

The **N3F**
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
March 2022

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~FINIS~

Editorial

Hidden behind these pages is actually a great deal of editorial work. All the Reviews must be found, read, and dropped into the rough draft of the Review. For the Reviews, I am grateful to everyone who sends me their Reviews; in this issue, that is notably Heath Row. I am also grateful to the many fine writers who post their Reviews and article someplace, and let me use them. A list of those people follows this Editorial. If you would like to be added to that list, and incidentally garner a bit of publicity for your posts elsewhere, please contact me.

The rough draft then goes off to N3F Lady High Proofreader Jean Lamb, who corrects typographic errors and incidentally warns me of political content. On return of the proofed article, I reinsert it into the issue, insert any Reviews received since the rough draft went off to Jean, colorise and set font size for article headings, insert credits, tune up the article spacing, proof and add page numbers to the table of contents, and print.



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A Pius Man – A Holy Thriller by Declan Finn
Review by Caroline Furlong
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Giovanni Figlia, the head of Vatican security, is about to die of boredom. After all, who in their right mind is going to attack the first African pope?

When a body is forcibly ejected from a hotel room to land on his car, Figlia's boredom vanishes. But when more bodies turn up, he soon wishes he had it back. With the head of the Catholic Church in the crosshairs and allies who may be enemies at his side, he has to find a way to protect Pope Pius XIII – preferably without dying in the process!

Like all good murder mysteries, A Pius Man starts with a corpse. The victim is David Gerrity, a Harvard professor obsessed with learning, family, and teaching. He's come to do some research at the Vatican and, this morning, has discovered something fantastic in the photos he took of the records in the Vatican library's vault. Taking these items out of the vault isn't allowed due to their delicate nature – and, of course, the possibility that someone will destroy them after absconding with them.

In the manner of Archimedes with his "Eureka!", Gerrity becomes excited and prepares to go back to the archives. When he goes to the door to leave his room, he is confronted by a bellman, who shoots him dead, then prepares to erase his research. But this assassin's not the brightest bulb in the box, and curiosity is a fickle human trait. He can't help but peek at what Gerrity was working on, despite being ordered not to do so. Eyes widening at what he reads, he contacts his employers...

...Only to be blown up and killed himself, to land unceremoniously on top of Giovanni Figlia's car.

Figlia is transporting Wilhelmina "Villie" Goldberg – a Secret Service agent – to the Vatican, where she is to consult with others on the Pope's security. While Figlia goes up into the hotel to have a look at the crime scene, Villie snaps photos of the dead man, who is given the last rites by a Father Frank when he happens to be walking by.

This occurs before Sean Ryan arrives at the scene looking for Father Frank, who missed their "usual meeting." All that action takes place in the prologue and the first two chapters, after which, things happen fast. Clues confuse other clues, leading to wrong conclusions and confrontations that bring in more dead bodies. Who is friend, who is foe? Only God and the devil know.

Time for the heroes to make order out of chaos – even if they have to resort to some extreme pyrotechnics to pull it off!

The characters

There is a lot of "head swapping" – i.e. changing perspectives – in this novel. Despite the rapid pace and odd "jumps" from character to character's head, we get to know them all well during the tale. Father Frank is mysterious but also fun. Giovanni is diligent with a sense of humor. Villie is sarcastic and a fun companion.

Of all the characters in this book, though, I have to say that Sean A.P. Ryan is still my favorite. The grandson of a World War II veteran and a Hollywood stunt man, playing the hero on the silver screen

wasn't good enough for Sean because it was all fake. Fighting real bad guys and making sure they can't hurt anyone anymore? Now that's a job he's willing and ready to take.

Being a disaster magnet doesn't hurt, either. Hired to train Vatican security to defend against attacks, Sean draws more trouble than a cat on its ninth life running from the devil with its tail on fire. He's a breath of fresh air as a special operative in a thriller, being cheerful rather than angst-ridden and unhesitating in dealing out the punishment the villains richly deserve.

The world

The world is a saner version of the real one. It's so sane, in fact, I half wish we lived in it. Even with all the explosions and intrigue, the return to sanity would be a relief so palpable it would be painful.

The politics

Such politics as there are boil down to, "Everyone hates the Catholic Church, so the Church had better remember she's a battleship, and she should maintain discipline in case of attack." The entire story is basically a warning: Don't mess with the Catholic Church, and you won't be hurt. If you cross her – well, you asked for it.

Content warning

A Pius Man is easily one of the most PG-13 thrillers I have ever read. The violence isn't over the top and the brief romantic scenes are easily skipped if they bother a reader.

Who is it for?

Those who enjoy thrillers, particularly Stephen Hunter's series following Bob Lee Swagger. Marvel Comics fans will love it, too. If Marvel's brains weren't currently being eaten by the Woke zombie virus, they'd hire Finn based on his performance in this book alone. This is how superheroes are supposed to be written – and since all the characters here are normal humans, is saying something.

Why read it?

How many other books can you read where the bad guys are killed in explosions that do massive property damage, and not only do none of the heroes turn a hair, but the men up the command chain accept that it was necessary? Move over, Nick Fury. There's a new director in town, and you can't bluff your way past him. In fact, you might be able to learn a few things from him.

Brood of the Witch-Queen by Sax Rohmer Review by Heath Row

Apparently, I've been on a bit of an occult fantasy kick in recent months. Perhaps inspired by Moira Greyland's memoir and subsequent reading of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Dark Satanic*, as well as watching the recent Guillermo del Toro movie *Nightmare Alley*—and then reading the original 1946 novel by William Lindsay Gresham (which I didn't Review here because it's not actually supernatural or a fantasy, just a plain old, awesome novel that deals with carnival side shows, mediums, and hucksterism)—there's something in the air, water... or at least in my reading pile.

This wonderful 1918 novel, written by Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward under his pen name more commonly associated with Dr. Fu Manchu, picks up where *Dark Satanic* leaves off, almost—and digs deeper into some of the occult activities that might have been undertaken by the antagonists in Bradley’s much more recent novel. Rohmer’s action-packed, globe-trotting book details the trials and tribulations of Dr. Bruce Cairn and his son as they chase Antony Ferrara around their home city—and to Egypt—trying to determine just the cause, nature, and extent of his occult power.

It’s not an easy effort, and the heroic pair, as well as their friends and loved ones, come close to death or madness several times. Chapter 8, “The Scorpion Wind,” reminded me of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” as Ferrara—and a sandstorm—approach a hotel party complete with military band in Cairo from the depths of the Sahara Desert, emboldened and enlarged by collective belief in Khamsin, a hot wind some thought to be caused by an efreit. As the plot proceeds, elemental forces decidedly come into play, and the scenes set in the bowels of a pyramid and pharaoh’s tomb are among the most claustrophobic, intense, and suspenseful I’ve ever read. As is the scene with ghostly beetles in the apartment of Cairn’s son.

Parts of the book read as though the book was originally serialized, which I don’t believe it was, and there are several instances in which the book resets, jumps locales, or otherwise changes direction, all in the service of keeping the narrative going for just a little longer. It’s not entirely a seamless read. Regardless, the book is a fun read, and notable. No less than H.P. Lovecraft referred to the novel in “Supernatural Horror in Literature.”

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Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Harvest **by Richie Tankersley Cusick** **Review by Heath Row**

For the last few months, I’ve been interested in sf and fantasy creators who have experienced extreme, severe reputational failures and falls in their careers. First came New York magazine’s ham-fisted confessional feature, “The Undoing of Joss Whedon,” (<https://tinyurl.com/mrw2fw4k>) in January, which explored the rise and fall of the Buffy the Vampire Slayer screenwriter and then showrunner who went on to write and direct *The Avengers*. In that article, Whedon—once a fan favorite—didn’t really explain or apologize for his misogyny and mistreatment of cast, crew, and others, but instead came across as just another tone-deaf man who couldn’t gracefully cope with or manage unexpected, newfound power and authority.

Instead of disavowing Whedon’s past work because of his reported emotional abuse and affairs, I chose instead to revisit Buffy, which I wasn’t an avid fan of when it first aired, but in which I’ve been interested because of its once-active fandom and online community. (The decision surprised my wife; we both find it challenging to enjoy Woody Allen movies or Louis CK’s comedy now that we know more about them.) Since the article was published, I’ve watched several episodes of Buffy: “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” “The Harvest,” and “Witch,” which aired March 10 and March 17, 1997. I also read the 1997 tie-in novelization of the first two episodes—really a two-part pilot—Richie Tankersley Cusick’s *The Harvest*.

The TV show, which is enjoyable, comes off as a bit dated more than two decades later—that Nerf Herder theme song!—and the novelization is a pretty straightforward beat-by-beat adaptation of the first two episodes, adding very little in terms of literature. Regardless, I'd watch and read more—and the tie-in novel has inspired an interest in other TV tie-in writing, specifically that surrounding Battlestar Galactica and Knight Rider.

Admittedly, I feel guilty revisiting Whedon's work, but it was once important and meant a lot to a lot of fans at the time. Part of me rationalizes the rubbernecking by considering whether Whedon's abuse of power had started yet that early in his career. Regardless, it's an interesting experience revisiting the work of people who are now much less respected and revered than they once were. (This Review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine Telegraphs & Tar Pits #4.)

Dan Leno And The Limehouse Golem by Peter Ackroyd Review by Will Mayo

This is a novel about serial murder and it is a novel about the theater. There is something theatrical about murder and there is something murderous about the theater. It is hard to tell, what with the wild parade of historical personages through this novel, how much is real and how much is not. At times, the reader wonders whether there really is a golem, a monster formed of clay and prayer, committing the murders in this story. In the end, all that can be known for sure is that the doomed women must hang - and so they do. With a few flourishes meant to thrill the audience, of course. This is a book to leave you guessing. No good guys. Not truly bad guys. Just one hell of a ride. Enjoy!

Dark Satanic by Marion Zimmer Bradley Review by Heath Row

After reading Moira Greyland's memoir, *The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon*, I read *Dark Satanic*, Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1972 occult novel now self-published by her trust. I chose to read it because it was one of the titles named in a court deposition.

The novel tells the tale of an editor and publisher of the occult who obtains a controversial manuscript just before its author dies under mysterious circumstances. The text in question reportedly reveals too much about hidden occult secrets, as well as practitioners in New York City, and the editor/publisher becomes embroiled in a battle of good and evil involving two different occult groups. After encountering representatives of both camps, it's not entirely clear which side is a force for good, and our hero risks his life trying to learn more—and to decide whether to publish the book.

Dark Satanic mentions the Sexual Freedom League, a real-world organization active in the '60s, and shows a rudimentary working knowledge of cultic groups, which came up in Bradley and Breen's court cases. It's also an interesting commentary on the publishing industry, as well as the relationships between authors, editors, and publishers.

Were it not for the controversy surrounding Bradley and Breen, the book was a relatively good read and could easily be adapted for film along the lines of *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*. It will most likely not be. That said, Bradley wrote a couple of other books in the series, including *The Inheritor* and *Witch Hill*, both of which are also available from her trust. (This Review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine Telegraphs & Tar Pits #4.)

The Door into Summer by Robert A. Heinlein Review by Heath Row

In one of the apae in which I'm involved through the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, there was some confusion recently between Heinlein's 1940 short story "The Roads Must Roll" and his 1957 novel *The Door into Summer*. So I read both. The latter, which was originally serialized in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and more recently adapted into a movie, is a slightly dated but wonderful read that combines engineer as hero, corporate espionage, and time travel.

The gist of the book is that engineer and inventor Daniel Boone Davis loses control of his housekeeping robot company through some underhanded contractual dealings involving his partner and their bookkeeper, who is also his fiance—but not for long. To exact a revenge of sorts, Davis elects to go into suspended animation for 30 years. However, his former partner and fiance trick him into doing so through another service provider, in order to further cheat him out of his shares of the company.

When Davis comes to 30 years in the future, he discovers that not only are some of his patents still incorporated in commercially available consumer technology—perhaps still a source of income for him—there are also some eerily similar patents that could very well be his own work, as well. Through a colleague at one of the companies still licensing technology he had a hand in developing, he learns about a professor who's discovered a mode of time travel—and is able to get sent back in time to several months before he first went into suspended animation.

Falling in with a group of nudists in Colorado, he develops similar, competing technology, establishes another shell company, and does everything he can to provide for the future he encountered—interpreting and claiming it as his own—before he gets pulled back into the future.

Some readers might find the protagonist's love interest problematic. Were it not for his preteen, perhaps distant relative also taking the cold sleep to reunite with him in the future—where they can finally marry as adults—most of their time together was spent as a man in his 30s and a girl of perhaps 12 or younger. He even agrees to marry her—in the future—while visiting her at a Girl Scout camp—having traveled to their past. The situation is somewhat uncomfortable and not entirely gracefully resolved through time travel. The other women portrayed in the book are either receptionists or his duplicitous bookkeeper fiance, who'd been involved in similar crimes.

The novel is an intriguing piece of fiction with two different forms of time travel, an interesting untangling of the time-travel paradox, and plenty of commentary on the positive contributions of engineering and engineers in overcoming challenges, solving problems, and creating a positive future. The details surrounding the "cold sleep" technology are also interesting, with its emergence from the military during a nuclear conflict that is largely glossed over.

Dragonheart by Charles Edward Pogue Review by Caroline Furlong <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

A knight sworn to a forgotten Code. A young tyrant no weapon can kill. A peasant girl who wants freedom for her people, and a dragon seeking redemption. Bound by chance, brought together by fate, they each pursue victory. What will it cost them to gain their hearts' desires?

The novelization of the film starring Dennis Quaid, David Thewlis, and the late Sean Connery, *Dragonheart* is as good a book as it is a film. In some ways it is better, since it gives fans of the movie greater insight into the story that was brought to life on film.

The story

Bowen is a knight of the Old Code, the protocol of King Arthur and the Round Table, which has fallen into disuse. He intends to rectify that by training the next king of the realm, Prince Eion, to be a better man than his father. At the behest of Eion's mother, Aislinn of the Celts, Bowen has been drilling the young future king in tactics, swordplay, and the Code.

While practicing amidst the ruins of a Roman fort, Bowen overcomes his pupil, only for Sir Brok to arrive with a message: the peasants are rebelling, and the king wants his son to see his father overcome them in battle. Unhappy with this turn of events, Bowen nevertheless accompanies Eion to the front lines. During the conflict the king is killed, and his son charges into the fray to find him. Taking his crown from his not-quite-dead father's hands, Eion is accosted by several peasants, including a girl named Kara. When an opportunity presents itself, she mortally wounds him.

Desperate to save the prince, Bowen rushes back to the castle with the boy to bring him to his mother, who knows of a single hope to save her son and the realm. Aislinn leads a caravan including Bowen and Eion to a dragon's cave, where she convinces the creature to share his heart with Eion. Although suspicious, the dragon wants the misunderstandings and violence between their species to end as well. He does as Aislinn requests after having Eion swear to uphold the Old Code.

The next morning, however, the three of them and the kingdom itself are betrayed. For Eion is not his father; he is worse. Enraged, Bowen vows to kill the dragon who corrupted his charge and dashed his hopes in the process.

Four long years pass, during which time Bowen becomes a skilled dragonslayer. He corners his latest mark near a waterfall, only to learn that this dragon is the last of his kind. But Eion still lives, which means Bowen has failed...

...Or has he simply lost his way?

The characters

The characters are given a fair bit of depth in the novel that can only be inferred in the film. Eion in particular is revealed to be more despicable than he appears onscreen, shown time and again to have no concept of love because he believes all that springs from it is weakness. Although he does beg for love to be shown him once, his inability to comprehend love prevents any attachment forming between him and others, including his own mother.

Bowen's and the dragon's thoughts are laid bare, and readers are privy to some extra scenes that did not make it into the movie. Kara and her worldview are also given more time to shine, as she laments the fact that Eion not only murdered her father, he stole her virginity as "punishment" for trying to assassinate him. Seeing her mourn the loss of the only dowry she can claim as a landless peasant when Bowen proposes to her is moving for certain.

Tertiary and side characters receive more development here as well. From the largely unnamed peasants of the film to the slimy nobles of Eion's court, to Aislinn herself, we get to see more of the char-

acters we came to love in the movie. It is easy to picture the actors' voices as those of the characters in the book, and to enjoy the story on its own merits if one has never seen the film.

The world

The world is deeper and richer in the novel than the movie, as it has time to delve into the day-to-day workings of the characters' lives. Readers will learn more about the dragons and how they fit into the world of Dragonheart through this book, which will explain how we reach the ending seen in the film. It also emphasizes the injustices practiced on the peasants which led them to rebel in the first place.

The politics

Dragonheart's politics are entirely internal and have nothing whatsoever to do with the modern day. It is a relief and a breath of fresh air for certain.

Content warning

Kara is raped, offscreen, but the scene may still bother some readers. We also see one of Einon's lords philandering with and drooling over a peasant girl he employs for his pleasure. Other than that, there is nothing objectionable in the book.

Who is it for?

Fans of the film on which it is based, fantasy lovers, and those who like reading about dragons. Any readers interested in the Dark Ages and early Medieval history will also enjoy this book. The novelization does not require one to have watched the film, as it contains the entire story and needs no viewing of the movie to understand. Pogue knew his business and wrote well for both mediums.

Why read it?

It is a translation of a good movie into a good book. You do not find those often, so why let this one get away?

Fantastic Schools: Volume One
by L. Jagi Lamplighter (Editrix) and Christopher G. Nuttall (Editor)
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I hate to use the word "charming" when speaking of magic, but some of these stories were just that.

"A Note From The Editor," Christopher G. Nuttall. Oh, hurrah, hurrah! Some things truly needed to be pointed out explicitly, particularly for those who think everything worthy was invented this morning around half-past ten. Discover these for yourself, but I must cheer the point that there is an extreme pathology of boarding schools that has NOTHING to do with magic.

"Little Witches" by Mel Lee Newmin. Anyone who has ever been affiliated with an educational institution knows the EXTREME importance of The Budget, and schools which are not supported by the state often must close their doors. Institutions of magic are not excepted. Loved it (but romance doesn't happen that fast).

“Path of the Phoenix” by Emily Martha Sorensen. I have heard that in some matters, if you aren’t cheating, you don’t deserve to win. I can’t testify to the truth of that statement, and whether or not Rulisa, our protagonist, deserves to win is up for discussion. However, she DID know what she was doing when she accepted enrollment in a school where consequences are...intense.

“A Firm Hand” by Aaron Van Treeck. Some schools welcome you with a reception, including food and handshakes. Not THIS school. Clearly, their school is modeled on basic training/boot camp for a uniformed service. As a graduate of D-7-2 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I can say that the only significant inaccuracy is that harsh treatment at this magic school actually has a training goal in mind.

“Asymptote at Three O’Clock” by Steven G. Johnson. For anyone who has EVER watched the clock, longing for release, this story will take that experience, and add another dimension. You see, time really does go slower, but not for the reason you think.

“Practical Exercise” by George Phillis. I have found that education is a great leveler of differences. Well, that’s the way it appears, at least; those who maintain a fiction that their differences matter more, somehow manage to linger on for quite some time. A punch in the snoot would have done them some good, in their earlier years.

“The Ascendant Cup” by Thomas K. Carpenter. High-stakes testing is something that seems to bother adults and educators more than it bothers students, at least initially. Perhaps that is because they don’t recognize just how high the stakes are. This test: it can kill you. Our protagonist knows this, but sometimes the win IS worth the risk.

“Doom Garden” by Benjamin Wheeler. Warren G. Harding was a wizard. The gardener has a shotgun that never runs out of ammo. And both of those things are needed, because all gardens are not alike. I loved this one, particularly the fact that the point of view character is a.....Methodist? No, that's not right...

“Crucible” by Frank B. Luke. This is an intriguing world, in which those who work magic come in three flavors: Good, Neutral, and Evil. It’s not QUITE an accurate set of descriptors, though. The subtle differences matter, because this test can be lethal.

“The Last Academy” by G. Scott Huggins. In the world of the mundanes, there is a huge drop-off between the number of people who enroll in the fall, and the number who eventually graduate. Why shouldn’t this be true with schools of magic as well? But, where would the drop-outs go? And what CONCEIVABLE use could they be?

“Finals” by Bernadette Durbin. The only people who like finals are those who have over-prepared, and a few instructors who are looking for a break from classes. Even those don’t want the routine to be disturbed. But sometimes, outside events trump academics.

“Metamorphosis” by Roger D. Strahan. Listen: just because your parents are monsters, and school is awful, that doesn’t mean that you get to go another way. That NEVER happens! Well, hardly ever. It would take a miracle.

“How To Get Into Magic School” by Erin N.H. Furby. I spent 7+ years working in college admissions. I only was threatened a few times. But then, magic wasn’t a factor. This lad is a recruiter for a scholarship program. I think he needs to seek additional reimbursement.

“Deep School Tuition” by Denton Salle. Private school tuition is outrageously high, but there ARE those who can afford it. Even so, defaulting on loans is a really bad idea. So: make SURE you understand the terms of the contract before you sign it. And if they want you to sign it in blood? Should be a clue.

“Gennady’s Tale” by Christopher G. Nuttall. It’s rather an old tale: the fresh-faced idealist who toddles off to college, and returns as an obnoxious know-it-all. The rules at college are just DIFFERENT than the rules at home; everybody changes, one way or another.

Gravity of the Game by Jon Del Arroz

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFReviews.blogspot.com>

I'm a fan of the epic Science Fiction or Fantasy story. I always have been. I want to see Jim Kirk and friends save the galaxy for the four million and sixth time. I want to see the Heroes of the Lance charge in and defeat the evil goddess Takhisis and foil her attempt to take over the world of Krynn...

Yup, there's nothing like a good romp with a definable villain and some heroes that just want to beat the everloving tar out of them because they deserve it. I mean, who doesn't love that kind of story? (Okay, people who read romance but they're weird.) Then again, sometimes it's good to read something a little lighter. Every once in awhile, a feel-good story works and removes all your cares... and entertains you if it's good enough.

Enter Jon Del Arroz and Gravity of the Game. It's a story about a baseball commissioner, a sick child and baseball on the moon. Yes, you read that right. Baseball on the moon. It's not really possible at first because of the gravitational differences between Earth and the Moon but hey, what's a story without a little conflict?

When Hideki Ichiro, retired baseball player and commissioner of all professional baseball, decides he needs to expand his league, things get a little weird. He thinks expansion is necessary. All of his owners seem to think that expansion is necessary. The problem is over-saturation. Where do you put a team when there is nowhere left to put a team? How do you grow your sport when it fills up pretty much anywhere that the sport is consumed? It's a conundrum to be sure.

Of course, that's not the only problem. Commissioner Ichiro is not universally loved by his owners. There are some inter-league politics that make his life especially rough. Partially, his plan to expand on the moon is motivated by them. Partially, he just plain sees an open market. He just needs to make the physics work. And that's where the truly Science Fictional part of the story comes in.

I don't want to give too much away, but the title of the story ought to make it obvious that Ichiro has to find a way to either make baseball work in one-sixth of Earth's gravity or increase the gravitational attraction of the moon. I don't want to give away too much, but I'm thinking that most SF fans won't be too surprised at the solution he comes up with. It's pretty standard in damn near every SF story that takes place in space.

And that's one of the really cool parts of this novella. We get to be in on the ground floor so to speak. A lot of works reference similar tropes and we all accept them because they're what we're used to, but very rarely do we get to start at the beginning and see where they came from. I really got a kick out of that. I have a feeling a physics professor may experience a catastrophic meltdown if exposed to the con-

cept, but honestly, I got out of the sciences because I didn't like physics professors and their tendency to force everyone to follow their formulas instead of thinking. So kudos to Del Arroz and all of the other SF writers out there who were able to think instead of following some formula out of a book.

I really like Mr. Ichiro too. He does his best to promote the interests of the game, and that includes making teams more profitable, or at least keeping their revenue from shrinking to the extent possible. It's not just about that with him though. Somehow this always seems to get lost in modern day sports coverage. We obsess over a player's stats and his paycheck. We'll spend all day debating a manager's play-calls and trying to get him fired. We'll all talk trash about our favorite team's general manager (and I'm from Detroit where criticizing Randy Smith used to be a more popular pastime than watching Tigers games) when he makes a move that we think might be slightly sub-optimal. What no-one seems to talk about is the people in the league and how much they love the game.

But Del Arroz seems to get what it's all about. Ichiro is not just some money-grubbing executive out to make as much as he can. He genuinely cares about the game and what happens to it. Listen, we've all seen our favorite pitcher walk a batter and asked if he could have struck him out for another million. It happens, but in *Gravity of the Game* we're reminded that the guys we watch on television love baseball as much as we do. They've dedicated their lives to it and there was a lot of work put in before they got their first check. It's something to think about.

I'll be honest in stating that *Gravity of the Game* is quite a bit shorter than the books I typically Review on my blog. I picked it up one day over lunch (I eat the vast majority of my meals alone) so that I would have something to read while I was eating. I was intrigued by the fact that I loved *The Stars Entwined* and also by the ninety-nine-cent price point. I didn't want to spend a whole lot on a story that was only one meal long. I'm pretty glad I did though. It actually took me two meals to read and was a good time.

At the end of the day though *Gravity of the Game* is what it is. If you're the kind of person that only reads works overrun by explosions and severed body parts, you won't find them here. This is a good story with a real conflict, but it's not solved with swords or bomb-pumped lasers. There is no fireball tossing wizard and you won't find a single phaser pistol in existence. On the other hand, if you're looking for something a little more laid back and relaxed with a solid plot and likeable characters, give *Gravity of the Game* a try. You'll be glad you did.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Outside Strikes

Greyfax Grimwald by Niel Hancock Review by Heath Row

While camping and hiking in the Mojave Desert in late February, I finished reading Niel Hancock's *Circle of Light #1: Greyfax Grimwald*. Published in 1977 by Popular Library, this book—as well as others in the series—featured youth-friendly cover artwork by Gervasio Gallardo. During the campout, one of my friends approached as I read in my camp chair after a day of hiking, and said, “Greyfax Grimwald! I read that in the '80s!” I said that I was enjoying it but didn't think it was very good, and she said that she remembered really liking it. (Both of us would have been much younger in the '80s, and I might have been more receptive to it then.)

That pretty much sums up how I feel about it: I don't think it's that good of a book, but I enjoyed reading it (especially in the desert)—and I'm sure I would have enjoyed it even more so three or more dec-

ades ago. When I was younger and first getting into science fiction and fantasy in the Midwest, the nearby Waldenbooks was a treasure trove of options—most notably including J.R.R. Tolkien, this series, and another, whose author I don't even remember (though I do remember the covers being gray and having a skull border of sorts around them). I kind of stopped at Tolkien before moving on to more modern authors. Outside of the obvious classics, the '70s seemed passé to me as a preteen and teenager, and I'm sure I neglected some fine books.

Hancock's book, the first of four in his Circle of Light series, introduces the fantasy setting of Atlanton Earth. The author builds on that world in two additional four-book series, as well as a standalone novel. The cover of the paperback says, "Beginning a great new saga for all who love The Lord of the Rings," so the series' intended and asserted lineage is clear. Similarly, the hand-drawn maps of Atlanton Earth, as well as the lands across a river, the Calix Stay, also assert a firm place and setting in fantasy fiction. But the book somehow falls short and flat for me, coming across as making the moves and noises that fantasy novels make, but not really making good on its promise. Which is what, exactly?

The three primary heroes of the novel, Bear, Dwarf, and Otter, venture across the Calix Stay to Atlanton Earth, which seems to be a cross between Tolkien's Middle Earth and Terry Brooks's postapocalyptic Shannara in that there are occasional signs and indicators of a pre-cataclysm society or world of sorts. Characters don't entirely remember who or what they were in previous ages, and magical beings meddle in the affairs of men from outside the boundaries of the known world. Evil forces manipulate vile creatures against the armies of mankind.

Much of the book features Bear, Dwarf, and Otter bumbling through Atlanton Earth with the assistance of their friend Greyfax Grimwald—the Gandalf of the tale. Grimwald, friends with a young warrior in love named Faragon Fairingay, has hidden the Arkenchest, an artifact needed to fight the forces of darkness, led by Dorini. Characters are captured and imprisoned, homes are destroyed, and eventually, Bear and Otter learn that they can adopt the guise of human beings to move more successfully through civilization.

Once that happens, the plot wanders less, as our heroes become more comfortable leaving the relatively safe and cozy confines of their new homes in Atlanton Earth. Setting out after each other, Bear and Otter end up befriendng a young soldier who brings them to a general who is in reality a wizard in disguise, and the gathering armies finally clash. That combat, which happens in a rush at the very end of the volume, is rather anticlimactic.

I suppose it's intended to pull you into the next volume, but I'm not sure I'll bite. (This Review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine *Faculae & Filigree* #9.)

The House Of John Dee by Peter Ackroyd Review by Will Mayo

This is a book about Dr. John Dee, magician and adviser to the court of Queen Elizabeth I who discovered the navigational measures that enabled English explorers to conquer the New World. But it is also about the homunculus, that manmade lifeform created by Dee that survives to modern times. And yet it is also a book about its own book and its author, woven through with dream states and interplay of medieval and modern speech. I suggest you read it. This reader found it worth the while.

Mecha: A Cannon Anthology edited by J.F. Holmes

Review by Caroline Furlong

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Mecha – humanoid tanks that respond to a pilot’s movements as though they were an extension of their commanders’ bodies. These often-titanic metal monstrosities are the next stage in infantry evolution, whether they have one pilot or several to command them. Walk through heavy fire and be ready to fight when these titans enter the fray!

The story

There are ten stories contained in this anthology, and while they were all enjoyable, the ones this Reviewer liked most were “Stack Knight,” “The Guardian,” “Graduation Day,” “Maelstrom Rising,” and “Maintenance Mode.”

Thomas Mays’ “Stack Knight” is a Medieval tale with a mech built from armor, sorcery, and pulleys. Not what one would expect in a story about mecha, which are typically hi-tech creations meant to fight on science fiction battlefields. But Mays’ makes it work by explaining that mecha in this wargame style story need to be controlled by a team. The combination of sorcery and science as well as the true merits of honor is fascinating and makes for an entertaining story.

Rick Partlow’s “The Guardian” is set in a far-flung future world much like Ancient Sparta. When hearth and home are threatened men must step up and fight for all they hold dear. But does this mean they are not “afraid and vulnerable”? The hero’s family is in hiding, as they are the only hope Sparta has. If they are killed, then their government and way of life will cease to exist. More than that, what else can a husband and father feel when he must go to war while his family trembles in a bunker, ostensibly safe, while traitors batter down the gates? “The Guardian” alone makes this anthology worth the purchase price, as it is one of the best stories in the entire collection.

Yakov Merkin’s “Graduation Day” is the only tale in the volume to deal with mechs that are not bipedal. The heroes command wolf-like zadir, which require a pilot, a gunner, and an engineer to control. On the day the latest group of Zadir Corps’ pilots are to graduate, an attack forces them to abandon the parade ground for the battlefield. Given the fact that they weren’t supposed to fight, they have no live ammunition at their disposal. As the conflict intensifies the Zadir Corps graduates must prove their worth on the field.

It’s worth mentioning that Merkin is continuing the saga of the Zadir Corps through stories available in his Patreon and Subscribstar accounts. If you like animal-based mecha, then you may want to click this link, which includes art for the wolf-like Zadir. When you read “Graduation Day” you will want to read more tales set in this world, so keep Mr. Merkin’s ongoing work in mind.

Jason Cordova’s “Maelstrom Rising” is a good story about tyranny told from the “Stormtrooper” POV. The hero leads his unit against the rebels, but all his subordinates are killed. He himself is captured and faced with the fact that he is serving an evil government. Presented with an opportunity to redeem himself and save another life at the same time, he has to decide which he will be: a man, or a cog in a machine bent on subjugating humanity.

Finally, John M. Olsen’s “Maintenance Mode” is a fun look at what happens when the bad guys tick off an engineer. Typically, making an engineer angry is a bad idea anyway. But when said engineer in

question is in a repair bay for humanoid mecha on a space station, and his only way to get back alive to see his wife is to fight, you have a recipe for putting the hurt on the enemy. The moral of the story is difficult to miss.

The characters

The characters are varied and well-drawn. “The Guardian,” “Graduation Day,” and “Maintenance Mode” have some of the best characterization in the collection. So does “Stack Knight” – a reader wants to spend more time with the heroes of that story, and it is a pity it is so short. “Maelstrom Rising” suffers from “zooming in” and “out” of a third person omniscient and a third person private point of view, but the story and the finale compensate for this.

The other five tales in this volume had similar success, and it bears mentioning that I have only touched on the pieces I enjoyed most. With ten adventures in this collection, every reader is likely to find one set of characters they resonate with more than others.

The world

The worlds are as disparate and different as the characters within them. Of those Reviewed here, I think “Stack Knight,” “The Guardian,” and “Graduation Day” have some of the most complete worlds in the story. While we are not given a great deal of time with any of them, they are all vivid and were selected for maximum advantages and disadvantages for the battles that take place within.

The politics

At most, the only politics that have nothing to do with the events in the stories boil down to: “Tyranny is bad, mecha help you smash it.” Beyond this message the politics are all related to events in the tales and have no bearing on real world policies.

Content warning

Most of the stories in this volume are bursting with foul language. There is also some discussion of sex in some of the tales, and some gore that would not faze mature readers. But this collection is not for children and may not be appropriate for younger YA readers.

Who is it for?

People who enjoy mecha, war stories, and military sci-fi as well as fantasy and near-future fiction. “Graduation Day” in particular will appeal to consumers of Japanese manga and anime while “The Guardian” will entertain history buffs as well as space opera fans. For those who cannot get enough of humanoid, manmade tanks causing chaos and spreading destruction, this anthology will be a solid favorite.

Why read it?

Read it for “The Guardian.” Then check out the other stories and pick your favorites from among those. You are bound to find at least two to three others you will love, but that one is the pinnacle of the entire collection.

No Choice by Mel Todd
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

So, what happens when you are a cop in the middle of a bank robbery — you're held hostage, a child is about to die.

You turn into a giant cougar and kill them all, of course.

Officer McKenna Largo is having a very strange day.

And it's only going to go downhill from here.

And she has no choice

The story

McKenna Largo is an ordinary beat cop who just wants to do her job. The last thing she wants is to be part of a reality show with some idiot with a camera following her and her partner around all day. In the middle of a bank robbery, she turns into a cougar. She wasn't a shapeshifter an hour earlier.

The problem is that she's not the only one. Millions of people around the world have shifted from human beings into furry predators. But in her case, there's video. She becomes the face of a movement.

Like Mel's other books, it leans heavily on character and world building to move the story along.

The characters

It's fun watching a normal, everyday person be turned into a PR representative against their will. And when McKenna gets turned into "the face of shifters," she hates every last minute of it. And it's fun watching her put up with all of it.

Or, as Jim Butcher describes his writing, "Suffer characters! Suffer!"

The world

Mel Todd handles this about as well as the TV show Grimm did. It's our world with a new development as part of it. Much of the world building is done as snippets of news coverage as it explores the worldwide phenomenon.

Basically, imagine if Blue Bloods had the supernatural as part of the law enforcement routine.

It also does doing media relations as well as Carrie Vaughn's Kitty Norville series.

And it examines the full spectrum of cultural impacts of the supernatural twenty times better than the Anita Blake novels ever did.

The politics

This is largely pro-cop, but it would be difficult to be anything else, considering that our point of view character is a cop. It's "largely" pro-cop because there's at least one corrupt cop, and McKenna has critical thoughts about her higher-ups.

Aside from that, the politics seem to boil down to "politics are stupid."

Content warning

Nudity, but no one lingers on it, so it's barely noticeable.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys good characters and fun world-building will love this. If you enjoyed Grimm, Blue Bloods, or Harry Dresden, you'll almost certainly enjoy this as well.

Why read it?

No Choice is a fun romp through a world that's been plunged head-first into the supernatural, and how it deals with it.

The Planet Savers by Marion Zimmer Bradley Review by Heath Row

After reading Moira Greyland's memoir, *The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon*, I also read the first of Bradley's Darkover novels, *The Planet Savers*, from 1962. I read a 1976 Ace Books edition that also includes the short story "The Waterfall," and it was an even better read than *Dark Satanic*.

Even though people have said that some of Bradley and Breen's interests occasionally showed up in her writing in uncomfortable ways only recognized later, there was nothing untoward in *The Planet Savers*, which I found to be an interesting take on Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

What if you could sublimate aspects of your personality and self that you didn't like or find useful? What if you could compartmentalize different selves functionally, to be invoked at will when the need arises? What if you could entertain both your best self and worst self? Interesting questions, given Bradley's history.

The slim novel was interesting and entertaining enough that I would read another Darkover book in a heartbeat. The later short story included in the paperback, "The Waterfall" is a coming-of-age and sexual-awakening tale that definitely gives women the upper hand—albeit through a near vampirism of male desire.

It's still slightly uncomfortable reading Bradley given her daughter's revelations. (This Review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #4.)

Red Planet by Robert Heinlein
Review by Chris Nuttall
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“See here, Frank, do you really want to live a life bound around with rules and regulations and discipline?”

“Mmmm ... I want to be a pilot. I know that.”

“On your own head be it. Me, I left Earth to get away from all that nonsense. Earth has gotten so muscle-bound with laws that a man can't breathe. So far, there's still a certain amount of freedom on Mars. When that changes—”

The third of Heinlein's juveniles, *Red Planet* starts the development of themes that Heinlein would explore for the remainder of his career. Freedom, personal responsibility and the importance of being prepared to fight, at a moment's notice, for both. It reads a little more cumbersome than *Space Cadet* – in some ways, *Red Planet* is a regression – but it very definitely has its moments. I enjoyed reading it when I was a child.

The plot is focused around Jim Marlowe and Frank Sutton, two teenage boys from Mars, and Jim's pet, a native creature called Willis the Bouncer. (Heinlein did not know, at this point, that Mars would be effectively lifeless.) They both grew up in the colony, but are heading to the Lowell Academy (a boarding school) for the academic year. Despite opposition from his parents, Jim takes Willis along, something that leads to an encounter with the enigmatic Martians that ends with them being invited to become 'water friends.'

When they reach the school, they clash with the new headmaster, Mr. Howe. Howe confiscates Willis, something that comes back to bite him when Willie remembers and repeats a conversation between Howe and Beecher, the colonial administrator. Beecher has unpleasant plans for the colony, starting with blocking the annual migration from the north to the south so that both sets of buildings can be populated at the same time. This would be lethal to the colonists, old and new, as the reason behind the migration is to avoid severe winter weather.

Jim and Frank set out to warn their parents and the rest of the colony, skating along the frozen canals. They nearly die, but because of their friendship with another Martian they are helped to reach their home by the natives. The colonists, running out of time, start the migration anyway, which nearly leads to disaster when they are confronted by Beecher and the corporation's troops. There is a brief skirmish, which ends with Beecher's defeat and the colonists proclaiming their independence from Earth.

Unfortunately, the native Martians have also decided to take a hand. After killing Howe (for his abuse of Willis, now revealed to be a Martian child) they order the remainder of the colonists to leave Mars. Fortunately, because of Jim's friendship with Willis, the Martians reluctantly relent. Jim is forced to give up his friend so he can make the transition into adulthood.

On a micro scale, *Red Planet* has many nice moments. The core of the story is the friendship between Jim, Frank and Willis, with all three of them risking their lives for the others. Jim, the viewpoint character, is very understandable, even though his society is quite different from ours. Heinlein also gives him a mentor, of sorts, in the old and erratic Dr. MacRae, who is stubborn, defiant and, when the colonists falter, gives them a pep talk that keeps them going.

A juvenile character is always restricted by his age – a common problem in such novels – but Heinlein neatly sidesteps the issue here. He makes it sound logical that Jim would be in a position to realise what is actually going on and do something about it. Later, he also captures the unwillingness of some people to rock the boat, even when disaster is breathing down their necks.

But, on a macro scale, *Red Planet* has many lessons for teenage boys.

The core conflict, between the colonists and the corporation, is precisely what you tend to get when the people in charge are divorced from the realities on the ground. Beecher and his superiors simply don't understand why the migration is important, nor does Howe grasp the dangers of venturing outside the domes (and thus trying to confiscate guns). Heinlein neatly demonstrates how people get trapped by a steady stream of new rules, an early display of the 'cook a frog by slowly turning up the heat' principle. Each of the new rules, building on the one before, strips more freedom and independence from the boys until it is too late. There is a lesson here for those who wonder why the bureaucratic state is feared.

Part of the problem, of course, is that each of the new rules allows newer and better opportunities for cheating and corruption. The people with the right mindset find ways to exploit it, while others are forced to suffer. However, it is impossible to convince the rule-makers – and the grafters – that perhaps the rules should be cut down sharply. The people who benefit from such stupidity have no interest in making life harder for themselves.

Indeed, the corporation is not evil (although Beecher very definitely is). It's just ignorant and stupid. And it is that ignorance that threatens to get everyone killed.

A further problem is the sheer time it can take to convince policymakers to change their minds, if they can be convinced. By the time the colonists can manage to get a protest back to Earth, it will already be too late to stave off disaster. They have to take matters into their own hands or die in the winter.

Red Planet is also the first of Heinlein's books to focus on the frontier life, something that Heinlein would idealise in later years. He works hard to show us that there is no room for petty rules and regulations – and even social conventions – on the frontier, pointing out that children have to grow up fast:

“Now as I see it, this is a frontier society and any man old enough to fight is a man and must be treated as such—and any girl old enough to cook and tend babies is an adult, too. Whether you folks know it yet or not, you are headed into a period when you'll have to fight for your rights. The youngsters will do most of the fighting; it behooves you to treat them accordingly. Twenty-five may be the right age for citizenship in a moribund, age-ridden society like that back on Earth, but we aren't bound to follow customs that aren't appropriate to our needs here.”

Indeed, Heinlein seems to have worked out how a habitable Mars might look like – it's clear that elements from *Red Planet* were later worked into *Stranger in a Strange Land* – and how it might shape its population. Mars of *Red Planet* is both strikingly familiar and alien enough to be different. It's the sort of place an adventurous young man might want to grow up.

And yet, the book also shows signs of its era. There is surprisingly little female presence, save for an annoying little sister ... but then, the book also makes a case for the female right to keep and bear arms. (Useful, in a dangerous environment.) The bad guys also pick up the idiot ball from time to time: Howe confiscates Willis because he hears the Martian repeat a series of unflattering remarks about him, but he doesn't realise that Willis will also hear and repeat his discussion with Beecher, which sets off the chain of events that lead to their defeat.

Overall, Red Planet is a good read – and very appealing to teenage boys, its intended audience. And its core message has not aged at all.

Seize What's Held Dear by Karl Gallagher Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

The tyrannical Censor tried attacking the Concord.

When they couldn't attack them directly, the Censor would "teach them a lesson"—orbital nuclear bombardment of their homeworld, Fiera.

But the nukes didn't destroy Fiera. They only pissed off the Fierans.

Now, it's time for payback.

The story

Our story opens with the end of the last book. In the Concord homeworld of Fiera, within the bubble, a dozen cities nuked by the Censor forces, people who saw 1984 as a handbook. Over ten million are dead. The Fierans are burning for revenge—so much so they make a new Revenge party. Their platform: find every planet in the Censor and exterminate the inhabitants.

That's a problem when the first planet within reach is under the Censor's lash, and the inhabitants hate the bastards just as much as the Fierans do.

The first problem of the book isn't even striking back against the Censor, but making sure the new Revenge party doesn't take over. The Fierans are pissed, and they all want a piece of Censor prisoners ... with crowbars. And there are some POWs who are too stupid to know what's good for them.

Then there's the problem of fighting the Censor on the ground.

In one sense, this book can be summed up as "One damn thing after another." In another sense... imagine if the United States had invaded Poland under the Soviets and asked for volunteers to fight the Soviet troops. The problem then becomes keeping the volunteers from becoming too eager.

The plot moves along in a series of snapshots. Karl doesn't go into the nuts and bolts of every little detail. At first glance, it may look like "one damn thing after another," but everything fits together like the pieces of a puzzle. Reading the books back-to-back will be a help because every event in the novel builds upon those of the previous book.

In terms of Military SF... It's Karl Gallagher doing space battles. He is literally a rocket scientist. This is his wheelhouse. He owns this wheelhouse. David Weber should be taking notes and hire Karl as his consultant, if not his ghostwriter.

Also, the last time I saw someone take this much care into discussing linguistics, he was John C. Wright.

The characters

This volume is largely carried by Marcus Landry and his wife Wynny.

Like most of the crew of the Landry trade ship Azure Tam, since Marcus has the most experience with Corwynt and the Censor, he's propelled into a position of authority, whether he likes it or not. Sometimes, he's the one of the highest ranks, and sometimes he's just the only one who gets the job because no one else wants it. He gets around, usually while being shoved or pulled into one position or another.

And Wynny is also serves multiple hats in the story, one of them literal. As a sociable woman with a wide array of contacts, she becomes intelligence for the Fierans. After solving the murder mystery in the second novel, she is propelled into the legal side of things. This ends up with an interesting case that concludes with some off Perry Mason judo legalisms, with a bizarrely romantic conclusion.

And it's fun when Karl ties both of their job hopping to the Corwynti culture. Heh heh heh. Culture shock is a bear.

But no one is ignored. The linguist of the first novel takes on a large part in the wider world. The Azure Tam is already set up for its own story.

Even one of the ship mates in the first book has a cameo in the novel... as part of the revenge party.

Let's just say that Karl sets up characters so well, and so easily, with so little screen time, he manages a great sucker punch with a character who was in the book maybe 10 pages.

The world

I am blown away by just how little of this book is action. Technically, a lot of it isn't even plot, but applied world building. But damn this world is so well built, it's just fun to be carried along on the day-to-day events and watching how things work. Everything we've learned about the world in the first two books come into play: how the Censor works, how life in "the bubble" works, and how life in the harsh world of Corwynti works.

I even like the small detail of "this is black market meat" and people whip out a Geiger counter.

Also "History books don't have sex scenes." Heh.... You'll have to read it to get that joke. It's a long story but has a nice punchline.

Also, when I said that much of the plot is applied world building? Part of that is culture shock going both ways. The Corwynti have no concept of voting (they understand it as a brawl), and the Fierans have no way to count how many people live on the planet, because census takers are traditionally shot. The solution? The movies.

The cultural misunderstandings also impact the plot. The Censor keeps seeing their enemy through the lens of their own corruption. It feels like Tom Clancy's *The Bear and the Dragon*, where the Chinese communists can't understand the United States, because they saw things only through their own worldview. It becomes even more impossible when they're lost in the wildness of mirrors that is intelligence analysis. Let's just say that this is Victor Davis Hanson's *Carnage* and Culture in action.

Oh yes, and the Tokyo Rose bit was awesome.

The politics

Much of this is pragmatics. “How can we get X thing to work.” What’s left is libertarian. How libertarian? There is a fleet of fighters that is all privately owned and paid for by the local militia. You can’t kick someone off their own ship.

Content warning

The worst content of the book involves Corwynti justice for treason and sabotage... which involves stripping an entire clan naked and shoving them into a pre-chummed sea. If you’re not a fan of the death penalty, you might want to skip that part.

Who is it for?

This section is for the Reviewer to compare the Reviewed novel with other comparable novels.

Honestly, there isn’t anyone who is as good as Karl Gallagher at what he does.

Imagine all of the cultural imperatives and world building that David Weber did in Honor of the Queen with his “Grayson” culture. Then take all of the logistics of a John Ringo novel. Add to that all of the space combat of the Baen library. He can balance intelligence, civilian political control and military strategy and tactics all at the same time.

Karl fits all of that into Seize What’s Held Dear.

Why read it?

You’ll want to pick this up because it’s some of the best science fiction you’ve ever read or ever will.

Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows

by James Lovegrove

Review by Michael Gallagher

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Sherlock and Cthulhu: while seemingly a crossover that should sell itself, few creative types of any stripe have managed to hit commercial gold with it — until now. James Lovegrove has, in my unreserved opinion, emerged the uncontested master of a niche pairing that almost no one manages to get right.

Attempts to pit of the avatar of New World deductive intellect against the agents of primordial forces beyond the ken of man have largely been fumbling at best and awful at worst. In 2003 the anthology *Shadows Over Baker Street* made an attempt with none other than Neil Gaiman heading the list, but the hard-to-find compilation yielded only a few decent stories.

Perennial mid-tier jobber PC studio Frogwares produced the glacially slow and atmosphereless *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* in 2005 to zero acclaim, and since then nothing much has blipped the radar. Then, in 2013 Lovegrove cracked his knuckles and started churning out darker-edged Holmesian fare at the rate of a title a year or more. 2016-2018 saw a trilogy that had Sherlock and Watson squaring off against the agents of Lovecraft’s rogue’s gallery, and I can say easily that no one does it better. Our journey begins in the slum back alleys of Shadwell.

The story

Lovegrove is, in my unreserved estimation, the writer who can positively nail the tone and feel of the characters from Doyle's own works. We join Dr. John Watson going AWOL with a company of his men in an effort to find glory in the form of rumored ruins hidden in the forsaken wastelands of Afghanistan. Their efforts are tragically successful, given that Watson is the only survivor; he barely manages to escape the underground monstrosities that they've disturbed. His compatriots are slaughtered, and he is maimed, saved only by making it into the light of the sun they so fear. Haunted by frequent nightmares, he scurries into the soothing lie that they fell victim to an ambush party to cope with the trauma.

He is alone and close to destitute when he is introduced to Holmes in disguise trailing a suspect in a pub, who happens to be an old university colleague of Watson's. Becoming more closely acquainted after a resulting back alley foot chase, Watson eventually moves into 221B Baker street proper, in need of distraction and friendship. It doesn't take long before their attention is drawn to a series of deaths in the Shadwell district of London. Victims turn up, their corpses gaunt and emaciated despite having only recently gone missing. Holmes quickly deduces that the deaths are occurring on each new moon, and when an opium-addicted suspect of theirs starts shrieking in a tongue Watson hadn't heard since that fateful day in Afghanistan, their trail takes them into the grimy depths of London's opium dens and far, far worse.

The characters

Lovegrove's core cast of characters will suit even the stodgiest of Holmesian purists. These are the characters played in the classic (and in my opinion, best) sense, wholly free of gimmickry. Holmes is in the infancy of his career, a bit younger and bolder than we may be used to, but the probing, pensive mind and all-seeing, all calculating eyes are very much there. Watson is every bit his role as trusted sidekick; no peer of Holmes in a deductive sense, but a war-toughened confidant who doesn't shrink from a fight and whose knowledge is vital to supplying key medical insight and advice. Inspectors Gregson and Lestrade also make their appearances. Gregson plays the everyman. His position in Scotland Yard can sway police attention away from or towards the groups' schemes as need be. Lastly, Mycroft Holmes joins in as the only member of the group able to intellectually knock Sherlock down a peg occasionally, and whose resources and contacts at the private and exclusive Diogenes Club become valuable to their aid.

Oh, the villain of the book? Yes, he is very much present, and he's working with powers of eldritch sorcery this time around.

The world

It's 1880 Victorian London in all its gray, dirty squalor. Shadwell is a particularly run-down section of the city, evoking a similar feel to Whitehall during Jack the Ripper's reign of terror. Poverty is life here, and its many drug-addled, poor and unknown denizens make for easy victims under cover of night. The gaslight lamps that line its streets do little to push back the darkness, and the long, black shadows they cast offer plenty of places for dangers both natural and supernatural to hide in.

The politics

None.

Content warning

In terms of violence, what's on the page is adventurous and pulpy, with more gruesome fates happening off screen or described in some muted way. The story is never even remotely in danger of swearing or including anything carnal. It's frankly a great gateway read to help get an adolescent interested in the character and perhaps into Doyle's classic stories — with one caveat.

Magic. More specifically, occult magic, is featured heavily and is the primary means by which our heroes combat their enemies. While this is true to Lovecraft's own worldbuilding (The Dunwich Horror is perhaps the best example of this), anyone who has strong aversions to this sort of thing should take this into account before getting the book. Lovecraft's world is one in which the Christian God does not exist in any real sense. Doyle was a lapsed Catholic who turned to Spiritualism. Holmes as written was functionally an atheist. It was this aspect of his character that partially inspired G.K. Chesterton, a Holmes fan himself, to create his own iconic detective figure in Father Brown. Chesterton admired Doyle and enjoyed Holmes' adventures, but disliked his ascetic and cold methodology, divorced from the human heart's chaotic passions and sinful nature.

While there is always some dim feeling of the urge to roll my eyes when reading about the might of the Great Old Ones & Co., it's something I can safely set on the back burner of my mind to simmer while I enjoy a Lovecraft story unimpeded. Divine assistance is not available, so magic must suffice; okay, fine. For a short while, it's a tradeoff I can make. If it's something you're not sure you'll want your kids reading, you might want to give it a read beforehand. Otherwise, what's inside is standard Lovecraftian magic(k).

Who is it for?

Most obviously fans of Sherlock Holmes and/or Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos who have been waiting since forever to see this pairing done justice.

Why read it?

It's as good as Doyle's own work, with better and more snappily written action sequences. Lovegrove's writing transcends mere pastiche to Doyle and Lovecraft; it is honor. The lore and characters are treated with utter respect, the rules dictating the supernatural are kept painstakingly intact. I'm halfway through the sequel, Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities, and it's proving just as good.

Sidequest: In Realms Ungoogleed by Frank J. Fleming Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFReviews.blogspot.com>

Ya know, it's weird. I've read approximately eleventy bajillion books. I've read books with heroes so eager to do their thing that they screw it up. I've read books with reluctant heroes who were forced into a role they never wanted and did what they had to do regardless. But I just read Frank J. Fleming's Sidequest: In Realms Ungoogleed and it is the first book I've read whose protagonist doesn't rush off to do the right thing because he's not sure if it's real or not. It can be a bit frustrating at some points, but it's also really awesome.

Terrance Denby is one of us. He's not some Superdude in bright colored underwear flying off to destroy the opposition with his big muscles and X-ray vision. He's not a test pilot and he doesn't have

some magical power ring that can make whatever he likes out of light and have it function like a regular object. He doesn't have a lass of truth and bullet proof bracelets. He's a goofball programmer who has no luck with chicks. One day, someone hands him a sword he doesn't know how to use. And he's not even sure if he WANTS to use it. Even worse, he's not even sure that there is a need to use it.

Look, I loved the opening to *Monster Hunter International* as much as any other human being on the planet. I hope to be able to write an opening like that myself someday. That much being said, I do kind of find Terrance's response to be more realistic than a lot of other peoples. Seriously, Terrance is confronted with the fact that there might be a world that he is unaware of and isn't sure if he should believe in it or not. He doesn't run away in fear, but he doesn't charge ahead swinging a sword either.

Mr. Denby (and I say this lovingly and as a kindred soul) is a nerd. He programs computers, plays video games and watches nerdy movies. He is way to easily influenced by beautiful women. He thinks before he acts but sometimes he's afraid to reach the right conclusions. And, above all, I can't help but shake the impression that he'd prefer to spend his time in his nerdtacular pursuits and just ignore the existence of the rest of the planet. I could see myself spending a Friday night with this guy over a bag of chips and a beverage or two playing *Dungeons and Dragons* and arguing over the proper tactics to take down the boss dragon at the end of the adventure. He's that guy and I'd be cool with it as long as he didn't keep my copy of *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* at the end of the campaign and eat all of my beef jerky because, ya know...

Errrr....

Anyway...

The world of *Sidequest* is our normal mundane world, only it's not. There are places that we could get to if only we knew how and where to look for them. Walmart and McDonalds exist there, but there's something pounding on the bottom of the floor, and Terrance lives in a ground floor apartment. His company has empowerment meetings, but they may not mean what he always thought they did. It's almost right but not quite. There are pretty ladies but you might be surprised what they do for a living. It's complex, it's rich and it feels close to normal without being mundane. I like it.

Of course, a sword is a weapon of war and when Terrance is given one, he finds out that there is a war to be fought. The enemy is not necessarily my favorite type of villain. It is neither obvious nor easily defined to start out. There is an immediacy to the threat but not one that most of the population can see. This isn't a Harry Potter novel. It's not that the villain is He Who Must Not Be Named. It's that Terrance isn't even sure if the villain exists or what they might be like. That adds a level of creepiness but it also speaks to another pet peeve of a lot of people, and how well Fleming avoided it.

Terrance Denby is not Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne or Tony Stark. He doesn't have any superpowers or a suit of all powerful armor. Terrance Denby is also not Honor Harrington or Montgomery Scott. He makes mistakes. He has massive shortcomings. He struggles the whole book just to believe that he is capable of doing what he needs to do. Half the time when he does something right it feels like he did so on accident.

I don't want to give too much away, but Terrance's girlfriend reminds me in some ways of some of the women I've dated and the one I was married to. I just wish they would have been as obvious about their tendencies when we first met. Lord knows I can feel his pain at times. He's not always as decisive in his love life as he should be either, but who can't identify with that? We've all had to fight that feeling of

doubt before. Terrance may take things a bit further than I would but hey, it's his call and I know the feeling.

There has to be a sequel coming. Actually, let me rephrase that: I WANT MY SEQUEL DAMMIT!!! I have yet to see an actual announcement but if I don't get one, I'm going to pout like a three year old and refuse to eat my dinner. I mean it. There better be a sequel. I'm not going to give away the ending because I'm not that guy. I will say that not everything is as resolved as I want it to be. I need closure. I have to know where this story goes next. Threads are dangling. I'm not a cat. I don't like dangling threads. Dangling threads are for authors to play with. They don't make good toys for Jimbos. I know this from experience. But when your biggest gripe about a book is that the next one hasn't been released yet, I suppose you have to acknowledge that it was a massively enjoyable read.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Faerie Swords

Summer Storm by Morgon Newquist Review by Ginger Man <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

In Morgon Newquist's Hellgate, Emilia King helped save Strawberry Hollow from a wolf demon.

In Summer Storm the unlikely heroine learns that was just the beginning of her problems.

The story

We pick up not long after the events of Hellgate when Emilia and her Fae boyfriend Kai blew up a massive amount of ordinance to put an end to the kludde that had been terrorizing them. While that might have saved the day for the moment, it also created a couple of problems. One is that it weakened the seals on the hellgate that creates the magical background noise that attracts the Hollow's magical residents in the first place. Even worse, it brought Emilia to the attention of Arcadia Property Management, the HOA that was spoken of in hushed tones of dread in the previous book.

As if a hostile board of supernatural beings wasn't enough, Emilia is also visited by her mother and sister. Difficult to deal with under normal circumstances, Emilia tries to keep her mother and sister from realizing just how bad her grandfather's dementia is and convince her that Emilia can take care of him. And then there is the true cause of the drought plaguing Strawberry Hollow, a demon tormenting the water spirit that hangs out in the creek.

The characters

First and foremost, we learn a lot about the primary characters, Emilia, Silas, and Kai. Kai has even more issues with his family than was suggested in Hellgate. In fact, it seems the animosity to the half-fae, half-human extends to other members of the magical realm, especially Mr. Greene, an elder fae and member of the HOA board.

We already know that Silas has a ghost moored to him. However, during a confrontation with the demon, Emilia sees it, and is terrified. Silas is also the most mysterious member of the trio, coming and going at odd times and clearly the most tormented person in Strawberry Hollow.

Emilia goes through a lot of growth in Summer Storm. Still struggling with her mixture of insecurity

and pride, the budding heroine makes a number of poor decisions throughout, often because she doesn't want to wait for or submit to any kind of authority. We also learn a lot more about the meaning of the 'sword' references from the previous book and how it is tied to Emilia's grandfather and the family legacy.

We get new characters as well. Jasmine Craft is a young lawyer involved with Arcadia. Being of a similar age and also chafing against the rules of the elders on the board, she and Emilia immediately hit it off. Silas, however, is less sanguine and distrusts her just as quickly. Given that Silas is clearly the most level headed of the bunch, it would be wise to expect some kind of nefariousness from young Ms. Craft in the future.

Our favorite ghost priest, Father Giles plays a more prominent role in Summer Storm as well. It turns out that he's tangled with the demon trying to break through before, experience that is essential in the final battle in the ruins of St. Martins. One of the more intriguing things about Father Giles is that he hasn't lost his mind like most ghosts who linger. For whatever reason, it seems he is meant to stay behind and guard his old church.

The world

While the world of the fae and other supernatural creatures is obviously different from our own, it is still largely governed by rules and even has obnoxious bureaucracies like the local HOA and the larger Arcadia Property Management. Of course, on the less boring end of the spectrum is the fact that there is a demon around that even at partial strength can take physical form, torment the local water spirit, and even possess people.

Emilia's world also expands as she learns what it means to be a sword. It isn't just getting a few cool powers, it's also drawing on a legacy that is hundreds, if not thousands of years old, a legacy that has ties to the legendary King Arthur.

The politics

While several characters in Summer Storm are clearly anti-authority of any kind, those who make the most positive impact on the story, recognize the need for authority and structure. In fact, even the very anti-authority Kai isn't above using some influence to get Emilia's mother out of the picture. In the end, there certainly isn't any woke garbage and proper authority is affirmed, so long as it isn't abused.

Content warning

There is a disturbing possession scene, some low-level magic going on, and an almost sex scene.

Who is it for?

As with Hellgate, Summer Storm will definitely appeal to anyone who likes the concept behind a lot of modern series like Supernatural or even Twilight but crave for better writing and no progressive agenda.

Why read it?

Emilia is back, there is a demon and Newquist works in elements of Arthurian legend, why wouldn't you want to read it?

Tales Around the Supper Table: -An Anthology of Texas Writers.

Collected by J. L. Curtis

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I have encountered almost all of these writers via the long form and can testify of their skill in that area. I have no explanation for the concentration of such talent in the Lonestar State, other than to note that some, at least, are Texan by choice, rather than by birth. Despite their shared geography, these are not what you are probably thinking of as "Texas Tales." That's as it should be; even in San Antonio, where I lived in 1958 and 1972, there is a lot more going on than the Alamo and the River Walk. My firstborn son's K9s for Warriors dog came from San Antonio, in fact. So, no, don't expect these stories to be stamped out with a Texas shaped cookie cutter. If they have any thing in common, it's that all Texans are liars, I mean, tell good stories.

Pigmintum Regium, Alma T.C. Boykin. Your average author says "Marie was a dragon." Boykin is NOT average. She tells us that Marie relies on long habit to keep from flaming a little, and that she fists purple talons on a brown forefoot in frustration. Isn't that lovely? The revelations of Marie's attempts to produce a specified chemical reaction are also lovely, in that she SCIENTIFICALLY has to consider, and painstakingly document, any number of factors that we mundanes would never encounter. This isn't merely a story; this is a cleverly constructed world, with humans and dragons fitting nicely into their defined roles and working together to punish violators of the peace. If you want a story that ends with the knight rescuing a maiden from the clutches of a dragon, you may either go elsewhere, or, better yet, stay here. Have your view expanded!

Caliborne's Curse, Monalisa Foster. No one disputes that our basic needs are food, shelter, and clothing. Some choices are better than others, but it seems to me that the 'shelter' need is most likely to offer long-term issues. True, some food might kill you, but you can get reliable mediocrity almost anywhere. Shelter, though; a bad decision there can leave you in misery for a long time. Roaches and leaks are bad enough, but Mallory has moved into a house with some truly unexpected features. It only STARTS with a mysterious magic sword; there's a vampire, a werewolf, it goes on. Fortunately, none of them make serious attempts to harm her, but these are just not acceptable variations for a home. So: get out of the contract. Wait, there's more...

Business not Bullets, Dorothy Grant. Catriona pilots a small-time trade vessel that is keeping one small village alive. These are people related to her by marriage, and their loss of technology means that what Catriona is able to bring them keeps them, barely, on their feet. She wasn't planning on making any changes to her trade routes, hoping that she can keep things going until a miracle happens. Her luck runs out, when a marooned naval officer asks to be taken on board. That's only the first impediment to her plans, though. If she isn't able to produce a working solution, everyone she knows will die.

The Invisible Train, Kathey Gray. This isn't exactly a ghost story. It might be made into one, but as it stands, it's just a story of discontinuity in time. Two brothers, Amos, 12, and Arthur, 9, tumble onto some very strange train tracks, and are transported back in time. Forget the paradoxes; that's been done to death. This story is about problem-solving, when most of the problems are people. The fact that these problem-solving folks are more the age (and manner) of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer just adds to the charm.

Runaway, Pam Uphoff. Another excellent short, set in Uphoff's ever-expanding Wine of the Gods universe. Zodiac is on the run from his mother, a Not Nice Person who wishes to torture and destroy him;

kind of makes you wonder about where she got her parenting advice from. He crosses over to a world very similar to the timeline you and I live in (but not exactly the same). Over the course of his adventures, the number of people, places, and things he is on the run from continues to mount. Those include the local cops, the local criminals, the local peasants trapped into criminal activities, and even a local grandmother. She's a great cook, though. Truly hard to run away from that...

Starting Over, Peter Grant. This one is set in the REAL world, at least, that world as described by Peter Grant in the Ames books. After the Civil War, discharged soldiers return home to try to start over in a cash-starved economy. Tyler is one of these, although he has the good fortune to obtain some Yankee cash money. He uses that to finance a move of beef cattle from HERE, where they live, to THERE, where they can be eaten by hungry people. This one is a great read, not only for the adventure story, but for bringing alive the feel of the toughness of trying to create a living out of devastation.

For a Child, Wayne Whisnand. Trip has special powers, which he hides so he doesn't get killed, as most of his folk have been. He admits to himself that they usually deserved it, but Trip tries to live a better life. Bad people, who steal the child of one of his few friends, make that impossible. He can't hide; he can't stay out of trouble, and he just can't stop people from looking at him with adoration in their eyes.

Bad Night in Falls Town, Lawdog. I do not intend any dishonor to the Great State of Texas when I say that MOST of the stories I've read with this feel are set in San Francisco, or Los Angeles, or Chicago, Detroit, or New York City. New Orleans, maybe? They are NOT set in Wichita Falls! (And there is a REASON for that!) This is NOIR (!), at least to these old eyes and brain. I LOVE noir! Magnificent variations: 1. He's not a Lone Wolf; he's a Married Fox. BUT: he's still willing to work for so many bucks per day, plus expenses, to help out a client. 2. All of the other hard-nosed PI types were easily affected by the pulchritude of the clients; not sure the "leather halter top attempting manfully – and failing miserably – to keep significant portions of her anatomy contained" will benefit this client. Married, remember, and wifey is...pro-active.

They Only Ever Send Just One, John Van Stry. I spent JUST enough time in San Antonio, at JUST the right age, to have some part of my systems respond to...TEXAS RANGER! The television series, I missed utterly; but I've read enough stories of the old days and the modern days, some stark fact and some total fiction, for Emmet, the Ranger in this story, to stride right into my imagination. In his cowboy boots, which aren't broken in. I wonder why his boots aren't broken in? New boots. Hmmm.... ONE of the great things about being a Texas Ranger is that you don't have to start from the beginning with your average criminal, or with innocent bystanders; they KNOW what's going to take place. And for those criminals who don't IMMEDIATELY fold their hands? Something bad might happen to them.

Knights and Dragons, Jonathan LaForce. If I'm not mistaken, Crayon-Eating LaForce is the most junior member of the Texas team. GOOD DEAL! He is in for SUCH great training! (Confession: I have a special love for LaForce. He and my firstborn son did the same things, wearing different uniforms, in the same conflict, and there were outcomes, and I am ever-so-frapping proud of them for coming back as well as they have. SO, feel free to laugh at an old man for some tears.) LaForce invents a GREAT private investigator. Nero Wolfe was fat, and functionally agoraphobic; Ironside was (fat and) in a wheelchair; I can't remember the name of the blind private investigator, but LaForce invents Hans Abney, a PI with an extensive background in uniforms who lost his voice to shrapnel. That ALSO permits him to invent Giselle, a sign-language interpreter who just happens to be drop-dead gorgeous, as his non-ditzy, dynamic partner. That OUGHT to give some better opportunities for developing plots; as it is, there is too much mental reflection spelled out. Another EXCELLENT aspect of LaForce's world

in this particular story is the ambiguous nature of the Bad Guy. Minor bad guys just look good but are really bad; they are a dime a dozen. But: you get a Bad Guy who looks bad, but is really good? Writers have based a franchise on that character alone. (But ditch the love scene at the end; it's clumsy.)

A Favor Owed, JL Curtis. Oh, how I hope J L Curtis has more to say in this world! The characters have SUCH depth, it would be a shame to shut them down with just this little view. The old blacksmith is a good man, and I have no idea whether or not this is characteristic of the trade. I DO know that craftsmen who do excellent work are honored wherever they go, and the honor shown Lubec by his customers shows him to be one of those. And he has some magical access as well, in the form of a fire-breathing dragon(-ish). It's rather unfortunate, though, because his excellent past has caught up with him. This is not an ancient crime that chases him down; he has been pursued because he once gave a great gift. The Baron thinks it's time for another one, and he has a point. But points need edges, and hilts, and flex, and strength, and none of that comes free.

1600+ words to describe 340+ pages; I'll take it. You will enjoy this read!

The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering

by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is the fifth book in the series. I read and Reviewed the first book in this series, and although I can't seem to locate my Review, I remember that I enjoyed it. That's...unusual. Fantasy is NOT something that I enjoy spending much time in, and I find that I avoid those whenever possible, THAT IS THE ONLY REASON THAT I DID NOT GIVE THIS BOOK FIVE STARS!

When it comes to purity of story, character development, and richness of description, Lamplighter ranks among the greats. That she isn't writing the kind of books that I prefer to read should not be counted against her, and I regret that the 1-5 star ranking system is all that is available. It simply isn't refined enough to convey the proper information.

Let me give you just the BRIEFEST example of what I mean about her richness of description. In the very first chapter, Rachel, the protagonist, has been summoned to help her boyfriend, who has gotten in unspecified trouble. She discovers that the messenger, a Raven of Immense Significance, has left her a vial of a potion that will render her, as well as her magical bristleless broom., invisible. This is essential, as her school is under lockdown (not due to COVID):

“Rachel downed the elixir the Raven had left for her, shivering at the slight lizardy aftertaste of chameleon.”

Is that not a wonderful turn of phrase? "the slightly lizardy aftertaste." Behold, I shall not attempt to deceive you: if ever I am at some snooty society event (not likely), I fully intend to describe some item I am given to consume as having a "slightly lizardy aftertaste" whether it does or not. Actually, not having eaten a lizard, to the best of my knowledge, I don't quite know what the aftertaste would be, but this is the sort of writing that inspires me to act.

For those who have an appreciation of the finer forms of fantasy, unlike myself, this is a book you will want to immerse yourself in. You will not come away unsatisfied.

Under the Earthline by Laura Montgomery

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Let me give you a small illustration of how I feel about this book: A short while ago, I discovered that the latest episode of “The Mandalorian” had been released. I chose to Review the book, instead of heading to the Disney Channel.

Four Preliminaries.

1. Background. This is the THIRD book in the “Sons of Martha” series, and to be properly understood, you must have read volumes 1 and 2. Let me put that in perspective for you: before I can properly enjoy the third kiss with my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, I must first give her the first and second kisses. Montgomery’s words are kisses for the reader, lovely invitations to get to know the characters, and understand HOW and WHY they do the things they do. Trust me on this: you will not want to miss the first two books.

Now, PRIOR to the Sons of Martha, Montgomery published the three-volume Waking Late series, which is set on the same world. I don’t really think that you MUST read that series first, but it’s likely you will have to play some catch-up. The world of both series is referred to as NWWWF, and acronym: Not What We Were Looking For. There are MAJOR difficulties with turning NWWWF into a place that will support humans, and most of the explanation is in the first series. I’d recommend that you read that series, without a doubt, but you don’t HAVE to read it first.

2. Foreknowledge. Coming into this third book, second series, I quickly became aware of just how much more I knew about the situation than all of the characters, most particularly Thaddeus, the protagonist. Nothing for it; it’s like knowing that Anakin Skywalker is going to grow up to be Darth Vader. Even so, I wanted to reach into the world described, grab certain of the characters, and INSIST that they not go there and do that.

3. Suspense. Montgomery does not treat her readers to the draining experiences favored by an elderly gent with too many initials; namely to make a habit of creating compelling characters, and then defenestrating or decapitating them casually and frequently. However, she HAS killed mainline characters JUST enough that you can’t follow the story without some edge-of-your-seat time. It’s a feature; it’s not a bug. This is not the kind of suspense found in a cheap slasher movie, with cheap thrills provided by killers leaping out from behind the door. This suspense comes from not knowing whether the hero can pull his plan off, or will end the book incarcerated, alone, dead, or sent into exile without a towel.

4. The Bible and Rudyard Kipling. The series title, “Sons of Martha,” is taken from the Rudyard Kipling poem of the same name. It addresses the hard workers of the world, the engineers and grease-knuckled doers, who devote their lives to making sure that the powerful forces of nature and industry are harnessed. Kipling took his inspiration from an incident presented in the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to Saint Luke, in which the hard-working Martha chastises Jesus for allowing her younger sister to ignore all the dinner preparations. Kipling pretends that all who serve others in dark, dirty jobs are the spiritual children of Martha, condemned to labor while others play.

The BOOK!

The characters. All of the players on the planet are descended from people from Earth, but there has been some differentiation. The ruling class is descended from settlers on Mars, an outcome not anticipated by the folks who set out on the mission. Beneath them are the people who came from Earth, and that class is further divided into those with Earth-normal physiology, and those with enhanced strength and senses, distinguished by a pair of horns growing from their heads; these are called ‘pan’.

Further divisions have been created based on where the characters live, with a mostly urban class, the WestHem farmers, those who split off and started a second settlement, and the unfortunate Sleepers. This last division consists of the original colonists, who are kept in suspended animation, and revived one at a time, solely to provide their skill set to further the work of the settled classes. Think of them as frozen yogurt, except without the power.

The story. In previous installments, Peter Dawes, a young pan farmer, grows more resentful of the government men who invaded WestHem, and disarmed the population. He develops a plan to steal the blasters back but is forced by his tyrannical father to take his nasty-but-charming-to-some brother Simon with him. Simon is killed on the otherwise successful expedition, and Peter is labeled an outlaw by the oppressive governor and his cadre. To avoid capture and prevent reprisals against his family, Peter flees to the outskirts of settled land, where his oldest brother has a farm. Things happen, but the event of primary significance is the discovery of a new territory being developed by some of the more adventurous settlers.

As the story opens, Peter’s older brother Thaddeus must respond to a request/demand by Dietrich Bainbridge, the governor’s chief agricultural officer. Ostensibly, Bainbridge wants Thaddeus to come advise him on agricultural policy, but the threatening tone used shows that he will be used in some way to atone for Peter’s actions, or at least be punished for them.

Maxwell, a friend and imitator of the deceased nasty-but-charming-to-some Simon, will also be going to the palace, where they will have contact with the beautiful Harriet, Maxwell’s cousin and target of Dietrich’s affections.

Despite my muttering “Do Not Go To That Treacherous Man, He Hates You And Has A Horrible Plan For Your Life,” Thaddeus proceeds, as he has managed to extract a promise from Dietrich that he can access the library, as well as the computer network.

And things develop.

Conflicts over class distinctions, and access to technology, provide the structure for the story, but the individual players do all the driving. This is NOT a gadget story; it’s a people story. The main characters become alive, as Montgomery gives us access to their thoughts, and thus, WE never have any confusion about the reasons for their actions. Sometimes they are confused about each other, a truth of human nature. It makes them real.

Again, unlike the hyper-initialiaed gent, Montgomery ONLY leaves the overall story development unresolved, while closing out, quite nicely, the human interest conflicts and alliances that are the primary allure of these works.

My conclusion.

I often find myself disgusted by the paucity of interest in the work of a gifted author, and that is DEFINITELY the case with Montgomery’s work. Her works should be on best-seller lists! It is probably an

unavoidable consequence of the open field made possible by indie status and Amazon publication practices. In a field of hundreds of books, it's tough to get noticed, even if a majority of the other works are dreck written by silly people who don't know how to use punctuation, much less write a coherent and compelling story.

I console myself somewhat by recalling that in decades past, when publishing houses had a stranglehold on what reached the consumer, an artist like Montgomery might have had nothing more than a few boxes of rejected manuscripts. At LEAST, her work is available, and I can but hope that at some point, she, and other talented writers like her, will get the recognition they deserve. It's ONE of the reasons I write Reviews.

Weird World War III, Sean Patrick Hazlett (Editor)

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Preliminary Comments. Gentle Reader, if I told you of my disaffection for horror in terms adequate for my innermost feelings, you might just call for the white-coated gents with butterfly nets to take me away; thus, do I foam at the mouth, raging at the impropriety of such abominations, solely designed to terrify. It extends beyond horror: I don't like getting scared, period. As a 4-5-year-old, I used to hide behind the couch when Roy Rogers would walk into the cabin, because I KNEW the bad guy was hiding behind the door, and was going to jump out on him.

You might wonder, then, how it is that I am Reviewing "Weird World War III," given that these stories are, to say the least, non-standard. It's a fair question.

First, I admit to some inconsistency in my views. I'm a fan of Quentin Tarantino movies, even though my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, steadfastly refuses to watch "Pulp Fiction" with me; something about Samuel L Jackson and cheeseburgers.

What I'd LIKE to say my criterion for acceptance is this: Science is not Horror. Even there, I draw lines. I have never seen ANY of the "Alien" movies, deriving all of my knowledge from cut scenes and memes, such as "Nuke them from orbit; it's the only way to be sure."

In the end, if you wish to make a deep criticism of my tastes, I can only say this: do not expect consistency from someone who often fails to discriminate between the functions of the delete key and the backspace key.

The Stories.

THE PRICE by David Drake. Whether you are of the opinion that David Drake invented the field of military science fiction, or merely that he took it from tiny crumbs to a smorgasbord, it can't be disputed that his works give voice to the difficulties of coming home. It is well enough, that this story is about a particularly difficult homecoming: Ab, the older brother, welcomes Jesse, the younger, back into the family residence, after a particularly horrible mission. Maybe some people come back home as the same people who left; you couldn't prove it by me.

SHADOW ROOK RED by Brian Trent. Concept: new tech allows passage between locations on Earth, which are linked to specific locations on an alternate world; except what is sea level here might corre-

spond to a mountain top there, or worse. The Soviet Union has weaponized it, with success. An essential researcher goes missing.

THE THIRD WORLD WAR by Mike Resnick. What is an appropriate response by a super-power, when a MILPOS country starts acting like a bully? Take “The Mouse That Roared,” rotate it 90 degrees, and you will get close.

WHERE YOU LEAD, I WILL FOLLOW: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE DENVER INCIDENT by Erica L. Satifka. I can’t remember the name of the online craze of a few years ago; lots of folks were trying to find treasure points, or something like that. Some people were so focused on the search that they ran into other people, lamp posts, traffic. That really happened; so, this story isn’t really far-fetched. And THAT’S what makes it a spine-shiver. BRRRR.

ALL QUIET ON THE PHANTOM FRONT by Brad R. Torgersen. Torgersen is a stupid name. There isn’t a spell-checker program on the planet, except maybe in some place populated solely by Viking descendants, where it won’t cause a red line to appear on the page, and that’s Not Nice. It’s a good thing that he has SUCH a deft hand at combining AMAZING truths of humanity to make phenomenal stories. For example: she isn’t what they think she is, but she pretends to be so they will leave her alone; he thinks the entire process is an abomination but participates because he cares for the troops. Torgersen invented a brand-new take on the BEM a few years back, but it’s the humanity in his writing that makes it shine. I love the guy.

ANASTASIA’S EGG by Kevin Andrew Murphy. Ouch. They have turducken somethings for sale at my local grocery store, but I’ve never had one. This story both uses things inside other things as a plot point, it IS a thing inside other things. Romanov princesses, ancient djinns, and a mechanical bucking bronco. It might help if you took notes.

TAP, TAP, TAPPING IN THE DEEP by Dr. Xander Lostetter and Marina J. Lostetter. Are the technical aspects of submarines and deep dives accurate? I have not a clue. My son-in-law was a squid, but he took care of the reactor, so I’m not sure enough of his expertise to delay the Review long enough to get a verdict from him. I suspect, anyway, that it’s all completely realistic; it certainly READS that way. Stealth, spies, monsters and aliens, lies and loss, and: “The truth is, I love you...”

THE OUROBOROS ARRANGEMENT by Martin L. Shoemaker. A trope in cheap stories goes like this: “Yes, it’s crazy, but it just might be crazy enough to work!” It makes for amusing action sequences, but none of the craziness would actually last past preparation for Step One. On the other hand: what if you found yourself at the end of Step Fifty? All of them were crazy, and all of them had worked?

LAST CHANCE by Sarah A. Hoyt. I absolutely, positively deny that anyone can write a classic set-up for a slasher film, have it turn out to be something else, and get away with it. It simply cannot be done. Except: Sarah A Hoyt did it. Right here. In this story. It’s as if someone decided to give Hoyt the most impossible story-writing task EVER: “write your way out of THIS one, Beautiful But Evil Space Princess! Moose and Squirrel cannot save you now!” Listen: gentleman feels a compulsion to drive to a distant location. His car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, and his phone doesn’t work. He is greeted by a Strange But Congenial Stranger! Even I, who refuse any interaction with horror, know how THIS is going to end up! Except, no. Because Science. Good grief, woman, can NOTHING stop you?

ODERZHIMOST’ by Deborah A. Wolf. Yes, she gives the translation in the text; it means “obsession.” Yes, science, but more; besides, this is also an eternal pain that comes from love betrayed (the obses-

sion part!) The creepy old legend of the abandoned love who drowns herself (or hangs herself, in some versions) and then takes revenge on foolish passers-by.

NO PLAN SURVIVES FIRST CONTACT by Stephen Lawson POW! There might NOT be a completely new idea in this story, but WOW! The way he puts the parts together is terrific! Where did the Soviets get the advanced technology? How did they move so fast? Alien crash? But wait: even OUR primitive craft have rescue beacons! So, yes, science, but also Mongo, who, before he NEEDS a candygram, goes for a run, bringing along a nasty, nasty captain. Just for company, you know.

THE SCHOLOMANCE by Ville Meriläinen. Not explained in the text, but readily available for discovery to anyone with a connection to the internet, the Scholomance was a mythical black magic school in Transylvania. We are introduced to this school in 1777, under the rule of Catherine the Great, and then we have brief glimpses under regime changes in 1817, 1918, and 1977. Mostly, the problems are the same as in any school: kids running in the halls, keeping order. That sort of thing. And maybe one other.

IT'S A MUD, MUD WORLD by Peter J. Wacks and Bryan Thomas Schmidt. This story is set in 1985. Gentle reader, I've been wading through these stories, without considering whether the background will be comprehensible to chronologically deficient individuals. If you haven't seen the movie "War Games," I believe it's on Netflix. Go watch it, if you want to really understand this story. Also, there is quite a bit of computer code that might obscure; it purports to be code which permitted access to computer bulletin boards of the day. (I used a program that came with my 300 baud modem.) MUD is referenced, but not defined in the story. I believe it's an acronym for Multi User Domain, or Multi User Dungeon, perhaps even Multi User Dialup; at any rate, it describes the way people talked to each other with computers prior to sometime in the 1990s.

A THING WORTH A DAMN by Alex Shvartsman. In this timeline, Kennedy wasn't assassinated in Dallas, and somehow, he managed to bankrupt the country in competition with the Soviets in the Space Race. California and Utah seceded; Cali goes socialist and falls under the influence of the Soviet Union. (No word on Utah.) Nothing works, except the famine. A Soviet officer is tasked with securing a scientist who tried to escape California and get him to Cuba for processing.

EVANGELINE by C.L. Kagmi. Evangeline has some ability to interact with the dead. The story seemed a bit short on explanations to me, but for some reason she is notifying people whether or not their sons/lovers/brothers/whatever are alive in Vietnam. She's kidnapped by government agents, who want her to ...do something.

BLEAK NIGHT AT BAD ROCK by Nick Mamatas. "Cold War" makes a convenient name, to cover all the organized violence done during a certain time. You can decide for yourself whether the efforts were to make the world safe for democracy, or to enable peaceful coexistence. Certainly, the US and the USSR were not the only countries impacted by the Cold War. Beyond that, this story addresses the impact of belief.

ZIP GHOST by T.C. McCarthy. Alternate realities/multiple dimensions can make you crazy. Don't worry, though, we have something for that. Here, take this peyote. And here's an injection to give you syphilis. That combination should work pretty well. Now, go blow stuff up, and try not to die.

DENIABILITY by Eric James Stone. We start with the idea that Kennedy's assassination was ordered by Khrushchev, and that the Warren Commission report was just to calm people in the US down. Then, postulate a person with the ability to kill people remotely. Feel like implementing a revenge program?

It cascades. It ALWAYS cascades. One of the best features of this story was the way that lead characters used language to appear to say one thing, while meaning something else entirely.

SECOND FRONT by John Langan. You ain't gonna BELIEVE this, but: both the US and the USSR built secret bases on the moon, without each other knowing! Truly, I loved the part of the story where the reasoning behind keeping the US base a secret for was revealed through, at least, four different Presidential administrations. We could have stopped there, but I suppose we did have to have an invasion by intelligent lobsters at some point in the book.

A Final Note. Mike Resnick crossed over earlier this year. He wrote one of the stories in this volume; he wrote a LOT of stories. He won awards. I hope he made a bunch of money, but I have no idea about that. Regardless:

“Mike always made a point of giving back to the science fiction and fantasy community by taking new writers and editors under his wing.” (Sean Patrick Hazlett. *Weird World War III* (Kindle Locations 88-89). Baen. Kindle Edition.)

White Ops by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

With *White Ops*, Declan Finn tosses his hat into the world of sci-fi and delivers an action-packed adventure mixed with layers of political intrigue against a background of interstellar warfare.

The story

Sean Patrick Ryan is known to many as the biggest badass in the galaxy. To paraphrase another character known for getting into more than his fair share of fights, “he doesn't say that, that's what people tell him.” With a reputation like that, trouble seems to follow him, which is how he learns that a little-known race called the Pharmakoi are breaking out of their star system in a bid for galactic domination. Fortunately, his early warning to Earth's military and his relationship with the most technologically advanced race in the galaxy, the Renar, gives Earth a fighting chance against the belligerent and well-armed aliens. Over more than a decade, the Pharmakoi are finally defeated, having been eradicated after a last-ditch attack on Earth.

However, Ryan and his long-time friend Peter Sierra sense early on that something isn't right. Realizing that the Pharmakoi aren't smart enough to have even reverse engineered their tech and that their hardware for ground warfare is far behind their spacecraft, the pair conclude that there is another race behind the scenes. A race that is almost certainly at least as far advanced as we are over the age of the musket.

As Ryan and Sierra conduct their separate searches, another, more political drama plays out between President Douglas Wills and Admiral Sherman Newcomb. Both fought in the Pharmakoi War. Wills however ensured that he stayed out of harm's way and intentionally crafted situations to make himself appear far more heroic than he was. Newcomb on the other hand was the hero of the war, leading the charge against the invaders with his combination of brilliant tactics and generous use of nukes. The Admiral's record naturally made him popular, so popular that Wills has always seen him as a threat even though the military man has never displayed any political ambitions.

Now, as the hidden enemy is ready to make their move, the war between the two men is heating up.

Wills may have Earth's military and the telepathic Thought Police on his side, but Newcomb has Sean Patrick Ryan and Associates.

The characters

In some ways, the main character of Sean Ryan is like other Finn main characters. He is larger than life, a tactical genius, and Catholic. However, Ryan's personality is markedly different than either Tommy Nolan or Marco Catalano. While he certainly enjoys taking out the trash, Ryan is more of a happy warrior than Marco who takes a borderline sadistic glee in dishing out violence. While he may have been raised in a monastery, Ryan is also less saintly than Nolan. Unlike both, he has never had any interest in leading anyone or anything up until now. Not that the biggest badass in the galaxy has held himself aloof from society, he just doesn't want to be responsible for anyone except himself. That is, until the Anima, the power behind the Pharmakoi, begin to make their move.

Admiral Newcomb is the picture of leadership. A mere intelligence officer at the beginning of the war, he finds himself in command of his ship after the top brass of his fleet are wiped out in the first battle. Fortunately, like Jack Ryan from the Tom Clancy novels, Newcomb isn't just good at analyzing data; he's also willing to act boldly on his conclusions. It's his willingness to think outside the box and actually learn about his enemies that allow him to rack up victory after victory against the better armed Pharmakoi. And while he doesn't have political ambitions, that doesn't mean he's inept on that front either as he has managed to hold off Wills' attempts to discredit him over the years, and even adapt to running a massive Dyson sphere known as Alexandria station populated with multiple alien races, including the perpetually fighting Soivan and Touri.

Douglas Wills is the classic overly ambitious politician, quick with a smile and turn of phrase that get the attention of the media and of voters. And like many politicians, he is corrupt to the core, willing to go far beyond mere media manipulation and skimming a few tax dollars here and there to murder in order to advance his career. In fact, it's one of his more detestable acts that brings him to the attention of the Anima.

There are a host of side characters throughout White Ops that are also well developed and interesting without ever quite stealing the show from the main characters. Most if not all of them could carry their own short stories and a few could be the focus of other novels in the future. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if that should happen given Finn's characters have a tendency to grow beyond their original confines.

The world

White Ops is set far in the future, far enough that humanity has spread far into the galaxy thanks to figuring faster than light travel. There are, however, several other intelligent species out there amongst the stars and not all of them are friendly and many others are much more advanced than the humans. However, thanks to human tenacity and their performance during the Pharmakoi War, the people of Earth often find themselves in the middle of galactic events, mediating disputes between a variety of other races.

It's also a galaxy full of strange locations and we get to visit more than one. Between Earth, Renar, and Alexandria Station, it's clear that this is a galaxy that is lived in by more than one kind of intelligent life form.

Different races also have their own unique aspects, most especially the Renar who genetically modify their ambassadors to reflect the world they are sent to, resulting in physical forms that look completely different than most Renar. The Touri are extremely dinosaur-like in appearance and the Soivan spend their first hundred years with an exoskeleton that earns them the nickname “crickets.” In short, the work put into differentiating the alien races is much more impressive than the Star Trek method of giving everyone different bumps on their foreheads or pointy ears.

Finn also avoids the Star Wars trap of giving one profession to an entire race, i.e. the Jawas are all junk traders. The Renar for example have a caste system centered on their different professions.

The politics

The politics within the book are typically corrupt and supposedly democratic. Those of the book however are along the lines of, “I work outside the system, don’t get in the way.”

Content warning

There are some gruesome deaths but that’s about it.

Who is it for?

If you are a fan of Finn’s other work, you will definitely love this. If you don’t already have that as a baseline, Kai Wai Cheah delivers a similar level of action in his novels. Also, any action-oriented franchise in which the hero mows through tons of bad guys. John Wick or the Equalizer immediately spring to mind.

Why read it?

Because Finn takes his penchant for larger-than-life characters who have no problems taking out the bad guys and puts it in space. What follows is not just action but a healthy dose of political intrigue and a hint of mystery that demonstrate that the author can do a lot more than just write a solid fight scene.

Who Can Own The Stars? by Mackey Chandler

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is installment #12 in Mackey Chandler’s “April” series, in which the astounding lady makes friends of people with no social skills, and enemies of countries with nuclear capabilities.

Twice, I’ve been tasked with writing Reviews of books nominated for a Dragon Award. Frequently, those were installments in a series; so much so, that I think a separate award category ought to be established for them. Unfortunately, in some cases, the work was nearly opaque to me, as I had not read the prior material. Now: in an installment number TWELVE, I would have expected that there be at least SOME aspects of the story that I would find confusing. After all, there have been eleven books setting the stage.

THAT WAS NEVER THE CASE.

There was NO preexisting story element missing that prevented me from knowing what was going on. That's amazing, especially when you consider just how many stories are being told at the same time: financial skullduggery AND development (those are two different story lines; families in conflict; conflict with Earth government(s); conflict with Martian government(s); technological discoveries; the fate of people re-establishing a community among the ruins in California. In every case, Chandler (somehow) manages to present the reader with enough background so that there isn't a single bit of confusion, and each one of those stories is INTERESTING! I think it's because he spent his life working with things. He MADE things. He FIXED things. And he doubtless had to EXPLAIN things to people who didn't share his expertise. He didn't learn how to tell stories from a university class in creative writing.

Anyway, that's my theory.

Now, on to the book Review; this part will be submitted to Amazon and posted on Goodreads:

"Who Can Own The Stars?" is a nice, catchy title; it's also expressed as a question. While I will disclose that the question is answered in the course of the narrative, I will NOT spoiler by telling you the answer, or the page number on which it may be discussed.

Multiple story lines, some intermingled, are all presented coherently, and without requiring that the reader have access to the first 11 books in the series. These include:

- The financing and occupancy of a space habitat, designed for near-self-sufficiency.

- The problems encountered by survivors of a near-total collapse of civilization in parts of the former United States.

- Trade interactions with a break-away Martian government, still in turmoil; in possession of potentially destabilizing alien artifacts, which they are fanatically determined to keep a secret.

- At least THREE story lines involve individuals with social skills deficits; they range from predatory/vindictive, to merely clueless but potentially lethal on a global scale.

- An exceedingly interesting series of events highlighting the difficulties of trade between governmental entities that have little or no common ground; thus, fiat currency, based on trust in a government is functionally useless in trade.

I found that each of these story lines was so compelling, that I almost shoved the conflict mentioned in the blurb, between the Lunar government and that of North America, into the background.

While there is much left to tell with the stories presented here, it's not a cliff-hanger. Yes, I want to know more about what happens, but I don't feel cheated in the slightest that I'm left with unanswered questions.

A note: I read FAST; I always have. Evidently, I encode content-free words (such as proper names) and numbers into smaller units for transmission to wherever I process stories. Thus, I can recall a PLOT quite easily, but can't tell you the names of the characters. With this book, I found it necessary to keep a log of people and places; there are enough characters and settings to make that essential for me to write a coherent Review. YMMV.

Prose Bono

Congratulations to N3F Webmistress Melody Friedenthal, who was a finalist in a writing contest and took away a cash prize.

Buoyed Up

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

The big news this last week in the writing world is the wild success of Brandon Sanderson's kickstarter. It's been amazing to watch, frankly, and despite not having read much of his (Tolkien is sufficient to all of my high fantasy needs, forever, it seems) work, I've been over here cheering it on when I could look up from Real Life(tm) and catch a glimpse. It's at, I think as of time I write this, 22 million dollars. I say again... I've seen entire islands for sale for less than that amount of money. Go, Brandon! *wild cheers and applause*

There are, inevitably, the naysayers and detractors who find themselves with a handful of sour grapes and a desire to pull this author back into their crab bucket where they can eat him at their leisure. The usual suspects are heard from with slights and pejorative language... and that makes me sad. They are missing the point. If you follow that link to the snip of an article, and then read the Passive Guy's comments, you'll better understand the sort I'm talking about.

And, by missing the point, I mean this: Brandon Sanderson's success buoys up all authors. His Kickstarter is creating buzz about books in a very big way. Sure, this will likely lead to more movies and TV and possibly video games as well (my son and I had a lively conversation last night about all the good movies stemming from written material. I'm not sure that's entirely true, but it may not be wrong either), but the consumers of written material should be ecstatic over this story. It means books are not dying. They live, and man! Are they popular still! I was pondering this not long ago, as I'm a writer. I love books, and I read almost every day (not fiction every day any more, though, but that's a different post). My retired husband is a voracious reader and goes through a book or more a day. My kids? Different story. They read, but it's more likely to be fanfiction. And many people are switching over to audiobooks (which is also another post for another day).

My friend and fellow author Martin Shoemaker (and you should definitely check out some of his books, he writes some amazing stuff, like Hard SF with heart) was talking about being a microSanderson and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease him. "Hey!" hands on hips. Looks up at Martin. "I am not micro!"

What Martin meant, and he's perfectly correct, is that most of us authors don't have – may never have – the reach that the other Sanderson has. What we can do is take away from this some lessons. One – reach for the stars. To reach the stars, or heck, even low earth orbit, you have to do a helluva lot of work. You have to understand the dynamics of what you are doing – not just writing great stories, but marketing, and engineering campaigns, and so much more. It's work. We have to put in the work if we want to see our book launches not explode on the pad. Two – find out what our audience wants and give it to them. The other Sanderson knew what people wanted: not the promise of books, but actual in-the-can just-need-to-publish books, with some sweet backer cookies to go along with the words they

wanted to read. I suspect the follow-on afterswell of ‘wow, that’s popular I think I’ll jump on the train’ may have surprised even him. But it shouldn’t have. It’s human nature to either want to join the party... or try to piss on it from the edges and kick dirt. Frankly, I’d rather have some fun than chow down on the bitter fruit covered in ashes of despair. Which brings me to something else... Three – have fun with it. The other Sanderson was doing something he was gleefully enjoying, and that’s infectious, folks. Be relentlessly cheerful, and people will start cheering along with you.

So! Here’s my challenge to you, good friends, fellow authors, and readers who support us. Let’s help out one another, rather than trying to pull down one who is succeeding. I’m not going to ask you to buy a book, today. Nope. I’m going to suggest that you think about what you’re doing, and how you could do it better. Just a little better, doesn’t have to be a big thing. Me? I’m going to celebrate having turned in a story last night just under deadline. Then I’m going to start writing the next one. And I’m going to contemplate how to grow my audience, even if it’s by one person. One person a day? Funny how these things get exponential after a while.

So share your ideas in the comments, and let’s get better together. We can all be microSandersons. At least until I put on my high heels! Ok, Martin’s like a foot taller than I am. Hey, Martin, we have to get our photo taken together the next con we’re both attending!

Inspiration by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I find it ironic that the new WordPress editor starts out a blank post with ‘Type to choose a block’ when that’s what I wanted to write about. Being blocked. I was sitting here staring at the wall, thinking about blocks, children’s blocks, the wooden blocks my Dad used to make for us kids... odds and sods of 2×4 or 2×6 or whatever was lying around, carefully sanded and smoothed. We had a lot of fun with those blocks, and they are long, long gone. You could build things with those blocks. I wonder what it would be like to have lived in one place for my entire life? To still be able to lay my hands on those blocks, or family photos, or... For generations of family? Heard a woman on a podcast the other day lamenting having to move her 7-year-old child two hours from the town she’d lived in her entire life, and it wasn’t hard to see through that to her own fear of leaving what she had always known. Me? We had 19 addresses by the time I turned 18. I don’t know what it’s like to have childhood friends I’m still in touch with a few from my teen years, but close friends? Those would come later, in adulthood, and I’d have to learn how to build a foundation of friendship with the measly blocks I had been given of interpersonal relationship tools as a child into an adult and...

Writer’s block is a bad thing, we think. We want to go in a direction, and the way is blocked. It’s not actually blocks that can be moved and built with. Or is it? Perhaps the block means it’s time to hang that left at Albuquerque and go check out the rattlesnake museum I’m reliably informed can be found in that city. When I’m sitting at the keyboard with my fingers hovering and my mind uncharacteristically blank, maybe that’s the time to look up at the wall instead and let my thoughts wander. On my wall, from this chair, is the mantel over our so-far-unused fireplace, and on the mantel are several dragons, an art deco vase, a cypress knee that looks a little like a horse’s head, a book titled “Hard Tack and Coffee,” an owl’s feather, a framed pulp Western magazine, a mother bear nursing two cubs, a set of bonsai tools in a beautiful brocade case, sketchbooks, and an 1880s Kipling edition. Oh, and a string of fairylights shaped like bees. If you couldn’t make a story from some of that, I don’t know what to tell you. Possibly a story about a woman who resembled a magpie.

But that has nothing to do with the story you want to write, or for that matter the one I want to write, either. Doesn't matter. No huhu. What it will do is warm up your fingers. Point your brain in the direction you want it to go in. Once that's started, I think you'll find things may flow better. It's more about the exercise and starting with a stretch before you try to vault over the block. Go around it, instead! Set a timer for 15 minutes, pick a prompt or a catalyst, and start writing. When the timer goes off, take a break, drink some water, and then sit down and do it again, only this time on the piece you wanted to work on.

The other thing that helps is to mindfully and deliberately set aside any distractions. Can you do the thing you are worrying about, right now? No? Put a reminder on your calendar for when you can and set it aside like you would a physical object. If you can do it, then do it. Finish, and come back to the writing.

Me? I'm going to write until my husband wakes up, and then have coffee with him while building castles in the air. Until that time, there's nothing more important I can be doing. Perhaps, in this way, I can make some progress, weaving my way through the labyrinth of my mental blocks, hoping I'm getting closer to my goal.

Literary Criticism

The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon
by Moira Greyland
Review by Heath Row

I wasn't overly active in fandom when Moira Greyland went public about the abuse suffered by her and others at the hands of her mother and father, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Walter Breen. (I was a member of the N3F, but I somehow missed the broader repercussions across fandom.) I was unaware of the 2014 uprising and fallout in terms of Bradley's waning favor. And I wasn't even alive during the Breendoggle that rocked Bay Area fandom in the early '60s. So, while preparing for a medical procedure earlier this year, I turned to Greyland's 2017 memoir, *The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon*.

The memoir mostly focuses on the abuse Greyland experienced from Bradley and Breen, and Bradley's covering up of Breen's sexual activities and preferences over the years. About half the book is made up of depositions taken as part of related court cases. If you don't know much about the Breendoggle that happened in the Bay Area in the early '60s, or Greyland's subsequent going public, it's a horrific read, and not one that I'd recommend even for the most rabid rubberneckerers.

It makes absolute sense that Bradley has fallen out of favor—and that many of her books are now available only through print-on-demand editions issued by her trust. Yet after reading Greyland's expose, I wondered whether Bradley's work was worth returning to. Naïf that I am, I haven't even read *The Mists of Avalon*, which I understand to be the work that gave Bradley her unexpected wealth and prestige—though her abuse far predated her fame. (This Review was previously published in slightly different form in the APA-L apazine *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #4.)

Letters of Comment

Editor:

The February 2022 issue of The N3F Review of Books is an impressive collection of book Reviews. A quick assessment of the table of contents offers some interesting talking points. The bulk of the 25-plus books featured were published between 2010 and 2021, though several of the titles might be more recent editions of older books. Examples of that include Robert A. Heinlein's *Between Planets* (1951), Andre Norton, P.M. Griffin, and Mary Schaub's *Flight of Vengeance* (1992), and Mike Resnick's *The Widowmaker* (1996). The titles Reviewed include at least three books written by—or contributed to, in the case of Pluto—Declan Finn. Finn himself contributes a couple of Reviews himself. The issue also offers three Reviews by “Ginger Man,” which I presume is a pseudonym.

In the Review's “Editorial,” the editor even remarks on the current roster of Reviewers and books featured: “[W]e encounter some well-aimed criticism that most of our Reviewers come from the same general region[s] of the mundane-world political spectrum. That's not being done deliberately, but our efforts to find Reviewers with a wider range of political orientations have not been at all successful. As a general statement, if you know anyone who writes Reviews of SF novels, please call them to my attention.”

Indeed. I encourage Neffers the world over to send in Reviews and critiques of sf, fantasy, and horror books that they think are worth sharing with other members. If you read a book, please consider Reviewing the book, even if it's a brief capsule Review. I, myself, will strive to do so, as well. I'm not sure that the issue at hand is the political orientation of the Reviewers—I'm not even sure that should matter, or be evident in their Reviews. But it might be evident in the selection of books Reviewed, which could be more important to Neffers and active readers.

Along those lines, the independent press is healthily represented in the Review. This issue features one book published via CreateSpace, two self-published books, and three “independently published” books. Very few titles from larger publishers such as Baen, Scholastic, Scribner, Spectra, and Tor are Reviewed, with Baen claiming the most Reviews—three titles Reviewed. The balance of the issue draws on titles from smaller publishing imprints, which is very welcome. Only two publishers earned at least two Reviews: Newquist Corp. and Silver Empire. Interesting stuff, and I haven't read the Reviews yet!

I especially enjoyed Chris Nuttall's Review of Heinlein's juvenile *Between Planets*, Caroline Furlong's reprinted Review of *Flight of Vengeance*, Pat Patterson's commentary on *Mamelukes*, Jason P. Hunt's Review of *To End in Fire*, Michael Gallagher's comments on *The Widowmaker*, and Jon Swartz's Review on the Fiction House comics history. I find the Upstream Review structure to be a little off putting. (Finn's Reviews also utilize the Upstream format even when credited to his Web site.) Regardless, there are a lot of quality options to choose from.

I'd love to see more original Reviews submitted by Neffers, but I appreciate the number of Reviews that reprinting from other sources affords the editor—and offers us as Neffers, readers—and potential readers. It's also certain that I was introduced to a number of writers and titles unfamiliar to me. I'll do everything I can to submit some of my own Reviews toward that end. I challenge you—as a Neffer and a reader—to do the same.

Sincerely,
Heath Row

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