

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
September 2021

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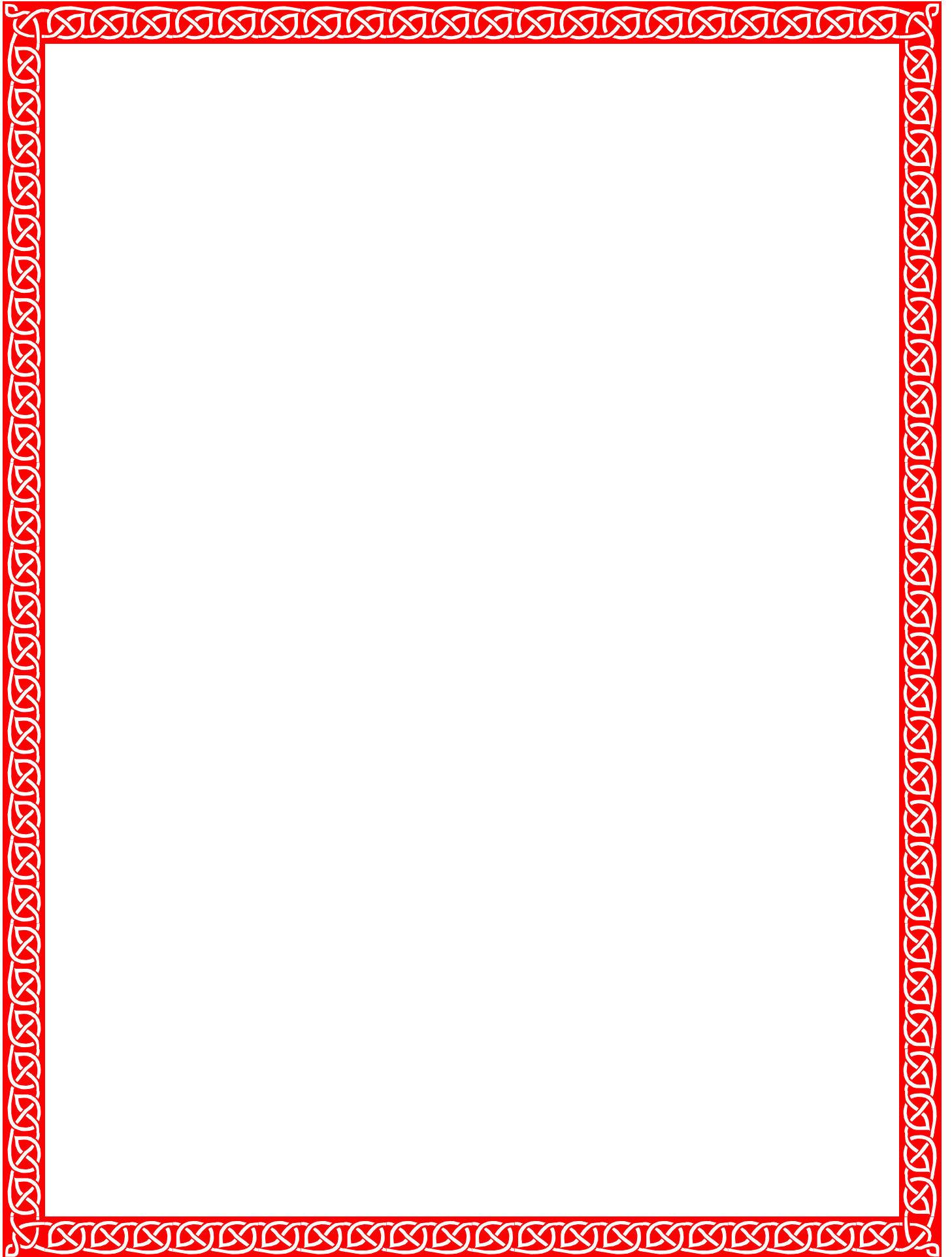
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Editorial

Neffers, we have a problem. It's not a deadly problem, but it is a problem. The N3F Review depends on readers to supply good book reviews. We are now steering into a dry spell in terms of material for your Editor to insert and publish.

Tamara Wilhite, God rest her soul, passed away; we recently received her very last interview. Pat Patterson and Jim McCoy write wonderful reviews, but recently they have been writing fewer of them. Chris Nuttall writes incredibly thoughtful reviews, but unlike his novels, they do not put food on his family's table or a roof over their heads. We are regularly grateful to new reviewers Sam Lubell, Jason P. Hunt, Mindy Hunt, and Robert Runte, and occasional reviews from Jon Swartz, Jeffrey Redmond, Robert Kroese, and the writers at Upstream Reviews...which alas went on Summer vacation.

Nonetheless, I can see in the near distance a time when we will have many fewer reviews. One solution, of course, is to accept thinner issues. Another is to go to bimonthly publication. Your assistance is welcomed.

On a different note, literary criticism is often political and controversial. You may see more of that, hopefully from multiple perspectives, in the future.



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Fiction

Black Chamber by S. M. Stirling

Review by Pat Patterson

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

This was the very first book review of a book I didn't read in the Kindle version. For this book, and the next three I'm reviewing, the paperback was cheaper than the e-book. That makes ZERO sense to me.

Out of the 24 books in the four categories I'm reviewing, one was too expensive in ANY format. The people who make the decisions for that book decided that the value of that particular book was at least \$15; I disagree. Isn't America GREAT? We get to disagree on the value of a thing! But at least, that makes SENSE. Pricing an e-book higher than a physical copy? I don't get it.

S. M. Stirling has co-written some of the books that helped me hang on, during that long, bleak period when it seemed NOTHING was being written that I liked to read. In fact, it was with the discovery of some books he co-wrote with Jerry Pournelle and David Drake that I discovered there was something new going on, and that all science fiction was no longer incoherent snapping at our own flesh. Thus, I am pre-disposed to look favorably on something he writes, although I couldn't really say he is well-represented in my library. I'm not sure of the reasons why.

At any rate, I was glad to see his name as one of the authors with a book among the finalists for the 2019 Dragon Awards. The category makes a lot of sense to me as well; even though I think I only read one of the volumes, his "Draka" series was Alternate History, so I knew he had some experience with it.

Refreshingly for a book in this category, we are immediately informed of the point of deviation from our timeline. It takes place on May 25, 1912, when incumbent president William Howard Taft dies of a heart attack, leaving the Republican field open to challenger Roosevelt. In our timeline, Taft lived to run, and Roosevelt took 27% of the vote, which allowed Democrat Woodrow Wilson to be elected. This was the highest turn-out ever for any third-party candidate for the presidency, a result even more remarkable in light of the assassination attempt on Roosevelt in October, when he took a single .38 Special to the chest, and still gave the intended speech that evening.

With the progressive Roosevelt at the helm, US foreign policy was more assertive. The border raids in Mexico by bandit Pancho Villa were met with a full invasion, instead of the milder and ineffective punitive raids ordered by Wilson. As a result, Mexico loses sovereignty and becomes a protectorate of the US.

A survivor of the revolutionary banditry associated with the Mexican revolution, Luz O'Malley Arostegui joins an American special operatives group, known as the Black Chamber. Operatives are given training to engage in counter-intelligence work, and she is chosen to impersonate an Irish-Mexican-American (is that too many adjectives?) named Elisa Carmody de Soto-Dominguez, who has been captured while engaging in terrorist activities, and has probably died under interrogation. Fortunately, Luz bears some characteristics in common with Carmody.

Using that identity, and traveling in the guise of a wealthy socialite, Luz boards an airship to Europe, knowing only that she is to meet with a German agent on the trip, and the code name he is using. And here, regrettably, we start running into some profound Mary-Sue territory, and whatever the male equivalent is called. And we never exit the territory, either.

Luz is the perfect example of female pulchritude, disguising a first-class brain (yawn), and furthermore, is skilled in all forms of combat, armed, unarmed, and stark naked. And her German agent is the perfect example of masculinity, disguising a first-class brain (another yawn) and is also, etc.

So, naturally, they start having sex with each other immediately, while on the airship.

I am SO tired of having to hear about other people's sex lives, and their sexual prowess, and their sexual preferences. I do understand that there are segments of the population that really enjoy that sort of thing. When I first discovered the original James Bond books, as they were still being written, I also took great interest in reading that sort of thing. However, I was 12 years old at the time. (WRONG!)

Heck, yeah, reading about passionate kisses and embraces was exciting, because I was 12 years old at the time! (Nope, that's not true. I just checked the dates, and I started reading them in 1963, when I was 10 years old. Sorry!)

Honestly, I'm asking myself now: is this book aimed at 12-year-old boys? Because the plot is rather simplistic, in precisely the way that the 12-year-old boy inside my brain likes them. The team Luz is a part of ALWAYS prevails, often at great peril, without sustaining any severe injuries. And they are always heroic beyond belief. And they are always lucky beyond belief.

Even the book points this out, as more than one observer says that if they had been told this by anyone else, they wouldn't believe it. And, as I reflect, I don't believe it, either.

If this IS a book aimed at 12-year-olds, well, shame on you. If not, could we PLEASE have more realistic characters next time? I really don't WANT the protagonist to be such a sex bomb that every male and female has uncontrollable lust for her, and when one male character doesn't, she immediately concludes that he is gay, and outs him to his co-conspirators, as a clever part of her plan.

A small, insignificant, and perhaps mistaken point, concerning the use of the Thompson sub-machine gun in 1916.

First, I get it: this is alternate history. Second, this is alternate history with Teddy Roosevelt as the sitting president, and he is mobilizing the country for war in a way that Woodrow Wilson didn't. However, in OUR timeline, the Thompson wasn't even a thought problem until 1915, and it took until 1917 that a design was produced, with the first models not coming off the line before the war was over in 1918. However, in the novel, it's been in production long enough for the first design flaws to be rectified, and for enough production to be diverted from America to the Germans, that the raiders are equipped with them.

And Luz is highly proficient with one, as well. Sigh. Mary Sue.

Okay, that's not a deal-killer for me. I am willing to accept the idea that under Roosevelt, the design happens much earlier, and that it's Springfield Armory that produces them, and not Auto-Ordnance.

Still, in the end, the deal is killed. It's the combination of the Mary Sue nature of just about ALL of the characters, plus the pansexuality being trotted out all the time, that closes the door on this one. It's really too bad, because I loved the concept.

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

My opinion: no, for the reasons cited. It's a great concept, and yes, Taft was morbidly obese, and might very well have had a heart attack; and, if so, Roosevelt MIGHT have gotten the nomination. I'd like to believe he would have done all of the other wonderful things ascribed to him, and I enjoyed reading the what-ifs. I just needed a more realistic protagonist, and I DO wish we could permit everyone, even fictional characters, the right to privacy concerning who sticks what where.

Bob's Saucer Repair, by Jerry Boyd

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Yes, I said "most delightful book;" I did NOT say "mostly delightful book." There is a difference. This one is most delightful; I found nothing to object to. The book has had some changes in the cover art, and the most recent cover reminds me of "The Hitchhikers Guide" series, and that's good. It's funny; there is an adventure story, but don't come looking to have exploding spaceships take you all the way. Instead, relish the dialogue:

"You have a point. Your hair covers it, though."

Boyd, Jerry. Bob's Saucer Repair (Bob and Nikki Book 1). Jerry Boyd. Kindle Edition.

The protagonist is: a mechanic. Bob, the mechanic. He arrives home at the end of a work day, anticipating chili and beer, and discovers a broken spaceship (not an exploding spaceship!) in his garage. He does NOT freak out; he invites the pilot, Nikki, to hang out while he mends a coolant pipe. Amusing cultural differences emerge, and the effect is made delightful by the fact that both Bob and Nikki are quick with a quip and an insult.

She is a pilot/guide to interstellar graduate students, who sought to cut costs by procuring a junker spaceship. Bad choice. Fortunately, Bob, then his medic buddy John, pull their chestnuts out of the fire. In doing so, they present an opportunity for continued commerce (and Bob and Nikki interact chemically, or something; anyway, they both want to smooch).

Translator devices; direct-brain-interface learning machines; some other different super-advanced tech, but this ISN'T a story about gadgets. Do you like...SPACE PIRATES?

It's a thorough romp, the first in the series, and it's my understanding that installment 11 has recently gone live. Amazing...

Fade by Daniel Humphreys

Review by Jim McCoy

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

Have you ever gotten so lost in a book that you couldn't focus back on the real world for a minute or so when your reading was interrupted, you had to blink and try to refocus on the real world? Have you ever been so stuck in a scene that you couldn't put a book down even though you knew you needed to? Have you ever been so affected by a scene that you were thinking about it for hours after you were forced to put the book down? If the answer is yes, then you get it. If not, you don't. Either way, you should read Daniel Humphreys's *Fade*.

Paxton Locke is our hero. He is also a scarred individual who has dealt with way more than any human being should ever have to. I won't go into specifics because I try to avoid spoilers, but ummm... damn. Like seriously, some characters you'd love to meet in real life. Paxton is kinda-sorta one of those. I mean, he's an awesome dude who sounds like he's got some really cool stories to tell. On the other hand, Paxton has been through things that no human being should have to endure. He's a weird one. At the end of the day, I'm kind of glad that this guy isn't real. Wow.

I love the way *Fade* is set up. This is the first book in a series, and it lays things out well to move forward. It is, however, a good standalone even if it makes me hope for a prequel before the first sequel is published. Paxton has an amazing if, as previously mentioned, horrifying history. We get just enough of it in the work to make me want more. Humphreys is a good enough author to wind it all together and make it work. I'll be watching his progress in the future. And the good news is that I know more is coming. I don't do end of book excerpts, but there was one included in my E-ARC. So, it's coming, it's just not here yet. Faster please.

Fade starts out in a manner that is a bit creepy, but not overly so. By the end of the book it's straight up horrific. Things proceed logically, but quickly. And boy, oh boy do they get ugly. Actually I don't mean ugly. I mean oogley. As in bad. As in eww, eww, AGAIN! AGAIN! (Ok, so maybe I'm a bit twisted.) The villains in this one are well, villainous. You want to see them get theirs. The heroes are heroic. You want to see them succeed. Sometimes there really are good guys and bad guys. This is one of those times.

Ok, so sometimes even the positive stuff in this book can be a bit gross. I'm okay with that. Hell, I enjoy it. A little bit of grossness makes the story more believable and good fiction produces an emotional response. A bit of squirming uncomfortably is precisely that. After all, sometimes natural processes can be a bit disturbing, but it gets even worse when it's sped up. And, let's face it, anesthetic is for wimps. Paxton is hard core. And I feel you, bro. I want a whole box of Twinkies right now too. Granted, I didn't do what you did to earn them, but hey nobody's perfect right?

Paxton himself is a bit of a complicated character. I mean, he wants to do what's right. He earns his living by banishing ghosts. He sends them away, stopping their torture and keeping them from tormenting the living as well. He only charges for his services sometimes. He's a good person. He works hard and plays little. He's been through a lot but has come out stronger. He's a tough dude.

And yet, he has a heart of gold. There is one part of *Fade* where no one, and by that I mean not a single human being living, dead or as yet unborn, could fault him for giving up on an unwinnable situation and walking away. I mean, sure it would have been a sad day but it's something that he probably could

have lived with. Instead, he damn near kills himself saving another human being using methods that he doesn't truly understand. If there has ever in the history of fiction been a character that has earned the right to be bitter, it is Paxton Locke. The fact that he put himself out there like this in spite of all of that is amazing.

Yet, when he is presented with a potential tool to use, he dismisses it as evil. This strikes me as perhaps not the most intelligent method of handling things. I mean, I get that the tool in question is something he has a history with and that it's not a good one. I just don't understand the fact that he destroyed something that was potentially useful just because someone had used it for evil. Listen folks, tools are not inherently good or evil. The knife you cut a tomato with is used to make a salad. It can also be shoved between someone's ribs simply because of a strong dislike. The hammer that you used to hang a picture last night can be used to murder someone. . Oh, and yes weapons can be used for good purposes as well. Self-defense is a positive. Pick a holy text. (And yes, a holy text is a tool. It is used to pass on knowledge of a religion and help convert people.) It can be used as the reason to help people. It can also be used for purposes of hatred and conquest. And so on. Paxton burns something that is potentially his most valuable tool. It irks me. I mean, in context it makes sense but it's just frustrating.

Oh, and let me say this about the ending: Humphreys gets it right. Fade ends in a way that a.) makes me want to read the next book and b.) isn't a freaking heart stopping moment meant to make me buy the book. Seriously. It's kind of relaxed but looks toward the future. I like that. I'll be reading it, too.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Apparitions

The Green Hills of Earth/ The Menace from Earth by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Robert Heinlein's short stories have always been something of a hit-or-miss affair. Some of his shorts have been very good, either exciting or thought-provoking, but others have been quite weak. The short story is an art that few writers can master – I'm honestly not very good at writing shorts – as one must either write within a developed universe (which Heinlein did, to some extent) or get across a great deal of information in a very small number of words.

Heinlein's shorts were originally written for magazine publication – it was the glory days of the old science-fiction magazines – and were later compiled into books. This set of short stories were placed in two collections – The Green Hills of Earth and The Menace from Earth – which were later republished, by Baen Books, as a single volume. The majority of them fit into Heinlein's Future History – which will be discussed later – but there are aspects of the stories that probably required editing to make them wholly part of the shared universe. There is also a considerable amount of values dissonance.

I do not intent to look at each of the stories in great detail – only a handful demand that sort of attention – but it's interesting to note the common themes. Most of them revolve around the sort of men (and women) who become pioneers, the people who put their lives on the line, time and time again, to explore new territories, boldly go where no man has gone before, and cope with disasters. Space Jockey, Gentlemen Be Seated, The Black Pits of Luna, It's Great to Be Back, Ordeal in Space, The Green Hills

of Earth, Sky Lift and Water is for Washing are all focused on such heroes, many of whom are seemingly normal people until they find themselves being tested by circumstance. It's Great to Be Back, for example, features a couple who spent years on the moon and hated every moment of it, only to discover – when they returned to Earth – that they no longer liked it. They promptly returned to the moon, where they were happy. In a similar vein, The Black Pits of Luna features a teenage boy who goes on a lunar walk with his little brother, who gets lost. After finding him, the boy determines to return to the moon as soon as possible. The story works very well, at least in part, because Heinlein captures the teenage male voice so well. Anyone who's ever been on a family trip as the elder son will sympathise.

“I was desperate. “Look, Dad,” I said, keeping my voice low, “if I go back to Earth without once having put on a spacesuit and set foot on the surface, you'll just have to find another school to send me to. I won't go back to Lawrenceville; I'd be the joke of the whole place.”

The Long Watch, by contrast, is a prequel of sorts to Space Cadet, the story of a young officer who sacrifices his life to avert a military coup. It's a strong tale of heroism, which Heinlein milks for all the sentimentality he can. Arguably, he overdoes it.

Several of the other stories represent attempts to peer into other genres. We Also Walk Dogs features a concierge service that can be hired to do almost anything (as long as its legal) trying to put the pieces together to accomplish a near-impossible task. The Year of the Jackpot focuses on statistical odds, with the characters calculating that bouts of periodic insanity are all too common. It has an uncomfortable resonance today. By His Bootstraps is a neat time-travelling story, quite like The Door into Summer, where a man gets press-ganged by a dictator and, eventually, becomes the dictator (and has to press-gang his former self). The time loop is neat, even though the future is quite depressing. Project Nightmare features military telepaths struggling to avert a Russian nuclear attack; Goldfish Bowl has a team of researchers stumbling across far more advanced (unseen and incomprehensible) aliens, who see humans as pets. It does not, I should note, have a proper ending. It is a creepy little story that seems out of place.

Columbus Was a Dope is a good example of how a short story can make its point. Two men debate the value of Christopher Columbus's voyage across the ocean, concluding, in the end, that it was sheer foolishness. But they're having the argument on the moon. Heinlein neatly shows us, as the men depart, that they're actually wrong. Where would they be without men like Columbus and Armstrong?

Logic of Empire is longer, but it makes the same general point. Two men make a bet that conditions on Venus (still presented as a habitable world) are not akin to slavery. Unwisely, they take ship to Venus to find out ... and get enslaved. The POV character rapidly comes to realise that the vast majority of men on Venus are enslaved and, when he gets home, he discovers to his horror that people on Earth don't want to know. One can argue that the distance between Earth and Venus makes it impossible to care, but there is a more salient point. Slavery is, and always has been, part of the human condition.

It's not a point that is discussed often these days. It's easy to forget that blacks weren't the only slaves in America, although the other slaves were not always called slaves. Nor is it easy to realise, as Heinlein points out, that slavery sprang from conditions that made it economic. The idea that black slaves were inferior was invented as a later justification for keeping them enslaved. It wasn't the reason for enslaving them. As one of Heinlein's characters points out:

“You have attributed conditions to villainy that simply result from stupidity. Colonial slavery is nothing new; it is the inevitable result of imperial expansion, the automatic result of an antiquated financial structure.” [SNIP] “You think bankers are scoundrels. They are not. Nor are company officials, nor pa-

trons, nor the governing classes back on earth. Men are constrained by necessity and build up rationalizations to account for their acts. It is not even cupidity. Slavery is economically unsound, non-productive, but men drift into it whenever the circumstances compel it.”

The last two stories appear very different, at least on the surface. And yet, in many ways, they share similar themes.

Delilah and the Space-Rigger may be the first science-fiction story featuring a woman trying to break into a male-only field. Tiny, the Chief Construction Engineer of Space Station One, is shocked to discover that his latest communications officer is a woman. His first response is absolute horror, a belief that her presence will distract the men ... and a number of attempts to get rid of her. (Interestingly, Heinlein makes it clear that Tiny wasn't entirely wrong.) Gloria – on the other hand – is equally determined to stay. A battle of wits and stubbornness ensues, which ends with Tiny reluctantly conceding that Gloria has won her place.

It reads oddly today, in many ways. Gloria is competent at her job, a point that is made subtly clear when Tiny tells her that one of the techs is a good man ... and she agrees, noting that she trained him. But, at the same time, she is neither a kick-ass heroine nor a bitch who will not accept even an unconditional surrender. Gloria is smart enough to make it clear that she wants to be one of the boys and that she will act like one of the boys (she went by 'G' on her paperwork to hide her all-too-revealing first name) ... and she will seek no special privileges for herself. She earns respect, rather than demanding it; indeed, perhaps more importantly, she is smart enough to allow Tiny room to retreat. It's better to allow someone to come to the right conclusion than force it down their throats, even if (particularly if) the conclusion is right. People resent such treatment and, if you have to have a working relationship with them, it can come back to bite you.

Indeed, Heinlein neatly illustrates the problem with 'lean in' advice. The good side is that it ensures that the women gets noticed, which makes it harder for her to be exploited; the bad side is that it's hard to tell, particularly if you haven't practiced, where to stop. The blunt truth is that men do not instinctively understand women and vice versa. Most men know, at a subconscious level, techniques for minimizing the apparent threats they pose to other men; they understand, all too well, that most men who think they are being challenged will react badly. A demand for something – anything – will generate pushback, where a more reasonable request may not. It is impossible to learn such skills from books – you have to practice – and it is very easy to mess up. Girls who were tomboys as kids tend to get much further in male-dominated spheres.

Heinlein also demonstrates the problem with the modern-day demand that men call out other men for bad (read sexist) behaviour. A secure man, like the narrator of the story, can point out when someone is being an asshole, but an insecure man – a teenager, for example – cannot without risking serious consequences.

“She does her work okay. You give her orders you wouldn't give to one of the men—and that a man wouldn't take.”

As oddly as it reads in places, Delilah and the Space-Rigger is far better at getting the idea across than more modern works. And, to Heinlein's readers, it would have been revolutionary.

In some ways, The Menace from Earth is very different from Delilah and the Space-Rigger; in others, it has quite a bit in common. Holly Jones may actually be Heinlein's most successful attempt at portraying a teenage girl; indeed, she is superior to Poddy of Podkayne of Mars, who came later. Holly is both

a very typical girl and one with great – and plausible – dreams of becoming a spaceship designer. Living on the moon, Holly works as a guide when she’s not in school ... a good life, until trouble intrudes in the form of an actress from Earth who captivates Holly’s boyfriend. Holly is none-too-pleased about this until she is forced to risk her life to save the actress from her own stupidity, an act that reveals that her boyfriend genuinely loves her.

It’s perhaps the strongest story in the book, both in background and foreground. Luna City is astonishingly detailed for such a short story, with both familiar and alien elements. And Holly herself is a living breathing person. The actress, on her way back to Earth (like some of the other people in the story collection), takes the time to reassure Holly that her boyfriend loves her ... and remind her not to rub salt in the wounds of his mistakes. Like the previous story, giving someone room to retreat is a very good idea. Just because someone made an ass of himself is no excuse for making matters worse.

Overall, most of the stories in this collection showcase precisely why Heinlein became popular in the first place. The combination of sweeping visions of the future with real-life people, true to his era, works in a way many other stories do not. Indeed, the people are the core of the stories, something which is true of most of Heinlein’s works. As Delilah and the Space-Rigger put it:

“Sure, we had trouble building Space Station One—but the trouble was people.”

Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy, NYPD

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Prefatory materiel! I MUST point out something about perceptions of reality before going into the specifics of the plot and characters. Due to some technical problems, at this moment I can’t see how the book is classified for marketing purposes on Amazon, but I suspect it’s listed as fantasy.

This may sound a bit weird to you, but: there is nothing in this book that would place it beyond the realm of everyday reality for the orthodox Christian believer. That’s a pretty bold statement, and feel free to dispute it if you like. It’s true, though, that classic, traditional Christianity teaches that angels, resurrection from the dead, demons, and a variety of miracles, are absolutely valid. Those beliefs are discussed at length in theologically oriented books, which are readily available. Similar themes are found in some popular movies and television shows.

Where Finn stands apart is that his protagonist, Tommy Nolan, is a good guy, an average blue-collar guy, working as a police detective in New York, who suddenly finds that his work combating conventional crime is “enhanced,” shall we say, by the tools and desire to combat authentic demons from Hell.

And: YES! That can be said to be COMPLETELY CONSISTENT with my belief systems. I’m not the same ‘flavor’ of Christian that Finn is, BUT, as I said earlier, the things he puts forward have traditionally been orthodox teachings of the mainstream Christian churches. If that seems too outrageous for sane people to believe, I recommend you look closer at the history of the Church, PARTICULARLY the foundation documents, including the Biblical accounts.

And now, to the book: As stated, Tommy Nolan is a good guy who finds himself gifted with super-powers so he can fight evil in physical form. That’s the premise, and I have to say that I found it delightful, perhaps largely because of my Christian perspective.

A very few days ago, I was given the opportunity to watch "Constantine," a movie which shares some of the same themes of power, demons, Heaven and Hell. However, the additional themes of betrayal, isolation, and unforgivable sin combined to alienate me, and I stopped less than half-way through.

What I liked about "Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy NYPD" is his constant virtue, in the form of his dedication to his wife and son, and his compassion even for the criminals he has to arrest. Long before he found himself in the role of A SAINT (!), Tommy was investing himself in his community and the people he encountered. This is NOT the story of a worthless, ineffectual dweeb who discovers a magical weapon in the desert and is transformed into a great American hero. This is a story of a regular guy, who commits himself to BEING a great American hero to his family, friends, prisoners, and anyone else he encounters, just with the tools of his hands and feet, mind, and heart.

While the reason he was selected for sainthood and super powers isn't disclosed in this installment, I believe it was simply a recognition of who he was becoming on his own.

A couple of closing remarks.

1. I don't read horror. There were elements of this story, in describing the crimes of the Bad Guy, that were horrifying. They may not be tolerable for those who are squeamish, and I would not recommend this to my 15-year-old Kenneth. However, those grotesque elements were essential clues to the nature of the killer. So, I hung in there, but I'd kind of like some brain bleach.
2. Although Tommy Nolan is a practicing Catholic, I didn't see this as a distinctively Catholic novel. True, Tommy DOES use some strictly Catholic elements to battle evil, but it's not so obscure that it can't be understood by this non-Catholic. If you have to look up the definition of a word, do it.
3. A couple of real-life murderers are mentioned as patterns/examples for the method the Bad Guy uses to murder his victims. I suggest you do NOT research their names; the crimes were horrific, and the failure of regulatory/supervisory agencies to intervene is likely to cause you to lose faith in certain systems which should be guarding public health. Again: I'd like some brain bleach.

Under normal circumstances, a phrase I have heard before but don't believe I comprehend, I would have already finished the Saint Tommy series. Keep checking in on me and let's see how it goes.

Peace be on your household.

Knightmare Arcanist by Shami Stovall

Review by Pat Patterson

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

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

Look to her work, and you'll find she absolutely NAILS the execution of the ideas, putting everything into the just-right sequence. She has the ability and the stamina to infuse page 180 with the same energy that's found on page 1. I'm inclined to believe that the stamina is what keeps most people from getting that novel published; it's just too hard to sit down, hour after hour, day after day, and punch the words into the keyboard. If my count is right, she now has eight books published, and that is some pretty amazing output.

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

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

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

It's a great old story, of poor and repressed folks, perhaps undiscovered royalty, arising from poverty to greatness. Surrounding them are people of privilege, which is given to them by accidents of birth. Tell the story the wrong way, and it is TIRESOME. Tell it the right way, and it refreshes the spirit, and gives you hope. Stovall tells it the right way.

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

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

Lies Sleeping by Ben Aaronovitch Review by Pat Patterson

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

I don't LIKE fantasy; I find it too pretentious. There are exceptions, certainly. I THINK that one of the reasons I liked The Hobbit and the rest of the Lord of the Rings saga (except for the Silmarillion) is because they are written as history, and the narrative really doesn't make too many intrusions into goofy-king-and-queen-land. The Silmarillion, on the other hand, HAS no narrative that extends beyond the short sections, and is slap-full of visits to goofy-king-and-queen-land. I have never yet had any success at completing any sizable portion of it before lapsing into a coma. A pleasant (for me) note: Peter Grant, the protagonist of this novel, agrees with my opinion on "The Silmarillion."

But fantasy doesn't necessarily require access to the prequels. Part of that, assuredly, is my personal prejudice; I disregard the significance of fantasy because I'm a snob. But another part is that in fantasy, it's a given that the rules of physics don't really apply, so if a grnknyr wedferets, you just pick up the meaning from the context, and drive on. You don't really have to know that in 2026, a hyperwave by-pass was constructed, requiring the destruction off Earth. And {khwo*fjy&rmaj that grynknryr, anyway.

The last large portion of affection I had for fantasy took a massive hit when I got to the end of "A Dance With Dragons," the fifth book in the "Song of Fire and Ice" series, popularly referred to as "Game of Thrones," and discovered that not only were we not at the end of the series, but that new plot lines were opening, and that there was no projected timeline for the future volumes, and NO END WAS IN SIGHT. I'll not sully the lines of this post by relaying to you the thoughts I had at that point.

“Lies Sleeping,” by Ben Aaronovitch, is Book 7 in the “Rivers of London” series. I found it both delightful, and, for the most part, quite coherent. The POV character is Peter Grant, although it took me quite a few pages before I harvested that bit of info from the book. He is a member of a London-based police unit, which works exclusively on cases in which criminals use magic to commit their crimes. He himself has magic powers, although some members of his unit do not, and a few others are more powerful.

The current target of their investigations is one Martin Chorley, a bad, wicked, and proficient wielder of magic they have associated with a number of prior crimes. He appears to be using former members of an Oxford College club called the “Little Crocodiles,” a group of posh individuals who enjoyed the play of dabbling in magic. Some of them were strictly in it for the amusement and affiliation, while others were attuned to the actual working of magic. It is the latter group that Chorley has selected to run errands for him.

Very quickly, we discover that whatever is taking place, it has lethal implications. As soon as members of the team enter the house of a former Little Crocodile, a gent named Richard Williams, a disturbance erupts. Peter and his partner Guleed emerge from their stake-out vehicle to see a woman burst through the tiles of the roof, blood smeared over her face. She leaps from the roof, and overpowers both of them, and makes her escape on foot. However, the blood on her face came from an attempt to kill Williams, by biting out his throat, and she missed.

The incapacitated Williams is hospitalized in a secure facility, with a machine-gun wielding police constable on the outside of his room, guarding the door.

The series title is “Rivers of London,” and whatever else that entails, we find that there are river gods and goddesses around. In fact, Peter is semi-keeping house with one of them, Beverly. They have the usual and customary physical relationship, but Beverly will manifest certain powers from time to time, from moving through rivers at will, to making some things happen quickly in the kitchen. Even so, she still exhibits normal concern for the well-being of her main squeeze, and he for her.

There is quite a bit of conventional detective work that has to be done in tracking down Martin Chorley. Quite a lot of it is boring, such as sitting in surveillance locations, interviewing witnesses, and the necessary but tedious filing of paperwork and attending meetings. Enough attention is given to these details that we are aware of them, but we aren't beaten to death by police procedural trivia.

That's not QUITE what my experience was with the magical / architectural trivia. As this was my first book in the series, and as a person who has spent a grand total (perhaps) of 72 hours in London, I found the descriptions of the history of some of the architecture to be other-than-illuminating. Now, SOME of this was necessary to the plot. However, other parts seemed solely designed to bewail the loss of a distinctive London-ness to the efforts of developers and financiers. There were also plenty of references to things that I'm sure would make sense to a person familiar with the London city streets, but which I found to be tedious.

Along those lines, the book was filled with I can only suppose to be specialized slang terms that I've never heard. For example, a police car goes on pursuit with blues and twos. From the context, I'd say flashing blue lights and a siren, but that's just a guess. There are other similar slang expressions that take a bit of thinking for this Redneck Biker, but it only slowed me down; it didn't take me out of the story.

A bit more problematic was the inclusion of untranslated Latin phrases. I had a half-year of Latin in 1966, and I was failing that. Fortunately, I discovered that there is an entire wiki, dedicated to the series, and a Google search for the Latin phrases yielded that site as the first result. The translations, and the context for the quote, were to be found there. While it was quite an interesting addition, I did not utilize the wiki further.

Some of the events are funny, although perhaps not so much to those involved, but the thoughts of the POV character were often extremely amusing.

Tossed in at random were any number of pop-culture references, such as the running joke “and one hard-boiled egg” line from “A Night At The Opera.” Unfortunately there were some references that were clearly meant to be humorous that went over my head; I'm not British enough (or at all).

Finally, there were certain plot developments that DID require some knowledge of events from prior books in the series. Here are just two examples:

Occasionally, late at night, I wonder whether this is true of Mama Thames and whether, perhaps, her blessing can make an old man kick his heroin habit and take up his trumpet again..

The first time while I was buried underground, and later when Martin Chorley launched his abortive attack on Lady Ty.

I have no idea what these quotes are referencing, or even if they ARE referencing something in an earlier book, or, in the case of the first quote, it's simply a jazz-insider reference.

On the whole, though, it was a very enjoyable read. I think I would be MILDLY interested in pursuing the rest of the series, as long as it wasn't at the expense of my regular reading patterns.

And now for The Question: Is “Lies Sleeping” a worthy candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award in the Best Fantasy Novel category?

Dealing with the series vs stand-alone question first, I'd have to say that I didn't really suffer from coming into the series at this point. Yes, there were a few parts where I knew I'd missed something, but I had no trouble at all in grasping the overall story line.

With respect to the consideration of the other factors, I guess it comes down to what you want fantasy to do for you. I DID enjoy the story and found myself looking forward to the next event; I liked the characters I was supposed to like, didn't like the bad guys, and felt appropriate ambivalent sympathy for those caught in the middle. It didn't INSPIRE me, though, which is something that I have enjoyed in some of the fantasy works I have read.

I have four more titles in this category to read, and here's what it comes down to for me: with respect to this year's award, it's too soon to make the call.

Peace be on your household.

Long in the Land by Laura Montgomery Review by Pat Patterson

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

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

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

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

Actually, let me not be TOO hard on Nigel; he is, after all, a good provider, who has carved out a prosperous holding, in soil which requires much work before it will support life transplanted from Earth.

And, since survival trumps all, I suppose he does finish with a score in positive digits.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the plot thickens...

Other significant characters introduce further plot developments:

Silas Zeelander: the last pilot of the last aircraft; he hails from Seccon, the break-away colony, bringing his newborn son Zak. Zak is sickly, suffering from failure to thrive. Silas used the plane to recon for a new nursing mother, and found Adelia, Edward's wife. Silas has the hardest head, EVER. Having grown up trusting, he thinks everyone is trustworthy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here, Montgomery strikes what I believe to be a perfect balance, between keeping the story alive, and giving us some insight into the character of Adelia, a farm wife, who has become a master of organizational skills, just in the course of doing her job, every single day. She's no Mary Sue, either; at other points, we see her suffer at the prospect of her children risking their lives. Nope, she's an efficient, hard-working lady, who doesn't need to be rescued, but isn't afraid of delegating, either, with "here, you hold this baby for a minute, while I go feed that one."

Tiamat's Wrath by James S.A. Corey

Review by Pat Patterson

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

“Tiamat's Wrath,” by James S. A. Corey, is a great read, with a single flaw: It's book 8 in a 9-book series. As such, there is a great deal of background material that an obsessively dedicated bookworm would have to cover before reaching full appreciation of this work. If you aren't obsessive about it, though, you'll find much to enjoy.

The POV shifts throughout the book, beginning and ending with Holden. We meet him as a prisoner of the ruling Laconians, under the leadership of High Consul Winston Duarte, at a festive funeral ceremony for the late secretary-general of the UN. Despite his prisoner status, he is able to circulate through the crowd, and those brave enough to risk being seen with him are pleased to chat.

And in this Prologue, I discover a MOST commendable skill of the writing duo using the pen-name of James S. A. Corey: despite this being book 8 in a planned 9 book series, they really DO manage to communicate quite a lot of the important background without going into endless data dumps.

As I progressed through the book, other key plot points are referenced, not through flashbacks, or the technique of explaining things to kids or novices, but through the present-time interactions of the POV characters with others in their environment.

An example can be found in the next POV character, Elvi. Admittedly, on seeing her name, an old Saturday Night Live skit came to mind, and I considered that this might be a plural form of Elvis, but I was soon disabused of that idea. She is a scientist who researched exobiology, and almost by accident, became the Laconian Empire's premier authority of a very strange substance referred to as the “protomolecule.” As such, they drafted her, and sent her on an exploration of the universe. Again, through natural communications with her comrades, we discover that this substance has the ability to transform, even destroy solar systems, that the originators are all mysteriously extinct, that whoever killed them is still out there, and that the purpose of the mission is not pure science, which all of the science staff onboard desire, but a search to find a weapon against the killers, if and when they return. And we also discover that the substance somehow transforms human beings who contact it, removing their memories, and giving them the ability to communicate with other alien technology. This is a gruesome technique, and it repulses Elvi, but she still makes use of the results of the process.

Other POV characters include Naomi, who is running secret missions to bring about peaceful rebellion against the Laconians, Bobbie and Alex, her former shipmates who pursue active military action, and Teresa, the teen-age daughter of Consul Duarte, who is being groomed to become the ruler of the universe upon his death.

As the Papa of a girl just a bit younger than Teresa, I found myself following her story the closest. It grew clear to me quickly that the person writing her POV had a clear understanding of what's important to 14-year-old girls, even if they are the designated heir. Teresa has a crush on a boy she takes classes with, and she is horrified when one of the girls confesses that she and the boy kissed on a recent camping trip. Yup, right reaction; show nothing in public, but consider means of revenge in private. She understands that she wouldn't even have to order the others killed; she can get her way by simply mentioning that she doesn't feel comfortable around the girl, and that she's like to see the boy around the palace more often. To her credit, though, she does none of those things. It's also to the credit of her fa-

ther; he may be (he is) a tyrant, but he has prepared her to carefully consider her decisions, with an eye to the future.

Science is happening, military things are happening, but the main thing that is happening is that all of the attempts, on everyone's part, to exert control over people and empires, are steadily failing. And I suppose that's a good lesson to learn.

I'm giving this four stars, because it really is written well, and I enjoyed reading it. However, despite the admirable efforts of the authors to incorporate the backstory into this installment, I'm not sure that's possible. As a result, there were too many times that I simply didn't understand what was going on, or what was driving the characters to act in the way they did. Still, it's a very good read.

Uncompromising Honor by David Weber Review by Pat Patterson

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

I deliberately postponed reading “Uncompromising Honor,” by David Weber. That one I MOSTLY postponed because of the length. When I was doing my initial data collection for this series, I recorded a page length of 784, but just now I double-checked, and the figure I'm seeing is 961. I'm reading this on a Kindle, and for some reason, it won't give me page numbers, just location numbers. Either way, it's massive, and that's MOSTLY why I put that off until today. I have a second (small-ish) reason, but it's rather scary for me to admit it: I didn't like the last couple of Honor Harrington books I read.

That's certainly NOT the way I started out. I guess if there had been an “On Basilisk Station” party, I would have shown up with home-baked bread, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes for EVERYBODY! But, after failing to connect with recent works, I had an inkling...

This is reported to be the 19th Honor Harrington book. I haven't verified that count personally, so I don't know if it includes the delightful stories that feature other characters than Honor, but regardless, this is an overwhelmingly successful franchise. It was prompted by the actions of Jim Baen himself, and the author includes that particular reference in the Afterword, along with sly suggestions that there may be more on the way.

The cabal running the Solarian System have managed to move the entire polity from a stodgy keeper of intergalactic law, and the greatest economic power, to a huge, blind puppet in the hands of a few mean old men and women, determined to keep a firm grasp on power. All of the backbiting and political treachery we have seen in the past gets accelerated, without even lip service being paid to the military restraint of past centuries.

That doesn't mean that the Solarian Navy is now composed of dimwits and fools. There are plenty of competent officers and crew, and leadership roles are often filled with people who avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. However, the ranks of the Navy have been depleted to a significant extent by a one-sided battle that takes place before the book opens. Those that are left are hungry for revenge. And it's up to Manticore and her allies to stop them, regardless of the cost.

A word about battles: Weber writes space battles with attention given to every detail. We know the classes of ships involved on both sides; their tonnage; their offensive capabilities, down to the last missile; we know how their defensive systems work together. We are given a look inside the mind of the

commanders on both sides, and see their plans, and their counters to the actions of their opponents. And even though we root for the Star Kingdom of Manticore, for any given battle, we don't have a guarantee that the good guys are going to win, and the bad guys are going to lose. Hence, there is always a certain amount of on-the-edge-of-your-seat tension in a space battle.

Sigh.

I fear that here I must insert my opinion that this is a strength that has become a weakness. The first battle in the book just drags ON and on and on, page after page (and I could tell you how many pages, if it weren't for the Kindle being stubborn) and it just got to be TOO technical for me.

Another sigh.

And the same thing is true of the non-battle scenes as well. Everything just drags in this book. The conspiracy-discovered scene. Feeding the children green peas. The discussion of the secret weapon.

I fully realize that in saying this, I am speaking against good sense. David Weber has pleased an untold number of readers with his descriptive powers. You can't argue with success! Well, I'm not really trying to argue; I'm just saying that for THIS reader, it's just too much. Maybe, if I were sent to a mountain cabin for a week, or a hermit, or incarcerated, I'd find myself pounding on a table with the handle of a broom and screaming "MOAR! MOAR!"

But I suspect it's just a matter of taste.

And now, The Question: Is "Uncompromising Honor" a realistic candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction?

I hope to kiss a duck, if it ain't. Weber has won this category TWICE. He has a HUGE fanbase. It's not my choice, both because of the personal tedium I experienced while reading, but also because it's an Honor Harrington novel.

Now, before you scalp me, let me explain that. I'm saying that's a deficit with this particular novel, because it really doesn't do enough with Honor Harrington. All of the character development has taken place in the existing work; I don't think her personality stamps this book in the same way that you'll find in the previous books in the series.

I'm just going to leave that here; make of it what you will. Know that I really, really DO know that I'm swimming upstream with this opinion. But I've got to give you the best I have to offer, and this is it.

Unholy Land by Lavie Tidhar Review by Pat Patterson

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

This is my first exposure to the author, and when I saw that she postulated an alternative Jewish homeland in Africa, instead of Israel, it raised my hackles. A number of the books I've read so far in this series fall into the "progressive" camp (I don't know what that means, but that's how they refer to themselves), and somehow, that camp seems to issue a lot of anti-Semitic proclamations. I wasn't ABOUT

to sit through a rant espousing driving the Jews into the sea, so, I started cautiously. It turns out I had nothing to fear; at least, from that quarter.

Here's the set-up: a plan to provide a safe haven for European Jews in Africa actually was fulfilled, in the early 1900s. As a result, the Nazi genocide didn't happen. Adolph Hitler was assassinated in 1948, but some form of a more beneficent National Socialism in Germany remained. The new land is called Palestina, located between Uganda and Kenya, with a border on Lake Victoria.

An ex-pat pulp mystery writer named Lior Tirosh decides to return to his homeland, perhaps to visit his perhaps-dying father, perhaps to seek healing from a yet-unspecified trauma. He encounters very tight security at the airport and elsewhere, and discovers a great wall being built for the protection of the country. Although the British had claimed ownership of the land, and had conferred the title onto the new state, the locals on the ground weren't consulted, and engaged in low-intensity conflict with the settlers from the beginning. Raids and bombings were becoming more frequent.

Tirosh begins to experience a growing sense of disconnectedness from his environment. His editor calls, and he doesn't recognize the sound of his cell phone. People stare at him when he finally takes the call, as if they had never seen a cell phone before, and at the end of the call, the text refers to the phone as a case for his eyeglasses.

An unexpected and seemingly utterly random attempt on his life goes wrong, when a childhood acquaintance breaks into his hotel room to greet and interrogate him and passes the time away by drinking whiskey from the mini-bar in his room.

And right after that, the primary plot development becomes evident. Tirosh and others are in a multi-dimensional time flow, with parallel worlds slipping past each other, seemingly at random. Other characters also are slipping back and forth between the worlds; some are hunted and others the hunters.

It gets very confusing, particularly when the POV character shifts without notice. And that happens a lot.

The closest to a political statement comes as Tirosh contemplates the multiverse:

And you wonder what Jews are like when they are not defined by the great Holocaust that shaped them, the survivors, that formed of them creatures of power and guilt: more easy in their ways, perhaps, more comfortable in their skins, or perhaps just a nation as all other nations, with the same natural impulses to assert themselves, to be masters in their kingdoms.

It's an INTERESTING read, but the promise of a straight-forward narrative I saw in the first part of the book essentially vanishes when the multi-verse plotline is introduced. It becomes more a book that you and your discussion group would want to read if you were interested on different perspectives on the continuing violence in the Middle East.

And now, The Question: Is "Unholy Land" a contender for the 2019 Dragon Award in the Best Alternate History Novel category?

I don't see how, for a couple of reasons. In the first place, there is no coherent plot, and nothing is explained satisfactorily, and nothing is resolved. There are too many partial players, and no POV unites the book. So, based on strength of story, "Unholy Land" is an also-ran.

In the second place, I don't know how a book with only 11 Amazon reviews makes the finalist list for a Dragon Award. The last book I reviewed had only 9 reviews, so it can happen. I don't know any of the stats on nominating frequencies, but it doesn't appear to me that the book has enough of a cult status to win on that basis, either.

We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity

Chris Kennedy, Jamie Ibson, eds.

Review by Pat Patterson

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
Wooded 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.

Zombie Killers: Falling by J.F. Holmes Review by Jim McCoy

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

Far too many zombie stories start off either well into the apocalypse or use the whole “Oh, look the world is going crazy. Let me spend the next week, month, whatever asleep and when I wake up it'll be all gone to shit.” Not so with J.F. Holmes's *Zombie Killers: Falling*. We get a view of the fall of the world from the sharp end. Nick O'Neil, our hero is there at Ground Zero of the zombie apocalypse just as it starts.

Holmes's portrayal of the military and the way it is treated is accurate as well. Nick's guard unit starts the story running a traffic control point in the Continental United States. They don't know why they're there. They don't know what they're guarding against. Put bluntly, they're treated like mushrooms, kept in the dark and fed shit. One guard member gets it right based on guesswork and they all think he's loopy. It's pretty typical and kind of cliché but it works. The military is trained to follow orders without questioning and that's what they do. The politicians seldom care what the military thinks. Even once details start to leak, Nick's unit only learns that there is a plague to the east, but not what it is. They don't know what the threat is until they witness it for themselves.

Seriously, this book starts so early in the fall (it is called *Falling* after all) that no one has any clue what is going on. Well, for the most part. At any rate things get ugly quickly and it all just goes to hell from there. The running. The fighting. The sudden death. It's crazy.

Holmes's zombies are just plain scary as well. They move quickly. They kill quickly from even the smallest bite. They turn so fast it'll make your head spin. That's probably their most horrifying trait. Like “Oh no, he's dead. OMG HE'S EATING ME!!!” That fast. They have glowing red eyes too. This is both terrifying and awesome. It also makes them easy to spot, but that's a separate issue.

Falling has all of the craziness and heartbreak you would expect from a zombie novel. I don't want to get into spoilers but trust me, one part of *Falling* had a big, bad, rough, tough, hardcore dude almost crying. Seriously, it hit me hard. I mean, the gut-wrenching heartbreaker is kind of a zombie staple, but Holmes knocked this one out of the park.

It's always a treat reading military science fiction written by someone who has served. There is a certain feeling that needs to be in a story about the military. It's hard to describe but it's kind of a mixture of “I've got your back,” mixed with “I love all of you,” crossed with “Fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” with just a touch of “I'm sick of this shit... even though I actually love it.” Holmes did a good job communicating that.

Something else that this book offers that most zombie stories don't is a goal. Somewhere to get to that actually exists. Remember the first season of *The Walking Dead* when Rick and company fought and fought to get to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta so that they could find the cure for the virus? Remember it not being there? I've seen an absolute buttload of that in zombie stories. Crying characters disappointed because they knew with absolute positivity, that there was a safe place to get to. There was somewhere that they could be sheltered and protected. But then they get there and it's not safe. The dead are stacked up like cordwood or, more likely, scattered around in a mess of random death. But not *Falling*. *Falling* actually works backwards from that. Nick has no clue that there is any place to run to until he finds it and stumbles in with tears in his eyes.

My only complaint about *Falling* is that it doesn't end when the story ends. There is a definite arc here. I read this thing all the way through, enjoying myself the whole way, and then got to the end of a chapter. I was satisfied. I turned the page, fully expecting to see an excerpt from the next book there. What I got was a new chapter. I was...uhhh... not disappointed, exactly. As a lifelong fan of the written word, I'm always sad to see a good story end. It was a bit confusing though. Having read it, it's obvious why it's there. It sets up the rest of the series.

Falling starts off a series known as *Zombie Killers*. I get the fact that the end of the book sets up the rest of the series. I kinda, sorta get the fact that it needs to. It was just a bit perplexing to see it there though. Before the last couple of chapters, *Falling* works as a standalone book. As a matter of fact, it is a pretty champion standalone before those last couple of chapters. With that addition though, this book really only makes sense in a wider context than what is contained in its pages. I can't help thinking that Holmes added that last little bit for marketing purposes and, while I don't disapprove (authors do like and deserve to get paid for their work), I don't really see that they add much to *Falling* as a whole. It's almost like a bonus short story at the end of the book. Kind of like *The Cleansing of the Shire* at the end of *The Return of the King* except at least Holmes made it entertaining.

All in all though, it was a good book and I do plan on picking up the rest of the series at some point in time. I mean, Holmes has made the whole series available at a good price on Amazon and who am I to argue with quality fiction at a good price?

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Bitten Appendages

Prose Bono

Learning to Write — Experiences from a Different Sort of Writing
Blue Blazes and Attempting to Tame the Imposter

...Jessi Silver

Jessi Silver <http://s1e1.com>

This essay contains spoilers for the Japanese live-action series *Blue Blazes*.

I'd wager that most of you reading only know me for my writing here and perhaps from my occasional self-inflicted speaking engagements at local Minnesota conventions. Part of my day job involves providing specialized onboarding and ongoing training in a professional setting. It's a job I sort of fell into after a while, but I enjoy being able to help people along in their learning processes, and it's also nice to be the person with all (or at least most) of the answers.

One thing I've learned over the years as I've tried to independently become a better trainer, is that adult learners tend to operate on a fairly predictable continuum when it comes to learning a new task or process. Before they start hands-on training, most folks are eager and willing to learn a new task. It's kind of an "ignorance is bliss" state of being, because whether or not they've done any pre-reading or observation before embarking on their learning process, they still don't always have a full picture of what the upcoming task entails. Once they're actually starting to perform the task is when vulnerability and self-doubt creeps in – they're confronted by portions of the task that they didn't expect or don't understand

right away, and their confidence dips. This is natural and expected; most folks go on to build their skills and become proficient in time. However, the time period while they're still learning can be a struggle, especially for those of us who are prone to self-doubt. It's the feeling of being a sort of imposter, fooling everyone around you into believing that you're good enough to do something that you're still unsure of.

I started really writing about anime in earnest some time in 2007 and spent kind of an embarrassingly long time in that "ignorance is bliss" stage. I'd had an interest in anime since at least late elementary school when I first learned that it existed as a specific form of animation, but my access to resources for both watching more anime or learning about the medium was limited. We didn't have cable TV at home for a long time and I missed out on a lot of the golden age Toonami material that punctuated the fandom lives of many of my contemporaries. The pre-Google internet was tough to navigate, and I didn't know where to find what I wanted. VHS and then DVD releases were expensive and once I got a job, I knew I had to save most of my money for college tuition rather than spend it on building a collection. And I had very few friends (at least until I got to college and joined the anime club) who had anything near the same amount of interest that I did in anime and manga. This is all to say that, while my enthusiasm to write about anime was there, my knowledge base and thus my perspective had many gaps.

I spent a lot of those early years spouting off like an absolute fool. One particularly cringe-y thing I recall doing is essentially calling famed director Osamu Dezaki a hack because I didn't like or really comprehend his 2009 adaptation of *The Tale of Genji*. I've since gone on to understand and appreciate Dezaki's contributions to anime's visual canon, but at the time I grasped very little about anime production or the history of the medium, leading me to, as they say, show my entire ass. I got rightfully lectured a few times in those early days, but because I also received plenty of bad-faith internet "criticism" at the time I tended to lump the negative feedback all together and disregard most of it. I wasn't using that time in my life to actively learn and grow; I thought I already knew everything that I needed to know.

I'd always had higher aspirations for my writing. I had some "friend-of-a-friend" connections at various fandom outlets, and thought my writing was good enough that things would just somehow fall into place for me eventually. When a certain anime podcast put out a call for folks with experience discussing feminism as it relates to anime, I thought my time had come. A friend with connections to this podcast told me they'd put in a good word for me. I emailed my interest and "credentials" off to those in charge. I got Skype set up on my computer and waited to get contacted about the details. I even told several people how excited I was about it (UGH...). Even just writing this out, I can feel my stomach beginning to knot. I was SO SURE that this was something that was 100% happening, that when the podcast released its next episode without having so much as emailed me back, I was in absolute disbelief. I spent a brief moment in shock, then I couple of days indulging in my anger. As that seething rage cooled and I listened to the actual episode (which I'm not sure was the right decision at that very moment, but probably ultimately the correct choice), I was suddenly faced with the truth – I wasn't quite so knowledgeable or talented as I'd lead myself to believe. It's not exaggeration for me to say that this incident really influenced how I felt about my writing for a long time.

I don't typically watch a lot of live-action Japanese entertainment. Even though live-action dramas adapt interesting manga properties from time-to-time, access to them is so much more limited as compared to the overwhelming amount of streaming anime there is to consume. But by some chance a few years ago I happened upon a Reddit post in which folks were discussing which live-action Japanese series might have some appeal to anime fans, and *Blue Blazes* (Aoi Honoo) was mentioned more than once. While I think it was available for a time streaming on some official outlet, then and now the only

way you can find it is through the unofficial channels. In any case, if you don't have qualms about going that route, I highly recommend checking it out.

Blue Blazes is a semi-autobiographical (but embellished) tale of manga-ka Kazuhiko Shimamoto's time at Osaka University of the Arts in 1983. Self-insert character Moyuru Honoo believes himself to have the most refined taste when it comes to anime and manga and assumes that this discerning eye of his will directly translate into becoming a successful animator. Unfortunately for him, his classmates happen to be none other than Hideaki Anno and other founders of Gainax (and Studio Bones, though that's less relevant). Anno's directorial skill and grasp of animation puts Honoo's efforts to shame. Honoo immediately starts to think of Anno as his direct rival (even though Anno and company barely register his existence) and puts all his efforts toward proving his own superior storytelling sense. Eventually Honoo enters into this cycle of passionately attempting to one-up his "rival" and almost immediately encountering some sort of hardship that causes him to have to face reality – he has a lot of improving to do before he can go up against Anno's seemingly demonic innate skill.

Obviously the appeal of the series is twofold. Firstly, it's essentially fanservice for anime and manga fans, especially ones who are familiar with the various players and events being fictionalized in the story. But Honoo is also an appealing character for multiple reasons, not the least of which is that his hard-headed stubbornness becomes a sort of battering ram against his many momentary, emotional feelings of inadequacy.

I purposely like to surround myself with people who inspire me. Most of the time I find myself very happy to celebrate the achievements of other people I care about, even if the feelings I'm expressing are nothing more than the one-way admiration I have toward people who don't really know that I exist. But there are also times where I find myself in a less constructive state of mind and I begin to question my own aspirations. It's not really "fame" that I want to gain as a result of people reading my writing, but my goal is to achieve some level of respect among people who are interested in the same things that I am.

In my work life, I'm considered something of a subject-matter expert, which is primarily how I found myself drawn toward training others. Continual learning and sharing information have served me well over the years, and I've become a go-to person when unusual things happen. It's a position I'm happy to be in; knowing things and having other people readily acknowledge that I know things feels good and it gives me a sense of purpose. What I've been struggling with is being able to capture a similar feeling of expertise in my hobby life. It's something that I really want to have and yet can't readily define and have no idea how to achieve.

A friend of mine whom I respect dressed me down a bit about this when I was feeling sorry for myself and whining about it on Twitter several weeks back. "Expertise" is such an ill-defined concept and also a very gatekeep-y one; for someone like me who has a fulfilling day job and who isn't really interested in going back into academia to deep-dive into anime and fandom, it's honestly a very strange thing to desire so strongly because it has very little direct bearing on my life. What even is an anime "expert," anyway? Is it someone who knows a lot of things (I'd say I probably do, at least compared to many)? Or is it someone who's managed to become well-known as a high-profile fan? I honestly don't know.

I think the issue is that my life is a very muddled mess of so-called "unfulfilled potential" and failures to meet others' expectations of me, and try as I might, I can't shed the baggage of being labeled "gifted" and then being left to fend for myself once I inevitably started to flounder. I was never allowed the gift of learning how to fail (and wasn't allowed to do so, until it just started happening again and again and I suffered punishment each and every time) and I never really grasped how to study and as-

similate information properly. My brain is this mishmash of weird “fun facts” that I can never quite seem to assemble into anything very useful. I can’t see a clear path forward toward what I want, because I’m expending more than enough energy just staying afloat and don’t have much left over to identify just what it is that I actually desire.

There are times, now and again, where I feel like Honoo seething in his frustration at his own lack of success, throwing blame around while avoiding looking into the mirror at the person who actually has the power to make changes. I construct one-sided rivalries in my mind with the people whose work I admire. They’re little competitions where the only possible result is my own failure, because I’m measuring myself against the wrong goalposts. It’s tough to ganbaru when your own standards are so unattainable that failure is the only end result you’ve constructed for yourself.

I attended an online convention in the recent past, and all the presenters seemed so self-assured and comfortable and specialized in their knowledge. They sourced their research and put effort into their presentations. I started to feel self-conscious about my surface-level knowledge and off-the-cuff presentation style. I suddenly felt like an imposter in a world of professionals. Like... I’d spent probably over a decade using convention presentations as a way of overcoming my stage fright, and thought I’d gotten pretty good at it. I’m ashamed to admit that I’d even privately rolled my eyes at other panelists who seemed ill-prepared or like they weren’t taking seriously the hour they’d been given to speak about something. But I was suddenly faced with the realization that being able to speak in front of people and having a PowerPoint slide deck with talking points were only very basic pieces of the overall puzzle, and that I was still missing a lot of what impressed me about the other speakers – deep knowledge of their subjects, solid sourcing and crediting, and unique voices that allowed them to express their knowledge in ways that were easy to respect.

That last one – the point about uniqueness – hit me like a truck, when during a Q&A session I asked a prominent online anime journalist and editor what they looked for when sifting through the many pitches they must receive. “A unique perspective I’ve never heard before,” to paraphrase. But I have no idea what that is in my case. I’m an anime fan who came to be serious about it starting in the early 2000’s. I grew up in the US with the same anime-viewing opportunities as everyone else in my age group. I don’t know what possible viewpoint I might have that isn’t reiterated a thousand times by other writers and panelists just like me. I’ve found myself deeply struggling with this question of “what’s my angle?” when I’m more like a Final Fantasy red mage – okay at a lot of things but a master of none.

In *Blue Blazes*, Honoo often waxes poetic about the manga-ka of the time that he admires. Both Mitsuru Adachi and Leiji Matsumoto exist in Honoo’s personal pantheon of greats, but the one that he seems to hold in the highest regard (and whose visual influence on his own work is the most immediately obvious) is Shotaro Ishinomori. Honoo not only enjoys reading these artists’ works, when he switches gears from animation study to manga production after being laid low by Anno’s skill, he starts to draw wholesale from what he’s already read. His idea of what the manga world looks like and the possibilities of the stories that might be told in the medium are limited by the very broad strokes of what he sees. Science fiction, sports drama, school stories... they’re compartmentalized in Honoo’s mind and so distinct, that when he gets the idea to combine already-existing genres it’s like a revelation to him.

It’s often said that there’s no truly unique story to be told, because all storytellers are influenced by the stories they’ve already heard. That said, the “uniqueness” is something that manifests in the voices of the storytellers, the best of whom can draw from their own lives and personalities to inject a special flair into even the most formulaic tales. Honoo is only doing what storytellers have been doing since the beginning of time – aping the things that he knows as he makes tentative steps towards developing

his own voice. We laugh, because his emotional acrobatics are over-the-top for the purposes of our own entertainment. We also laugh, more knowingly and with a sense of bittersweet camaraderie, because his is the struggle of many artists and creative people. He's grasping and flailing to find his own story, and the feelings of inadequacy that are simply inherent to that process can be difficult to watch unfold.

Even though Honoo has his own small fan club of supporters, he's so hung up on his lack of ability as compared to both literal industry professionals and rare creative geniuses that he sabotages his own efforts. He's confronted by the imposter inside, the inner voice that tells us all that we're no good and that everyone else is better. That we don't have the right to stand beside other creatives because our own output will never be as accomplished. It's the shit-flinging monkey on our collective backs that sabotages our progress and our will to improve.

Near the end of *Blue Blazes*, Shimamoto himself makes a cameo. Within the context of the series, it's amusing on its own (his characterization is as cartoonish as Honoo's), but there's also a certain poignancy to it. It speaks to the fact that Shimamoto, in real life, was able to achieve a measure of success despite having felt less-than in comparison to Anno in the moment. In the 1990s, Shimamoto was approached by none other than Shotaro Ishinomori himself to create a re-make of Ishinomori's *Skull Man* manga. The series doesn't go so far as to cover this; it's simply one of those "fun facts" that's emotionally satisfying to know about. To be able to work alongside someone you admire and who's so greatly influenced you has to be quite the experience.

But despite the comfort it brings to see Shimamoto in the flesh enjoying the fruits of his life's creative labor, it's Anno, at least as he's depicted in this series, who ends up making the larger impression when he asks Honoo to sign his copy of the weekly manga magazine containing Honoo's debut. Anno speaks to Honoo's feelings of apprehension at this, because Honoo isn't feeling as excited about it as he thought he would. Truthfully, becoming a pro means bearing the expectations of others regarding your potential, and that's a heavy burden indeed. Having just gone through his own creative story arc – putting together a team to create the famous *Daicon* opening animation – what he says certainly holds weight. When I think of the arc of Anno's career, especially as it relates to *Evangelion*, which has been in the forefront of fan chatter again due to the release of the final *Eva* film, it's easy to see this line of thinking in action. Telling a popular, iconic story, especially one that's said to be so thoroughly connected to the emotions of its creator, can become an exercise in allowing oneself to be emotionally damaged by an unappreciative audience. And yet, the cost of not creating anything is often still higher.

A few weeks ago, I watched the 2 episode *Blazing Transfer Student* OVA, which was based on Shimamoto's debut manga and produced by none other than Studio Gainax (though, to be clear, with no involvement by Anno). There's no way for me to know all the details surrounding the studio's choice to take it on as a project but having been presented with the somewhat-embellished history of the relationship between all the major players it's fairly easy to fill in the blanks with poignant speculation. Even just on the surface, the feeling of contemporaries meeting to bring forth something entertaining and ridiculous is the stuff of fandom fantasies. But it speaks to the larger fantasy of having your work appreciated by those whose talents you admire.

While I don't think anyone would complain about receiving compliments from friends or family, those people's connection with you implies a sort of support that, in the healthiest relationships, is unconditional. But the acceptance by one's peers and influences is a different sort of respect that's not only difficult to obtain, but difficult to describe. It's easy to say, "why worry about what other people think?" if you're a self-assured sort of person and don't care that much about how what you create is received. But if you're not, and if the fruits of your labor aren't monetary, then by what measure can you say "I deserve to be recognized for my work" other than the respect of others in your community?

The little voice inside me constantly reminds me that “senpai” (whoever or whatever that might be) hasn’t noticed me. Never mind the fact that I 1.) never pitch my writing anywhere or 2.) perform any nominal amount of self-advertisement to try to fool people into reading my writing. There’s also a sinister self-flagellating pleasure in failure, I’ve found; I wasn’t allowed to do it as a child, so now it’s a naughty treat I wrap myself in so I can continue to mope rather than face any real kind of change. I’m no Moyuru Honoo – I’ve got the same tendency toward mental gymnastics, for sure, but thought processes aren’t even funny, they’re simply self-defeating.

It’s so easy, so tempting to listen when your brain reminds you that “you don’t belong here.” Lacking success and recognition, even if such things are to a self-created standard that’s completely unrealistic, only fuels the dark thoughts that cause us to define ourselves as imposters in our own lives. We fool ourselves into believing that our knowledge or skills aren’t good enough, and in doing so we begin to believe that working to be better isn’t worthwhile. This brain poison turns molehills into mountains – I was with some friends recently who I met through anime club, and they got on a bender of criticizing some of the old anime we’d watched in the club, all of which were my personal nominations. It made me fall into a spiral of feeling that my taste was bad and therefore I was bad; I wanted to share those anime creations because I wanted to share something I thought people would enjoy and that I’d enjoyed, and if they didn’t enjoy them (or even felt like outright ridiculing them) it meant that I’d done something wrong – wasted their time, at the very least. For someone who reviews anime, the thought that your opinions of it might be just bad, actually... well, it’s a tough idea to wrestle with. What right do I have to say “this is great” when I can’t even manage to convince people close to me?

I don’t yet know how to tame the beast that convinces me that I’m an imposter in my own hobbyist circles; I’m sorry to those of you who might have been looking for an inspirational, instructional post rather than simply me feeling my feelings. I do know that, as ill-advised as it might be, it’s often media that gets me thinking hard about my own life, and Blue Blazes is one of those shows I found by chance, enjoyed, and then began to consider more thoroughly much later. I’m going to be honest – I spend a lot of time being unkind to myself. But I’m also beginning to accept that this tendency to do so is the product of many things, and not necessarily a reflection of reality. I’m beginning to have some pride, if not in my writing itself, at least in the fact that in the face of many mental obstacles, I haven’t stopped doing it. And maybe someday I might even start to believe that it’s good enough.

Literary Criticism

Why Superservice fiction?
A movement we need,
fighting for the fiction we deserve.

Declan Finn

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

CS Lewis' demon, Screwtape, once had to advise his nephew Wormwood about a moment when the junior demon could not influence his targeted human. Screwtape patiently explained that Wormwood made the mistake of allowing the targeted human to read a good book. Any demon worth his sulfur should know that they must make certain that the humans they tempt must only be made to read

important books. When people read good books that warm the soul, it cloaks them in a fog that a demon can't penetrate.

“Important” books like that have been why the term “literature” has always had a bad rap – especially 19th and 20th century literature. Because, you will notice, that Lord of the Rings is rarely put in the literature section of a bookstore – if ever. I know of no English Literature program that will include Lord of the Rings as part of the curriculum.

No. For “literature,” people are subjected to Steinbeck, or Lord of the Flies, or half of Russian literature, which makes you want to slit your wrists by the time you're done. To heck with being subversive, I would submit that much of the drivel labeled as “literature” is in fact corrosive to the human spirit, if not the human soul.

Much of the science fiction during the Cold War has the same problem. Ellison's *I Have No Mouth But I Must Scream*, may indeed be great literature, or even brilliant, but I do come away from it wondering why I cared, or why I read it. It's a good example of Cold War science fiction, filled with the despair for the future. Heck, one of the reasons Star Trek worked so well is that it was perhaps the first Cold War sci-fi that showed a world after World War 3 that didn't look like a variation on Mad Max or The Terminator.

So, that's why Superversive fiction has always been a mystery to me – not because I didn't understand the concept, but because I didn't see the need for the term. Growing up, I always understood the difference between fiction that edifies and fiction that doesn't. Which was my original problem with the concept of Superversive fiction. Shouldn't all fiction be Superversive?

Obviously, the deeper one looks at some of the fiction being shoved into the face of the general population, the more it becomes apparent that we need a Superversive movement, mostly because of all the works being labeled “important” and then thrust into the face of the general reading public, insisting that we should read it.

Too much fiction tries to be “important” fiction, and in being “important,” goes for “reality” ... only their reality is grim, dismal, and amazingly Unreal. If you're trying for literature, and making it a matter of despair, you're doing it wrong. Because, sorry, I've met people whose lives have been misery, and hope is quite abundant in them. To be Jean Paul Sartre about life is to invite suicide.

J. Michael Straczynski, in his comic *The Book of Lost Souls*, has one tale of a street artist who recently lost her boyfriend to drug abuse. Soon after, the mural she made of him has come alive, and is talking to her ... and telling her to come and join him, offering her a needle. And it is not the voice of a demon, or a monster, but, as our hero explains,

“It is the voice of reason and resentment The voice of madness is the voice that Believes, despite all of the evidence to the contrary ... that sustains us when logic demands that we surrender to the louder voice – the voice of reason, and resentment. And it always comes in the guise of those who love us most, who want only the best for us Sometimes their motives are pure, wishing only to save us from pain. And sometimes the pain they wish to spare is their own, because if you can be convinced to set aside your own dreams, they can remain comfortable with their decision to do the same. The Voice of reason is the voice that tells us that our dreams are foolish[it sometimes becomes] a genius loci, the spirit of the place. And the spirit of this place is despair.”

And that's the problem with those “literary” souls who want to sacrifice their characters, and their audi-

ence, on an alter of “reality.”

Sometimes, just because something is “rational,” doesn't necessarily make it true.

This concept of “the real” is as unreal as Tolstoy’s lie, that “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” an idea that probably requires being Russian to believe. Is there any more Russian concept than to believe that being happy is bland and uniform, but being miserable is unique? It is a lie, but perhaps Tolstoy didn't know that at the time. If those of the self proclaimed literati truly see the world as miserable as they write it, it does make me wonder why the authors in question just don't do away with themselves and leave the rest of us alone.

I would argue that most true literature is written by those who aren't trying. There is more truth in the hope of John Ringo's Black Tide series, than in the shallow materialism of Wagner's Ring cycle (his Twilight of the Gods has the hero die, the villain die, the king die and his sister die, the girl die, and her horse die, and the mermaids of the Rhine get their ring back and they live happily ever after ... and why did we care?). Then you have the epic scope of John C. Wright's Iron Chamber of Memory and the magic around us, and the wonder and majesty of the world and the universe.

And if you doubt me that there's wonder and majesty in the universe, go Google some Hubble photos.

If you're writing a novel, and no one in it laughs, or has a reason to hope, or live ... or if you're writing sci-fi and fantasy without a sense of wonder ... or you write about space without the terrifying beauty of what's in the dark ... you might just be doing it wrong.

Just consider, for a moment, that Captain America is about a psychically perfect human – not uber-mensch, not a superman, or a supernatural man, but essentially more preternatural – and that says and suggests more about the dignity and ability of the human person than anything in that Thomas Hobbes knockoff, Lord of the Flies. (Yes, I have problems with a whole book based upon one line by a philosopher who has no real concept about how human beings or society works. Also, it happened in real life, and it happened exactly the opposite way as Golding wrote it.)

To write well is to write Superversive.

To write fun, entertaining books is superversive.

Because to entertain well is to edify, to build up the reader.

I would put more faith in Die Hard than in Lord of the Flies. I would put more faith in John Ringo, Larry Correia and Wright than all of the art films in the world. I'd rather read CS Forester and David Weber than Heart of Darkness or Lord Jim. Hell, I'd read any Ringo novel with a 90% casualty rate than anything by Stephen King, who has a similar rate of death.

At the end of the day, Superversive fiction – any fiction worth its salt – could be summed up by GK Chesterton: “Fairy tales are more than true, not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”

Which makes them a thousand times more real than anything most recent “literature” has to offer.

Why Superversive fiction? Because it might not be "real," but it's true.

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~FINIS~