah.

All of that to say that I REALLY REALLY enjoyed William Lehman's Shadow War and I can't wait to read the first two, since it's the third in the series. Seriously, this hero is a heroic hero that does, like,

heroic stuff. I like that. He's not afraid to fight when he needs to and he's willing to use his brain when necessary as well. If he's a master werewolf and an Asatru priest in a world where magic exists, and he can go berserk (only he spells it baresark. I'm guessing that's the Nordic spelling) and do magical stuff too, so much the better.

Although, honestly, this is one of a very few Urban Fantasy works that I've read that could have worked without the Fantasy part attached. Don't get me wrong. I loved the fantasy elements. I just think that the basic plot of the novel is good enough to stand on its own without the magic if that's the way that Lehman wanted to write it. I'm kinda glad he didn't, because the only thing cooler than a detective novel/spy thriller mashup is a detective novel/spy thriller/fantasy story mashup. I just think he built his world well enough that it fantasy is a useful addition instead of the main attraction.

Of course, he used a couple of real-world cities (Seattle and San Francisco) to set Shadow War in probably does help. He had like street maps and stuff and being a retired sub vet there's a good chance he spent some time in Washington State as there is a sub base in Bremerton, Washington. Actually, I think there's one in San Fran too. Ok, so that probably saved him a bit of trouble with research, but hey, there is nothing wrong with being a SMART author.

Or sumfin'

It's weird though, because although Lehman himself is a bubblehead, his main character is a Marine who was with Seal Team Twelve. Never heard of them? I guess that's because they're the preternatural SEALs and you're not read in. Yup, that's where they send all of the 'Thropes (short for lycanthrope, get used to seeing it) vampires, etc. They're the A Team, the guys you don't want to mess with. He used to be one until he retired, joined the Park Police and went out to live the simple life.

Or sumfin'

Apparently, he ended up with a life more complicated than what he anticipated, but he and his girlfriend, a Native American shaman with magic of her own, seem to do pretty well dealing with what they're faced with. For the most part. I mean, it's not easy but they get through it. Somehow.

I also really like the fact that Lehman, like another personal favorite Declan Finn, adds things in that make his work that much more realistic. Think about it this way: How many times have you ever seen Martin Riggs and Roger Murtaugh (think Lethal Weapon) have to fill out paperwork after a gun battle? Lehman doesn't dwell on it, but it's there. It adds a lot to the atmosphere of Shadow War, and it makes it a lot more realistic. I like that.

But that's not to say that this is a book all about paperwork. Shadow War is a work of art with plenty of action and intensity to keep the reader interested. Some of the specialized munitions in the book sound fun all by themselves and when you add in the real-world firearms and missiles then toss in some hard fighting with edged weapons, well, it just works, especially if you're already in the mood for some skull cracking to begin with.

There is plenty of political intrigue in the background as well. Actually, it's not really in the background, it's pretty much in your face during large chunks of the book. It makes sense though. Shadow War isn't just the name of the book, it's a good description of what happens in the book, at least in general terms and Lehman gets it: Wars aren't fought just because of hate and a desire to kill the people we don't like. They're fought to further political ambitions using actual force instead of political pressure

and money. Alliances rise and fall because of the political goals of the allied nations. His story makes sense because he gets the way things work in the real world.

Lehman's service to his country is obvious in his characters as well. These aren't just people who have been stationed in the same part of the country. They're not just friends, although they are that. They're comrades, people who have been welded together through shared training and shared danger. I'm a historian because of the real-life equivalent to the characters in Shadow War. Seriously, if Fisher actually existed, I'd buy him a beer. He's good people.

And I've already gone and downloaded the first book in the series, Harvest of Evil. Of course, I had to boot a book from my Kindle Unlimited queue to get it, and that's all Lehman's fault. I'll have to stick my tongue at him if I ever meet the guy. It's all his fault that I'll never read...

Uhh...

Whatever that other book was.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Severed Claws

Sinclair's Scorpions by P.P. Corcoran Review by Pat Patterson

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

Preliminaries:

1. PP Corcoran had a story, "Dead or Alive," in the very first Four Horseman book I read, which was right after LibertyCon 2017. Since LibertyCon 2019 is now about to start,...something. There HAS to be something significant about that, but I will be John Brown if I can figure out what it is. This installment was released almost a year ago, so whatever synchronicity exists is purely a function of...something. Don't worry about it. I certainly won't. BTW: I enjoyed the story, which introduced Peacekeepers.
2. ALSO: I am aggravated about the fact that one of the GREAT story features is something I cannot divulge without being a spoiler, and I HATE spoilers. Evidently, the characters do as well, because when the reveal takes place, only ONE of the Scorpions present show any reaction, and that one finishes the book in a state dramatically different than the other two. And that's all I am saying about that.
3. AND FINALLY! I am not an atmosphere scientist. I pretend no great knowledge of anything. HOWEVER, my limited knowledge and understanding of our relationship with air, verified with a tiny bit of google-fu, leads me to believe that there is a Great Big Science Error in the middle of the story. And that is: the fuss over the "high concentration" of nitrogen in the atmosphere of the target zone. It's not essential to the plot, although it DOES allow for some character exposition, as the commander of Sinclair's Scorpions, Colonel Alastair Sinclair, is "slightly embarrassed by his inadvertent Human prejudice toward races from oxygen-rich planets." On the other hand, there FIVE full references to the lethal nature of nitrogen. Except, it's not lethal. To support the idea, the author discusses the horrors of 'the bends,' which takes place when divers who are too deep for too long ascend to the surface too fast. Yes, that will tear them up, as is described in one of those passages. However, it is the function of the deeper pressure, not of the nitrogen itself. We are walking around in air almost completely composed of only two gasses: nitrogen, which is 78% of the air, and oxygen, which is 21% of the air. The remainder is nothing that really has an impact on us. So, to write about nitrogen gas, slowly seeping in through our skin and poisoning us: nope. Now, I am STOPPING RIGHT THERE, while things are still on a friend-

ly basis, because I am NOT an atmosphere scientist, and who knows? Maybe the author had in mind a concentration of 86% nitrogen and 14 % oxygen, and maybe that concentration WILL kill us. If so, please supply references, and you have my apology. As I said earlier, though, while I believe this to be a significant error, it does NOT invalidate the plot in any way. An example of a science glitch that invalidates a story is failing to take into consideration the incredible distances between stars, and having Zippy Rogers drive his atomic-pile craft from Earth to Borgsnoggle in the Andromeda Something in three days. Science error of that nature would guarantee a negative review.

So, on to the review.

Alastair Sinclair is the commander of Sinclair's Scorpions, a Human Merc company, formed by the three returning survivors of Campbell's Foxes, one of the 96 companies that had a semi-bad experience during the Alpha Contracts. While they really can't be said to have a concentration area, the way that Winged Hussars have, they DO specialize in dirty deeds. At a substantial price. Perhaps that makes him a bit more paranoid, or maybe he is just gifted, but his monitoring of the state of the Galactic Union tips him off to the truth that a Bad Thing is about to happen to earth, and, in particular, to mercenary companies. So, he gathers all his troops, and gets them off-planet, just in the nick of time. He also arranges for the dependents, residing on base, to be evacuated to a safe house, prepared in advance for such a contingency. And that doesn't work out; a HecSha guided missile cruiser smacks the non-combatants out of the sky. The wives and children of many of the Scorpions are wiped out in a moment.

It's not ALL revenge, after that, but that's the main motivation to bet on. Colonel Sinclair has dispersed his forces among the stars in order to prevent a single engagement from eliminating them, but he has a pre-arranged disaster code, which he sends, allowing his son Charlie the opportunity to clear out and seek cover. And then, he goes to find the most destructive mission he can.

Big scary aliens are a part of ALL of the installments in the 4HU, but they are never CONSISTENTLY given only one dimension. Here, Corcoran is brilliant. His aliens are alien, no doubt about it, but he manages to infuse fear, hope, weakness, loyalty, and defiance into the erstwhile enemies of the Humans, so that they become, well, people. People we can care about. Even the nasty little rat-faced Flatar and his gigantic spider buddy have their good sides, who can help but have affection for a four-foot intelligent millipede who gives a persecutor the hot-foot (all over)?

Some love, with a TINY bit of smooching, but all very G rated; lots of exploding spaceships; several great get-away scenes; brilliant techs geeking out on equipment, and it all ties in to the consistent universe. (Has this EVER been done to this scale before, with acknowledged authors?) I am capriciously taking away one star for the nitrogen thing, but I'll edit my review and put it back if I get contacted with scientific justification. It's a great book!

Sons of the Lion by Jason Cordova Review by Pat Patterson Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I have not had the luxury of ignoring things taking place in the continent of Africa; I have family living there. Therefore, this book resonates with me. Yes, it is primarily a good, old-fashioned, shoot-em-up exploding spaceship story. Yahoo! However, it is set in Western Africa, mostly in Liberia, and the poverty, corruption, cynicism, beauty, and steadfastness of that area are treated seriously in this book. It

doesn't fall off the cliff of white guilt on the one hand, nor does it fall off the cliff of blaming everything on incompetent savages on the other side. I found it to speak the truth, based on my own personal experience and research. Furthermore, the love of country, expressed primarily through the unmitigated patriotism of the protagonist, makes this book a special gift to me. Others may have a different experience. I challenge the reader who is inclined to blow off the book's serious examination of a complicated situation to speak to primary sources, and to listen, listen, listen.

And now, to the book.

We start with some insights into the Veetanho family structure, which pretty much makes most Human families look like paradise. Males are useless, except for breeding, after which they are murdered. Sterile females become something akin to sadistic harem mistresses, with the sole, declared intent to make life for those under their care to be the very worst imaginable. And it appears to me, that within the creche, there is ONE dominant Alpha, and everyone else serves as prey, to be tormented to no end, other than to reinforce to the Alpha that they are truly the Alpha. I may have missed some subtleties, but that description hits the high points.

So: no wonder Peepo is a psycho. It's what she was TRAINED to be.

One who has (somehow) managed to break the mold a bit is Thorpi. A biological female, she passes herself off as a male; and how she got away with THAT, I don't know. She has found a valuable place as Logistics Officer with the Kakata Korps, a merc company based out of Monrovia, Liberia, and has totally escaped the demands of Veetanho society.

Until they want her back.

Senior members of her family have noted her place and decide to use her influence with the Kakata Korps to persuade them to take on the role of enforcers for the Mercenary Guild, and then to serve as their agent-in-place. It's a tough position for her, because her loyalties are torn so severely.

The enforcement role is plausible on the surface for commanding officer Colonel Mulbah Luo, because Kakata Korps was NOT in the inner circles of the mercs, didn't know what was happening with the Four Horsemen, and they came back from a mission to find that there is an apparent rebellion against the Galactic Union. They are tasked to bring the remaining rebels to heel.

It's a nasty job, but on paper, it seems appropriate. There are, after all, records showing all the broken rules the Four Horsemen left in their wake as they abandoned Earth. It's a trap, of course, but it's baited with some sweet, sweet cheese. If the Kakata Korps takes the legal contracts given to them by General Peepo's faction, they will be rewarded with enough money to buy the best equipment first and promises of influence a little bit later.

Here's where an understanding of some of the basics of African politics is helpful. In almost every case, the borders that define African countries were drawn up by EUROPEAN nations at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The reasoning had NOTHING to do with the political, religious, or cultural affiliations of the Africans, and everything to do with carving up land for colonialism without conflict with each other. From the beginning, the tribal structures extant were ignored, with the result that life-long enemies were thrust together and told to stop fighting. Not effective. Still causing problems TODAY, and so, into the future of the 4HU.

Despite the mess, Col. Luo LOVES his country, and hates the turmoil that the impoverishment resulting from hi-tech only available from the Galactics has brought to the people of Africa. So, the tempta-

tion he cannot resist: he is promised influence, if not actual dominion, over most of West Africa. It's not in him to turn down the chance to bring order to a region that has been unable to provide peace and a decent standard of living to its people, despite abundant resources.

Of course, this brings him into conflict with the graft-collecting bureaucracy, and he anticipates having to stage a coup. However, a reform candidate has just been elected to the Office of the President in Liberia, a man with the same dreams for the future.

Now, ALL of that is the background. From here, you get into the exploding spaceships, which manifest in various ways. In addition to the allegedly 'rogue' merc units General Peepo sends him after, there are numerous psycho warlords who collect the very finest filth by the power of intimidation, forced drug addiction, and child enslavement. Think they can co-exist with the virtue Col. Luo is attempting to bring?

Okay, that's all I have to say about this book. If this was Book One of a series, I'd spend a paragraph giving you more background, but I'm going to assume you have SOME degree of familiarity with the 4HU. If not? Today is as good as any to start.

Stand or Fall by Kevin Ikenberry Review by Pat Patterson

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

Open war exists between the Humans and the Galactic Union. More precisely, that conflict is instigated and carried out by certain elements of the Mercenary Guild, led by General Peepo; and targeting Human mercenaries, with special emphasis on the Four Horsemen.

In this installment, the agents primarily used by General Peepo are the MinSha. Operational command is held by Major General Drehnayl, while Lieutenant General Chinayl is the behind-the-scenes decision maker.

(NOTE: In the American military, these ranks would signify that Chinayl, with three stars, outranks Drehnayl, with two stars. A lieutenant general outranks a major general, as a function of relationships to two obsolete rankings; the Lieutenant General was second in command to the Captain General, while the Major General is derived from the Sergeant Major General. However, it is not possible that the actual rank structure of the MinSha and the American military are a one-to-one rank equivalent. Their actual ranks are likely something like GerbSn893^%jk and VrZum*)@gf, and taste purple and footwear, respectively.)

The mission: wipe out Human colonies. Kill them all.

MinSha carry out their orders cheerfully and to the very best of their abilities, but General Drehnayl also has a personal animus toward the Humans: she was related to some of the MinSha killed by rogue Humans during First Contact. And, as the rogue attacks came from representatives of a polity from which Asbaran Solutions eventually derived, her hatred toward that group is particularly intense. Golly; I wonder if this will cloud her judgment?

A Very Strange Thing has happened to the first target of Gen. Drehnayl, the planet of New Persia: all of the settlements, save one, have been destroyed by nuclear weapons. The only location where

Humans remain is devoid of fighters, with only women and children present. Certain of Drehnayl's staff believe this should result in a change of targets. Nah, says Drehnayl. We're here already. Let's kill the civilians.

Actually, she's not QUITE that calm toward those so bold as to make the suggestion. And thus, a bit of discord finds root.

But, the facts behind the Very Strange Thing are ignored. Wonder what's up with that?

The First Human Peacemaker, Lieutenant Jessica Francis, back home after her work on Weqq, is given the task of determining why there has been no communication with New Persia; intelligence, in this instance, has provided the correct lead that Gen. Drehnayl is responsible. She is given a memorable send-off by her supervisor; one might even say it's the farewell of a lifetime. She will not rest until she brings resolution to the assignment she has been given, because that is the way she's wired, and because that is the choice she has made for her life.

While she is doing that, the Peacemaker Council has to face the fact that with the active hostility of the Peepo-lead Mercenary Guild, their role as Galactic Cops is in imminent danger of ending catastrophically. That's the deal with cops; there are ALWAYS a lot more of Them than there is of Us.

Meanwhile, the THIRD Human Peacemaker, Jackson Rains, is being an ass. It's a role he has developed to a high degree, and he rather stays in that role for the entirety of the book. I don't know why he gets such devotion from his comrades. He seems to use every opportunity to whine, and when no opportunity is available, he makes one. Maybe he'll eat something poisonous soon.

With respect to other major plot threads and characters: I leave those as an exercise for the reader. You will NOT be disappointed!

Tales from the Lyon's Den
Edited by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson
Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Preface by Chris Kennedy. Read this to find out where the stories came from. I'm not going to tell you, which illustrates BEAUTIFULLY the problem I have, as a reviewer, with anthologies. Frequently the point of the story turns on One Thing. And I can't reveal that One Thing without it being a spoiler.

Now, I don't hate spoilers as bad as some people do. In fact, when I was a lad, I can remember turning to the last page of the story and reading that first, because I WANTED to know how it was going to come about.

Here are two points: It's not the One Thing that makes a good short story; it's the craft of the author. That's the first point. The SECOND point is that it takes me just about as long to communicate the craft of the author of a short story, as it does to communicate the craft of the author of a novel. So, while I LOVE short stories, and they were really what got me hooked early on, I HATE REVIEWING THEM. No, that's not true. I don't HATE them. But I do sigh, knowing they are going to be hard work. How much work? Well, I've just passed 200 words on the PREFACE. And avoided the One Thing!

The Devil in the Pit by Mark Wandrey. A merc walks into a bar... Jim Cartwright, the Original Cavalier, is visiting a new merc pit, when a chaotic fight breaks out. It appears the fight is everybody against everybody else. Survival is not a certainty; make a profit? RIDICULOUS!

A Job to Do by Quincy J. Allen. FOUR mercs walk into a bar... They are POSSIBLY the new Fireteam Cooper for the merc unit Hu's Hawks. Although they all have the raw material, they have to pass another test before they are accepted. It involves taking a drink.

For the Honor of the Flag by Doug Dandridge. A burnout has walked into too many bars. That was his choice, after a bad thing happened, a bad, bad thing. To return from Burnout World, he has to walk in to a different kind of bar, and then walk in to a death trap.

Lucky by James P. Chandler. I don't know who walks into a bar. Some people may enjoy stories that are told in disjointed reveals, with continuity something you have to assemble after the entire thing is over. Me? I hate them. I hated this story. And a PART of that emotion is because it's got what LOOKS to be a fairly interesting plot. I don't really know, however, because I gave up about half-way through. YMMV. (But you are wrong if it does.) (insert defenestration gif here (not really, I don't have a gif))

Shit Day by Marisa Wolf. (who walks into the bar is a secret!) The best of these days are those that happen to other people. Keep that in mind. Also, keep in mind that help can come from unexpected places, and that sometimes, as when you are hanging upside down in a cave waiting to be eaten, you had better count on that. Because there is no other way you are getting out of this...

The Charge of the Heavy Brigade by Chris Kennedy. A merc ALMOST walks into a bar, but a T-rex stops him. Yeah, that IS a strange start, but it DID happen, really. Peace-loving, cabbage-eating T-rexes need help, because wicked, wicked MinSha have threatened to do a Bad Thing.

The Bottom Line by Michael J. Allen. An IRS agent walks into a bar. See, that's ALREADY a bad move. Why go into the bar? Why not make them come to you, and sit down in your air-conditioned office in the Official Building building? Hmmmm. Wonder if the agent has OTHER reasons?

Midnight Diplomacy by Tim C. Taylor. Captain Blue, of the Midnight Sun Free Company, longs for a bar to walk into. Instead, there are these WORTHLESS, STUPID diplomats who must be protected. Despite the fact that they HAVE to be the worst treaty-makers EVER.

Desperta Ferro by Eric S. Brown & N.X. Sharps Lt. Mazzey walked into a bar. A long, long time ago. And has been busy pickling brain cells since. It's rather pathetic, since at one point, he was a pretty good merc. Now he's the kind of merc only a loser would hire. Or, somebody who was LOOKING for a loser.

The Deadly Dutchman by Kevin McLaughlin. Corporal Wilson SLAMS into a bar. With his head. Fortunately, his suit protects him from most of it. But he's confused: Where is all this wreckage coming from? He was on a drop, when everything went away. Now, he is adrift in space. Where are his comrades? Where are his enemies? Does he have a future?

The Felix by RJ Ladon. Why in the world would anyone PLAN to make an Oogar mad? And what would you do if your sister told you to do just that? Well, I'll tell you this: you had BETTER have a LOT of trust in your sister if you comply with those directions. NOTE: this story wins the award for finding an actual use for the .500 S&W. It DOES take space opera to make that come true.

The Heart of a Lion by Terry Mixon. When you need rescue, Rick Betancourt is the man you want. This mission is a bit different, though. Wicked, treacherous aliens are waiting to swarm an expedition to retrieve the fallen. For every successful mission, a price gets paid.

What Really Matters by Chris Winder. Ummm...sorry. I don't know what this story is about. I can tell you that it has GREAT action sequences, but I must have missed something, because the ending went over my head. Look, I was probably asleep, okay? Don't let it bother you.

Headspace and Timing by Robert E. Hampson. A whole bunch of mercs walked into a bar a while ago. They are playing a very ancient game, call "mess with the newby," and are telling lies. This PARTICULAR assortment of lies involves having your brain enhanced.

Return to Sender by Benjamin Tyler Smith. Well, the merchants have done it to the grunts again. The delivery of arms and ammo that will save them from being wiped out will suffer a slight delay, slight being a VERY flexible term. In this case, it means the mercs will die. They have ONE chance: a just in time delivery, by the service called "Justin Time;" captained by none other than Candy the Gun Bunny.

Grunwald by David Alan Jones. With the massive firepower called upon by some merc companies, it seems unlikely that a niche would exist for a one-CASPer unit. However, that is the case. It's only a guard posting, though, a guard of nothing valuable. Yeah. Right.

The Quiet Was Fine by Jake Bible. The ship exploded, and he was alone in space. And then he wasn't. As long as there is a hope, you strive. Eventually, striving is over.

A Mother's Favor by Kacey Ezell. A Depik walks into a bar. Unseen, of course. I believe you need to read THIS, then "Gilded Cage" in "A Fistful of Credits" and then this again, then "Gilded Cage" again, then this again. Why? Well, BESIDES the fact that they are both just excellent, creepy, engaging stories, regardless of content, they both deal with a Depik walking into a bar, and the consequences. Ezell is one of those writers who has the gift to use just a few words, and utterly rip your heart out of your chest. "I suppose I can't stop you," Lyon said. "No," Del said, slowly blinking. "I suppose you cannot."

Brrrr! To my way of thinking, that soft-spoken phrase carries more menace than paragraphs of raging threats and weapons waving in the air.

With one exception, these are well-told. They aren't predictable; in the 4HU, we start off with the fact that 96 of 100 missions ended in failure. And they are well worth your time. Heck, you might even like the one I threw out the window!

Unfettered Journey by Gary F. Bengier

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

It's a question that's been bandied about for a long while: what is consciousness? Can a machine have a soul? What makes us human?

Set in the near future, Unfettered Journey gives us a glimpse of how society could evolve if social media is left unchecked: everyone has a "level" following the passage of the Levels Act. This creates a class structure that keeps people of a certain level from having relationships — or basic interactions, for

that matter — with those of other levels. It's a means by which humanity has decided to order itself with the hopes of making progress after a great environmental disaster.

Now, in the midst of this relatively post-apocalyptic landscape, Joe Denksmith (level 42) is reviving his research into artificial intelligence and the question of whether or not artificial persons can have souls. Taking a sabbatical from his regular employment, Joe heads out to Colorado, where he begins work at Lone Mountain College. Along the way, he starts to wonder if his pursuit is all it's cracked up to be. Through long and intense conversations with colleagues, he continues to question whether or not the code can be cracked — or should it? — when circumstances work to throw him a curveball.

Enter Evie Joneston, leader of a movement protesting the Levels Act and fighting to get it repealed so people have more opportunities for individual achievement. Meeting through an accident of circumstance, the two slowly reach an understanding as Evie hides out in Joe's apartment. As the two get to know each other better, Joe finds himself thinking less and less about the question of robot souls and more about whether humanity is being given a fair shake.

What follows is a long, nuanced discussion about human rights, artificial intelligence, consciousness, and government overreach. The philosophical discussions between characters, while sometimes very dry and convoluted, are an interesting examination of cause and effect, free will, the existence of God and whether or not He has direct influence over events or if He just wound up the clock and let it go. At times I found myself recalling what Harrison Ford said to George Lucas about how you can write certain things, but you can't say them. The conversations sometimes felt a little more suited for academic papers than dialogue, but overall, they made the point of what the book is driving at.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who wants a straight up epic fantasy novel with amazing world building and (no pun intended) fantastic action

If you're tired of JK Rowling and Harry Potter, read this book.

If you want something that's superior to Harry Potter, definitely buy this book.

If you want Christian fiction on par with Tolkien and CS Lewis, why don't you own this book already?

Why read it?

As someone once sneered about CS Lewis' Narnia, "This series is too good for children." You should own book one already, and probably have started book 2 by now.

I think this is the first time I've come across a science fiction book where the core of the story wraps around the question of consciousness and free will. You skate around it a bit with things like *I, Robot*, perhaps, but Joe's driving force is puzzling out this conundrum. All the while he gets shunted sideways into working on a space station to help diagnose a technical problem and at the same time protecting Evie from authorities, and that's just about two-thirds of the way into the story.

No spoilers, but things take a turn in a direction I did not expect with the back half of the book, and the ending felt a little anti-climactic, with some action happening "off-screen" when it probably would

have helped the resolution be a little more robust. Of course, it probably would have added another hundred pages or so, but still...

Overall, it's a good book that's well worth the time. But read it knowing that you're going to have to pay attention, because there are some big concepts. In the end, you'll have quite a bit to think about.

War Demons by Russell Newquist Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Devil went down to Georgia. He was looking for a soul to steal.

And this time, he isn't coming with a violin. He's prepared for war.

Welcome to War Demons, by Russell Newquist.

The story

Chapter one opens up with a swordfight with a demon and ends with dropping a daisy cutter on it.

That irritated the sucker a little.

Fast forward a few years to our hero, Michael Alexander, who Jack Ryaned out of the military when his helicopter crashed. He and his buddy hid in a cave ... only to discover something in the cave that was colder than the dark... and hungry.

When Michael returns to Georgia, the thing that haunted him in the sandbox follows...

Ahem, "The Devil went down to Georgia...."

But when Michael starts to see his dead friend stalking him in the shadows, well, it's just some PTSD demons. Nothing to worry about, right?

Yeesh. When this guy is haunted by his past, he takes it literally.

The fun continues as the circle of crazy threatens to suck in the entire state. Black Ops commandos, Vatican operatives, a billionaire prepper (seriously, don't mess with the billionaire prepper), a moment of "I wanna bring the flamethrower" that I really believe (Down to "We got it from the Bureau of Land Management"). He gathers the magnificent seven, mounts up, and "We're gonna save the damsel from the dragon..."

Aaaaannnnndddd it's only the halfway mark. Which made me wonder how the bloody blue Hell the rest of the book was going to go.

That was pretty much the point where things got worse, complete with a villain you really just want to run through with a stake, cut its head off and burn the body ... maybe in that order. It was such a deliciously evil sucker.

And then he had a couple of Blackhawks and Apache attack helicopters fight a dragon.

And, it being Georgia, it ends at a football stadium.

Because of course it does. It's Georgia.

The characters

Honestly, War Demons was solidly authored and put together. 11% into the book, he's established most of the characters we're going to see throughout the novel, including the villains.

Yes, all of them.

What? You thought just a demon was going to be enough? Nah. We're going to have golems and vampires and zombies and warlocks and Jihadis, oh my. (Or, as I thought of it as I read it, "terrorists and demons? Challenge accepted.") Newquist also does a great job of sprinkling everyone's back story throughout the novel.

It's got a nice sense of humor. Up to and including a spook who picks his aliases out of a liquor cabinet.

The world

This is very "secret world" –it's our world, only with monsters lurking in the background. Despite that War Demons gives you just enough world building to keep the story going, it's clear that this is the tip of an iceberg that can sink an ocean liner. It's very much like Harry Dresden that way — "Here's some lore, now duck!"

The politics

We have a SpecOps team fighting the forces of Hell, an Apache gunship playing tag with a dragon, preppers to the rescue, and yes, we're on a mission from God.

... You could say that the politics are somewhat socially right-leaning.

The politics of War Demons is somewhere between "Guns, lots of Guns," and "Deus Vult."

Or as one of our other reviews coined, you could call this "Punch you in the face Catholicism."

Content warning

There is reference to sex in here (as in "X slept with Y about Z years ago.")

Who is it for?

The back of War Demons describes it as "Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden collides with Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International in this supernatural thriller that goes straight to Hell!"

That tag isn't bluster.

In fact, it's fairly accurate. Personally, I think War Demons leans more on MHI than Harry Dresden. So much so that I'm willing to say up front that I would not be surprised if Russell ends up authoring an MHI spinoff novel. No, I'm not exaggerating. This is a story that could have been mistaken for a Monster Hunter International novel if Larry Correia used prayer as a weapon more often. But I will admit, there is a TON of Dresden-level action.

Why read it?

Because it's every day, average people fighting the forces of darkness with enough firepower to make the A-Team envious. It's just plain fun.

Wolf Time by Lars Walker

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Excellent cover art by Gary Ruddell

I started to say that there are two themes running through the book, but that's not really accurate. I'm guessing there might be as many as six, maybe a few more. However, for the purposes of the review, I'm only dealing with two.

The first is a howling great nonrational eruption of Scandinavian myth into the life of the present-day world, as expressed in a tiny college in Epsom, Minnesota. That's a real place, by the way, but it's ONLY a place; nothing there but Minnesota. This is not the semi-gentle Minnesota that Garrison Keillor spoke of; this is a place that has no lasting identity, but is desperately running around in all directions, looking for one. So, the Scandinavian horror suits them just fine, at first. It is, after all, a way of deriving identity. Later, when people start getting eaten, chopped to bits, etc, they have other thoughts. Usually, coming a bit too late.

The second aspect of the story is a biting commentary on certain aspects of American society and the educational system that are aggravating. At the core of the irritating bits the idea that everything is great and equal, EXCEPT for saying that everything ISN'T great and equal. That's a VAST oversimplification, but I believe it's true to the bit of the book that veers a bit toward message fiction.

NOTE: if it wasn't actually HAPPENING, this wouldn't be message fiction at all. It would just be fiction. It's what seems to be the desired outcome of the most abrasive elements of society that have given this book what may be regarded as a political spin. But that was the choice made by the Influencers, not by Walker. He was just writing a book.

And here's what he has one of his characters say:

“A good, hard fact is the best defence there is — against everything except tears. There's a whole generation of debators in the church who've learned that you don't have to refute an argument if you can only burst into tears and make your opponent look like a cad.”

I don't suppose that at the time he wrote that, it was reasonable to predict that the bursting into tears would be supplemented by hitting people in the head with bicycle locks. Unfortunately, that has turned out to be the case.

We can hope, however, that mysterious and evil bits of pre-history do not suddenly appear in our neighborhoods. The calling together of elements of Ragnarok and Armageddon, etc., IS a popular topic in fiction, according to the movie feeds that cross my line of sight. However, Walker rightly points out that the alleged noble and peaceful Viking traders, promoted by deconstructionist historians, are not quite the flavor we will get if they move in next door to us.

Re-reading has been a great visceral release. The good guys are good, the bad guys are bad, and usually, the difference between the two is evident. However, this is NOT 'Fun with Dick and Jane.' Characters are conflicted and have multiple motivations, so be prepared for that.

But: do yourself a favor, okay? Go ahead and get this one.

The Year's Best Military & Adventure SF Volume 5

by David Afsharirad

Review by Pat Patterson

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

PREFACE by David Afsharirad. Read this for two reasons: first, Afsharirad discusses his rationale for the selections, which is nice background, but SECOND! The amount of effort put into harvesting out a 'best of' collection is something I simply cannot comprehend. Anybody who does that deserves the trivial amount of effort the reader expends to read his comments.

LOVE IN THE TIME OF INTERSELLAR WAR by Brendan DuBois. It's a grim future postulated, with alien monsters in control of space, and thus in control of the surface of the planet. If you think that a fatal disease, amputation, and alien domination will prevent love, then you have never spent time in the company of a teenage boy.

GOING DARK by Richard Fox. Again, a grim future, because the aliens have landed, and with superior technology are making a mess for the humans. Part of the human solution: develop cyborgs/golems. These are large, not-very-smart, powerful and intensely loyal soldiers, bonded to their team leader. Loyalty runs both ways, though, as anyone who has lead a team under stressful circumstances can attest.

THE SCRAPYARD SHIP by Felix R. Savage. This one is FUNNY! Yes, the technology is there, and the aliens, and the carnivorous bushes, but the deep joke is found elsewhere. It ALWAYS comes down to the little guy making the big guy look stupid. Even when the little guy is a shapeshifter. I'm not quite sure how the beautiful human girl and the strange alien guy work through their relationship, though. Sigh. Love is beautiful.

BROKEN WINGS by William Ledbetter. A beautiful story. The most SCIENCE-y part of the science fiction is an artifact found floating in space, but we don't need to know ANYTHING about it for the story to be wonderful. It's really a story about what happens when you do as much good as you can with what you've got, and don't allow what you DON'T have to rule.

A SONG OF HOME, THE ORGAN GRINDS by James Beamon. I believe all steampunk is supposed to be creepy. Maybe not. But, in this alternative universe, an organ grinder has more than one function, and more than one meaning. Yes, there are monkeys involved. And I recommend you get a music source that allows you to hear the songs mentioned in the story.

ONCE ON THE BLUE MOON by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Sigh. Kristine Kathryn Rusch. It is astounding to me that a person this young could be this talented and this accomplished. It wouldn't surprise me to discover that she also knows how to repair televisions. In this story, however, she takes elements from adventure, family pathos, space treachery, hacking, and cruise ships, and gives us a heroine to admire, and one who, if she moves next door to you, makes you move to Alabama.

CRASH-SITE by Brian Trent. Creepy, convoluted, and with enough intrigue and betrayal for anyone interested in that sort of thing. Although all of the action doesn't take place in a swamp, it feels like one has soaked your underwear as you read it, and there is sand in your shoes, and no dry towels, anywhere.

THIRTY-THREE PERCENT JOE by Suzanne Palmer. Black humor, nicely done. When a guy who wants to be a baker is thrust into a combat role because his psycho mom wants that, it's hard to imagine a good outcome. And, to help us understand the story a bit better, he has various prosthetic replacements of battle wounds that talk to each other. And to him.

HATE IN THE DARKNESS by Michael Z. Williamson. Mad Mike has so constructed a universe that we MUST root for the people who are devastating Earth. Is that not strange? In this case, there are additional ethical dilemmas, centering on the core issue of who it is that has to pay the price for policy decisions. It's all couched in an edge-of-the-seat, long distance pursuit. Yes, something can be boring and terrifying at the same time.

HOMUNCULUS by Stephen Lawson. I believe that civilization has one primary purpose: to provide for the special needs of the replacements. To be less obtuse: pregnant women and children. This story is consistent with that; in a highly toxic environment, people go to extreme lengths to rescue a small child who has escaped the safe quarters provided for him.

NOT MADE FOR US by Christopher Ruocchio. The United States is CONSTRUCTED around the concept of the citizen soldier. With all of the hoopla about the Second Amendment, you'd think that would be a bit more well-known, but it's not. But the decisions made at the time of the writing of the Constitution, and carried out since then, is that if we go to war, we pull in a bunch of civilians, arm and otherwise equip and train them, let them do the fighting, and then go back home. It's worked...okay. It's a better system than relying on a large standing professional military. But what if you had the technology to put your soldiers on ice? Just bring them out when there was fighting to do? This isn't a novel concept explored here, but it IS something worth thinking about, over and over again. Where will their loyalty be placed? That's just one of the first questions.

THE ERKENNEN JOB by Chris Pourteau. Ah, loyalty. The topic arises again, and it will KEEP on coming up as long as the possibility exists for there to be conflicts. Tough guys with .38s walk the mean streets of the Moon, because the game isn't EVER money; the game is POWER, and money is just how you keep score. Industrial espionage, control of narcotics, and dames.

Now, in my review of Volume 3, I designated which of the stories I felt were worthy of being included in Year's Best, and which were marginal, and which flabbergasted. This time, not gonna do that. Last year, I took on the task of reviewing as many of the Dragon Award nominees as possible, and I found that with a few exceptions, they were ALL worth a win. And this year, I have read some AMAZINGLY good short stories, mostly in the military & sci-fi category. I don't trust my ability to make a recommendation about which is 'the best.' I can tell you that there are some that I ENJOYED more than others, but I must disclose that there are some stories that I HATE that are stark raving excellent.

But the bottom line is this: David Afsharirad made the call to include these, and his expertise surpasses mine.

So, that's all I have to say about that.

Prose Bono

Mirrors or Windows

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Which would you choose in your entertainment? When you open a book, are you hoping to see your own reflection, or would you rather have a window open up on a strange new world, through which you can watch adventures unfold?

I know what I'd want. And that's why I write what I write. I don't particularly want to be a gigantic orc with a penchant for cookies and mommy issues. I feel some connections in life with the woman who has to balance her blasted talent with her career, but I don't want to be her. I don't even want to be a wildlife biologist kidnapped to serve a life as a fairy princess. I will admit to a sneaking desire to be a starship captain, but I lack the skills for that, although I could be it's gardener.

Mostly, though, I'm not trying to write the Real Worldtm because I don't particularly enjoy reading long, dragging books where very little happens, and when it does, it's ambiguous and messy and difficult. Because I want to escape from the uncertainties of all of that into a place where actions matter, conclusions can be had, and most of all, dreams are fulfilled. Not that I don't have those in life, but it takes time. Books give me a window to stare out of a daydream while I'm waiting on the action to happen in real life. They give me a way to climb through to Elsewhere if I'm sick or hurting. A refuge.

You can't take refuge in a mirror. You are stuck with yourself. I don't know about most other readers, but me? I don't think of myself as heroic. I'm bumbling through life trying to make the right decisions, looking ahead into misty futures-that-could-be and setting my steps into paths that might take me to my goals. Books give me models of heroic people who do, and who win through, and that helps me have hope that perhaps I can use their examples. We do learn from books, and I don't mean message fiction. We can learn how to human, from books that don't even have any human characters. If you hold up a mirror? You're only reinforcing your own pattern. Look through a window with observant eyes?

“Literature has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that can help the students to gain insight into human behaviour.”

(page 239, Tashkenova)

Reading can, I believe, offer things that other forms of storytelling cannot. Which is not to say that the fine art of oral tales is not also important, because a gifted speaker (I do not mean eloquent, here. I have in mind someone who is very talented at the oral style of telling Tall Tales, and it's a gift to be able to hear one in person.) can render a short saga in the best of ways. In the times before books, and movies, that was all you had, and we still have remnants of those days in written-down form with much of the

color and lustre of them rubbed off in the process. The audience was always limited, though. Books? Can be passed down and from person to person and are in their way a deeply intimate solo experience for most readers. Save the rare ones who read aloud, but that's another post I think.

Movies? Designed for the masses. So are books, or at least, they were. Now? Books can appeal to the most niche of audiences. From a house with few windows, we have moved into a time when there are more windows than we can possibly look through. Why would you want to stand still, staring in a mirror?

I know why. Personally, that's not my cuppa tea. I want to learn, to grow, and mostly? Get away from myself a bit and gain some perspective while I'm escaping reality for a short while.

Interview of Henry Vogel by Richard Paolinelli

How long have you been writing?

There are two answers to that question. If you only look at science fiction novels, I've been writing for eight years and released my first book six years ago. But back in the 1980s I wrote comic books and was part of the independent comic book movement.

Since fewer people will know anything about my comic book writing, I hope you don't mind if I expound on that for a bit. I really didn't get into comic books until I was a freshman in college. That was comparatively late in life for the time (1975), since most fans started and stopped reading comics between the ages of 10 and 14. Seven years later, with the help (and financing) of fellow comic book fan David Willis, I wrote and we published the first issue *The Southern Knights*, about a superhero team based in Atlanta. We selected Atlanta because it was two hours down I-85 from Clemson University, where David and I were students. (I was on the lazy-student ten-year plan, having left Clemson for a semester and then re-enrolled with a different major.)

The comic book format is a great fit for my short attention span style of writing. (My attention span was such a roadblock to novel writing that I didn't overcome it until 2012.) Over the next eight years I wrote and helped publish 60 comic book issues. Along the way, I also became the first online comic book professional. That was 1984 on Usenet, the Internet's predecessor.

Fifteen years after I stopped writing comics, I stumbled across Bruce Bethke's Friday Challenge weekly writing group. Essentially, Bruce tossed out a writing prompt and we had a week to write something based on it. The prompts ranged from real life issues to wild ideas like "the Star Trek death scene you always wanted to see." The highlight was online discussions and reviews of the submissions, and it created a real sense of community among the dozen or so regulars in the group. It also rekindled my interest in writing and got me thinking about writing novels. It took years of increasing participation in the group before inspiration struck.

I'd begun novels several times before 2012 but my short attention span balked at the size of the project. The trick that got me past that involved writing short "chapters" of a story and posting them online on a regular schedule. I needed the obligation to my handful of readers to keep me writing, and that turned the huge project of writing a novel into the small, manageable project of writing the next chapter to

post online. It seems like such a small thing, but in the last eight years I've produced over a million words of fiction.

Which writers inspire you?

Many writings inspired me over the years, but three stand out among them. First and foremost, must be Edgar Rice Burroughs. I love his sword and planet tales—especially his Mars and Venus books—which is why my first three books (and another three since then) are my takes on sword and planet adventures. I even gave my sword and planet hero the last name Rice, taken from Burroughs' middle name. The idea of dropping a man into a strange world filled with swashbuckling adventure appeals to me. Throw in an alluring romance and you've got the ingredients for a great story. That's why the second name on my list is Leigh Brackett.

Brackett's sword and planet stories have a harder edge than Burroughs' do, but they're just as fanciful and exciting. But she also delved deeply into space opera—she was the Queen of Space Opera, after all—and told exciting tales of daring men and women thrust into strange situations that brought out the best in them. She's also the perfect foil to the claim that women were shunned in the early days of science fiction.

Finally, I must credit Gary Gygax with my development as a writer. While he wrote fiction, it was his work polishing and publishing *Dungeons & Dragons* that had the greatest impact on me. Who could resist the lure of experiencing fantastic adventures as a participant rather than a mere reader? Not me. I immersed myself in D&D to the detriment of my college education, but to the enhancement of my abilities as a storyteller. Nothing honed my grasp of story elements, of what intrigued people, of what bored them, and how the players interpreted—or misinterpreted—the events I presented better than role-playing games. I can honestly say I'd never have become an author without the experience I gained running role-playing games.

So, what have you written?

Sixty to seventy comic books, all but a handful of them featuring characters I created or co-created, and sixteen books. The books fall into several series, though I should note that every book stands on its own. They're all appropriate for young adult and older readers, too.

The six-book sword and planet Scout series begins with *Scout's Honor*, my first book, and currently ends with *Hart for Adventure*, my most recent release. *Hart* is a bit of prequel to the other five books in the series. The books feature swashbuckling action, airships (because airships are cool), a bit of romance, and even space pirates.

The Fugitive Heir, my most popular book, kicks off the three-book *Adventures of Matt & Michelle*. This pure space opera series begins when Matt, the heir to a vast fortune, heads off into space with Michelle, one of his bodyguards, intent on finding his long-lost parents. Matt's emerging psychic powers, romance, gun fights, and space pirates complicate matters. The next two books delve deeper into Matt's psychic powers as he and Michelle struggle against an interstellar government intent on controlling all psychics.

Two books feature Captain Nancy Martin, who first showed up as a minor character in *The Fugitive Heir*. Her first book, *The Counterfeit Captain*, is my take on the old science fiction trope of the genera-

tion colony ship that's been lost so long no one remembers they're on a spaceship. I followed it up with *The Undercover Captain*, which is something of a space opera missing-persons thriller.

The Recognition Run is the first book in my Recognition series. I entered it in the 2017 BookLife Prize contest, where it was a semi-finalist. You could call it *Anastasia in space*, as it follows Jeanine, a young woman who doesn't know she's the last surviving heir to an interstellar duchy. While the first book deals with Jeanine's attempts to claim her title, the second and third books—*The Recognition Rejection* and *The Recognition Revelation*—expand the story beyond that straightforward premise to include a threat to the entire star kingdom and all humanity.

The Lost Planet is a standalone space opera adventure, and the first of my books featuring alien races. As a century-long cold war between the Terran Republic and the Regency, a vast alien empire, turns hot, humanity's survival rests on the shoulders of Glen, a young man who doesn't know how to be human, and Elise, a young woman who has never been out on her own. They must evade Regency pursuit, solve the millennia-old mystery of the disappearance of the Progenitors, and hope they can discover a weapon to turn back the invading Regency armada. In my opinion, this is my best book to date. I also have a book of three illustrated children's stories, *I'm in Charge! & Other Stories*, plus two books in a new, grittier, pulpier series. The first book, *Fortune's Fool*, will release in late August or early September.

What draws you to Superversive writing?

I like heroes who have a moral core. I like villains who are comprehensibly villainous without the author resorting to the tired "victim of society" trope that's so popular among certain writers. I like fast-paced action where story is paramount. I like it when the hero triumphs over the villain. I like it when the guy and the girl fall in love and make a life together. I like happy endings. It's insane that these preferences are Superversive rather than the norm.

What are you working on at the minute?

I have a novella titled *The Scales of Sin & Sorrow* with beta readers now. It's a sequel to *Fortune's Fool*. Beyond that, I'm between projects now, and trying to figure out what to do next. I began a sequel to *The Lost Planet* but am not sure the book needs one. At least, not one from the points of view I used. I'm considering starting a fourth *Fugitive* book or a seventh *Scout* book.

Do you read much, and if so, who are your favorite authors?

I suppose it depends on your definition of "reading." I listen to a lot of audio books, though my listening time tailed off since my day job told us to work from home. My one-way commute went from 25 minutes to 15 seconds. I also still read books, just not as often or as voraciously as I did in the past. My favorite authors is Lois McMaster Bujold. I love almost everything she's written. The last *Vorkosigan* book was decidedly subpar, in my opinion, but her *Penric* series of fantasy novellas have more than redeemed that mistake.

How can readers discover more about you and you work?

They can swing by my website—which needs work, but the information is up to date—or check out my Amazon author's page. The advantage of stopping by the website is you can sign up for my mailing list (no spam, I promise): <https://www.henryvogelwrites.com>
<https://www.amazon.com/Henry-Vogel/e/B00KFESWK6/>

Letters

Thanks George!

I read Desolation of Peace, the reviewer and I are in agreement on that one. I think it might have been written a little too quickly, compared to the first one. I do hope there will be a third novel.

Cathy

~Finis~

