

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
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Tamara Wilhite

1976-2021

Texas resident Tamara Britain Wilhite, 44, died Thursday, August 19, 2021 at her home in Euless, Texas.

Tamara was born October 10, 1976 in Grand Prairie, Texas to Kent and Jeanette Britain. She graduated from South Grand Prairie High School in 1994 and earned a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1998.

She married her college sweetheart, David Wilhite, in 1999 and together they raised a daughter, Renee, and a son, Ian.

In addition to her engineering career, Tamara was an avid technical writer having written several books and short stories over the years. She also contributed over 20,000 articles to more than 700 publications across multiple categories including science fiction, family, religion, and self-help.

In her spare time she helped her father manage his online antenna business.

Tamara is survived by her husband, David; daughter, Renee; son, Ian; father, Kent Britain; mother, Jeannette Britain; brother, Kyle; and other extended family members.

Fond memories and expressions of sympathy may be shared at www.grandprairiefh.com for the Wilhite family.



Editorial

Tamara Wilhite 1976-2021



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Fiction

A Memory Called Empire by Arkady Martine

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is a first novel, and as such, to be a finalist for the Dragon Award for Best Science Fiction Novel is quite an achievement. I believe the author, who writes under the pen name of Arkady Martine, is still a relatively young person, and thus we might be getting a first look at someone who will be winning awards for quite a long time.

The story develops into a perfectly good murder mystery, with intrigue, some small amounts of excitement, very nicely done. Unfortunately, it drags on, and on, until I was hoping for a power failure.

Had I NOT been reading this book as a self-induced assignment to review Dragon Award finalists, I suspect there is a good chance that I wouldn't have gotten past the Prelude. That runs, according to the Kindle software on my laptop, about six pages. There is SOME narrative here, but it is surrounded by so much purple prose that I found it truly aversive. Still, it was just the Prelude. I soldiered on...

...and came close to a sort of reader-death-coma with the beginning of Chapter One, because the prose was SO purple; but wait, that was just a quote from some historical document. I'll let it pass. The next pre-story chapter heading was refreshing, in that it was the bureaucratic requirements for the kinds of paperwork needed for entry into the main kingdom. (And we are about to meet the POV character, Mahit the Ambassador.)

Pathetic, it is, when I take some ease in reading (fictional) requirements for passport control. The actual chapter wasn't nearly as nice. Third sentence:

Thus the first time she saw the City with her own flesh eyes, not in infofiche or holograph or imago-memory, it was haloed in white fire and shone like an endless glittering sea: an entire planet rendered into an ecumenopolis, palatially urban. (Martine, Arkady. *A Memory Called Empire* (Teixcalaan) (p. 18). Tom Doherty Associates. Kindle Edition.)

No. I tell you again, NO. NOTHING in a book you want a lot of people to read is “palatially urban” or an “ ecumenopolis,” and if you wish to write about halos of white fire and endless glittering seas...then I have nothing for you. By the way: any large body of water in sunlight is an endless glittering sea. There are no new images being brought here, and it's tedious.

The utter banality of big words run together in endless sentences eases up considerably by the end of the first chapter, but the second starts just as poorly:

The suite had been aired out before Mahit arrived—or at least she hoped it had, and assumed it had by virtue of the open windows and the antiseptic scent of cleaning fluid that the air coming in through those windows and blowing their draperies back hadn't managed to dispel—but it was nevertheless very much a place someone had lived in, and for a long time. (Martine, Arkady. *A Memory Called Empire* (Teixcalaan) (p. 39). Tom Doherty Associates. Kindle Edition.)

Yes, that's all one sentence. And according to my Kindle, I'm on page 39. If this isn't something I'm

REQUIRING myself to read, the book gets closed and returned. And I'm pretty flabbergasted that NONE of this even crops up in the Amazon reviews, but never mind.

Here's the TRULY tragic bit: somewhere in the vicinity of page 50, I noticed that the style had eased up, a bit, and that some of the dialogue was FUNNY. Yes, there was too much reliance on hidden knowledge of some rare ambassadorial expertise that we don't have, but it wasn't the killer that the purple prose had been. (It also didn't stop; throughout the book, the conversations that Mahit has with EVERYONE are subject to eternal internal: "What does this smile mean, how do I move my eyes," things of that sort. Just accept it, and drive on.

And drive on YOU MUST if you are to catch some of the brilliantly wicked (or is that wickedly brilliant?) dialogue that passes between Mahit and her new associates. Some folks complained that their names are stupid, but I find that ridiculous. There's no reason to think that naming conventions we are familiar with will survive into the far future, or alternative universe, or new universe. Actually, I think names like Six Direction (the emperor) and Three Seagrass (her assigned assistant (ish)) are kind of cute, and didn't interfere with the story at all.

If you bailed early, you would ALSO miss the ability that the author has to faithfully render the chaos we have going on in our heads when we are in a crisis situation. Mahit is meeting with Three Seagrass, and Fifteen Engine, when a bomb explodes near them. She is frantically trying to process the events, her only contact with the society is incapacitated, she has to deal with seemingly cyborg-like police units, and she finds herself thinking about points of grammar, and whether the right forms of language are in use, and of the papers that may be written. In my experience, that is EXACTLY the sort of things our minds do, to give us relief from the nightmare we happen to have fallen into. I think that's an excellent bit of observation, and it's written as close to perfectly as anything we have the right to expect.

Oh, alas, for there is one more bit that doesn't belong: the LENGTH. If this book was indie published, these would be EXACTLY the sort of first-novel mistakes I would expect. When I encounter these, I usually suggest that the author get into a writers' group, and develop some plain-speaking friends with good language skills. This book, though, is published by a major house. I find it VERY difficult to believe that an editor didn't see the issue with starting the book off with such melodramatic language, and that they didn't take a red pen to the last 300 pages, and SLASH. Take it for what it's worth, and it may not be worth much, but I DON'T think they did the author any favors, at all, with their treatment of her work.

She has a GREAT set-up. While I don't really believe in her space station, and there are some un-addressed science issues (how does a person who lived forever in free-fall, or micro-gravity at best, suddenly adapt to walking around on a planet?) I think the portrayal of the culture shock she experiences is very nicely done. I also thought the single science issue introduced is a great concept. The imago system allows the experiences of past generations to be resident in a new host, and she has an older version herself, with an obsolete personality of the prior ambassador. I ALSO like the fact that it's central to the entire story, and not some jambo-slamb-whizz-bang prop introduced just for flash. Good work, indeed.

As it is, it has a million dollars worth of potential. For most people, however, I fear that the slow slow dreary painful beginning is going to turn people off, big time, and thus, they won't see the nicely done parts.

A Star-Wheeled Sky by Brad Torgersen

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A comparison with Robert A. Heinlein usually results in a collapsed modern author, but Brad Torgersen does just fine, in my humble opinion. I don't make the comparison lightly; I can point to four separate profound influences on my life from Heinlein's books, from "Have Spacesuit, Will Travel" in 5th or 6th grade, to my discovery of a dog-eared copy of "Starship Troopers" in the day room of Charlie 2 at Ft Sam Houston in 1972. Perhaps, if I were found in the form of an impressionable 12 year-old lad, and someone gave me a copy of "The Chaplain's War," similar life-changing understandings would emerge, because Torgersen did two things in that book I've never seen before.

In the first place, in all the military movies and literature I consumed in my life, there was never anyone like ME, or any of my family. My grandfather took care of the mules in France. My father was a B-17 door gunner during WWII, my uncle was an aircraft mechanic in Korea, and I was a medic in Germany. It wasn't until they send my cannon-cocker son to Afghanistan, and turned him into infantry for the good of the service, that any of us who served did something that looked like what John Wayne did in all those movies. So, who is the hero of Torgersen's book? A chaplain's assistant, later turned into a chaplain, for the good of the service.

The second thing that Torgersen did in that book was to come up with a brand new take on the Bug Eyed Monster. I can't spoil it for you, but every prior BEM was going to eat your face, OR you THOUGHT it was going to eat your face, but it turned out to be harmless and gentle and helpful. Well, that's not the nature of Torgersen's BEM, and read the book.

Here's another Heinlein tie-in: he wrote a short story called "Goldfish Bowl," in which inscrutable and undetectable aliens create giant structures that humans don't understand. The story has NO resolution, except to equate our relationship to the aliens with the relationship existing between goldfish and humans.

And, in "A Star-Wheeled Sky," inscrutable and undetectable aliens have constructed an interstellar network of passages between star systems that humans can't understand. However, as far as I can tell, there is nothing else that connects the stories in any way: just: two guys, seventy years apart, thinking about things and then writing them down.

"A Star Wheeled Sky" is set in the far future, long centuries after humans boarded arcologies and fled some impending disaster to Earth. So much time has elapsed that only the tiniest fragments of Earth history are known; not even the location of the home planet, nor the reason for the exodus. Surviving humans, separated into five factions, have settled a region of space, which they refer to as the 'Waywork,' linked together by mysterious passageways (Waypoints), which can only be opened by alien artifacts humans call "Keys." The Keys can only be operated by a select few, those with the talent to make psychic contact with them. The drain on the operators is intense, and they have to be closely monitored to prevent burnout.

We discover early on that there is an ongoing war in the Waywork, with the Nautilan faction determined to conquer all. People of the Starstate Constellar provide the primary POV characters' they are the number one enemy of Starstate Nautilan. Minor players include Star states Yamato, Sultari, and Amethyne. Nautilan has overwhelming military superiority, however, and it seems that their goal of total conquest will be realized.

That path is completely disrupted by the unprecedented appearance of a new Waymark, with unknown resources on the other side. The structure of the book is set by the race of the competing factions of Constellar and Nautilan to secure the Waypoint, and whatever is on the other side of it,

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW:

1. This is book one of a new series. No idea how many are planned, but while numerous story plots are resolved, the main issue is only JUST broached.
2. These are not trivial characters, and they aren't treated trivially. Clearly, the Nautilans, with their desire to conquer and tyrannically rule, are the Bad Guys, and the Constellars are the Good Guys, but there is plenty to be ambivalent about with both sides. Some of the Good Guys die, usually heroically; some of the Bad Guys die, and it's a bit sad. One of the primary characters voices the truth that war requires good people to do bad things to other good people.
3. In my mind, this story unfolds like a path in the woods. We go down the path, and then, there is a fork! Okay, Mr. Author, let's see how you handle THIS! And .every.single.time. Torgersen pulls a ptarmigan out of his trilby. He makes this work with technical problems, story-line resolutions, and relationships between the characters.

There are MANY examples of this masterful writing, such as his explanation of why the humans stopped expanding, and a wonderfully played, throw-away few lines about current habitats, but my favorite involves an interaction between what passes for royalty, First Family heiress Garsina Oswight, and her long-time bodyguard, Elvin Axabrabst. For Garsina, no image comes to mind, but maybe Natalie Portman would fit. However, for crusty Elvin, I DEFINITELY have the image of some combination of Lee Marvin and Sean Connery (the gray-haired version). They have a heart-to-heart about his past, and his loyalty, and why he has a tattoo on his hand that says, essentially, "I HATE FIRST FAMILIES" and quite frankly, I didn't see HOW Torgersen was going to write his way out of the situation he had set up. And then, he did it, and it was as perfect as we have any right to expect.

And for those who would like a look behind the scenes, here's some backstory on Elvin Axabrabst.

"A Star-Wheeled Sky" contains "Death before Dishonor!"; desperate ruses; a tiny, tiny hint at potential romance maybe; "so crazy it just might work"; the demands of service; exploding spaceships; David vs Goliath; and a huge portion of technology-indistinguishable-from-magic. There is even some slight taste of Bug Eyed Monster. No scantily-clad maiden fainting into the arms of a rescuer, though; Torgersen ain't that kind of writer. Other than that, it's got it all that you could want in space opera.

Query: Was it a contender to win the Dragon Award?

Here's one factor that I don't know how to evaluate, or even if it's relevant: is a stand-alone novel a more likely winner than a series novel? I know that at one point, back in yawn-take-a-nap, there was some serious discussion about a separate category entirely for books considered as a series. I know this, because I read about it in Isaac Asimov's autobiography; he won the award with "Foundation." But apart from that bit of trivia, I have no clue. Furthermore, this is only my second review of a finalist in the Best Sci Fi Novel category, and I don't know the nature of the other four entries.

With that caveat, I've got to say that Torgersen has lost NONE of his ability to generate compelling stories, and what he has produced is NOT some other kind of story, with a thin veneer of science fiction spray-painted over it as a disguise. It's solid, with respect to characters, interaction, setting, technology, and I don't know what else a reasonable person could want. I find myself saying: if this wins, I will be neither surprised nor disappointed.

The Calculating Stars by Mary Robinette Kowal

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

“The Calculating Stars” is, if nothing else, a paean to the courage and strength of the women featured in “Hidden Figures.” Also receiving well-earned recognition are the women who served with the Women’s Airforce (or Army, or Auxiliary) Service Pilots (WASP), a cadre of over 1000 pilots who flew in various essential non-combat roles in WWII, replacing male pilots who were cleared for combat status. The author includes some additional information in an appendix.

Protagonist Elma Wexler York and her husband Nathaniel are taking a brief semi-honeymoon, prior to returning to jobs with the newly founded National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in Washington, DC. He is an engineer, she a mathematician, although that title is not used for her. Rather, she and her fellows are called computers. Both served during WWII, he as an Army captain, she as a WASP.

Although the catastrophic meteorite ocean strike offshore Washington DC, at 9:53 AM on March 3rd, 1952, is the foundation of the story, this story diverged from our timeline before that event. We are told that Dewey actually did defeat Truman, and also that NACA has launched three satellites. No additional background is provided, but the author explains that she made the changes so that Werner von Braun and his crew could receive funding from a Dewey Administration.

Elma pilots the couple to the nearest open airfield. There they meet with Air Force Colonel Stetson Parker. He is delighted to see Nathaniel, as he believes that the catastrophe may be a result of a Russian rocket attack, and wants to use his expertise to prepare a counter-attack. He is far from pleased to see Elma, though, as he believes she reported him for sexual harassment ('conduct unbecoming for an officer') when they happened to be serving in the same area during WWII. NOTE: Throughout the book, he remains the Bad Guy.

Elma is able to gather data which predicts global extinction within 50 years. The nascent American space program is funded to research immediate development of off-planet colonies. NACA is absorbed into the new International Aerospace Coalition, IAC.

Elma recruits a cadre of women, including some black aviators, as well as a Chinese woman, to run the calculations necessary to develop the hardware for the space program. She is also preparing the women to participate fully in the operational aspects of the program, by the formation of a women's flying club.

Elma's contact with the black women opens her eyes to the segregation in the system. The refusal of the IAC administration to consider women for training as Lady Astronauts, as well as the exclusion of non-white candidates, and her efforts to overcome that choice, provides the text for the remainder of the book.

Stories classed as science fiction absolutely get to take liberty with facts. Even so, at points, the narrative seems stretched. I think the author is wildly optimistic about implementing race- and gender-free recruiting for military programs in a post-meteor US.

Three of the Lady Astronaut trainees participate in an exercise which simulates an aircraft crashing in water. The “Dilbert Dunker” is a real device used in training, but in this scene, the women are given bikinis to wear, instead of a flight suit, and are photographed by a horde of reporters as they go through the process. I found the scene to be clownish and grotesque, and it utterly took me out of the narrative.

Denver Moon: The Minds of Mars
by Warren Hammond and Joshua Viola

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

(First off, I'd like to again thank Warren Hammond, co-author of this Denver Moon: The Minds of Mars for his guest post. You rock Warren! Also, there is a review of the Denver Moon trade paperback coming, but I'm waiting until I get the third comic as I plan to review the whole thing at once. Also, the ARC of the novel that I received came with a copy of the short story that got turned into the TPB, I'm holding off on reviewing that until I can review the TPB itself. I did enjoy it. It's just not time to review it yet.)

I grew up on far-future science fiction. Humanity had colonized the stars. Whether it was (ironically) long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away or the final frontier, humanity had spread far beyond the limits of the Solar System and into the far reaches of space. What humanity found among the stars varied widely of course. Usually it was aliens but not always. Always though, we were outside of our Solar System and among the stars. It wasn't until I got older that I experienced SF and the struggle to make things much closer to home work. What I've found though, is that I've thoroughly enjoyed the battles that I first became aware of as a result of reading Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy. It's not all that surprising that I thought of that either, given the fact that I'm reviewing Warren Hammond and Joshua Viola's Denver Moon: The Minds of Mars. This book has all of the fun of near future SF and some unique twists as well. I had fun with this one.

Denver Moon is our title character and she is a bit unusual. For one, she's a colorblind private eye. This makes things a bit unusual. I was skeptical that this would work when I first realized it, but as I was reading it didn't harm the story at all. As a matter of fact, Denver actually needed to be a monochrome because of some later parts of the story.

As befits a story about a detective, DM:TMOM is a mystery. The great thing about this being a mystery is that it's an EPIC mystery. I recently reviewed Ready Player One and this Denver Moon is out to solve a mystery that is every bit as big and as important as the mystery in RPO but even more important... even if our heroine doesn't realize that at first.

Probably the best part about this book is all of the twists and turns that it takes. Every time you think the mystery is solved it gets deeper. I've read mysteries since my days as a fan of the Hardy Boys and you don't see this in a lot of places. Lots of mysteries are murder mysteries (ala just about every police procedural on TV) and once you know whodunit the story is over. Not so much here. It actually reaches the point where the solution to the initial mystery just introduces the next one, which morphs into another one you didn't even know existed. This thing doesn't stop and it doesn't rest.

Things are not always as they appear here either. The people you think are your friends may not be. The people you believe are the villains might just be heroes. You'll know who is who by the end of the book (at least I think I do now) but it's not until the last few pages that everything sorts itself out... probably. I think. Unless I'm wrong. Which I may be, but there's a sequel coming and once I read that... Well, who knows. This thing has a bunch of twists and it's intended as a series so there could be a bunch more coming. I'm not making any guarantees here, except to buy the next one. Oh, and I also promise to stay

Speaking as a man who fired his first BB gun at the age of five and his first rifle at the age of eight, I have to give props to Hammond and Viola for placing Moon's person AI in his pistol. Smith, as the AI is known, is a mix between a high powered computer, a best friend and a tactical advising/targeting system. Oh, and toss in a smartgun feature ala the first (and possible later) edition(s) of Shadowrun. Smith is freaking awesome. I want like six of these things. It doesn't get any better than this. Putting an AI in a private eye's gun makes every bit as much sense as giving Tony Stark access to Jarvis in his Iron Man suit. Both AIs are integral parts of the characters they partner with as well as being characters in their own right.

One of the key aspects of the mysteries that Moon tries to solve is "The Feve". The feve is a disease that effects the brain and causes extreme violence. No one is sure what causes it. Everyone knows that only monochromatic individuals are immune to it, but no one is sure why. It could be because so much of Mars is red or it may not be. All that they know for sure about the feve is that it comes randomly and without warning. People are scared and they should be.

Hammond and Viola manage to avoid two of my biggest pet peeves when it comes to mysteries: They don't bring in a solution out of nowhere that makes no sense. They didn't telegraph the eventual ending of the book in the first ten pages. Those two facts combine to make this mystery worth reading. I want a mystery that keeps me wondering and DM:TMOM definitely does. I could read this all day long. Actually, I did read most of it during a slow shift at work. Thank God for cellphones and their lit up faces. I drive a cab on the midnight shift and this book gave me something to focus on and stay awake. It kept me interested when I got fatigued. That's about the biggest compliment I know how to give to a book.

Now, I don't do spoilers, so I'll just leave this here and let the reader figure out if they can figure out why I wrote it. Ready? I have a very strong and visceral dislike for cliffhanger endings, especially in books when you don't know when the sequel is coming. I get the fact that they're somewhat entertaining as well as a good business move. I just don't like them. That much being said, this is still a really good book. I can't wait to read the next one.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Martian Rocks

Directorate School by Pam Uphoff

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So, sometimes works in the Fantasy genre are based on popular tropes. I'd go as far as to say that most are. The thing about any trope is that it became a trope because it's entertaining. So yes, Pam Uphoff's Directorate School is, at its heart, based on a trope: It's a boarding school for kids. And yes, J.K. Rowling used it too. Rowling has sold only God knows how many millions of books though and that's because it's a good trope. It works. And Directorate School is a good book. I like the whole "Let's go to school and save the world in my spare time" thing. Who didn't think their problems were world ending as a teenager? Of course, in this book they're probably right, but why nitpick?

The Directorate Series, so I have been told, is a continuation of the Wine of the Gods series, which started with Outcasts and Gods. I have to confess that I have not read as many of the books in the series as I would like to. I'm working on it. I damn sure plan to own them all at some point. Despite the fact that Directorate School is a follow on to an earlier series, I had no problem whatsoever understanding what was going on. There was less heavy world building than I've seen in other books to be sure, but I liked that. The fact that we missed the lecture on the middle name of the emperor's sister's, cousin's, cat's, dog's, pet goldfish's little brother is a good thing. It kept things moving and the book has multiple

sequels, so it's not like she had to squeeze it all in. Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed John Ringo's *The Last Centurion* and I'm a David Weber fan (and sometimes I'd like to see a Weber of words meaning a huge infodump the same way people refer to a Weber of missiles) so it's not like I don't enjoy some background. I just don't think it always needs to be there and Heinleining in details works.

The upshot of avoiding needless exposition is that we get additional action. Directorate School cooks with grease. There is always something going on. Whether it's schoolyard battles in the dojo or actual combat, something is happening. And there is the usual teenage thing going on in the background. I can't believe how grateful I was that I didn't have to save the world right before that big math test. I mean, I didn't KNOW how grateful I was, but I was totally grateful. Seriously, these kids do great.

And that's part of what works about Directorate School. The kids are just that: kids. They do things that every kid does and they sweat about it. When Magic class finals roll around, they start to sweat. When school starts and they have to face off in Martial Arts class to decide who's best things get interesting. There are high school style cliques. One of them causes the problem that pushes the plot. It all makes sense.

Our heroes end up involved in things that should be well above their pay grade as cadets. They rock it out anyway because they're the heroes. Seriously, it's a bit surprising in one respect. Magic is an integral part of the world that Uphoff has created but our characters are in their first year at the Directorate School and don't know how to use their magic yet. I can't wait till the next book when they learn how to because it is on like a neck-bone. These kids are bad asses now. When they have all of their tools, look out. I mean that. I can't wait to see it. Uphoff intentionally disadvantaged her main characters this time around but when it's go time and they actually learn what they're doing it's going to be scary. It's weird how they're all going into separate specialties too. It's almost like they're going to need multiple talents to overcome problems in future books and she's working to make that believable now. Hmmm...

A lot of these kids are important kids. Don't get me wrong. Those of you out there who hate any mention of *The One* are going to be okay here. There is one kid who seems to be more powerful than the rest, but for the most part none of them seem to be prophesied or anything. They're just kids doing what they need to do because they're stuck at ground zero of a terrible event. I would hope that I'd be able to do the same if I were in their position. And, upon more mature consideration, it may be two of the kids that seem more powerful than everyone else. So, either there is no Chosen One, or there is and he hasn't been born yet. I haven't read any of the sequels yet, so there is a ninety plus percent chance that I'm talking out of my third point of contact but hmmm...

Probably my only complaint about Directorate School is that it's too short. I mean, I know there are like elebenty bajillion sequels or something and that's awesome but what happens here could have been more detailed. I know one particular occurrence that I would have liked to have seen that happened off-screen. I was a bit frustrated by that. I'm sure Uphoff had her reasons but some things are better shown than told. It kinda irked me a bit. It didn't ruin the story. It was definitely believable. It just happened where we couldn't see it. Then the big reveal hits and I was left feeling a bit cheated.

The story is a good one overall though. I plan on picking up a copy of the next book as soon as possible. Uphoff can really write. Her worlds live and breathe. Her characters are entertaining and have believable motivations. People underestimate that. The fact remains that a character only makes sense if the reason that they're doing what they're doing for an at least semi-logical reason (semi because some emotional motivations don't make strict logical sense even if they are understandable) and Uphoff nails that. In reading Directorate School I never stop to wonder why someone would bother.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 School Books

Heavy Weather by Bruce Sterling Review by Samuel Lubell

Nine tenths of *Heavy Weather* by Bruce Sterling is really excellent, even though it is not really about the tornadoes. The tornadoes are almost a backdrop and an excuse for the story he wishes to tell, that of Juanita and her brother Alex who join the tornado chasers because Juanita is in love with their leader, the charismatic mathematician (not an oxymoron in this case) Jerry Mulcahey. Juanita (whose real name is Jane) has had very little contact with her younger brother, in fact when she calls him at the start of the novel he is puzzled because he didn't think it was Christmas. But in an exciting opening she breaks him out of a Mexican clinic, takes him aboard an extremely high-tech smugglers' vehicle and makes him join the storm troopers, a band of tornado chasers looking for a F-6 storm, which Jerry's calculations predict but no one aside from the Troopers believes can exist.

Much of the book is the struggle of Alex, whose extreme medical problems have prevented him from having a normal life before, to fit into the troop and the efforts of the storm troopers to chase through a few smaller tornadoes. Yet when the final storm does come in, rather than focus on the efforts of the troopers to gather the data and survive the storm, the author drags in a conspiracy by a few secret spy types to quit their conspiracy to destabilize the world by taking advantage of the F-6's effects on communications systems. This subplot and the twist in the ending demonstrate that Sterling is not trying to do a print version of the movie *Twister* (which it predates) but rather tell a more people-oriented story. Jane frets about her relationship with Jerry, at one point misinterpreting a conversation about the F-6 as a metaphor for their relationship.

The background to this is just as interesting as the action of the novel. The book takes place in a world that has been devastated by the weather and overpopulation, with strange new diseases appearing from nowhere (which would be unbelievable if not for our world's recent experiences) and cyberpunkish technology and attitudes about software being free coexisting aside a fairly anarchist landscape (governments have basically no control over money and not much over anything else either.) Characters wear clothes made out of paper, a city is rebuilt to look like a wasp's nest, and the border is even more permeable than today (a guard tells Juanita that they don't even try to stop vehicles.)

At one point Alex says "The border is f--ked and the government is f--ked! And society is f--ked and the climate is really f--ked. And the media are f--ked, and the economy is f--ked, and the smartest people in the world live like refugees and criminals!.. And nobody has any idea how to make things better, and there isn't any way to make things better, and there isn't gonna be any way, and we don't control anything important about our lives! And that's just how it is today, and yes, it's funny!" He laughed shrilly. "It's hilarious! And if you don't get the joke, you don't deserve to be alive in the 2030s."

This book shows the future of cyberpunk, not books drenched in cyberpunk like those of Gibson and Stephenson (although Sterling can write pure cyberpunk as well as anyone) but as part of the SF writer's toolbox to be combined with other elements to form a unique vision.

The characters are all firmly drawn, not only self-pitying Alex who gradually matures as the book goes on, eventually abandoning his fancy fake dude clothes for the paper suit of a Trooper, but even minor characters are given enough of a chance to clearly define their personalities.

I recommend *Heavy Weather* as having an interesting background, fascinating characters, and enough action even to overcome some dissatisfaction with the ending (which I admit is properly foreshadowed, most notably in Jerry's wondering about what will happen after the F-6 storm is over.)

House of Assassins by Larry Correia
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Yesterday was a marathon reading day! I read almost 800 pages, and fortunately “House of Assassins” came first. It's quite the compelling read, and:

The purity of the writing created a momentum in my reading, and I was able to accomplish much more than I normally would.

Actually, I just made that up. The truth is that I finished reading “House of Assassins” too early to knock off for the day, but I didn't want to try to write anything, so I grabbed the next book in the queue and started reading.

Upon reflection, the page count is rather more than 800, because it's been a LONG time since I read the first book in the series, and I had to keep referring back to it to refresh my memory.

“House of Assassins” is the second book in the “Saga of the Forgotten Warrior” series, released three years after “Son of the Black Sword.” It's helpful, but not necessary, to read SOTBS first. There are plenty of storylines which originate in SOTBS and which are advanced or completed in HOA, but the intro material is sufficient to introduce a newcomer into the story without problem. All of my clicking back and forth between the two installments in the story were for satisfaction, and not because of confusion.

The book opens with an emotionally rich flashback into the life of Thera, the Prophet. We see her as a little girl ferociously becoming a warrior, under the guidance of her father, Andaman Vane, respected leader of his house and troops. And we discover what set her apart: a “bolt from heaven pierced her skull.” The injury/intrusion has a broad impact: her father refuses to leave her side, and those in power use this as an excuse to strip him of his position as a leader.

The flashback ends as Thera regains consciousness in the House of the Assassins. They had captured her at the climactic battle at Jharlang, when the magic sword Angruvadal had self-sacrificed to defeat a demon hybrid, according to the terms of the prophecy. Sikasso, the leader of the Assassins, is determined to discover the source of her power and control it. Her protestations that she has no idea of how the power works, or even when it works, only make him determined to rip the secret from her by force.

Ashok has gathered a small army, an outcome not entirely to his liking. He is still under the command of Grand Inquisitor Orman, who ordered him to find and protect the prophet agitating against the rule of the Law, and standing for the protection of the casteless. Having discovered that the prophet is none other than Thera, a person he does not particularly care for, he sets out to find the House of Assassins and rescue her. In his company are Jagdish, a dishonored noble warrior, determined to regain his status by killing the wizards who wiped out his men, and Keta, the former butcher turned (mad) evangelist/priest of the Forgotten.

They are being tracked by the Protectors, Ashok's former companions, lead by Devedas, the closest thing to a friend he has ever had. Also the most formidable foe he will face, Devedas may actually be able to defeat Ashok, now that Andruvadal is destroyed.

Along the road, they pick up Gutch, a former blacksmith turned magic smuggler. He has the ability to detect magic from a distance, and offers his services to help Ashok find the House of Assassins, who

are noted for paying top dollar for magic-bearing items.

Meanwhile, back at the city, Grand Inquisitor Orman is preparing his plan to wipe out the casteless, overthrow the ruling first-caste aristocracy, and make himself the supreme authority over all. To accomplish this, he sends out teams to devastate the countryside, and claim to be a part of Ashok's rebellion.

And there are some really, really strange secrets that few know, and no one talks about. Anyone who stumbles upon the truth dies. (But no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.)

There is a particular type of lazy writer who drools out a story in which no rules apply, at all. That, in itself, separates them from the body of science fiction, in which the rules matter. It is perfectly acceptable practice to violate one particular reality (FTL travel is the most common example), but after that, a good writer has to work hard to provide internal consistency. When someone points out to the lazy writer that their mythical beast actually can't DO that, or that instant communication isn't established, or that there was no reason for the guy in the hat to have a yo-yo in their pocket, they offer up the excuse: "It's fantasy!" And, if the story is GOOD enough, a writer can do that, but, the lazy writers aren't that good.

And Larry Correia is the OPPOSITE of the lazy writer. In more ways than one, of course, because his output is...impressive. But here, I speak of the fact that he has an ESTABLISHED fantasy series going, when rules CAN be violated without penalty, and: he works very, very competently to rationalize it. There are science hints throughout, but the emphasis on the storyline is on the irrational, but I THINK that's along the order of "sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

It's not an approach taken often, and even less often is it done well. Handwavium has been around, and been popular, for a long time. It's what provides Superman with an origin story, and why Spiderman had to be bitten by a radioactive spider; those are SCIENCE explanations for fantasy. The best earliest rationalization of fantasy that I am personally familiar with is 1969's "Not Long Before The End," by Larry Niven. That was followed by other short stories and books with the same theme: magic is a natural resource, and it can be depleted.

I do not know where this series is going to conclude. But, I find myself hoping that he woke up one night with a perfect ending in mind, and that everything this far has been in support of that superlative final scene where All Is Revealed.

And now, The Question: Was "House of Assassins" a contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Fantasy Novel?

Elsewhere, I have discussed the matter of series novels winning awards vs. stand-alone works. It's a factor, but the fact that the intro material covers the background well speaks in favor of HOA.

In prior years, I think HOA might have a lock on the award. However, this is the year in which nominations for Dragon Awards have come for books which came from sources which have previously held the Dragons in contempt. That being the case, I'm inclined to say that this is a different game than the game we played last year, and the year before, etc.

Was it worthy of the award? Affirmatively, yes. Will it win the award? I would not bet money on it.

How Few Remain by Harry Turtledove

Review by Samuel Lubell

Let me start with a confession. Despite having a M.A. in American history, I didn't know any of the historical information in Harry Turtledove's novel *How Few Remain: A Novel of the Second War Between the States*. In fact, I always thought the North won the Civil War. Here, Mr. Turtledove sets the record straight and, unlike in *The Guns of the South* in which South African time travelers were involved, writes straightforward (alternate) history. Apparently two confederate soldiers rescued a dropped copy of General Lee's Special Order 191 that said what every Confederate division was going to be doing. I could certainly understand how the Union might have won the war if General Grant got his fingers on that! Of course, since he didn't the war continued on the course with the Confederacy winning and establishing a separate country allied to France and England.

Lincoln survives the war to become a Socialist rabble-rouser, hated by both the Confederacy and Union war veterans (and I always thought he was assassinated.) Samuel Clemens became a newspaper editor in California (which means who wrote *Huckleberry Finn* is now a bigger mystery than the author of Shakespeare's plays). A fairly young Theodore Roosevelt turns his ranch hands into a private army and plots an attack on the British in Canada (or at least a defense of the U.S. from the same.) And General Custer has no last stand but fights secessionist Mormons in Utah. Other major characters include an African American journalist named Frederick Douglass, a German military observer (who makes sardonic comments on American lack of preparation and willingness to trust to improvisation), and Stonewall Jackson. However, the novel for all of its characters and broad scope lacks any strong women characters (or indeed any with more than a few lines) and there is no representation from the common man.

The election of Blaine, the first Republican president since the ill-fated Lincoln and the decision of the Confederacy to buy Mexico's northwest provinces (extending the Confederacy from sea to shining sea) plunges the two American nations into war- a war the North sees as a chance for revenge, the South sees a chance to lick the Yankees once and for all, and England and France see as Northern aggression. Turtledove jumps from one situation to another, fitting in several fronts of the war and covering different perspectives.

The historical aspects of the novel are all very clever and all the characters seem believably themselves, under these circumstances. Unfortunately, there is a difference between history and a novel and between action and a storyline. This book has the history and action but no growth in characterization. This leaves *The Guns of the South* the superior book, since it includes a shift in Robert E. Lee's character and gradual principled rejection of slavery. We don't see this to the same degree in *How Few Remain* even though it is touched upon.

This brings up my usual question as to whether alternate history is science fiction, fantasy, an offshoot of historical fiction, or its own beastie. At least for the paperback edition, Del Rey has labeled it simply *Alternate History*.

My recommendation: If you like alternate history or fictionalized history, buy *How Few Remain*. There is a reason why Turtledove is science fiction's best living writing of *Alternate History*. If you liked *Guns of the South* buy this book. It is not quite a sequel but close. If history bores you, skip this book. If you aren't sure about alternate history, or have not read Turtledove before, I'd not start here. Read *Guns of the South* first, and then this one. But whatever you do, don't give this book to someone who doesn't already know the real history. You'll confuse them for life!

The Iron Codex by David Mack

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

“The Iron Codex” is a finalist in the “Best Alternate History” category. I don't know who decides on which category is appropriate for the nominations; is it all done by the person nominating? If I turn my head to the side and squint one of my eyes nearly shut, I THINK I can see the justification for this being in the category of Alternate History. It does, after all, tie the story into real-world events, but offers different causes for them. And maybe that's all that is necessary.

However, I don't think that's the MAJOR characteristic of the book. Now, admittedly, I'm going to suggest that it belongs in a category about which I know nearly nothing, so, take my opinion with a grain of salt. But do, please, at last give this some consideration.

I think the book belongs in the Horror section. I have two comments about that classification preference:

I do NOT read horror. I don't watch horror movies. I stay as far away from horror as I can. Therefore, I may be just as ignorant about the rules for the horror genre as I have been about the rules for some of the romance books. I was schooled about that several years ago, when I read a book about a person who turned into a jungle cat, and so on, and who encountered a person who turned into a bigger cat, and so on, and they formed an immediate attraction for each other, and so on. My interpretation was that this was soft porn; those with more experience than I pointed out that this sort of thing was EXPECTED in that genre, and so on. Okay, I learned that. And there are surely some things that I would need to learn about requirements for the horror genre, were I to try to obtain expertise in that field. I'm basing my classification just what I know about today, and:

The CORE to this book is not about alternate history; it's about demonic possession. And I think that makes it horror. Maybe not. But, until I learn otherwise, having murderous, grotesque minions of the devil summoned via incantations, hemmed in by lines drawn in specific diagrams, or even being controlled and internalized: that's horror. And, had it not been that the book was nominated in another category, and that I feel responsible to follow through with my public commitment to review the entries in the four categories of Best SF, Best Fantasy, Best Military SF, and Best Alternate History, there's no way I read this book past the first half of the first chapter. As it was: I was squeamish. YMMV.

I think the cover is GREAT! In fact, that's how I selected this as the next book to read. It's a dark-haired, black-clad figure with a blade, riding a black motorcycle, so YAY! The cover art is by Larry Rostant, and the cover design was done by Jamie Stafford-Hill; these are people I'm not familiar with, but I do like their work here.

And, the book opens with that scene. It's 1954. The figure on the bike is one Anya Kernova, and she is in hot pursuit of a wicked, wicked NAZI!

Whatever else may be going on in the book, the author is good with the details. The bike she is riding is a Vincent Black Shadow, a legendary machine that was clocked in excess of 150 mph at a test run at the Bonneville Salt Flats. The motorcycles are no more, alas; they depended on hand-fitting the parts by master craftsmen, and that just wasn't economically feasible, once assembly line techniques were mastered. At the time, though, this was the fastest production motorcycle in the world.

Although I loved the bike, and am always in support of tracking down wicked, wicked Nazis, I do confess to being a bit perplexed by one thing: Anya is possessed by demons. At first, I thought they were speaking figuratively, as in, the demons of your guilty past, etc. Nope. These are nasty, pit-dwelling demons; even if they ARE used as weapon to capture and interrogate wicked, wicked Nazis, how do you tell the good guys from the bad guys if they are all possessed by demons? It's a non-trivial issue.

But here's a take-away: Anya wants to kill Nazis.

On the other side of the world, in a London gentleman's club, dastardly Dragan Dalca hosts manufacturer's representatives from France, America, and Russia. It's pretty east to tell that HE is a bad guy, because he accepts bribes from them to sabotage a British de Havilland Comet, an early jetliner.

In Washington DC, Briet Segfrunsdottir starts a new day in the Silo, in the Pentagon, where she summons demons to prepare a defense against nuclear war. Ob this particular day, she is angered, because she is presented with four new trainees. She has already prepped three prior sets, but they have mysteriously disappeared.

In Rome, Father Luis Rodrigo Perez is horrified by the action of Dalca's demon, as he destroys the airliner and passengers, and is dismayed that the church team observing fails to intervene.

In Laos, British intelligence agent Miles Franklin finds his partner, American ex-pat Cade Martin, in a narcotic stupor, as a demon prepares to devour him. At the last second, Cade rises and kills the demon. Then, the pair kills three Russian agents on a hit mission. And Cade seems to be available to go back to work.

Anya tries to swap the journal she took from the body of the wicked, wicked Nazi for assistance from a group of rabbis in translating a peculiar document she owns: the Iron Codex. It is written in an angelic language that only a few can read. The rabbis aren't interested in helping her. A group in the Catholic Church could help, but they want the Codex for themselves. In fact, the head of the secret magic-wielding order, Cardinal Lombardi, sends Father Luis to La Paz to get the Codex from Anya.

Briet has her work shut down, in the middle of interviewing a powerful demon. And Dragan blackmails a US senator into transferring title of a facility over to him.

Those are all the pieces we start with; of course, the fate of the world is in the balance. And I'm just guessing that the group that is working against the plans of the evil jetliner-killing Dragan are the good guys, although I can't quite work out the morality of subjugating demonic and angelic beings.

I think your opinion of the book is going to depend on how you feel about working with demons. Me? Don't care for it. Would not read this book, or the prequel, or the sequel. However, I THINK you'll find that the book is well-written. I only found one minor weapons quibble; a flash suppressor on an M3 carbine will NOT muffle the sound, but for sure, wind noise can distort the sound of a gunshot. And other elements are well detailed.

As for The Question: Is "The Iron Codex" a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Alternate History?

My opinion: No, it isn't. In the first place, as I said earlier, this isn't alternate history, it's horror. In the second place, the history itself isn't alternate at all. The REASONS behind some historical events are different, but the events themselves take place in the story just as they do in our timeline. YMMV.

Job: A Comedy of Justice by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“I would not want to be a saint in Heaven if Margrethe was not with me; I wouldn’t fear going to Hell if she was there – not that I believe in Hell or ever stood a chance of being a saint in Heaven. Samuel Clemens put it: ‘Where she was, there was Eden. ‘Omar phrased it: ‘- thou beside me in the wilderness, ah wilderness were paradise enow.’ Browning termed it: ‘Summum Bonum’. All were asserting the same great truth, which is for me: Heaven is where Margrethe is.”

–Job

It is a point of record that Heinlein suffered a major series of health problems dating from the 1970s, which adversely affected his writing. Many of his later works, particularly *I Will Fear No Evil* (which I found unreadable), tended to show signs of a mind in steady decline. The tightly-plotted works of Heinlein’s period of success gave way to meandering pieces of literature that were both oddly readable and yet, in many ways, failed works. *Job* (1984) manages to have elements of Heinlein’s cleverness, and a curious inversion of his normal trick of getting his readers to like a character before he reveals some salient fact about them, but it also wanders all over the place. And, after the reread, I am left with some curiously mixed feelings.

Job opens with Alex, a Christian preacher who has gone on a luxury cruise with the intention of getting away from his wife. When the ship makes a layover on a pacific island, Alex is manipulated into walking across burning coals ... and, when he recovers, he finds himself in another world, replacing another version of himself. This Alex is more of a common criminal than a preacher, one who formed a relationship with a hostess called Margrethe. Alex picks up where his counterpart left off, falling deeply in love with Margrethe. But, when he tries to convince her of his story, they find themselves shifted into another world. Here, no one has heard of them at all.

They keep trying to make their way back to Alex’s home, even as they keep shifting from world to world. (A deeply frustrating process, as every time they earn money they find themselves in a world where their hard-earned cash is useless.) Alex, eventually, comes to identify himself with the Biblical Job and frets, endlessly, over what will happen to his lover when the Rapture comes. Eventually, it does come and Alex finds himself in Heaven ... only to discover that Margrethe is not there. As a pagan, she’s gone to Valhalla.

Desperately, he sets out to find her. Passing through hell, where Satan offers him a job, he finally discovers that his life has become a cosmic plaything between God (here a subordinate of a far greater entity) and Loki. He appeals to this entity, claiming that any place without his lover can never be good for him, and they are both returned to Earth, where they live happily ever after.

It’s interesting to realise just how many alternate history tropes may have started with *Job*. The fond belief that alternate worlds will have airships, instead of jumbo jets, is reflected right from the start (although SM Stirling is commonly credited with starting it in 1988), along with the difficulties in adapting to worlds that don’t appear that different to ours.

Alex and his wife have immense difficulty with currency, alternatively discovering that they underestimate or overestimate the value of money or simply discovering that money from one world is no good in another. The culture shock too is quite immense, as they have to learn a new set of rules with each

shift. At one point, Alex finds himself shocked by public nudity; at another, he is stunned by suggestions of socially-condoned incest.

Heinlein may well have had a greater influence on the alternate history community than anyone realises.

There are also moments of humour that made me smile. Alex silently tags his fellow travellers on the cruise ship with pet names – the Professional Bore, the Authority, the Sceptic, the Well-Travelled Man – that makes it easy to follow them even as Alex meets their counterparts after the first dimensional shift.

The book's real problem, however, lies in Alex himself. And I think, to some extent, that Heinlein did it deliberately.

Heinlein had a habit, as I noted above, of convincing us to like someone before telling us a pertinent detail about him. Here, we are convinced to like Alex – he's warm and chatty and quite likable – before we realised that the pre-shift Alex was an utter bastard. On one hand, he sees his role in the church as organiser rather than preacher; he runs his church like a business, to the point where it's clear he has few morals and fewer scruples.

And, on the other, he is very much a religious fascist. Not content with his own domain, he is actively trying to expand religion into politics, plotting to stab his fellow travellers in the back and wondering if one should seek a 'final solution' to the Jewish Problem. I can't help wondering if this is as close as Heinlein ever got to detailing the origins of the religious theocracy of Revolt in 2100. A man with powerful ambitions, combined with naked hypocrisy, could go a long way if he found the right sort of backing.

He is also the very worst kind of unfaithful husband. His wife is not a nice woman – that much is clear – but that doesn't excuse Alex treating her with a peculiarly nasty form of passive-aggressive crap. As he puts it:

“On her birthday after we had been married a year I gave Abigail a fancy edition of *The Taming of the Shrew*. She never suspected that I had been making a statement; her conviction of her own righteousness did not embrace the possibility that in my heart I equated her with Kate.”

To some extent, Alex's problems are not wholly his fault. He grew up in an alternate world where the authorities were already cracking down on free speech and discussion. (Alex recounts how science-fiction was banned for children, among other horrors.) But it's hard to look at his casual, off-the-cuff remarks about his 'successes' and not realise that Alex is a horror. Heinlein, who distrusted organised religion, was trying to make a point. The likable man you know might easily be a fascist in disguise. It's easy to point and laugh at *Left Behind's* jerk suits – Buck Williams and Rayford Steele – but they are so thoroughly unpleasant that it is hard to take them seriously. Someone a little nicer might be far more dangerous in the long run.

That said, Alex does have his good points. He's a hard worker, even when it comes to washing dishes. He is quick to realise that, when they become refugees, that they have to work to live, rather than depend on handouts. (Heinlein also shows how easy it is for refugees to be exploited.) His work ethic isn't bad, which makes his religious activities all the more horrifying. He doesn't show any signs of anger at working under a black boss. And, as the story develops, he does become a better person. Not everyone will agree, I suspect, that he really could improve. (God thinks so, but God in this story is a

petulant jerk (something else that might have crept into *Left Behind*.) His devotion to Margrethe is genuinely touching. But it's also an illustration of why religious communities tend to frown on people who marry outside the faith. Alex also offers some good advice on everything from reading contracts carefully and studying tax law to the importance of witnesses:

“No, I did not know that he was crooked. But I had learned long ago, in dealing with legislators, that anyone who tries to keep you from having a witness is bad news.”

Heinlein stated, back in *Revolt in 2100*'s afterword, that every religion will eventually start legislating its creed into law. Here, he shows what it looks like from Alex's point of view: attacks on abortion, gambling, tobacco, non-faith private schools ... all with the eventual end goal of securing ultimate power. If Alex wasn't a Stalin, it is fairly certain that he would be replaced in short order by someone who was. The dangers of giving an inch to people like that is that they will eventually take a mile. And by then it is too late:

“As Brother Draper pointed out, there are enough exciting and adventurous stories in the *Good Book* to satisfy the needs of every boy and girl in the world; there was simply no need for profane literature. He was not urging censorship of books for adults, just for the impressionable young. If persons of mature years wanted to read such fantastic trash, suffer them to do so – although he, for one, could not see why any grown man would want to.”

In some ways, Heinlein predicted the steady decline and fall of American universities; his only mistake was in assuming the bad guys would be religious fanatics (although SJWs have more than whiff of religious fanatic about them). There are odd echoes of his predictions in events on campuses today:

“One of my English professors who was bluntly opposed to censorship once said that Mr. Wells had invented every one of the basic fantastic themes, and he cited this story as the origin of the multiple-universes concept. I was intending to ask this [professor] if he knew where I could find a copy, but I put it off to the end of the term when I would be legally ‘of mature years’ – and waited too long; the academic senate committee on faith and morals voted against tenure for that professor, and he left abruptly without finishing the term.”

In his later years, Heinlein liked poking fun at our assumptions and forcing us to question our beliefs. Here, he showcases the hypocrisy of religion and, perhaps, some of the nastier implications of religious belief. Heaven, as Alex discovers, is a hugely-stratified society; the faithful believed in a hierarchy, so that was what they got.

Others, such as the pagans, found themselves in more likable worlds. It's interesting to think that here was where books like *The Sandman* or *Lucifer* got their start, although I could be wrong.

Job is not Heinlein's best works, even of his later period. It has its flaws and weaknesses, moments where it is clear that Heinlein was losing his touch, but ... it also has much to respect and admire.

And, if nothing else, there are some useful lessons that one should learn.

The Light Brigade by Cameron Hurley
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Still, it's military sci-fi, and I settled down for an engaging read.

Don't just fight the darkness. Bring the light.

Hurley, Kameron. The Light Brigade . Gallery / Saga Press. Kindle Edition.

I do not have any idea what the author intended by starting her book with this wise advice. It IS wise advice, by the way, and something that I heartily wish we could find more of in the world. However, if there is any of this sentiment expressed in the book, anywhere, I utterly missed it.

Instead, the reader is immediately exposed to a bitter, cynical outlook in a world populated by mean-spirited people, who themselves are the target of heartless acts by giant organizations. It doesn't seem to matter if the organization is the military, or some manufacturing/distributing/mining concern; all of the people are treated as an expendable, easily replaced resource.

Dietz, the POV character, is a prime example. We never learn the character's first name. I'm not sure that we ever learn ANYTHING about the character, not hair color, eye color, gender, religious affiliation; nothing. We do learn that Dietz was a former quarterback, who was replaced by a more photogenic character, and that at one time, Dietz had a girlfriend. However, in this universe, that's not a reliable clue as to whether we are speaking of Angelica Dietz or Andrew Dietz. It's probable that the ambiguity is by design; she made the Tiptree Award Honor List

"for works of science fiction or fantasy that expand or explore one's understanding of gender." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kameron_Hurley

There is nothing to hold onto here, except that Dietz gets treated like dirt by anyone with more power.

The author goes out of her way to portray squalor. The brief glimpses we are given of Dietz's past life are filled with despair and hopelessness. Now, it is absolutely the case that many, many individuals have joined the military to exit a life of despair, and very often, it makes the difference for them. But for Dietz, it's just an exchange of one abusive situation for another.

My personal experience, and that of every veteran I've ever talked to about the matter, is that bonding takes place under duress. It doesn't have to be foxhole duress, either, with artillery rounds coming down all around. The simple task of surviving basic training is a bonding experience. This is not a book about bonding. This is a book about evil power:

The corps were rich enough to provide for everyone. They chose not to, because the existence of places like the labor camps outside São Paulo ensured there was a life worse than the one they offered. If you gave people mashed protein cakes when their only other option was to eat horseshit, they would call you a hero and happily eat your tasteless mash.

Hurley, Kameron. The Light Brigade (pp. 244-245). Gallery / Saga Press. Kindle Edition.

It's hateful wickedness, all the way around, with no escaping.

Here's the science hook: transporter technology has been developed, somewhat along the lines of the transporter in Star Trek. Troops can be transformed into light, and beamed elsewhere. And via hand-wavium, that permits time travel.

And that's all I could stand.

I am so glad to live in a society in which people can publish anything they want to. I don't have to understand their reasons. Based on my reading of "The Light Brigade," I conclude that Hurley hates the military science fiction genre, and wishes to destroy it. Here's what Wikipedia has to say:

Her second trilogy, the Worldbreaker Saga, is grim dark epic fantasy that aims to subvert the genre's tropes such as the hero's journey. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kameron_Hurley

Yes, it is a GOOD thing that people are able to write, and to publish, and to PURCHASE works that are subversive. But that doesn't mean that those works are good reading.

And with respect to The Question: Was "The Light Brigade" a worthy candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction Award?

Absolutely, positively not. I do not understand how this book has readers. I do not understand why this book was nominated. And if this book wins the Dragon Award, then the Dragon Award system is broken enough to be discarded, and replaced with something that will treat the field with respect.

Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is, clearly, alternate history. It's hard to say exactly what the point of divergence could be; Alan Turing is the most prominent secondary character, and one source said the divergence was that Turing refused chemical castration, and took a year in prison instead. That doesn't fly, though, because Turing was arrested in 1952, and died in 1954, while the book also mentions that the US did NOT drop the atomic bomb on Japan, which would have been a divergence in 1945. Whatever the divergence point, in the setting of the book, England in the 1980s, there are numerous technological advances that vary from our timeline, and that leads to a British loss to Argentina in the Falklands War.

So, yes. Alternate history.

But that hardly seems the point. Although a chief plot device is the ability to purchase a human-appearing robot, which then acts more-or-less like a human, almost all the action takes place in the mind of the protagonist. And his mind is a terrible thing to waste your time on. He's a boring drone; although not born to wealth, he has inherited a great deal of money due to the sale of his family home. He then proceeds to squander it, mostly on the purchase of a robot, but on a smaller, more constant scale by online trading. He is really a zero, going nowhere, and the purchase of a robot human mostly serves to give him the opportunity to whine about how pathetic he is.

He's right, you know. He IS pathetic. He has a wretched love affair with his neighbor, which he is afraid to invest in. They appear to have some sexual chemistry, the details of which transpire behind a closed bedroom door, thankfully, but otherwise don't really seem to like each other.

There are plot developments. They transform the story from a dull monotonous tale of a drone who owns an android to a dull monotonous tale of a drone who owns an android and has a couple of things happen to him. However, none of the things which happen to him seem to result in any change at all.

It is entirely possible that this is a brilliant, scathing satire on middle class British life. If so, it went over my head entirely, and makes me ever so grateful that my ancestors fled the island for America.

It took me the better part of a day to read this. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, I would rather have done just about anything else.

Manhattan Transfer by John Stith Review by Samuel Lubell

You've all heard the expression, "I'll take Manhattan." Well in John Stith's *Manhattan Transfer*, aliens do just that--steal Manhattan off the face of the Earth and install it in their collection of domed cities. Why, and what they have planned for the humans they've captured, is part of the fun of this action-adventure.

The first third of the book is devoted to the humans coping, rather resourcefully, with the disaster. The hero, a military colonel in the city to visit a friend who just happens to work for the mayor (a black woman--take that Rudy!) talks his way into building a team to translate the mysterious message the aliens have written on the top of the dome. In the middle third, the colonel, a translator, a computer/video expert, and the colonel's friend take an underground boring machine to visit some of the other alien cities that have been captured in the same way as Manhattan. What they learn tells them that more is at stake than just Manhattan and forces them to confront the alien city-snatchers once and for all.

There are some light moments in the book, such as a fight between the hero and some looters in low gravity; the comparisons of the do(o)med city to bird feeders, hamsters, and ant farms; and the character of Bobby-Joe, sort of the ultimate techno-nerd. These humorous touches aside, the bulk of the book concentrates on straightforward exploration of the other cities around them and the giant alien ship that holds them captive. Politics is not really present; there is a small subplot of a preacher who opposes the mayor's attempts to communicate with the aliens, but this is the weakest part of the book.

Despite a plot seemingly stolen from Superman's bottle city of Kandor or maybe Green Lantern Mosaic, what holds the reader's interest is the inventiveness of the situation, the aliens they contact, and the author's slow revealing of information that radically changes the entire picture of what is happening. Although characterization is not emphasized, there is enough for the characters to be distinguishable and to have real motivation for their actions.

Two small quibbles: Isaac Asimov once explained why there were so few aliens in his classic works by saying that John C. Campbell (the publisher of *Astounding* (now *Analog*) then the major market for sf) always insisted that humans be smarter, stronger or in some way better than the aliens. Stith doesn't even have the excuse of Campbell. Also, the humans seem to understand these alien cultures far too readily.

Still, this is a fun book that is hard to put down. It would appeal to mystery fans and adventure fans as well as those who like science fiction. It makes a great end of the summer book and I suspect would make a wonderful movie.

Marine by Joshua Dalzelle

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I started reading “Marine,” by Joshua Dalzelle, last night after completing some required admin/maintenance duties. Maybe around 8:30, or so. , I finished it in the wee hours this morning. Could NOT put it down, and I TRIED, several times, so be warned. It could happen to YOU!

I can't give you a precise timeline, but internal evidence points to a not-too-distant future. Earth has been attacked twice by aliens, and miraculously saved each time. Now Earth is a minor player in a dangerous universe, where almost every other civilization is more powerful. With some assistance from interstellar allies, the humans are trying to build a military and trade presence. The most powerful players set limits on what technology transfer is permitted.

I'm not familiar with the other works of the author, but a SLIGHT use of my Google-fu reveals that (at least) one of his prior series, “Omega Force,” provides the background to “Marine.” However, I was struck by how well the author lays the necessary foundation without seeming to do so. The only section of the book devoted to backstory is found in the Prologue, and THAT is written in the Protagonist's voice, and it comes across as HIS backstory, not that of the series. There are a LOT of ways I've seen authors bring new readers into the middle of an existing story arc, but I've never seen one I can say is superior to this.

The protagonist is a young man, going by the name of Jacob Brown. Except for the Prologue, when we meet him he is in his early 20's, enduring the rigors of the last months of humanity's premier (only) off-planet military academy. At the precise moment of introduction, he is crawling in the weeds on a recon mission; we later discover it's a field problem set for the assessment of the ability of cadets to lead small units. And it is the course of this exercise that we are SHOWN, and not told, a key bit of information about Jacob Brown:

“Satisfied with his preparations, Jacob stepped off the edge of the outcropping and dropped thirty feet to a ledge below.” (Dalzelle, Joshua. Marine (Terran Scout Fleet Book 1) (p. 9). Kindle Edition.)

It's so casually done, that I read right past it at first. Then the tickle in the back of the brain: “wait... 30 feet...that's the height of a three-story building...”

And it is PRECISELY with that casual, throw-away reference, that the author lets us know that there is Something About Jacob.

He also doesn't leave irritating character defects ignored, until you wind up hating the people you are not supposed to hate. I grimace while reading about a character who just can't get over...whatever. While I have never used the therapeutic technique of punching someone in the face as a means of helping them become more mature, I rejoice that the author both SEES that persistent whining is an issue, and that he USES the skill-sets appropriate for the setting. I speak theoretically, of course.

There IS quite a bit of familiar territory covered here: young man making his own way, coerced to do something he doesn't want to do out of loyalty, must earn respect of comrades, overcome impossible odds, discover Injun Joe's buried treasure in a cave, slay the dragon, and close with persecutor rolling ball-bearings in hand while mumbling about strawberries. See? That's EASY! Anybody can do THAT, right?

Wrong. Any cook (or anyone with a fork) will tell you that there is a huge difference between the recipe and the cake. Dalzelle has taken the basics, treated them with all the respect they deserved, and served up something that is a delight for anyone who loves military science fiction.

Order of the Centurion
by Anspach and Cole
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

“The planet Psydon”

“27 years prior to the Battle of Kumar”

That's how the story opens. At this very moment, I know that the Battle of Kumar figures prominently in the series “Galaxy's Edge” by the Anspach-Cole team, but last night when I started reading, I had not a clue. And my first interpretation of the data was:

“...this is going to tell me about how Lieutenant Washam, the protagonist, goes from a naive butter-bar on this back-water planet to achieve greatness at the Battle of Kumar...”

I knew greatness was in the picture, because the name of the book is “Order of the Centurion.” The preliminary material describe the nature of the award, which only goes to those who display exceptional valor, refusing to yield even unto death, and that 98.4% of all citations are awarded posthumously. This will NOT be a story of a young man who finally learns from a kindly drill sergeant how to put a spit-shine on his boots, and gets to have an extra cookie on graduation day*, okay? Greatness is going to happen.

*This is not meant to be a disparagement of shiny boots, kindly drill sergeants, or cookies. In fact, all are worthy of endorsement.

But: what I was expecting was a quick series of episodes, taking Lt. Washam across the galaxy, sort of like Johnny Rico. Oh, my, no! This is the tightly-wrapped story of a single patrol, with appropriate head, tail, and feathers attached to give proper context. And, the closer I got to realizing that was the scope of this book, the more respect I gained for the opening: “27 years prior to the Battle of Kumar.” NEVER, not once, within the pages of this book is Kumar referenced after that opening. It doesn't have to be; the intro is enough to tell me it's enormously significant. And because it's significant, I looked it up, and now, I know how to find out about it.

Well-done, Anspach and Cole!

And on to the story:

Lieutenant “Wash” Washam is stuck in a rear-echelon office as a paper-pusher, and he hates it. He's part of a group of political appointees that have been commissioned in the Legion, the elite military force that is responsible for the continued existence of civilization. To a man, they have been rejected as unworthy by the rest of the Legion, who correctly see them as

“The long con everyone saw and couldn't get out of.” (Anspach, Jason. Order of the Centurion (Galaxy's Edge) (p. 4). Galaxy's Edge Press. Kindle Edition.)

The rest of the 'points,' as the legion contemptuously calls them, accept their pariah status as a necessary preliminary to political careers after they complete their terms of service, and spend their days doing nothing that looks like work. Washam alone went through all of the training required to be a regular member of the Legion, while the other points skipped everything, knowing that there were no consequences.

Except: there are political consequences, and there are consequences that have tissue damage attached to them. Wash has ignored the political, and prepared for the lethal. Unfortunately, the Legion will not give him the opportunity to show what he can do. And so he sits, processing supply requests.

Until his buddy shows up. Almost everybody has a buddy like this; they show up, they have a plan, and you know in advance it's going to be a bad idea. Still, they cajole, and prevail; and, despite the fact that good old buddy Major Berlin's idea is most likely to result in death or court-martial, Wash goes along with it.

And the next day, a helicopter shows up, loaded with a squad of Marines, and Berlin and Wash get aboard so that Berlin can get in some combat time, which will almost certainly guarantee a successful political career upon discharge. The fact that he skipped ALL of the training necessary to lead a small group in combat, the fact that these troops are NOT in his chain of command, the likelihood that they will all die; none of that enters his plan. He blithely assumes that he can do Great Things, despite all evidence to the contrary.

It's up to Wash to fix things. The first order of business is to keep the Marines, all with some degree of experience in combat, from fragging Berlin as soon as they realize he is a fraud. The second is to accomplish whatever mission he can, and to bring back as many alive as possible.

Once I realized the entire focus was going to be on a single mission, I had a new appreciation for the fact that some of the story arcs might be closed, and that there was no guarantee that ANYONE was going to make it out of the story alive. Everything was on the table, and that adds to the fascination with the story developing before me.

As evidenced that I read this book in one setting, I loved the story, the writing, the characters. And so to the question: is this a viable candidate for the Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction Novel?

Based ONLY on what is found between the covers, yes. This was a book that could very well bring home a Dragon.

Record Of A Spaceborn Few by Becky Chambers

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Full disclosure: as I gathered the materials for this reviewing project, the title of this book caught my eye, and I found it very difficult to postpone reading it until yesterday. I don't know exactly WHY the title hooked me so significantly; if I understood that, I'd probably start a consulting business writing titles for books. I also found that the thumbnail pic of the author spoke to me, a bit, about a person who had fun writing a book. It seemed such a contrast to a few headshots I'd encountered lately of blustery guys with beetling brows and fierce expressions, and some glam shots of vampires; people I wouldn't ask for a lift to the next service station if I ran out of gas.

This is Book 3 in the Wayfarers series, and it shows. The background work in establishing the world has already been done; we are told exactly where in the story arc this book is found. It's my hope that those who prefer origin stories above all things can find them in the other installments in the series, but I confess that I cannot testify to that of my own experience.

There are a couple of points I found confusing, although I can't really say that they detracted from the presented story in any major way. The primary confusion I had was this: We have a huge exodus of humans from a worn-out planet Earth; they have spent generations in space on their voyage. The departure from Earth is referenced in a ritual followed by those who live on the ships:

We left the ground behind. We left the oceans. We left the air. We watched these things grow small. We watched them shrink into a point of light.

(Chambers, Becky. *Record of a Spaceborn Few (Wayfarers)* (pp. 34-35). Harper Voyager. Kindle Edition.)

This, I understand; I've read unknown stories of giant habitat-ships among the stars. What I DON'T understand is the mechanism by which the Exodans (for so they are called) maintain contact with remaining humans on Earth, on Mars, and living in other artificial environments in the Solar system.

The other issues are more trivial. I understand that there are two primary languages spoken by humans, Ensk and Klip, and that Ensk is primarily Terran in origin, while Klip is Galactic, but I wasn't able to determine how the mix began. It's easy to pick up, and is, in fact, a central story point, that humans are significantly limited in their technological prowess. It SEEMS that they gained almost all of the essential technology currently in use as a gift from more advanced species, but the nature of the technology transfer is undefined. And the ability of humans to adapt easily to different gravities (okay, accelerations!) isn't addressed. As I said, though, these are trivial.

There is one respect in which they MIGHT matter, though, and I don't have enough evidence from this single exposure to know whether it applies. With the exception of a tiny area of science fiction literature, that dealing with the intrusion of a new technology on current society, it's accepted that you can violate any ONE aspect of reality with no penalty whatsoever. That's usually some form of hyperspace, but it can vary. However, given that single violation, anything else has to be explained, or at least justified. It's all a matter of acceptable limits. Within the context of "Record of a Spaceborn Few," I don't know how many of the technological marvels have been properly introduced. I'm inclined to give the benefit of the doubt, as technology transfer is a significant part of the storyline. However, if it's ALL handwavium, or even if it's ALIEN handwavium, then: ouch.

This is a mere quibble.

The book delivers EXACTLY what the title promises. These are the personal stories of a few individuals, told over the span of a few years. I'm not really good at paying attention to chapter headings (actually, I'm very bad at it). However, the kind author provided a subtle clue about which character's POV was going to be represented in each section, via the esoteric method of TELLING US THE NAME! (Yes, I am slow to catch on.)

The protagonists are Tessa, a materials handler and young (almost single) mother of two; Isabel, a keeper of the archives of the Exodans, and administrator of rituals; Sawyer, a young adult, orphaned on a planet, who enters life aboard the Fleet; Kip, a ship-board teen who has to fight the coming-of-age crisis in an environment he finds unreasonably limiting; Eyas, a Caretaker, the high-status professional who manages the funeral rites of the ship, including preparing the bodies of the deceased into compost,

which is then returned to the soil which grows the oxygen-providing plants. Each one is surrounded by a rich community, and it's in the interaction of these with the primaries that we really understand the tensions experienced by the humans who have fled Earth.

Without exception, the characters presented seemed very real to me, and likable. There was something about each character, other than Caretaker Eyas, that I could relate to, whether encroaching limitations of aging, the perils and joys of parenthood (& grand-parenthood), or the struggles Kip and Sawyer were facing in discovery of their place in the world. As for Eyas, her story was told with such beauty and power that I didn't feel a need to recognize myself in her.

And now we come to the question: is this book a real contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for the Best Science Fiction of the Year?

I've already addressed the issue of whether or not a series novel has the same chance of winning the award as a stand-alone novel. My answer is ALMOST the same as before "I have no clue." However, in this case, the book in question is not the first of a series, it's the third. And, for a mid-series work to qualify for Best Science Fiction Novel of the Year, I think the burden is SIGNIFICANTLY higher; it must tell an ENTIRE story, not just a part of one.

This is just my opinion, and you can take it or leave it: while "Record of A Spaceborn Few" is an excellent read, I just don't think it brings enough innovation to the table to warrant "Best of the Year" status. Too much depends on the other books in the series. This is NOT a criticism of what I found between the covers, because I really enjoyed the book. However, I don't find myself highly motivated to interrupt my sleep to read the other installments in the series, and frankly, I think that's exactly what a mid-series nomination for Best SF of the Year ought to do.

Having said that, it was an excellent read, and I recommend it.

Red Tide: The Invasion of Seattle by Chris Kennedy Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

(This is the second installation of my Memorial Day weekend binge of reviews of books written by veterans of the American armed forces and featuring the United States Armed Forces in action. Mr. Kennedy is a former Naval Aviator. He flew the A-6E Intruder bomber off of carriers as well as the EP-3E reconnaissance aircraft. He flew during the Kosovo conflict and during Desert Shield and Storm. He retired after 20 years as a Commander. Oh, and yes it's more Speculative Fiction than Science Fiction, but who gives a rip? It's a good book.)

You know, it's hard to say this, but I kind of wish this book hadn't been written by a veteran. Don't get me wrong, Chris Kennedy is a good author and Red Tide: The Chinese Invasion of Seattle is a damn find book. It's just that when I read some of what's here (I'll explain in a bit) I'd prefer to believe that the author doesn't have a clue. I'd really like to think that it can't actually happen. When it's written by someone who has been there/done that, it's a bit worrisome on a real world level. I mean, when someone points out holes like this in our national defense I want to be able to reject what they're saying. I can't really do that when they're in a position to know what they're talking about.

Having said that, I really did enjoy this story. It's action packed and has believable characters behaving in a believable manner. I don't remember who it was, but someone posted a question on Facebook the

other day inquiring as to whether or not you have to like the characters in a book to make it entertaining. My response was that a character doesn't have to be likeable to be entertaining but I do have to have a rooting interest in the book. Red Tide delivers precisely that. A lot of what happens in the book comes down to people not doing their jobs right. I don't like people who don't do their jobs right. Granted, they don't really have advanced notice that they're not doing their jobs right, but when you're dealing with the national defense not knowing is no excuse. Then again, I do have a rooting interest. I'm an American. I root for the home team.

This is the first book in (I believe) a duology and I've already bought the second one. It's that good. I had to. I couldn't stop myself. Honestly, I should've waited a week because I had just spent a bunch of loot on my munchkins but it wasn't going to happen. *SIGH* I wish I could say it was the first time I spent money on a book that I shouldn't have. I love it.

Red Tide is, as advertised, about a Chinese invasion of Seattle as a distraction for their main thrust into Taiwan. I don't think it's too much of a spoiler to say that the US starts this fight off in a bad way. I don't want to give up too much, but yeah, things don't look good for my boys. That's putting it mildly.

The villains in Red Tide are actually pretty villainous while not being the type that cause unbridled hatred. They're Chinese diplomats and soldiers simply doing their jobs. Seriously. They're not the people making the decisions. They're the people following the orders. And follow the orders they do. If they might use a wee bit of subterfuge, well it is a war. That's how things go. If Sun Tzu recommended it, it probably makes sense to use it. I mean, not only is he still studied by every military on the planet, but he was actually Chinese. I get why they do what they do. I'd do the same thing in their situation.

I really like that fact. Kennedy's villains are not just cardboard cut-outs. I mean, I loved Battle: Los Angeles but the people who complained that we didn't know a lot about the aliens weren't wrong. Kennedy gets something I think a lot of authors miss: Everyone is the hero of their own story. The Chinese people in Red Tide aren't dastardly villains cackling in their lairs like Cobra Commander in a bad episode of GI Joe. They have planned well. They follow the plan well. They don't see themselves as bad people. They believe they're doing the right thing. The Americans may disagree, but the Chinese are not interested in the opinions of the Americans.

It's worth mentioning that the Chinese are as humane as they can be. I mean, it's war and people die. The fact remains that they only kill when they have to and several of the steps they take are clearly meant to avoid kill people unnecessarily. These are reasoning human beings who do what they need to do but don't do more than that. I've never met Kennedy personally but he seems to be a warrior with a respect for other warriors. I like that.

My one bitch about Red Tide is that sometimes I felt a bit like I was being talked down to. Kennedy was obviously aware of the fact that he is a Naval Aviator writing for a primarily civilian audience. Sometimes he gives a bit more of an explanation of various terms than I really feel is necessary. Maybe I'm not the best judge of this, I've read military fiction of one type or another for a few decades now and I've studied military history. Someone was actually goofy enough to give me a history degree after I wrote long papers about the security of the Manhattan Project and the involvement of the Heer (the German Army) in the Holocaust so I probably have a better understanding than most. The fact remains that there were times when I felt like I was being talked down to. If I had more time I'd try to find someone who hadn't done all the reading I have and see if they felt the same way.

Other than that though, this is a really strong story. Kennedy's military experience really shines through. There are a couple of aerial combat sequences that just work, and I can easily see why. Kenne-

dy also seems to have a solid grasp of planning and executing an operation from an officer's point of view. It sometimes irks me that the officer is almost always the star of the story, but this time it makes sense. Kennedy himself is an officer so of course that's how he's going to write his books. And maybe I should just stop whining because the other two books I reviewed this weekend centered around an enlisted man and a mustang.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 AMRAAMs

Redcaps Rising: A Walter Bailey Misadventure

by P.A. Piatt

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Somebody call Piers Anthony, because I found an author who actually knows how to do humorous fantasy and it's not the way he did it. Seriously, I read two of the Xanth novels. One on purpose and the other because I was book starved and in a position where I couldn't get more. One of my friends gave it to me for free. I almost asked for my money back. I mean, it sucks because I really loved his Bio of Space Tyrant series but Oh my God, did the Xanth novels suck. Every joke was a bad pun. At least they eventually ended and I was able to get somewhere to buy a new BattleTech novel. Now that I'm done nerd raging about something that has nothing to do with what I'm writing about...

I recently received a copy of P.A. Piatt's Redcaps Rising: A Walter Bailey Misadventure. He warned me that it would be funny, and he wasn't wrong. I love a good comedy, but very rarely have I seen it done well in a novel length work. P.A. Piatt managed to knock it out of the park though. I'll be honest. I found P.A. asking how to get more reviews in a Facebook group and told him to send me a copy. He sent me one, then told me it was humor. I got a little nervous and flashed back to dandy-lions and hypnogourds. I mean, dude's initials were even P.A. I was about to get Anthonied. The Xanth bomb was dropping. Oh God. Oh God, Oh... Wow. I'm actually enjoying this. How did that happen?

Seriously, the humor is well done and not always tasteful. That's okay, tasteless humor is my favorite kind. I'll say this much: Don't ever get hit with a curse in a Walter Bailey Misadventure. The cost of breaking it is just too damn high. Oh, and I'm not a fan of anything that involves a mullet. Really. Even if I end up with a curse sticking to my achy, breaky ass. I just couldn't do it. I'd have to live the rest of my life like that.

Redcaps Rising also turns into a written version of one of my favorite movie genres: The road trip flick. I have to admit that I've never seen a movie with quite as motley a crew as Redcaps Rising but it works. Our main character, Walter Bailey ends up in situations he never anticipated with friends and enemies he never would have believed possible and ends up traveling cross-country on the run. There are food fights and shenanigans. There are serious, worrisome moments. There is hijinks and hilarity. It's really well done.

And then Boosh farted.

BAM!

Anyway...

It occurs to me that Redcaps Rising included one of a very few prologues that I have ever enjoyed. It was entertaining. It set the stage for the story and it included characters that were in the rest of the story. Ordinarily prologues are against my religion, but I'll make an exception here. It's actually relevant.

Redcaps Rising started off like a mystery novel, but that only lasted a couple of chapters. I like that though. Not only does it show a bit of range as writer on the part of Piatt, but it was a good lead-in to the rest of the book. Walter needs a reason to start on his journey of laughs and the first couple of chapters do a good job of getting things headed in the right direction.

The cast of characters Redcaps Rising is slightly non-standard, but I mean that in a good way. The garden gnome is nutty. The elves that live in the shed are... well... not Tolkien-esque to put it mildly. The main character doesn't really seem to be the Chosen One. Seriously, Walter is just a guy doing what he can in a situation that he never really wanted. I don't want to spoil too much but the supporting cast isn't exactly archetypal either. He does an excellent job here.

I really like the way that Piatt brings fantasy races into the modern world. He is hardly the first author to write urban fantasy, but he gives an interesting take on the way the classic races would act in a modern world. His non-human races are not just cardboard cut outs either. They're real people who just don't happen to exist. They do things for the own motivations. From orcs to elves to gnomes to all kinds of crazy stuff. I kind of wish he had included a dwarf but that's just me. I have a thing for dwarves in fantasy stories.

This novel cooks. Something is always happening. There is no downtime and even a stop for dinner can turn into a riot. You never know what's coming next but it gets here quickly. I loved that aspect of this book. Redcaps Rising is far from being the longest book I've ever read, but it has more action than a lot of longer books. It doesn't take long to read and I never got bored. This one had me hooked all the way through.

My only real beef with Redcaps Rising is that I needed to see our chief villains more. My favorite part of any fantasy is hating the villain. The Redcap sisters are portrayed as evil and power hungry. Their minions are out for blood. It would be fun to spend more time with them though. I'd like to get to know them more. There is the potential for these three to be every bit as classic as the Wicked Witch of the West from The Wizard of Oz but he just hasn't taken them there yet. Then again, the series is The Misadventures (plural) of Walter Bailey, so maybe we'll get to know and hate them a bit more in future novels. Here's hoping anyway.

You know what? Yeah, I'm going to take it there. I was going to nominate Declan Finn for the Dragon Award for Best Fantasy. I think I'll still nominate him, but I'm going to move him down to Best Horror. He writes vampires after all. That makes it horror, right? I'm going to nominate Redcaps Rising for the Dragon Award for Best Fantasy Novel. I would urge all of you to buy and read the book and if you agree with me to nominate Piatt as well. How cool would it be to see someone you nominated on the final ballot. Help your boy out! Let's get this thing done. This work is that good. Take a bow, P.A.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Cursed Elves

Someplace to be Flying by Charles De Lint Review by Samuel Lubell

Charles De Lint's *Someplace to be Flying* is an excellent fantasy novel, one of the best by this superb author of urban fantasy. Although it is set in Newford, the site of many of his books and superb short stories, it stands totally alone (It does make a reader wonder how so many different magical creatures could coexist in the same city without running into each other. Is there a schedule? To be fair many Newford characters do meet in other books.)

The story mixes native American myths about animal spirits and the creation of the world by Raven and the Crow Girls with urban fantasy and gangsters (really!). The animal spirits are able to interbreed with humans, creating people who think they are human but really have some animal spirit blood in them. They are protected by their cousins, the full-blooded animal spirits, who also have custody of Raven's pot, which can unmake the world. The animal spirits are grouped into tribes, including a special hatred by the Cuckoos (who have become gangsters) for the Ravens and Crows (who are artists and street folk).

The plot begins when Lily, a photographer, is attacked on the street and a gypsy-taxi driver tries to save her, only to be saved himself by the Crow Girls. This leads them into the world of the animal spirits, whom they only half-believe. Mixed into this is a total innocent, who grew up in a mental institution because she believes she has a twin sister who no one else can see. Unknown to her, the twin sister is already in the city and the animal spirits can see her. And then the bad guys capture Raven's pot and things really get stirred up, literally.

De Lint's gift is in making this magic perfectly believable in an urban context. This isn't magical realism, where the magic is taken for granted, but a slow unveiling of a secret world and a magic hierarchy that fits together perfectly as the reader gradually makes sense of what is really going on. Characterization is very strong, especially of the Crow Girls who seem childlike most of the time. They live in a tree and everything in the world seems new and strange. They drink sugar and call it tea, cannot grasp the idea of privacy or personal property, and appear to be 14 year-old children (although a character is shocked when he realizes that he's known them for years and never wondered why they never grow older.) At the same time, they can heal injuries and fight cuckoos to the death, perfectly seriously. The different characters all seem to be their own people (once again De Lint has populated a novel with intriguing artists and street-eccentrics, although this time he does have a few with jobs) with the Crow Girls being especially vivid.

Usually with De Lint's works the plot is less important than the mood and atmosphere. Here, though the plot and atmosphere join together seamlessly. Even the "tall tales" told throughout the volume have a purpose and links to several of the book's characters.

If you have not already discovered De Lint, *Someplace to be Flying* is a perfect place to start. Follow it up with *Memory and Dream* and his excellent short story collection *Dreams Underfoot*. Then, you too will find yourself peeking down inner-city alleys, looking twice at various street-people, and wondering why more readers don't know about his wonderful individualistic brand of urban fantasy. *Someplace to be Flying* has my highest recommendation.

Taking the Night by J.F. Posthumous Review by Becky Jones

Taking the Night mixes the mafia and magic and comes up with an adventure in the underworld, both criminal and magical. Selia Lascari is the daughter and employee of a well-heeled mafia boss. And she has a secret. But it's not the kind of secret you might expect. Selia is highly trained in a number of ancient fighting techniques, and she controls magic. One evening on an errand, which she presumes is for her father and boss, she walks into a trap set by a rejected suitor. Between what she hopes is a subtle use of her magic, and New Campania's mysterious vigilante crime stopper, the Sandman, Selia escapes the trap, but now faces a more deadly foe from her past as well as family members who will kill her for associating with the Sandman, their sworn enemy.

Here's the blurb:

Magic and the Mob don't usually mix well. But to survive, Selia Lascari has made both work in her favor.

Banished from her hidden island homeland and adopted into a Mob family, Selia has spent nearly a decade learning to live in the "modern" world of technology and doing legitimate business for one of the city's oldest crime syndicates. Being a part of it all while still feeling very much apart from everything and everyone around her.

When she's asked to run an errand, she discovers too late that it's a trap. Alfi Barboni, a would-be suitor, wants revenge on her family and he'll do anything to get it.

When her adopted father is left for dead in the attempted coup, Selia's forced to turn to her only other option: the city's vigilante known as the Sandman. Risking everything to protect her father and save herself, Selia dons a mask—a lot of Kevlar—and begins her search for Alfi... only to discover he's nothing more than a necromancer's puppet.

If Selia, with the Sandman's aid can't stop the necromancer and end the attempted coup, everything she holds dear will be left in ruin.

In Selia, J.F. Posthumous has created another strong female main character in the mold of Catherine in the Lady of Death although the commonalities between the two women end there. While the character arcs in Taking the Night are familiar—heroine is stronger than she realizes, there is more going on than she's paid attention to, might be attracted to her rescuer—Posthumous employs those arcs in an engaging story, with a detailed and easily visualized universe, that keeps you turning the pages. There are enough twists and turns that the reader is kept wondering (and hoping) as to the outcome. The author has also set up her readers for what presumably will be at least a couple more books in this series. This story wraps up well and leaves just enough loose ends for another installment or two or three to carry the character arcs even further along.

As mentioned, Selia Lascari is a strong heroine, but not one who refuses all help, nor does she hold the men around her in disdain. She doesn't carry a grudge even though she had to flee her homeland. She's smart and capable and deals with her personal issues as best she can. In other words, she's human... with special abilities.

I thoroughly enjoyed both books in Posthumous' earlier series, *Lady of Death*, and jumped right into *Taking the Night*. I was not disappointed. Three dimensional characters and settings round out a plot that is complex, but not so confusing that you need to keep a list of characters and places next to you while you read it.

Taking the Night is the first book in Posthumous' second series, *Nightshade*. I am looking forward to the rest of this series!

Unfettered Journey by Gary F. Bengier

Review by Jason P Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.tv>

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 are 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.

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.

We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity,

Chris Kennedy, Jamie Ibson, eds.

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

“We Dare” is one of the books I was reading when the Dragon dropped in, and disrupted all the plans that were in place. Now, that ended a week ago, and I haven’t been QUITE idle since then. In fact, almost as soon as the last review was filed, I grabbed up some Heinlein I keep for just such occasions, and lost myself in the tales of The Man Who Sold The Moon, and so on. Quite lovely. In fact, I doubt that I have reviewed those oldies, since I only started doing this a little over five years ago, and I really don’t know when I read some of his works. But, that’s for another time.

There ARE some others that were high on my list of TBR&R, and they will come in as rapid a fashion as I can honorably do so. So, Jennie, Mackey, Laura, Doug, Peter, Jerry, Chris, Nitay, Robert, and all of the others: YES, I have your books, and I am champing at the bit to get them into my brain and the results out of the ends of my fingers. Everybody else, all of you who have been patient, have been patient, and have been patient, I’ll put out a request for new materials as I clear up space.

“We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity,” is a collection of fifteen stories from fifteen authors, and MOSTLY, the only thing they have in common is that they deal with implications of a world in which human beings are able to receive machine enhancements. Not a new concept, it received popular attention with the 1970’s series “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Good thing, or bad thing? It depends on who you ask, it depends on what you read.

“A handsome young cyborg named Ace
Wooed women at every base.
But when ladies glanced at
His special enhancement
They vanished with nary a trace.”
("Alpha Centauri," Firaxis Games)

Some who read this may be old enough to remember purchasing vinyl LP record albums. One of the marketing approaches was to take two hit songs by a group, add 10 mediocre songs, and form a playlist: the first song on side A was a hit, the last song on side B was a hit, and all the stuff in between was mediocre filler. That’s not the way these books are put together. ALL of the stories are good stuff.

KADE by Christopher Woods. The protagonist of “This Fallen World” has, somehow, managed to live to a ripe old age. He’s still a rascal, as much as his 90 year-old, much-abused body permits him to be. Rather than augmentation in the form of repairs and enhancements, he is offered a chance to start as

a new adult, with additional features. However, this world is run by corporations, and they don't like competitors to get advantages.

TAMING THE BEAST by Kevin Steverson. Sadly, I am not familiar with the universe this story is drawn from. I hope that changes sometime in the future. Here we have Gunny Harper, who has been given prosthetic legs to replace the destroyed originals. The problem: while they are good for some activities, there is no way that he can operate with the pain which remains. The Beast referred to in the title is an obstacle course. If the Gunny can't beat it, he is going to retire.

TANK by J.F. Holmes. The tank is a former cyborg soldier in the Army, now a NYC cop. The question is: are you still a human? He doesn't really know the answer to that, but an encounter with a similarly enhanced criminal, and an astoundingly nasty criminal, and some criminals with suits and nice jobs, all conspire to force him to discover the answer.

CRADLE AND ALL by Quincy J. Allen. The corporation, no matter where it's located, is always concerned about the bottom line. Who decides about the ethics of the situation? Usually, that's someone else's job. However, when we are referring to our own children, that answer isn't good enough.

DO OR DIE by Jamie Ibson. "All problems can be solved with the proper application of C-4." Or, Deton-8, in this future. Except, not really. Some jobs require a proper application of heart. In fact, without the heart, the jobs aren't really worth doing. In this universe, people born with neurological conditions that are debilitating and ultimately lethal are, shall we say, re-purposed. But, the heart comes over, regardless of whether the pump is included.

YELLOW IN THE NIGHT by Philip Wohlrab. "The King In Yellow" is one of the creepiest, multi-level stories, ever, so why NOT add to it? These enhanced warriors KNOW they are being lied to from the beginning, but they also know the mission orders are valid. They hope the lies aren't going to mean they don't have a chance,

THE CHAOS OF WELL-SEEMING FORMS by Rob Howell. The Hatfields and the McCoys, or the Montagues and Capulets, on Mars. Howell can take a bizarre set-up like that, and ALMOST make you cry. Probably WILL make you cry, if you read it when you are alone, instead of in the car while waiting on teen-age girls to buy their school supplies.

FORTY ACRES AND A MULE by Luke R. J. Maynard. There is such sadness associated with this term; it comes from an attempt by the victorious North to provide the former slaves in the defeated South with property, that would have ended much of the economic disparity that prevented access to inherited wealth. In this story, we see the retirement longed for by a man given the strength of the mule by his enhancements.

IMPERFECT MIND by Jason Cordova. In a hard, cold, distant future, children born with imperfections are dumped into people warehouses until they age out. Then, they get dumped anywhere else. However, some of them get picked for other things, other uses that the elite might have for them. That could be anything, really; sex slave, dog food, whatever. One young girl gets picked to test-drive a cyborg-soldier package. It gives her the chance to experience love, for the very first time. And that's what makes this story particularly nasty. I wish I could not draw a line between this fictional piece, and the brutal reality of the child soldiers; I really, really wish I could not do that.

BAG MAN by Jack Clemons. This one takes place in my semi-adoptive home town, and I recognize the place names, have visited a number of them, and I would prefer that we could find a path so that

things will not work out this way. Humans with vastly modified brains and bodies do rough justice(?) for money. The choice of a theme park for some of the action clearly has nothing to do with the fact that it was the setting for gang activity in real life. It's a sheer coincidence. But things won't work out this way.

COME UP SCREAMING by Kevin Ikenberry. Captain Mairin Shields commands an armor unit used as a screening force for an assault team trying to re-take a formerly human city. In addition to her conventionally-acquired skills, she also has access to the memories of an ancestor who also drove a tank. This reminds me of a comic-book series from my youth; the tank was haunted by the ghost of Jeb Stuart, I believe.

ANGEL by Robert E. Hampson. I did my medic training at places found in this story. Some of my cadre could very well have been the models for medic sergeant Martin. He was given experimental nanobots to save his life, and they do that, repeatedly. Not sure it really works to his benefit, in the end, but it sure does allow him the opportunity to pay it forward.

TO DUST by Marisa Wolf. Ignored and abandoned, and going insane. Who HASN'T had that experience? Well, hopefully, none of us. But even if that's the case, you don't just up and quit. After all, there are your comrades, and they are depending on you.

If you recall, at the beginning of this review, I said that anthologies no longer use the recording industry practice of placing the hits at the beginning and at the ending of the book. However, if I were to be persuaded otherwise, the next two stories would be the best evidence. Each one is excessively wonderful. Taken together (they are a pair), they are almost unbearably great.

NOW YOU SEE ME by Kacey Ezell. Ezell cheats, and it's not fair. This is a collection of stories about enhanced humans, people who are given special powers, sometimes contained in their own skin, sometimes by being coupled to machinery. There IS such a thing, you know, and I have experienced it: I'm a biker.

The physical limitations I feel in the flesh seem to vanish, when I throw a leg over the V65 Sabre in my garage, crank the engine, and move on down the road at the speed of heat. I am AUGMENTED, baby! And although I don't know that Ezell has ever been a biker, I DO happen to know that she has strapped a big honken jet turbine to her spine, and danced the sky on laughter-silvered wings. So, when she tells you the story of Cary, who pilots a shell, and inhabits a body of a MOST powerful force, she is drawing from her own experience. It isn't fair! It's a lovely, lovely story, though, particularly because it's half of a Rashomon.

NOW YOU DON'T by Josh Hayes. This is the other half of the Rashomon, and I THINK Hayes is a cheater as well. He's got the perspective of Gage, the other POV in the story of techno-thieves, and his recounting of the sequence rewiring a crashing aircraft while waiting for an explosion are just a little bit too vivid to be completely selected from YouTube videos. Shucks, y'all, this is an excellent pairing of stories, and I would surely love to see more like it, 'deed I would.

Conclusions: Do not, under any circumstances, plan on missing this book. Also, do not plan on starting it one month, and finishing it the next month, and then think you are going to dash off a quick review.

I'm a die-hard fan of Human Wave fiction, in which people find a way to survive, and technology is our friend. Most of these stories would not fit into that category; there is too much forced on individuals. However, I didn't find anything here that really felt off; they are all possibilities. While I would

hope that the possibility of augmented humanity will mean that those of us who are physically limited will have a shot at turning cart-wheels again, I also know that it's not likely to be a technology available to everyone with a need. So, we will just take it as it comes.

~Finis~