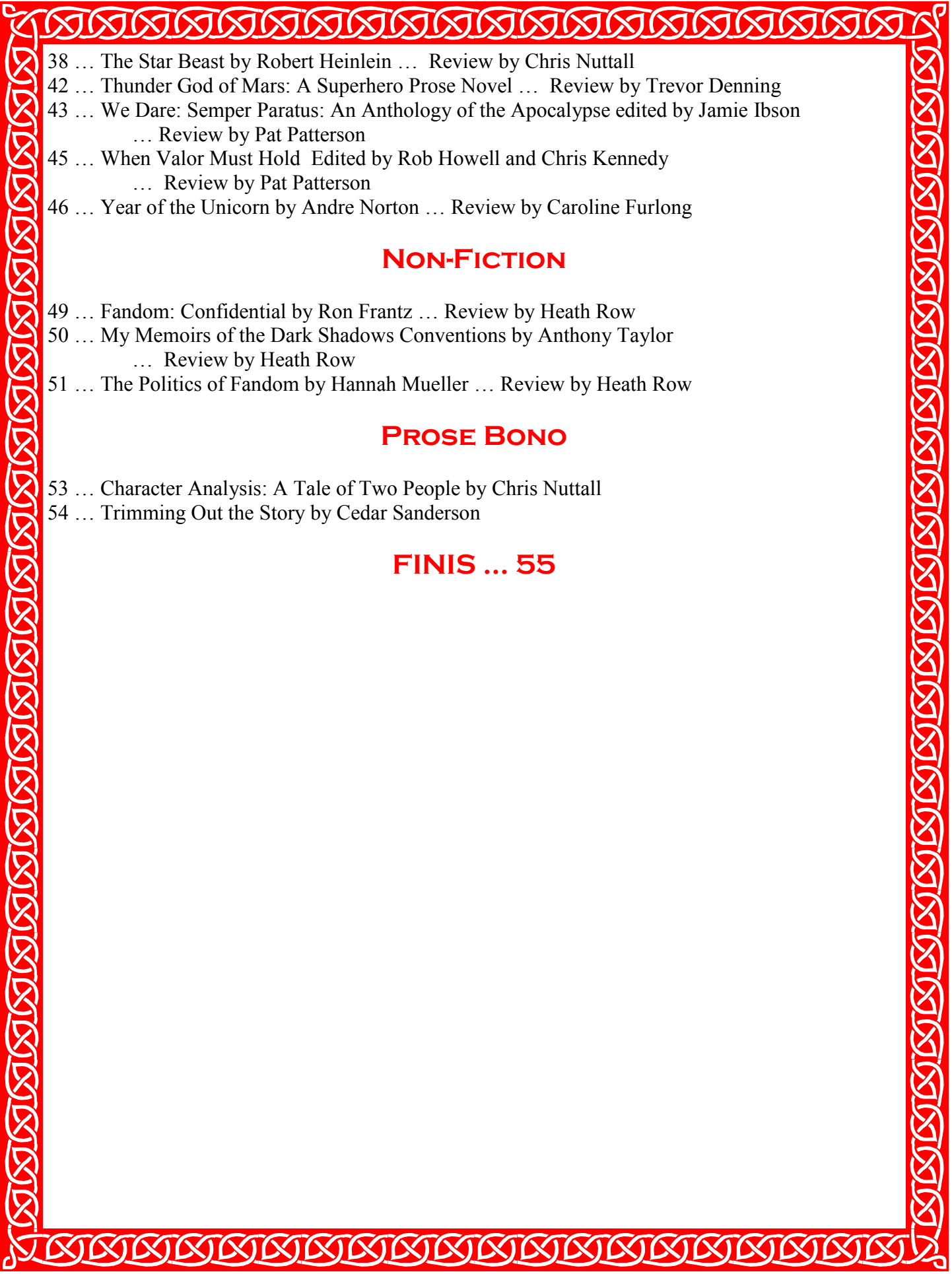


The *NSJ*  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor  
May 2022

**FICTION**

- 2 ... A Long Time Until Now by Michael Z. Williamson ... Review by Trevor Denning  
3 ... A Princess of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs ... Review by Caroline Furlong  
5 ... A Wizard's Guide to Defensive Baking by T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon)  
... Review by Tom Feller  
6 ... Across the Green Grass Fields by Seanan McGuire ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
6 ... Alexis Carew series by J.A. Sutherland ... Review by Jim McCoy  
8 ... Beat The Devils by Josh Weiss ... Review by Jason P. Hunt  
9 ... Chaos on Catnet by Naomi Kritzer ... Review by Tom Feller  
9 ... Dark Sojourns by Beth H. Adams ... Review by Heath Row  
10 ... Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin by Terrance Dicks ... Review by Heath Row  
11 ... Drosselmeyer: Curse of the Rat King ... Review by Trevor Denning  
13 ... The Einstein Intersection by Samuel R. Delaney ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
13 ... Escape From the Future by Paul Clayton ... Review by Michael Gallagher  
16 ... Fireheart Tiger by Aliette de Bodard ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
16 ... Five Hard and Crunchy SF Tales by Michèle Laframboise ... Review by Robert Runté  
17 ... Foundation by Isaac Asimov ... Review by Heath Row  
19 ... Foundation and Empire by Isaac Asimov ... Review by Heath Row  
19 ... The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood ... Review by Heath Row  
21 ... Jaguar Rising by Amanda S. Green ... Review by Pat Patterson  
22 ... Light Chaser by Peter F. Hamilton and Gareth L. Powell ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
22 ... Light Unto Another World by Yakov Merkin ... Review by Caroline Furlong  
24 ... Lord of Light by Roger Zelazny ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
24 ... Magnetic Brain by Volsted Gridban ... Review by Heath Row  
25 ... Marymae and the Nightmare Man by A. M. Freeman ... Review by Caroline Furlong  
27 ... Mission: Interplanetary by A.E. van Vogt ... Review by Heath Row  
28 ... Monster Hunter International by Larry Correia ... Review by Declan Finn  
30 ... The Mummy of Monte Cristo ... Review by Trevor Denning  
32 ... My Luck by Mel Todd ... Review by Declan Finn  
34 ... The Necessity of Stars by E. Catherine Tobler ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
34 ... A Psalm for the Wild-Built by Becky Chambers ... Review by Perry Middlemiss  
35 ... Responsibility of the Crown by G. Scott Huggins ... Review by Pat Patterson  
36 ... The Ruin of Kings by Jenn Lyons ... Review by Tom Feller  
36 ... Servants of War by Larry Correia and Steve Diamond ... Review by JE Tabor

- 
- 38 ... The Star Beast by Robert Heinlein ... Review by Chris Nuttall  
42 ... Thunder God of Mars: A Superhero Prose Novel ... Review by Trevor Denning  
43 ... We Dare: Semper Paratus: An Anthology of the Apocalypse edited by Jamie Ibson  
... Review by Pat Patterson  
45 ... When Valor Must Hold Edited by Rob Howell and Chris Kennedy  
... Review by Pat Patterson  
46 ... Year of the Unicorn by Andre Norton ... Review by Caroline Furlong

### **NON-FICTION**

- 49 ... Fandom: Confidential by Ron Frantz ... Review by Heath Row  
50 ... My Memoirs of the Dark Shadows Conventions by Anthony Taylor  
... Review by Heath Row  
51 ... The Politics of Fandom by Hannah Mueller ... Review by Heath Row

### **PROSE BONO**

- 53 ... Character Analysis: A Tale of Two People by Chris Nuttall  
54 ... Trimming Out the Story by Cedar Sanderson

**FINIS ... 55**

# Editorial

Not at great length, but I have sometimes expressed regrets that we did not have a wider variety of points of view among our referees. The reviewers were great, but sometimes you want reviewers speaking to those who love chocolate torte as well as those who like a well-composed Russian salad. In this issue, I believe that we have advanced in that direction.



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# Fiction

A Long Time Until Now  
by Michael Z. Williamson  
Review by Trevor Denning  
[UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

A group of US soldiers in Afghanistan find their survival skills put to the test when they are unexpectedly transported back into prehistoric times. Once they recover from the shock, they start rebuilding civilization from the ground up with their limited resources and knowledge of technological development.

At the same time, they have to deal with the locals, other groups of accidental time travelers, and their own differing worldviews. In some ways it's no more dangerous or foreign than the world they left. In others, it's far more frightening and lonely.

## The story

What starts as a normal day in A-Stan for a small US military transport turns into a two-year fight for survival in prehistoric Asia when they and their two vehicles are suddenly dropped in the paleolithic era. With limited supplies, they have to rely on their training and discipline. Mostly strangers at the start, they also have to learn to rely on each other. Fortunately (conveniently?) each member of the unit has some knowledge or skill that makes building a piece of civilization possible.

They soon find that they're not alone. First, they encounter the local paleolithic tribe, who welcome them as strangers with magic gifts from strange spirits. Later they have to deal with other bands of temporally displaced peoples, including a less-friendly tribe from the near future, and an arrogant group of Romans that keeps doing what Romans do: conquer for Rome. The US soldiers do their best to keep the peace and not become too personally entangled, but they're only human. The primary focus is to survive, mentally and physically. Plagued by various health and mental conditions, they don't always make wise choices.

Hope comes with the arrival of a pair of visitors from a far, far distant future. These perfect specimens of human evolution seem friendly and helpful. Still, in an unprecedented situation it's only logical to question their motives. Can they be trusted? Can they really get everyone back home? And at what cost?

## The characters

With ten main characters, I won't attempt to summarize all of them here. Author Michael Z. Williamson does an admirable job of giving everyone equal time and character development without falling into stereotypes. It's a diverse crew, with a wide range of ethnicities and religious beliefs. The most controversial character may be the militant feminist, and while her portrayal in that aspect may be flawed, she (like everyone else) is more than one note.

## The world

Williamson did his homework. This is a world with almonds that are still poisonous, mammals that are now extinct, and the language barrier is significant but not insurmountable. It's a hard world where those who mean to survive must sometimes be cruel, sacrifice their convictions, or die. Yet it's balanced with moments of grace and beauty. It could have very easily been written as ugly place, and thankfully Williamson does not take the easy path.

## The politics

Good fences make good neighbors. When all else fails, kill or be killed. The conversations about religion and feminism are far more involved than liberal/conservative ideology.

## Content warning

Our soldier characters are only human, and even a devout Christian can't help but swear, have a couple of drinks, and maybe some porn saved to his phone. They're lonely people, who justify doing things they know are wrong, and feel shame. Everything here strives to be as realistic as possible given the premise, which means a fair amount of sex, language, and violence.

## Who is it for?

A Long Time Until Now is for engineers who tolerate time travel stories. The involved descriptions of every construction project will be painfully tedious to readers who just want plot and adventure, which is how I would describe myself. However, I grew attached to the characters and the piece of civilization they built from practically nothing. It's not for fans of military fiction per-se, yet there's enough here to satisfy them as well.

## Why read it?

Ultimately, it's a sci-fi survival story, with interesting characters in meticulously built world. It has all the qualities that make good fiction: humor, heartache, excitement, and hope.

## A Princess of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs Review by Caroline Furlong UpstreamReviews.com

John Carter, gentleman from Virginia, sets out with his friend Captain James Powell to prospect in the Arizona territory. But their tools are not up to the task; to continue their endeavor, they need better equipment. Since Powell knows more of mining than Carter and has greater familiarity with the area, he is the one who sets out to collect the gear they require.

Unfortunately, Powell is captured and killed by Apaches. Feeling something amiss after spotting three dots on his friend's trail, Carter goes looking for him in time to rescue his body from the tribe. After a brief chase he manages to hide within a cave, where the adventure really begins.

## The story

Falling unconscious within the cavern, Carter awakens to discover he cannot move. When the Apaches find him, he seems doomed to die, but something scares them off. Hours pass, with Carter unable to rise until one final wrench of his will brings him to his feet – or seems to do so. For on the floor of the cave lies his body, still clothed, while his consciousness or spirit stands looking back, completely naked.

Exiting the cave, he studies the sky until his eyes land on the planet Mars. Feeling called to that far-off world, he raises his arms and has a brief impression of hurtling through space. The next morning, he wakes stretched out on a dead seabed of the Red Planet.

John Carter is not there long before he encounters the Tharks, or Green Martians. Having sighted one of their incubators and gone to investigate it, Carter is perceived as a threat and the Tharks waste no time firing on him. They are surprised, however, when their prey leaps away – several feet away, to be precise. For Carter is of Earth, accustomed to a different gravity, where his strength and mass are the equal of most men on his homeworld.

But on Mars his strength and weight are different, allowing him to perform feats no Martian can accomplish. The Tharks, who are typically stronger than the Red Martians that also inhabit their dying planet, soon learn the gentleman from Virginia can kill one of them with a single blow.

Taken captive by the Tharks, Carter's strength and prowess prevent the Green Men from enslaving or binding him. For the next three days he learns more about their customs and way of life, nearly perishing in the process at the hands of a pair of great white apes. In the process he earns a loyal guard dog (calot) and the friendship of one of the female Tharks: Sola.

On the third day of his captivity John Carter watches the Green Men attack a convoy of flying ships. Three manage to escape but the rest are destroyed, and their crews killed. Only one woman survives the destruction: Deja Thoris, princess of Helium. It is love at first sight for Carter, who will find himself drawn into more and greater adventures trying to see his princess safe. Green Martians and Red soon learn that there is no threat on Barsoom more deadly than a motivated gentleman from Virginia, whose strange brand of courage, honor, and compassion has not been seen on the Red Planet for millennia.

## The characters

John Carter is the point-of-view character, so the story is told entirely through his eyes. A gentleman and a fighter, Carter never hesitates to enter battle and will often leap into combat for the sheer joy of it. A rare trait in the present, it is nevertheless a necessary one in a dying world where the denizens know only war, and it makes establishing an understanding with both the Green and Red Martians easier than many a modern novel would have readers think.

Deja Thoris is the space princess archetype to top all others. Kind, wise, entirely conscious of her position and her honor, she would outshine almost all other women to bear the title of princess on either Earth or Mars. It is not difficult to see how and why John Carter falls in love with her.

Tars Tarkas is a figure who commands respect. Cunning, strong, and a better politician than he lets on, the conclusion to his arc will leave one cheering. Sola has time to shine and Woola, John Carter's dog (calot), also receives plenty of characterization.

Kantos Kan rounds out the immediate cast and is absolutely one of the best characters in the book. Though sidelined a fair bit toward the end, he is nonetheless a memorable friend to the protagonists and one that readers will wish to see again.

## The world

Mars – or Barsoom, as its inhabitants name it – is a rich culture entering its twilight. Large parts of the first few chapters are spent explaining the beliefs of the Tharks, and it is too bad that Carter didn't learn Red Martian culture sooner. Theirs is less harsh than the Green Men's but it is still distinctly different from Earth's, with a set of austere conditions imposed by the planet's declining resources. A reader will marvel at the extent of the worldbuilding that went into *A Princess of Mars* and never want to leave it.

## The politics

The only politics are those related to the story's world. Edgar Rice Burroughs had no trouble ignoring the current events of his time to tell a story that is as entertaining now as it was when it was first published.

## Content warning

There is a tribe of Tharks that wear the heads and hands of their fallen enemies as both trophies and armor, and there is a disturbing scene at the end of the novel in a cave. Carter is also shut up in a dark dungeon for three days, nearly driving him mad. None of these things are dwelt upon, though, and they pass quickly enough readers will barely notice them.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who loves space opera and sci-fi. *Star Wars* borrowed extensively from the pattern set by *A Princess of Mars*, so reading the book gives one a new perspective on the beloved franchise created by George Lucas. Comic book lovers will also enjoy the book, since it helped to inspire Superman and dozens of other superheroes. The science is well-considered, and those interested in a pulse-pounding adventure will love this story.

## Why read it?

The book set the stage for modern pop culture to take off. Reading it will give one a better, deeper perspective of present-day stories. Besides this, it is a rip-roaring good yarn. Why not read it?

## **A Wizard's Guide to Defensive Baking by T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon) Review by Tom Feller**

I was still working my way through last year's Hugo Award packet, and this novel was last year's winner of the Lodestar (not a Hugo!) Award, the Andre Norton (not a Nebula!) Award, the Mythopoeic Award, the Dragon Award, and the Locus Award for Best Young Adult Novel. The narrator is Mona, 14 year old orphaned girl who works in her Aunt Tabitha's and Uncle Albert's bakery. She has magical abilities, but they are limited to working with breads, cookies, cakes, and other materials used in baking. Furthermore, her magic is weak when it comes to icing and frosting. She lives in a city-state

in a world where magic is common, although not universal, and knows another wizard, Nacking Molly, who can re-animate dead horses. Mona has two familiars, Bob, a sourdough starter with carnivorous tastes, and a little gingerbread man she has animated. Her day normally starts at 4 AM, but one morning she walks into the bakery and finds the dead body of a young woman. This sets off a chain of events that by the end of the novel lead her to growing up and becoming a full blown wizard. Initially, she is charged with murder by the Inquisitor Oberon, the story's principal villain, but is released by the Duchess, the city's ruler, because of lack of evidence. Returning home, she meets Spindle, the 10 year old brother of the dead woman, and learns the dead woman was a thief/pickpocket with magical abilities. She also discovers that she is now the target of an assassin, the Spring Green Man, and that there is a conspiracy to overthrow the Duchess. If all this wasn't bad enough, her city is about to be invaded by an army of marauding mercenaries named the Carex. I found the novel to be quite enjoyable. I don't think I know any fourteen year old girls these days, but Mona's character rang true to me. By the way, all the young adult fiction publishers who looked at this book thought it was too dark for young adults, so the author published it herself.

## Across the Green Grass Fields by Seanan McGuire Review by Perry Middlemiss

This is the sixth volume in the author's Wayward Children series of fantasy novellas. Regan is a young girl whose friends are all starting to develop physically, while she gets bigger but remains in a childlike stage. A difficult conversation with her parents informs her that she is intersex, a revelation that she shares with exactly the wrong schoolmate.

In a resultant state of trauma, Regan runs away from school back home and encounters a door near a creek—the classic McGuire portal into another world. This time, the world she enters, known as the Hooflands, is populated by unicorns, centaurs, and other weird and dangerous hooved animals, most of which can talk, if you take the time to listen.

Regan's arrival portends a major change in the land, as all such human arrivals do, and the reigning queen sets out to capture Regan by any means. McGuire continues to impress with her tales of children in distress, and she always seems to find something new to say. I suspect that you could allocate each of them to a different branch of Joseph Campbell's Hero Cycle. That is meant in no way to diminish these stories. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

Alexis Carew series by J.A. Sutherland  
Review by Jim McCoy

Seriously, if you're an Honor Harrington fan and you haven't read J.A. Sutherland's Alexis Carew series, what are you doing with your life? And if you're an Alexis Carew fan who hasn't read Honor Harrington, what's wrong with you?

Or sumfin'

I mean, the two series are far from identical, but they have a lot in common. The plucky young woman who takes a position of authority in the navy, the career growth, the love interest, a certain willingness to do what is necessary even if it doesn't -strictly speaking- match up with the exact wording of their orders as given, etc.



The thing is, we get to meet Alexis younger and follow her career sooner and that means, potentially at least, more death rides than Honor got to have. We all love that, right? The charge directly into fire, the blasting away, the shooting, the carnage, horror, it all works for those of us who like a particular kind of literature, and it's all here. This is combat in its gritty, horrible detail, and yet...

It's not what you'd expect from a typical work of Space Opera. I mean that. And the reason is because of how the combat and interstellar travel are conducted.

Combat in the Alexis Carew series is closer to that of the Age of Sail than David Weber ever dreamed of for his Honor Harrington series. Stop laughing. I'm serious. When Alexis charges into battle, she's not loading a missile. She's loading a cannon. Granted it's a cannonball coated in Gallenium to decrease the effects of Darkspace (keep reading, I'll get there) but it's a freaking cannon, on a rail that has to be loaded from the muzzle and fired over open sights. When Ms. Midshipwoman Carew goes into her first boarding action, she's not just armed with a flechette pistol, she's carrying a cutlass. Yes, just like pirates used to use. And she's not afraid to use it. She actually does really well with it.

Space travel is so Age of Sail that it hurts. Real space transits are made to Lagrangian points, where the ship transitions to Darkspace. This is where the Age of Sail thing really takes over. It works out that Darkspace is filled with dark matter, which flows and creates "winds" that ships can sail on. It also collects in places and creates dangerous "shoals" that ships can founder on. So it is really close to real life travel on the high seas circa the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. The ships are actually three masted (sticking off the sides and top of the ship one hundred and twenty degrees apart) so you get people actually working the masts. The best of the crew are referred to as "topmen" because they handle the highest sails. Add in the fact that dark matter causes shots to curve and drop like what would happen when firing a normal cannon on planet Earth and if it wasn't for the loss of oxygen and need for suits, you'd never know you weren't in a real-world naval battle two hundred years ago. Sutherland did some serious research to write this novel and it shows. I don't know that John Paul Jones could have written a more accurate and entertaining account of combat at sea than Sutherland has.

Alexis Carew is not a character for the squeamish or for those of you who will rise up screaming about political correctness and strong female characters. Alexis is a teenage girl with a girl's smaller physical frame and more powerfully displayed emotions. She also starts out stuck on a world where she cannot inherit her grandfather's lands and political power due to her gender. That's why she takes to the stars. She is strong, proud, smart, tough and brave. Her guts get her through when nothing else will. I wanna buy this chick a drink, only I can't because she's too young. Also, because she doesn't really exist, but nobody's perfect.

Alexis finds herself in a world where she is doubted by the provincials that she has chosen to protect. She puts them all to shame, not with her words but with her actions. This is a woman that I would gladly follow. She has the grit, the determination and, above all, the intelligence to lead a crew into their duty. That's not to say that she's the nicest person ever. Her job is to fight wars and wars are fought by killing people. It's that she understands her job and that mistakes on her part will cost lives on her side. She is also forced to accept that doing the right thing will sometimes lead to the deaths of her "lads". I won't say she's happy about it, but she doesn't shy away from it. Well, for the most part.

This is a series of books that goes much further toward showing the true costs of war on the people that survive it than anything else I've read. Alexis looks the horrors of war straight in the face...

And blinks.

Hard.

It almost ruins her. She struggles with the guilt of giving the orders she had to give. She feels the weight of every crew member she loses in combat. That's not a small amount, especially for such a young girl. She attempts to balance some of the losses against some of the lives she's saved, but it's not easy. There may be a bottle involved...

It gets ugly.

Let's face it though. War is ugly. What war does to people is ugly. This is a fairly accurate depiction, which means it's going to be ugly. Kudos to Sutherland for the hard work he put into creating a character that acts the way she really would. And no, I don't say that because she's a girl. Men act like this too and it's time we acknowledged the cost.

There are six books to this series so far and I've read them all. Of course, I would read more but there aren't any more to read and I find myself somewhat vexed by that. Now, it happens that Sutherland had a somewhat rough 2020 (he's err... not the only one by the way) and didn't get any novels completed last year. I'll give him a pass because 2020 was pretty terrible, but still I've subscribed to his newsletter, and I keep hoping to see an update about a new novel coming soon. It hasn't happened yet, but I'm confident that it will. The ending of the last novel led me to believe that more was coming and that's all I'm gonna say about that.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Cutlass Blades

## Beat The Devils by Josh Weiss

### Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Alternate history stories are tricky. On the one hand, you get a chance to play with known historical events and people in a way that's completely(?) unexpected. On the other hand, if you don't get the mix right, it could fall flat and not meet expectations.

Beat The Devils manages the former, working several familiar historic elements into a noir story that feels like it could sit on the shelf next to Chinatown, The Big Sleep, and The Man in the High Castle. Set in an alternate 1958, where Joseph McCarthy is president of the United States, a double homicide brings detective Morris Baker into intrigue as he's pulled into the middle of the investigation — even becoming a suspect. The murders of film director John Huston and journalist Walter Cronkite set off a series of events that pull Baker into a conspiracy that involves Communists, Jews, a femme fatale, and a nuclear bomb.

The murder investigation is just the entry point into a more convoluted mystery that pulls Baker into a deeper conspiracy, and author Weiss piles on complication after complication in a way that may have you asking, "What more could go wrong?" And he keeps all the plates spinning with a good amount of speed, all within a framework of world-building that delivers story elements and characters that are familiar, such as Humphrey Bogart, but different enough that it surprises you and keeps you guessing throughout.

While it's a solid stand-alone story, I can see the potential in Morris Baker as an on-going character. He's got a good group of supporting characters around him (save for a dependable girlfriend...), and he just needs his own rogue's gallery.

Beat The Devils is a tightly written, well-paced yarn with a nice mix of alternate history and film noir elements. The world-building is thorough, and the characters are layered and dimensional. They feel lived in, warts and all. No one feels perfect, and no one feels two-dimensional. I very much enjoyed this story, and if there are more stories in this universe, I will look forward to reading them.

## Chaos on Catnet by Naomi Kritzer Review by Tom Feller

Strictly speaking, this novel is not a Hugo finalist, but rather a 2022 Lodestar finalist, which is given out at the Hugo ceremony for best young adult novel. The author has previously won a Hugo for the first story in the series, "Cat Pictures Please", and a Lodestar for the first novel in the series, *Cat-fishing on Catnet*. This novel picks up shortly after the previous novel ends, and both are set in a near future that features driverless cars. The main characters are CheshireCat, a truly sentient artificial intelligence secretly lurking on the Internet that loves cat pictures and videos; Steph, a teenage girl who, along with a few other cat lovers, knows Cheshire Cat's secret; and Nell, another teenage girl whose mother is missing. Steph and Nell meet at a charter school in Minneapolis and, both being new girls, bond with each other. Steph's mother is a genius computer programmer who until recently, along with Steph, has been on the run from her abusive husband, now in jail. Her parents divorced, Nell's mother is a fundamentalist Christian whose sect is called the Abiding Remnant while her father is in a poly-amorous relationship with two women. They all live together with one of the women's lesbian lover. Molly's best friend Glenys has also disappeared, and, with CheshireCat's help, their efforts to find her drive much of the plot. Steph also gets involved the Mischief Elves, a Pokemon-GO style web site that gives its members assignments while Nell is involved with the Catacombs, a similar site for fundamentalist Christians. Both sites come to resemble Fight Club more and more as the novel goes on. They eventually learn that both are operated by an AI similar to Cheshire Cat that has been created by Rajiv, a former associate of Steph's mother. He is a nihilist seeking to destroy the modern world. This novel was very hard to put down, and it is worthy finalist.

## Dark Sojourns by Beth H. Adams Review by Heath Row

This 2002 *Dark Shadows* gen novella published by Secret Pleasures Press "is intended for entertainment of the fans of *Dark Shadows* and is not intended to infringe on copyrights and trademarks held by others." I believe I ordered it from Agent with Style about a decade ago. Agent with Style—once a wonderful source for hard copies of fan fiction—seems to have stopped operating in 2015 (their domain name expired in 2020). Regardless, I finally got around to reading Adams's 138-page novella, which is well written, well printed, and spiral bound with a couple of pieces of photo collage artwork. As fan fiction goes, it's relatively clean reading—well edited—and I only remember a couple typographical errors.

Barnabas Collins and Willie Loomis have left Collinsport, Maine, moving down the east coast eventually to Augusta, Georgia, where they meet their neighbor, a friendly single mother who works as a plastic surgeon. The novella is largely a love story, perhaps presaging that of *Twilight*, with Collins and Loomis becoming fond of the mother and her 5-year-old daughter. (Collins finally expresses his appre-

ciation for Loomis's caretaking and service.) Collins and the mother eventually fall in love. But Collins is torn: between his need for human blood and love for a woman, and between Angelique's witch curse and the hope that if he commits "an act of selfless love," Josette will be returned to him.

On one level, the premise of the novella seems to be that the only bad thing about Dark Shadows is that Collins is a vampire. What if he weren't? I'm not sure he'd even be interesting were that the case. More so, however, it's the story of a love reclaimed and reunited. The idea of a reincarnated Josette, of Collins finally being able to find love after 400 years are very human desires and tensions worth exploring, even if their resolution effectively ends what turned out to be the best part of the television program. After all, Dan Curtis's creation admittedly plagues the writer still.

Adams populates the story with several other interesting characters, including a coworker named Ty and his grandmother, Mignon, who practices "a bit of voodoo." There are also several notable scenes. In one, Collins saves his new love from an attacker in a parking lot. In another, she confronts him about slaking his thirst on young prostitutes even though he'd promised not to do so. Most husbands aren't guilty of such a severe betrayal, but its parallel to spousal infidelity resonated. And the surgeon channels her inner Victor Frankenstein as she tries to save Collins from himself and his dark desires, too.

A fun read—and better than most fan fiction I've encountered online.

## Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin by Terrance Dicks Review by Heath Row

This 1977 Target book is a novelization of the four-episode Doctor Who serial "The Deadly Assassin," which originally aired Oct. 30 to Nov. 20, 1976. I just love these slim little volumes. At about 120 pages, they're perfect for reading in one or two evenings, and I recommend reading them after you see the original episodes, if you're able to read and watch in close proximity. I read this one evening seeking inspiration for a drabble (a 100-word fan fiction story) I wrote and submitted for an online challenge; I have not yet seen the television serial.

As a novelization, I'd presume it's the expected linear retelling of the original teleplay by Robert Holmes. (I haven't seen the episodes yet, but the Target adaptations don't tend to ever stray too far from the source material.) The storyline occurs following "The Hand of Fear," at the end of which, the fourth Doctor takes his companion Sarah Jane Smith back home. In fact, that makes the serial notable. Reportedly, "The Deadly Assassin" is the only original Doctor Who story not to include a companion. Tom Baker thought he could carry the show on his own, and this was a pilot of sorts for a solo Doctor. In the end, producers determined that companions were necessary. Regardless, the story works well without one.

At the end of "The Hand of Fear," the Doctor is summoned back to Gallifrey. There, he has visions of the assassination of the President on Resignation Day, and he sets out to ensure that that does not occur. However, despite his assistance during the Omega crisis, law enforcement still considers him a criminal and tries to stop his interference—taking him for an assassin himself! The book explores the assassination plot, political intrigue among the Time Lords and one of the Doctor's most formidable opponents, and the resolution of the crime investigation.

It's a fun read, shades of *The Manchurian Candidate* and *The Dead Zone*. Dicks works in some useful Time Lords back story, including a description of their social hierarchy; a reference to another Target book, *The Three Doctors*; details of the biological nature of the Time Lords' telepathy; brief technical

details for the Matrix; and a description of what happened after the Master died. That might not be as much additional exposition as readers received in Glen A. Larson and Roger Hill's Knight Rider novelization, but the additional detail is welcome and helpful.

It's perhaps worth reading after you watch the serial. It's best not to know what's going to happen—or how—and I have high hopes for the visualization of the Master. The cover art suggests an approach akin to the Phantom of the Opera.

## Drosselmeyer: Curse of the Rat King Review by Trevor Denning [UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Did *The Nutcracker* need a dark and gritty YA prequel? Yes. Yes, it did. And now we have one. Movie score composer, Twitter personality, and author Paul Anderson launches a new trilogy with *Drosselmeyer: Curse of the Rat King*, the story of a young boy named Fritz, who later becomes the mysterious godfather and wizard whom we later come to know as Drosselmeyer.

### The story

In the world of Five Kingdoms, Fritz and his younger brother Franz suffer a Dickens-esque existence at Ivanov's Home for Orphaned Boys. Knowing little of their lives before the orphanage, all Fritz has from their parents is a gold pendant which he keeps carefully hidden. One day, after being imprisoned in a wooden box as punishment, magic erupts from Fritz in a powerful explosion.

Days later he wakes up in a mysterious house full of clocks and under the care of the wizard Boroda. The older man explains that Fritz has snapped, unlocking his magical potential. If he wishes to train under Boroda's instruction he may. Franz cannot stay. However, Boroda can arrange for Franz's adoption by a duke, and he will forget everything about his brother. Should Fritz object they will both be sent back to the orphanage.

Fritz reluctantly accepts, and soon finds himself learning both magic and hand-to-hand combat. To Boroda's surprise, Fritz (a late bloomer as wizards go) is an extraordinarily fast learner. Soon the boy is ready for St. Michael's, a school where young wizards study side-by-side with the children of the royalty they will later serve. Like all schools, there is an urban legend about a student who died on the school grounds and now haunts the surrounding woods. Unlike most schools, it may not be just a story.

One day Boroda's house is attacked by a giant ape. Wizard and apprentice barely escape. How the monster found the hidden fortress is another mystery in a world filled with questions and deceptions.

Between homework assignments at school and grueling lessons with Boroda, Fritz soon falls in with his other wizard classmates and a fowl of the Czar's son. His trusted ally, Marzi Pan, accidentally let slip that she and her master were also attacked in their home. A wizard's house is a closely guarded secret. How did the creatures find them? Who sent them? And most of all, why? When a political assassination strikes, it becomes clear something big and dangerous is looming.

As if that's not enough, Fritz falls in love with Marzi. And if that isn't enough to further complicate his life, he's repeatedly attacked by swarms of evil rats.

## The characters

Fritz/Drosselmeyer may start out as a wide-eyed innocent, naive even in his strange circumstances, but there is another side to the boy. As tensions rise Fritz discovers a side of himself that is iron strong, but chilling to the reader.

Boroda is secretive, like any good wizard. At turns he is cruel, deceitful, compassionate, and vulnerable. Through it all, he fights to maintain a steady control in difficult circumstances. The wizard carries a deep wound, which humanizes an already complex character.

Among all of Fritz's classmates, none is more significant than Miss Marzi Pan. Like Fritz, she is a wizard-in-training with a good heart. She brings out things in Fritz even he never dreamed were there.

## The world

This is a Victorian style world of kings and czars, rich and poor. Some shopping districts are for magical items and some strictly mundane. There's no school of wizardry, so students with a magical bent have to learn their academics by day and their dark arts at night.

## The politics

For the most part, the Five Kingdoms seem to be autonomous. But there seem to be movements in the shadows that could launch a world war. Thankfully, there are no real-world analogs to distract us. Thompson just wants to tell a good story.

## Content warning

Some of the battles get surprisingly graphic, even for a YA novel. Fritz takes a delight in vanquishing rats that Conan the Barbarian would respect. A key plot point also hinges on a homosexual tryst. Otherwise, the romance is chaste and the language is tame.

## Who is it for?

Longing for more Harry Potter, but wish it had a little more of an edge? This is for you. Perhaps no one was asking for a prequel to *The Nutcracker*, but sometimes we don't know what we want until we see it, and this happens to be one of those times.

## Why read it?

The characters are what really make the story here. Thompson has built his fantasy world for them, and we are invited to thrill in every new discovery with Fritz on his journey to becoming Drosselmeyer. There have plenty of stories about young orphans going off to school. This is the first one in quite some time to have strong male role models, which is only incidental to the narrative. There's no agenda here. Just the pure, simple joy of storytelling.

The Einstein Intersection by Samuel R. Delaney  
Review by Perry Middlemiss

This novel won the 1968 Nebula Award for Best Novel and was nominated for the 1968 Hugo Award for Best Novel in the same year. The book is set on Earth in the far future after a time when the planet has been exposed to large amounts of radiation, causing a vast number of mutations among the human population.

After Friza, the life of his life, is found dead, our main character, Lobey, sets out to track down Kid Death—who seems to have committed the murder—and to return Friza from the realm of the dead. This is Delany's take on the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, with bits of the Christ and Minotaur myths, and cultural references to Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow thrown into the mix.

This doesn't quite work for me. Well-written as it is, I don't get a sense that it was going anywhere of importance. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

Escape From the Future by Paul Clayton  
Review by Michael Gallagher  
[UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Paul Clayton, whose novella *Crossing Over* has been feted on this site before, has now released an anthology of short stories. In *Escape From the Future*, Clayton serves up five short stories offering everything from modern-day comedy to eco-pocalyptic sci-fi.

The stories

The types of stories here run quite a gamut. Perhaps gamut isn't the right word; it might be something more akin to running a baseball diamond, with human politics and emotions going in every direction. The ride starts off with the eponymous novella *Escape From the Future*. Here, a family in 1960s San Francisco travels to present-day San Francisco, with the help of a time machine the grandfather had been working on in their basement. It's briefly mentioned by the story's main character, 14-year-old Bobby, that Grandpa had worked with Nikola Tesla in the 1930's, and that upon the scientists' death, the FBI seized his papers, "But they didn't get all of them."

Grandpa had briefly shown the machine to Bobby in secret, explaining how some of the controls work and ominously noting that "It won't let me set it past 2025". Grandpa suddenly turns up missing after spending the past months grieving his dead wife and slowly slipping into a depressive state. Bobby spills the beans about Grandpa's project, and the family piles in and makes the journey to the coordinates he'd last set, the modern-day Land of Needles, Bum Crap and Rampant Petty Larceny. That's only the first half of the story, however; their culture shock upon arriving and what they discover when they finally find Grandpa is when things really kick into gear. The contrast between the two eras, the seemingly impossibly fast societal decay of the city from a cultural and industrial mecca to city-sized third world nation are at the center of the story's drama. Clayton's masterful ability to write human pathos gives as a stark warning to what awaits America should the state's ongoing crusade to break the final bonds holding the family together finally snap. It's far and away the longest story in the bunch at 67 pages, and once you're through it, you'll be emotionally exhausted, but will nonetheless feel compelled to finish the journey.

Following that is *Human Exclusion Zone*, which finds Baird Dorsey, a champagne eco-activist out on the town about to bed a beautiful and mysterious young woman. He's the figurehead behind the radical Bring Back Nature movement, a cause so pro-nature it's anti-human. In an effort to cede more of the country back to its wild natural state, he spearheaded the formation of the first Human Exclusion Zone in the Pacific Northwest. When we fast-forward to that night when he finds his date, a bunch of cash and one of his hovercars missing, there are ten such zones. The establishment of these areas has pushed humans to second-class citizenry or to survive in the wilds, squatting in small illegal camps, ever a thorn in the BBN's side.

Baird naturally isn't feeling the pinch of the rules his organization has foisted on others; his fame among our social betters has set him up with a palatial house right on the border of his zone, overlooking the beautiful wildlands and far removed from the dangers within. Nouveau riche art lines his walls, two hovercars (well, one at the time of the story) are in his garage, and a voice-responsive AI is at his beck and call everywhere he goes. He eventually tracks his stolen hovercar to a spot in the nearby Human Exclusion Zone and decides to follow and see if he can talk some sense into his beautiful young date. He may just be magnanimous enough to forgive her impulsiveness if she was willing to show him an acceptable level of gratitude. Now, if he could only figure out why the car's Cabin Temperature light wasn't working . . .

Following that is the short but quite funny *Sometimes a Great Lotion*. This 2,300-word short about a writer trying to sell a script of the same name without compromising his art comes across as an almost cathartic work, albeit one every fiction writer who's ever gotten a rejection letter will find themselves nodding their heads to. Our protagonist Carl gets rejected so often, it's even happening in his dreams (he gives his elevator pitch to Oprah Winfrey). Early on, he bemoans his trials facing the TradPub watchmen thusly after one of his editors suggests he make his main character trans:

"This was my story, and I was not going to change it to fit some transitory doctrine. All the agents and editors were young, fresh out of the best schools—Vassar and Sarah Lawrence—and enamored of their role as cultural gatekeepers. How could I ever sneak my work past them?"

If any singular work by Clayton can sum up his sheer talent at the craft, this is the one; a writer writing about the emotional perils of writing will often come across as boring, narcissistic and self-indulgent in any but the most talented of hands. Clayton pulls it through. It's part exorcism, part fever dream, and an absolutely bonkers and welcome lightening of tone after the previous two entries.

'Til *Death or Whatever* begins with a doddering old lady, Ginny, stopping into her and her husband's favorite Chinese restaurant for lunch. Carrying what appears to be some futuristic fishbowl mounted on top of a speaker, her waitress asks her where her husband Harold is. Ginny sadly explains that Harold died but doesn't tell her that his life force is in the swirling clouded liquid filling the bowl. Despite the somewhat weirdly comedic nature of its setup, the story is a gut punch. As I mentioned in my review of Clayton's novella *Crossing Over*, he's particularly good at writing the tragedies and dramas unique to old age. In this case, it's the scary reality of facing the harder end of your life without the one you loved the most, at an age when less of society cares about you. For most of its run, it shines as weird humor, but there's a nagging undercurrent of worry beneath it all that surfaces and swallows you whole right at the final words.

Finally, *Adios, America* is another longer story, and a banger of a closer. It originally appeared in another anthology, *Appalling Stories 4*, and I can see why it got chosen. In a nearby future where people are forced to surrender their lives to a process called Green Cremation at 65 to preserve resources, or prevent climate change, or whatever the party excuse is this month, our 70-year old protagonist is a



homeless fugitive, on the run for having the audacity to want to live. The female double-minority President of a hyper-socialist progressive political party has just won her second term and is doubling down on already authoritarian policies to usher out any traces of the Bad Old America.

Clayton uses the premise to delve more deeply into worldbuilding than he usually does here; this future sees the world as an open-air prison where an infantilized population shuffles along, unaware of its own captivity. He tells off a group of young people in an electric self-driving car, unafraid of anyone pursuing him because he knows the doors won't open until the vehicle has reached its destination. The petty theft he has to engage in to survive is easy enough, because people wander around constantly distracted by various devices. Public snitching on anyone over the age of 65 is common and encouraged. He's managed to panhandle and pickpocket just enough money to get himself trafficked to Mexico, if he can make it to his planned transport date; but his plans gain a considerable wrinkle when one of the staff at a library he holes up in during the day starts to recognize him.

## The characters

The scope of Clayton's stories here vary wildly, and so to do the origins and motivations of his characters. From geriatric widows to teenage boys to middle-aged would-be authors, everyone occupying the tales in their respective worlds is fleshed out and fully human (even Oprah Winfrey). Even in short stories, it's easy for the reader to connect to the characters on some level for the brief time you share with them.

## The world

Again, this changes wildly from entry to entry, and the reader may find themselves with setting whip-lash as the scene zips from a densely wooded forest where genetically engineered fauna prowls the night to a strip mall Chinese restaurant, but everything is richly detailed and steeps the reader in the story. Human Exclusion Zone especially drew me in. You know who's incredibly awful at this? Guess.

## The politics

While I praised Clayton for his political agnosticism in *Crossing Over*, whatever muzzle he had on his messaging has come quite a bit looser in this go 'round. *Adios, America* is perhaps the most blatantly political piece, which should come as no surprise considering it originally ran with the likes of Paul Hair and David Dubrow. That's not necessarily a strike against it, I thought it was the best story of the bunch, but politics are here in spades, dragging progressive policy through the mud with the subtlety of a shock jock. Likewise, the effects of the aftermath of years of untrammelled leftism are practically the entire point of the plot of *Escape From the Future*, and *Human Exclusion Zone* pulls zero punches in its pointing out the hypocrisy of the celebrity activist classes.

Your mileage for the tolerance of this sort of thing will vary of course, so reader beware. Clayton does a good job of using politics to shine a light on its often unintended (or worse, intended) consequences on the people that have to live under it. The addition of this human element makes what is in there more palatable. I'm generally not much for message fiction of any stripe, but enjoyed these stories nonetheless. The brief breather during *Sometimes a Great Lotion* and *'Til Death or Whatever* definitely helped.

## Content warning

I had moderate depression after reading the book's story of the same name. This wasn't so much Clayton's fault as reading about 1960s San Francisco knowing what it turned into.

Who is it for?

Do you like well-described worlds? Characters with soul? Politics with a point? Pick up this book. It's a one-man multi-genre showcase of how it's done.

Why read it?

I'm a big fan of Paul Clayton; put plainly, the guy can write. This compilation shows his strengths in not just the speculative fiction we're used to seeing from him, but in comedy and drama as well (I consider 'Til Death or Whatever a very much a drama with a single sci-fi trapping). It's quality fiction, pure and simple.

## Fireheart Tiger by Alette de Bodard

Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was nominated for the 2022 British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Short Fiction, as well as the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. Alette de Bodard continues to impress with this new novella set in a fantasy world inspired by pre-colonial Vietnam. As a young girl, Thanh, daughter of Empress Binh Hâi, was sent away to the neighboring country of Ephteria, ostensibly as a hostage—but also to learn the ways of their court and their people. Years later, she returns home to act as political adviser to her mother, who is rather unimpressed that Thanh did not become the powerful young woman she wanted.

As a result, she tends to treat Thanh as the least of her children. But fire follows Thanh: The castle in which she lived in Ephteria burned to the ground, and now small fires are breaking out in her mother's palace. She finally gets a chance to redeem herself in her mother's eyes when a delegation arrives from Ephteria, including Princess Eldris, a young woman who Thanh had been involved with previously.

Against a backdrop of colonial political power games, de Bodard explores the relationship between the two young women and how it affects both of them—and their two countries. I don't think de Bodard fully lands the ending, but this author is one to watch. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

## Five Hard and Crunchy SF Tales by Michèle Laframboise

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

When I say “science fiction”, most people immediately picture Star Trek/Star Wars-style space opera, or at least fiction reacting in some way to developments in the “hard” sciences. Founded by inventor Hugo Gernsback editing *Amazing* and solidified by engineer John W. Campbell editing *Astounding*, ‘hard SF’ remains core to the American version of the genre. Storytelling generally takes priority over lyrical prose in hard SF and the stories are often idea-focused rather than character-driven.

In contrast, I think of French-Canadian SF as on the more literary end of the spectrum and more likely based on the “soft” sciences, like sociology or psychology. It is therefore a bit surprising to come across a Francophone Canadian writing SF so hard it is positively crunchy.

Michèle Laframboise is a bilingual writer who writes in French but publishes as often in English. Indeed, these days she is making her presence in English felt everywhere. Just this month alone, she has

stories in Analog and Asimov's—arguably the top American markets—as well as Canada's On Spec magazine. The current release of Five Hard and Crunchy SF Tales presents yet another opportunity to discover her uniquely French-Canadian brand of hard SF.

“Thinking Inside the Box,” is the first story in the collection and the most accessible. Told from the perspective of the alien assigned to deal with a group of touring humans, it provides an amusing example of how one's cultural assumptions can be problematic and the corresponding benefits of cross-cultural thinking. I was initially distracted by a few minor glitches in Laframboise's self-translation, but one does not expect perfect English from an alien liaison officer, so that ultimately added to, rather than detracted from, the piece. It is really fun.

“Ice Monarch” is a dystopian tale and the most lyrical of the stories here. It has a much more European feel, a certain cold detachment to the narration that immediately distinguishes it from the typical American first-person narration. Ray Bradbury or Kurt Vonnegut might have been capable of writing something similar—had either been trapped in an isolated cabin at the north pole under siege by robotic polar bears and trying to capture that mood on paper. Everything about Laframboise's icy future makes the reader shiver.

“Closing the Big Bang” is another dystopian future; more action oriented, but like “The Ice Monarch,” the critique of late-stage capitalism and the evils of technology feels more European than the more conspiracy-oriented dystopias one gets from Americans. In Laframboise's universe, the conspirators are generally the good guys.

“Women are from Mars, Men are from Venus” is a great little story translated by Sheryl Curtis that nicely illustrates the personal impacts of demographics and cultural expectations. I have a no-spoilers policy, so I won't give away the slow reveal here, but American SF, particularly media SF, could really benefit from a lot more stories like this one.

The fifth and final story, “Cousin Entropy,” is the hardest of hard SF. It is all idea with essentially no action. Covering roughly 20 billion years of history, its scope reminds me more of Olaf Stapledon's universe-spanning novel, *Star Maker*, than any American author I can call to mind. Laframboise's disembodied narrator reflects on the heat death of the universe—a fascinating contemplation, but not exactly a *Star Wars* actioner. It certainly has its “huh!” moment, but there is something uniquely French about the voice here that is both fascinating and a bit alien.

If you're interested in reading hard SF with a distinctly European edge, or in keeping up with what's happening in the French-Canadian version of the genre, this is a great place to start. It's also a great little sampler of five top-end English language magazines/anthology series you might not be familiar with if you are only reading Analog and Asimov's. I am quite sure we will be seeing a lot more of Michele Laframboise in English, so this is also your chance to be the first on your block to tune in. I consider the ebook five dollars well spent.

## Foundation by Isaac Asimov Review by Heath Row

I've been reading science fiction, fantasy, and horror for about as long as I've been able to read—since before kindergarten. And I've never, ever read *Foundation*. I've long known that it's a classic, that it's one of the best sf series ever. In fact, in 1966, it received a Hugo for Best All-Time Series, beating out no less than Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Barsoom* series and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. (I bet

that inspired some lively conversations among fen.) But I've never, ever read it.

Why? It was supposed to be daunting, convoluted, complicated. It took place over the course of something like 30,000 years and was therefore way multigenerational. As a preteen, I'd fizzled out reading Frank Herbert's Dune series midway through *Heretics of Dune* when I realized that I didn't really know who anyone was anymore. (Having reread Dune during the pandemic, I intend to take another stab at it. Who knows whether that experience will hold.) And I was put off by the idea of a series focusing primarily on conversation, psychology, and politics—with characters who don't stick around. So I've avoided and neglected it despite reading and enjoying much other Asimov.

When the television show came out, I returned to the idea, wanting to read at least the first novel before watching the Apple TV+ program, and last month, I finally turned to it. But even the TV show wasn't the real reason why. You see, I learned that *Foundation* is a fix-up.

Yes, though a novel, *Foundation* is in fact the melding together of several short stories. The book, originally published in 1951, contains the stories "Foundation" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, May 1942), "Bridle and Saddle" (*Astounding*, June 1942), "The Big and the Little" (*Astounding*, August 1944), and "The Wedge" (*Astounding*, October 1944). They are reprinted in the novel as the sections "The Encyclopedists," "The Mayors," "The Merchant Princes," and "The Traders." And the first section of the novel, "The Psychohistorians," was written last as an introductory section to the first Gnome Press edition of the book in order to help it begin less abruptly.

Despite the long-time frame, the multiple characters, and the wide-ranging aspect of the series, the series of novels is in fact quite manageable because it was written and originally published in pieces and parts. The same is true for the next two novels in the series. *Foundation and Empire* combines "Dead Hand" (*Astounding*, April 1945) and "The Mule" (*Astounding*, November-December 1945), and *Second Foundation* incorporates "Now You See It..." (*Astounding*, January 1948 and June 1949) and "...And Now You Don't" (*Astounding*, November 1949 to January 1950). That means that not only can you take breaks while reading the books if you need to, but the books are also designed for readers to do so in a logical and story- —or stories- —serving manner.

So I finally read *Foundation*. And it was grand. Asimov's introductory remarks, "The Story Behind the 'Foundation,'" goes far to detail the history of the book and series, as well as situate it in the writer's life and career. "[T]o make sure that [John] Campbell really meant what he said about a series, I ended 'Foundation' on a cliff-hanger," Asimov wrote. He even writes about the popularity of the series and how he kept getting called back to it to write more even though he'd moved on to other projects. An interesting background story.

And the novel itself? Even if read in several sittings rather than as its pieces and parts? Excellent. *Foundation* effectively tells the tale of a society as it falls and struggles to rise again, as various parts of society—different social functions and groups—pass the baton to rebuild. The psychohistorians give way to the encyclopedists, who hand things over not entirely willingly to the mayors, who pave the ground needed by the traders and merchant princes to emerge. The book is still largely political and the narrative predominantly conversational, but it's an interesting look at social forces at work—even religion. Not sure how I would've taken to it as a younger man, but at my current age, I loved it.

So I started reading *Foundation and Empire* immediately after finishing *Foundation*. I don't always do that with series. I'll take a break and read other books before picking up Larry Niven's *The Ringworld Engineers* (having recently read *Ringworld*, below), which I'll probably read before returning to Jack L. Chalker's *Well World* and *Exiles at the Well of Souls*. Wanting to remain immersed in a series' world is a good sign that I'm enjoying a book. Sometimes you just don't want the book to end.

I've also watched the first few episodes of *Foundation* on TV. I recommend you read at least "The Psychohistorians" before doing so yourself, but already the program is different enough from the book that I don't think Asimov's characterizations or narrative will suffer dipping into both. Personally, I'm glad the show was produced. It helped pull me back to a series I've too long neglected. A series I need to now read to completion.

## Foundation and Empire by Isaac Asimov Review by Heath Row

I started reading this immediately after reading *Foundation*, reviewed above. That's not always the case with me for series or sequels. For example, while I'll return to Jack L. Chalker's *Well World* series and Larry Niven's *Ringworld* series based on the strengths of the first books—which I also read recently—I wasn't driven to do so immediately. With the *Foundation* series, however, after all these years, I had to. It's just that good. Again, what was I waiting for?

As above, *Foundation and Empire* is also a fix-up, collecting two short stories published over the course of several issues of *Astounding Science Fiction*. The novel combines "Dead Hand" (*Astounding*, April 1945)—here, the section titled *The General*—and "The Mule" (*Astounding*, November-December 1945). Both continue Asimov's ongoing exploration of the activities and impact of various kinds of men after the collapse of the Empire.

While *Foundation* considers the role of the psychohistorians, encyclopedists, mayors, traders, and merchant princes, *Foundation and Empire* narrates the first steps of a returning Empire, considering the generals, as various leaders reclaim border planets while vying for power against the Foundation. And the Mule is a very special leader indeed. You see, he's a mutant.

Both sections—stories, really—of the novel are excellent, but it is the Mule ("The Mule") that sings. The character Ebling Mis might remind readers of Hari Seldon. Bayta Darell might remind you of Teela Brown from Niven's *Ringworld*. She doesn't have the same luck, but her realization of why she and her husband Toran seem to be present for the occurrence of so many notable events struck me as a similar epiphany.

In the end, the Mule is humanized. Readers will empathize. And the Darells are left to continue to search for the Second Foundation, on the opposite end of the galaxy. Just as I searched for the next novel, *Second Foundation*, in a few boxes of paperbacks we have in our library. I don't have the next book easily at hand, so I can't continue reading the series immediately like I want to. Instead, I've turned momentarily to Lloyd Biggle, Jr. Hopefully my copy of *Second Foundation* isn't on the opposite end of the galaxy, too.

## The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood Review by Heath Row

Margaret Atwood's 1986 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has experienced a relatively major resurgence in the last handful of years. First gaining new traction about the time of President Donald Trump's election in 2016, the book has since re-entered the public conversation because of the Hulu streaming television show and, more recently, the Supreme Court's leaked preliminary ruling to strike down *Roe v. Wade*. Dark days call for dark books. While my wife read the book shortly following Trump's election with a book discussion group, when the Supreme Court ruling was leaked, I pulled the book from our

shelves to read it myself. I never had. I read it in two sittings, over the course of two evenings, and I'm of the opinion that everyone should read this book.

Atwood's book, some have said on social media, isn't prescient—though one could argue that it still is—it's history. Though both positions are unfortunate and valid, it might depend on a reader's point of view—and knowledge of history.

Yes, the Salem witch trials of 1692-1693 persecuted women for a number of social causes, including factionalism, family rivalries, fraud, sexism, and socio-economic hardships. Yes, the United States government jailed tens of thousands of "promiscuous" women during World War I ostensibly to protect soldiers from prostitutes and sexually transmitted diseases. Yes, more than 60,000 people—mostly non-whites, and mostly women—were sterilized in a majority of the United States during the 20th century, well into the 1960s. And yes, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study led to the death of more than 100 untreated Black men between 1932 and 1972. Eugenics and race- and gender-based persecution is real, and more recent—still current—than we might have realized. And they could return.

Atwood's book is a stark, simply told story of a society in which all rights are removed for women. They cannot work. They cannot maintain their own bank accounts or credit cards. They can either work in forced labor camps, as prostitutes, as caregivers for men, or as handmaids—surrogate mothers—for the wealthy, well to do, and well positioned. Men are in charge. It's a riveting read and well worth public attention. The most recent documented attempts to ban the book in American high schools—in 2020—failed, and the book was retained.

Not only is Atwood's novel socially relevant and a serious warning for citizens not considering the body politic—it's inspired me to learn more about body autonomy and integrity as human rights issues—it's a very well written book. Largely considered a dystopian novel, I'd suggest it qualifies as social science fiction in which society, politics, and culture become the speculative technology under consideration. I view it on par with Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Cautionary tales for times of societal unrest and upheaval.

The end piece, "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," is offered as a fictional academic paper and presentation delivered at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. The paper examines the discovery and legitimacy of the document, its potential authorship, and the impact of the Gilead regime.

Along the lines of social science fiction, it also mentions the "top-secret Sons of Jacob Think Tanks, at which the philosophy and social structure of Gilead were hammered out." Yes, the persecution of women was planned and socially engineered, with the Sons of Jacob in stark opposition to Isaac Asimov's Foundation, which was entrusted to preserve and protect human knowledge in order to rise from the ashes of a collapsed society.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is about the societal collapse in terms of the removal of citizens' rights, and the first generation of women to experience it—the transition. To paraphrase the Aunts—female educators and wardens—that first generation will get used to it, and future generations of women won't know any better because they won't know the way things were before Gilead. That, I think, is the true horror of the book.

Jaguar Rising by Amanda S. Green  
Review by Pat Patterson

The first book in this series, *Nocturnal Origins*, was one of the first books I reviewed when I started out in 2014. I blush now, when I admit that I wrote the review with my tongue so firmly placed in my cheek that my ear was slightly bruised. At the time, I was a bit put off by message-fiction, in which all of the value seemed to be related to whether some social or political agenda was promoted, and good story-telling was ignored. As an act of rebellion, I decided to write the review as if I were one of the worst of the message-fiction lovers, and had missed the point, utterly. The title of my review on Amazon was “A blisteringly erotic LGBT allegory.”

I blush, again.

If my count is correct, this is the tenth installment in the story of Mackenzie Santos, who started her story as a cop, only to have complications added over the past seven years (or so) of her life in literature. Thus, we have a significant problem for the author who writes a series:

How do you address the disorientation of a reader who enters the world, somewhere other than at the beginning? And, how do you do that, without boring the reader who has been following the story all along?

Without detailing the alternatives, other than saying that failure to provide SOME mechanism to bring the initiate up to speed is a BAD choice, I think the method Amanda Green chose in this volume is magnificent. She incorporated most, if not all, of the necessary background into the narrative. Thus, as we see Captain Santos preparing for a new job, we are also given the history of the job she is leaving behind. Her relationships with friends and family are revealed, in the course of the discussion of who will attend which event, and which child needs a snack, and who will provide it.

A straight data dump would likely have been indigestible to the novice, and a waste of space for the committed fan of the story. Furthermore, the transition from background to current events would have been clunky; with this treatment, I found the transition to be perfectly seamless.

I’m going to have to give part of my applause to the craftsmanship of the writing, and another part to what HAS to be some great planning of the story arc. Knowing what is going to happen in the life of the character isn’t always possible, I’ve learned, but it surely does make for good beginnings and endings to stories.

There is no guarantee that the principal characters in these stories are going to emerge unscathed, or even alive. After all, Santos herself dies in the first installment. However, WHATEVER befalls them is integral to the story; they aren’t killed off just for the sheer bloody-mindedness of it. So, be prepared to have some shocks, as you start your read. Green does NOT hamstring the villains, and in some cases, they accomplish their evil plans.

And those evil plans initiate RAPIDLY. Before the close of the second chapter, the action commences. I really wouldn’t call the book “action-packed,” as it isn’t one exploding spaceship/car chase after another. However, it IS story-packed, with no wasted narrative, and if there are any rabbit trails, I didn’t notice them.

The complications added to Santos' life over the years are present in the storyline; we see her in her role as a cop, as a Marine officer, as a member of a family with close ties, and as a person with responsibilities to a greater organization. All of these are strongly positive in her life, but they also take a toll on her, and there are times when her fatigue is palpable; I found myself wanting to take a nap for her.

I find myself wanting to tell the story, but I'm not going to do that, because spoilers. However, I WILL say this: there is no time in which Santos shape-shifts into a duck. I'm not saying whether that is a good thing or a bad thing; it WOULD bring an element of the absurd into the story, which would be out of place, but who am I to judge? At any rate rate, it doesn't happen, and we can thank the good sense of the author for that.

## Light Chaser by Peter F. Hamilton and Gareth L. Powell Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was nominated for the 2022 British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Short Fiction. If you are looking for a galaxy-spanning, massive time-span space opera, then you would be hard pressed to go past this one, currently shortlisted for the 2022 BSFA Award. The Light Chaser of the title is Amahle, a genetically altered and almost immortal human female, who is the captain, and sole human occupant, of the starship Mnemosyne.

Her role is to continually travel between the human-populated planets of the Domain strung across the galaxy, at close to the speed of light, stopping off to distribute new—and collect old—memory collars. Those are life experience-recording devices that her employers sell for entertainment. Between worlds, Amahle likes to sample the collars as well, and on one voyage, she comes across a 1,000-year-old message to her, from someone called Carloman, telling her not to trust the AI controlling her ship.

Amahle is intrigued and then starts to find other messages from the same person, from different planets, leading her into a mystery concerning her own life and the future of the human race in space. Classic space opera, with a human touch. What's not to like? (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

## Light Unto Another World by Yakov Merkin Review by Caroline Furlong [UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Soldiers have to be ready to improvise, to face changing threats and chaotic situations without panicking or being driven by their emotions. This ethos serves well on the battlefield and in civilian life, but it has its limits.

Thus, when Uriel Makkis is pulled through a mysterious portal to another world, he does not panic. But he does realize there is no easy way out, and that he has several disadvantages, one of which is lack of ammunition. Nevertheless, he is here for a reason, and he intends to see it through to the end.

The story

Arriving at base to prepare for two weeks of training, Uriel is looking forward to spending time in the field with his tank crew. Until he is yanked through a portal into a new world. Not long after, Uriel



saves two women from goblins.

The women thank Uriel for his help and the young man strikes up a friendship with the demi-human, Kirala. They take him to the nearest town, where he learns that the goblin menace has been growing but that the military has no apparent interest in eradicating it. Uriel also discovers that he is the only human in the village – a fact that tantalizes readers but matters little to the protagonist himself. He decides to help the locals with the goblin threat before going to the capital to retrieve his sword and learn more about the reason he was summoned,

Merkin makes some nice changes to the Isekai formula. After falling through the portal, with no obvious way home, Uriel decides his best course of action is to shoulder his gear and start walking – a welcome respite from the expected episode of pure panic which many portal fantasies leave their heroes to experience. There is no language barrier, but that makes the adventure flow more easily.

Uriel takes his time leaving the village, allowing Merkin time to introduce the world. Isekai typically prefer to skip to the plot but this tweak to the formula allows Uriel to make friends naturally at the same time he learns more about this world through observation. That gives him the chance to gain the nagging feeling something more sinister is going on. Something no one really knows about – or which they would prefer not to discuss.

## The characters

Uriel Makkis is a man of action in a situation that does not allow action to be taken often. So being transported to another world where decisive engagement is not only necessary but makes an actual difference is extremely satisfying for him. Unlike isekai protagonists left wondering what they should or should not do next, panicking at the thought of never returning home, Uriel takes one day at a time and refuses to let anxiety win. His practicality, curiosity, ingenuity, and willingness to do what is right are refreshing, not to mention enjoyable.

Kirala, the young demi-human mage whom Uriel saves when he arrives in this new world, is a well-drawn and sweet girl who may be a touch starstruck by the new Sword of Light. Nevertheless, she proves to have mettle, following him into combat and demonstrating her competency as well as her strength. The fact that he has someone kind who is genuinely concerned about him means Kirala's presence is a balm for both the reader and Uriel.

## The world

Picture *The Rising of the Shield Hero* or another isekai (portal fantasy) with Biblical overtones, add a healthy dose of common sense from the protagonist, and you have the general idea of *Light Unto Another World*, Vol. 1's setting. Merkin doesn't drop readers in with no idea what is going on nor give information dumps throughout the narrative. The story flows naturally, sharing information as Uriel learns or guesses it, so that the audience is never left wondering or wandering.

## The politics

Uriel makes mention of politics on Earth that annoy him, but these are brief and used primarily for comparison to the politics he is dealing with in this new world. Beyond these, there are no political arguments within the story.

Content warning

None. There is no objectionable content in this book. It is very PG friendly.

Who is it for?

Young readers looking for a fun adventure in another world. Parents who want to find such a story with a Judeo-Christian perspective for their children to read will discover that this novel satisfies that requirement elegantly. Those tired of modern isekai conventions will cheer this tale, which takes a more mature view of the tropes that have become ingrained in the genre. Fantasy readers of all ages will find this book entertaining, and the idea of a knight who carries an M4 into battle will likely intrigue them as well.

Why read it?

It's a good book with good characters on the adventure of a lifetime. Why not pick it up and give it a read?

## Lord of Light by Roger Zelazny Review by Perry Middlemiss

This novel won the 1968 Hugo Award for Best Novel and was nominated for the 1968 Nebula Award for Best Novel in the same year. On a distant planet, descendants of human colonists from “vanished Urath” (Old Earth) seek to survive against hostile indigenous races by undergoing genetic and physical enhancements that render them almost godlike in their abilities.

As a result, they start to believe themselves to be actual gods, naming themselves after various Hindu deities. The renegade Siddhartha, who goes under multiple names in the book but who just prefers “Sam,” undertakes a revolt against the other “gods” in an attempt to make the human technologies available to the natives.

I suspect that if you were familiar with the Hindu religion—and the Bhagavad Gita in particular—you would find this novel an intriguing retelling of the mythological stories. I'm not, and I didn't. At times, the plot seems deliberately obtuse and the dialogue, which can carry on for pages, often appears to be between two virtually indistinguishable characters and written in a faux, comic-book style without the self-awareness of that genre.

I can see this as a bridging novel between Zelazny's earlier work and his later commercial Amber novels, and it indicates—to me at least—that the author's startling 1960s burst of creativity and style was on the wane. I was very disappointed in this. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

## Magnetic Brain by Volsted Gridban Review by Heath Row

Inspired by an interview with Philip Harbottle in Justin E.A. Busch's wonderful sercon fanzine Far Journeys and subsequently reading Harbottle's book on the early history of sf publishing in England, *Vultures of the Void: The Legacy* (Cosmos, 2011), I picked up several examples of early British paperbacks and sf magazines, including this 1953 novel. Written by John Russell Fearn using the, oh, so

awesome pseudonym Volsted Gridban, the 128-page book was published by Scion Ltd. The book's cover painted by Ron Turner is absolutely beautiful and starkly colored but has little to do with the story—other than the image's portrayal of how a reader might imagine the titular magnetic brain. Hearn was a very prolific writer, publishing no fewer than 19 novels in 1953 alone. In that year, he wrote five novels as Gridban, with the bulk of his output credited to Vargo Statten. So the book was quickly written and inexpensively printed. Regardless, *Magnetic Brain* is a fun, brief read—I read it in two sittings—and includes several interesting science fictional ideas.

After crash landing on Mars and suffering a head injury, the protagonist, Timothy Arnside, receives medical care from a noted experimental Martian surgeon, who implants a device in his brain. Upon returning home on Earth, Arnside realizes that he is now able to read the minds of humans—but not Martians or Venusians—within a six-foot radius. The newfound ability plays helpful havoc with his marriage and affects his friendships and business prospects. (A relatively unsuccessful salesman, Arnside was fired shortly after his return home.)

Arnside becomes embroiled in industrial espionage, as well as governmental intervention in some Venusian fifth column activity initially led by a charismatic orator calling for armed defense of the planet Earth. That leads to the Venusians targeting the protagonist to remove the threat to their sleeper agents living on Earth. But Arnside's decaying moral fabric—caused by his falling prey to the temptations offered by his telepathy—and side effects of the surgical implant lead to a problematic end.

Other than the magnetic brain itself, the book also includes elements of anti-gravity flight—which could inspire a sequel, were one so moved—and a fictional wonder metal, niridium. The book isn't the best sf novel by any stretch of the imagination, but Hearn's authorship and Scion's publication are of historical importance. It offers an interesting look at the early state of mass-market sf publishing in post-war England.

## Marymae and the Nightmare Man by A. M. Freeman

### Review by Caroline Furlong

[UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Marymae has problems. No one believes that her imaginary friend is real. Then he goes missing and it is up to her to find him, because there are no others to take up the search.

Along the way Marymae realizes that a dark malaise is spreading through the forest of make-believe. With help from the denizens of the world of imagination, she sets out to save not only her friend, but her family and the rest of the world as well. For if the plane of make-believe falls, the real world won't be far behind!

#### The story

Living with her family on the edge of the forest of make-believe means that Marymae and the other children in her neighborhood are often warned away from the river that separates the real world from the fictional one. Marymae, however, is a braver girl than most. Every afternoon she goes to her favorite spot on the riverbank, sits down, and eats her popsicle. The other children are too afraid to go so close to the woods, so her practice is a rather lonely one.

But one day a bug boy and denizen of make-believe, Waldo, joins her by the riverside. Marymae hands him a popsicle and a strong friendship is born. For quite some time the two spend every afternoon

playing by the riverside after eating popsicles together...

...until the day that Waldo mysteriously misses their playdate.

Initially, Marymae thinks nothing of it. But when the day turns to a week and nightmares of Waldo running while looking over his shoulder in terror plague her, she is slowly led to the conviction that something is wrong. She also comes to understand that something has to be done; someone has to rescue Waldo.

But no one – not even her family – believes that Waldo is real. She and the other children are also forbidden to cross the river or enter the woods. It is this very ban which has led to no one believing that Waldo is real in the first place.

Eventually, Marymae decides there is only one thing left to do. She will have to cross the river, brave the dangers of the woods, find her friend, and save the day. There is no one else who can do it but her.

What the girl does not know is that something in the woods desperately wants her to come to it so that she may be transformed from the bright, brave girl she is into something else entirely. If she is to rescue her friend and protect the world, Marymae will have to rely on more than herself to do it. She will have to reach for the light in her soul to defend everything she holds dear – or see the universe fall into utter darkness!

## The characters

In sharp contrast to most female leads of the current era, Marymae is a charming heroine. The primary color she wears is pink, she has no problem playing the damsel-in-distress if that will rouse the courage of those who have been rendered timid, she sings, and she prays. Fierce as any young child determined to do the right thing, she never retreats to temper tantrums to get her way, though she is more than willing to tell off those who are misbehaving. She is a refreshing reminder that a girl embracing her femininity gives her a power all her own.

Waldo is a decidedly loyal friend. Filling the role of sidekick to Marymae, he nevertheless has opportunities to prove his mettle. Whether entering battle or standing guard over others, he supports his friend without having his masculinity compromised or his character demoted. A twist on the modern trope of the bumbling best friend, Waldo is a good return to the esquire archetype. He may not be the heroine's knight in shining armor, but he's a pageboy with heart and courage nonetheless.

Finally, there is the Nightmare Man himself. Neither a cackling villain nor a "misunderstood" one, there is more depth and strength in him than first meets the eye. Even he does not quite recognize who and what he is anymore, making way for an antagonist greater than himself to appear. Without the titular Nightmare Man, the book would not be half as much fun as it is.

## The world

The world takes its cue from *The Wizard of Oz*, every Disney princess movie in existence, then adds some elements from *Rise of the Guardians* for its foundations without copying any of the above. Throw in some *Anastasia* and *Dora the Explorer* for seasoning, along with Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeleine* and the result is a story world richer than anything written in at least three decades. Marymae and the Nightmare Man is a worthy heir to all of the above tales and feels like a continuation of their type of storytelling.

The politics

There are none. If this book had any politics within the narrative at all, they would ruin it completely.  
Content warning

None. This is a story for everyone regardless of age. You could read it to an unborn baby and the child would be the better for it.

Who is it for?

Fairy tale lovers, children of all ages, and anyone who wants a refreshingly feminine heroine they can cheer on. Those searching for a feminine model to emulate will find Marymae and the Nightmare Man inspiring as well as fun, while young readers will doubtless head outside in search of their own forest of make-believe. Anyone who already has such a forest nearby will probably recognize at least a few of the denizens in this book, allowing them to say hello to old friends.

Why read it?

It's a sweet story that would make a great gift for birthdays, holidays, or just because you want to give someone something they will enjoy for years to come. There aren't enough of those types of gifts to go around as matters stand. Do you need another reason to purchase Marymae and the Nightmare Man?

## Mission: Interplanetary by A.E. van Vogt Review by Heath Row

This paperback edition features an alternate title for van Vogt's 1950 novel *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*. Sporting an excellently dark painting cover by Stanley Meltzoff, the book is a fix-up of several short stories. Rewritten as a novel, the book includes material from "Black Destroyer" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, July 1939), "War of Nerves" (*Other Worlds Science Stories*, May 1950), "Discord in Scarlet" (*Astounding*, December 1939), "M33 in Andromeda" (*Astounding*, August 1943), and some new linking material.

As a fix-up, it basically follows a series of adventures and encounters of the crew of the *Space Beagle*, staffed by scientists, including Elliott Grosvenor, a Nexialist. A Nexialist is someone trained in integrated science and thought, accelerated learning techniques, and hypnosis. Unlike more specialized scientists, they are able to see the connections between different disciplines that others cannot see. In the book, Grosvenor is also skilled in conflict resolution and at encouraging people to collaborate to solve complex problems.

Given the creatures and situations encountered by the crew, they need all the help they can get. Some of the newfound enemies reach out to the crew accidentally—and alarmingly. Others have decided ill intent, perhaps to take over the rest of the universe. Only by working together is the crew able to overcome their challenges. And despite disagreements among the different crew members, leaders, and scientific disciplines, in the end, Nexialism gets a fair hearing.

The writing of van Vogt is clear and compelling, and as a fix-up, the novel offers multiple places to take a breather if one needs to take a break. I found the idea of Nexialism extremely intriguing and wonder if there's a real-world corollary among the sciences. It reminds me slightly of Ken Wilber's integral theory, a philosophy that strives to synthesize all human knowledge and experience. You can

learn more about Nexialism in Gautham Shenoy's 2017 article "The Nexialist approach: Van Vogt and the idea that 'specialisation is for insects'" (<https://tinyurl.com/Nexialism>). You can also read some select quotes from later portions of the novel at <https://tinyurl.com/vanVogtQuotes>.

## Monster Hunter International by Larry Correia Review by Declan Finn

In 2015 I kept running into a name on Facebook. It was vaguely familiar to me from trips at Barnes and Noble. He even popped up in one of my groups from time to time.

So after a while, I shrugged and said, Oh what the Hell? Why not? Being a bit of a cheap bugger, I decided to go for his Three-in-One collected work of his largest series at the time. And book 5 had just come out, so obviously someone likes it. And it was published by Baen Books, and I already read their top authors.

But I really just wanted to understand who or what was a Larry Correia, and why was he writing about the monster hunter video game franchise.

Unknown to me, I had started at the deep end.

I promptly went out and bought ... well ... everything else Correia has written, including the rest of MHI, his three Grimnoir and his Dead Six novels.

Seriously, these books are kinda awesome. I finished all of them in a matter of days.

One thing at a time.

The story

Five days after Owen Zastava Pitt pushed his insufferable boss out of a fourteenth story window, he woke up in the hospital with a scarred face, an unbelievable memory, and a job offer.

How can you argue with a plot description like that?

Yes, chapter one involves a brawl between the above-mentioned Owen Pitt, and his boss, who has become a monster of a completely different stripe than he had been. Let's just say that I would have considered throwing him out a window before he became a large furry sociopath.

Yup. Pitt has to go toe-to-toe with a freaking werewolf. And he has no silver. But Owen Pitt is 6'7", and gravity kills.

After Pitt hands in his resignation the hard way, he has officially fallen down the rabbit hole. Monsters are real — all of them. Pick a B-Movie horror film or a Lovecraftian monster. There are only two forces that deal with the legion of nightmares (that we see in this book). One is the Monster Control Bureau (MCB), a government bureaucracy that looks like it's run by either the Keystone cops, or whatever random thugs can be brought in off the street (though it'll turn out that they aren't random). The other group is Monster Hunter International, a private organization dedicated to collecting bounties as they exterminate the world's nastier pests — including vampires, giant spiders, and a few creatures from the black lagoon.

And MHI offers Owen Pitt a job. The perks are good — play with weapons, hang out with the stunning woman who recruited him, and the paychecks are insane — and, well, why not?

Unfortunately for Pitt, his first day on the job is going to get messy. He soon finds himself being haunted by an old Jewish ghost, is getting visions of an ancient entity called “the Cursed One who just arrived on US soil, is hip deep in ghouls, vampires, flying killer gargoyles that bleed magma, and did we mention that the Cursed One might be about to end the world?”

This book was awesome from start to finish. It didn’t really slow down. Despite the constant description of these books as “gun porn,” I have yet to be bogged down the guns. Most of the time, the weapon details are critical to the plot, considering what fresh new horrors they run into all the time. The chapters that amount to a large training montage are detailed and interesting and establish the characters better than heading straight into the action.

Then the shooting started and didn’t really stop for another three hundred pages or so.

And just remember, vampires only sparkle when they’re on fire.

## The characters

MHI has a wonderfully colorful cast of characters. From a former Vegas stripper who is more vicious and bloodthirsty than the lot of them, to Julie, a member of MHI’s founding family, who is also a sniper... and her physical description in the book reminds me a lot of Bayonetta, but we won’t go there.

There is a wonderfully broad collection of folks here, from the high school chemistry teacher who had to blow up his school filled with spiders, to the poor guy who had to kill his zombieified students, to the explosive-happy Q-variant, to Earl Harbinger — an old member of MHI’s founding family with an interesting history. The characters are likable, the dialogue engaging, and I don’t think I came across a single flaw in the execution.

## The world

For the record, MHI has nothing, repeat, nothing, to do with the Monster Hunter video game series. Thank you. All the books are fun. There’s one novel in the series that you swear is going to be boring, it rallies at the midpoint, and ends with a demonic werewolf hellspawn and his legion of unkillable feral weres.

Imagine a fully developed world for Buffy the Vampire Slayer, where the government has been aware of monsters for decades, and those civilians who have been dragged into the nightmare little world in the shadows have become Bounty hunters in their own right. Of five books, I saw only two punchlines coming ... only one of them was more like a feinted jab so we could be decked with an uppercut. That’s not bad.

Now, there isn’t a ton of worldbuilding in book one. Everyone is too busy trying not to die.

## The politics

The really, really, really short version about Larry Correia is that he is an unstoppable writing machine who pumps out books the size of Tom Clancy doorstoppers at least once a year, in addition to maintain-

ing an almost daily blog, is almost omnipresent online, and has a BS tolerance threshold lower than mine.

Correia is, personally Libertarian. He prefers his heroes to be smaller, private groups, rather than sprawling government bureaucracies, though even the bureaucracies get a fair shake in his books (one of them at the very least). He also owns a gun range, so he likes his weaponry.

Content warning

Monsters and gun violence. There may be a language warning. But I'd honestly give this to early teenagers. Granted, I read Tom Clancy novels when I was 14, so I may not be the best judge of that.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes, fun, innovative ways to use the forces of darkness as an enemy, and new ways to approach them.

Or, to paraphrase Correia himself, these books are for anyone who thinks Cujo should have been a five-page short story, with three pages debating which gun to use.

Why read it?

Larry Correia sets the standard for fun insane action and vivid characters.

## The Mummy of Monte Cristo by J. Trevor Robinson Review by Trevor Denning [UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Edmond Dantes had it all: a promising career, a loving father, and beautiful fiancée. Then, in a moment of petty jealousy, three bitter men conspire to ruin his life to advance their own fortunes. Of course, the problem with digging a pit is that you often fall into it yourself. When Edmond comes back from the dead (literally and figuratively in this retelling), he's educated, wealthy, cunning, and has a chip on shoulder under those wrappings.

The story

Even if you haven't read the classic French novel (I haven't), you know the story. A wholesome young man is framed as a political dissident and sent to an island prison where he meets an erudite and wealthy prisoner. After escaping the prison he uses a hidden treasure to fund his revenge. Of course, people and circumstances have changed while he was away and he has to reconsider some of his plans.

The characters

This is a huge book, and without a spreadsheet I couldn't begin to go over everyone even if we had the time. But to mention three we must begin with Edmond Dantes, the young sailor wronged who returns not just as the Count of Monte Cristo, but as its mummy (and inventor of a tasty new sandwich). In a dark fantasy like this, we don't need metaphor. He literally gives up his humanity to pursue revenge.

Mercedes is the woman taken from him, who unwittingly marries one of Edmond's rivals and has son



whom Edmond rescues. Fernand is the chief conspirator, who manages to steal Edmond's life and the woman he loves. He can also conjure fire.

## The world

This is an alternate history, where Napoleon defeated a zombie outbreak, and all manner of supernatural horrors abound. The time period of the original novel remains, but the addition of magic and monsters forces some significant changes. Robinson does an admirable job of incorporating these new elements in a way that really feels organic. The werewolves, vampires, and lesser known ghoulies aren't just there for their own sake. Every new element serves to develop the story and flesh out the world.

## The politics

France at this time was in upheaval, and Edmond is accused of conspiring to help Napoleon return to power. The politics, while present, are only there so much as to put the story in motion. From there, this is really about the characters and the moral consequences of their actions. Any political points that may have been present in the past take a backseat to pure revenge fantasy.

## Content warning

Well, there are monsters. It could be argued that Edmond's transformation from man to mummy is a sort of body horror, yet it's handled tastefully. Robinson maintains the style and tone of the novel. Except for the monsters.

## Who is it for?

It may seem geared toward the *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* crowd, but while that and its innumerable imitators was written as a silly cash-grab that worked, *The Mummy of Monte Cristo* is so much more. Robinson's rearrangement is written from the heart, with a deep respect for every source from which he draws. Anyone who loves classic literature and the darker side of folklore will find chocolate for their peanut butter.

## Why read it?

One of the advantages of fantasy is that it allows us to consider the real things of life from an unrealistic perspective. So while monsters may seem like a heretical addition to a story that has already stood the test of time just fine on its own thankyouverymuch, they can also help us notice things that were always there, always true, and easily overlooked. Also, it's a good time. Because, monsters.

My Luck by Mel Todd  
Review by Declan Finn

There are few fantasy novels that have an open world of magic. Kim Harrison has one. Larry Correia's Grimnoir is a second. There are a few others. But most prefer "Secret World," where magic and mystical properties are covert from the rest of the world. Because the moment magic becomes public knowledge, everything changes.

Mel Todd has created yet another. One with a size and scope that will eventually be on par with the others.

The story

Cori is a non-magical person in a world of magic. But things just keep happening to her. The body she found is just another in a long line. But this body has her name in his pocket. We follow along with her exceptionally strange life as she tries to get by with her triple associates degree.

Let's start with something simple. This has the best opening routine since "The building was on fire and it wasn't my fault." I hope I don't have to explain that reference. But the opening is a dark comedy routine that I read to anyone who would listen to me.

The characters

My Luck is almost entirely Character driven.

Much to my surprise, this entire book is carried by character and world building. And when I say I was surprised, I mean I was 80% of the way through the novel (chapter 34) when I realized that this wasn't what you would call plot heavy. Normally, I'm very dismissive of media that is clearly more of a setup for a series than a standalone ... but this was so well executed, and so self-contained, I can't really say anything against it.

And I mean I have nothing against it. Nothing at all. Another series of Mel's I read had errors sprinkled throughout—many were minor, but some just drop-kicked me out of the story. Here? Not a thing. Trust me, I was looking.

The world

Mel Todd excels at world building. As is her style, she opens each chapter with a bit of history and culture around the world. This time, magic has emerged in the world in the late 1800s— a few years after the Civil War (which, of course, leads to in-world alternate histories of what the Civil War would have looked like if magic had existed a few years earlier). Mel doesn't use it excessively—we hear about the partnership of Rasputin and Lenin, but not a lot about World Wars (okay, FDR is still an a-hole)—and it works just enough to give a flavor of the world.

The real world building comes throughout the story. Our heroine, Cori, is getting her degrees in the most practical certifications she can—EMT, Medical Assistant, and Criminal Law—which also happen to be the best points of view from which to present slices of the world. Within the narration, some of the sections that are obviously data dumps are worthy of David Weber. Then again, one section did start

with “most of the bodies I found were rarely stupid or boring.” Anything after that will grab your attention.

Her world building is either brilliant, or borders on brilliant. In her world, every mage of a certain strength must be trained, and every mage is full-on drafted. She prevents this from having shades of Babylon 5’s Psi-Corps by having over half the population be magical—there isn’t a lot of discrimination against non-mages, but the upper brackets are surprisingly heavy in the magic set.

I especially like the impact on culture. Facial tattoos for mages are part of fashion—and they help in intimidation since they show off how powerful someone is, and in what fields of magic. The magic system recommends long hair (magic is powered by cellular matter-to-energy conversion of the mage’s DNA— eg: Winston Churchill was a Time Wizard who kept checking future timelines to win the war, which is why he was bald all the time). There are aspects of law that are interesting (pay attention to the “Good Samaritan” laws). Diamonds are a basis of currency, because freaking alchemists. And I even like that she hints at an origin of magic coming through rips in dimensional planes that make me want to call Doctor Strange.

Though the “Office of Magical Oversight” being established by Lenin? A little creepy. And will get creepier as the books go along.

The execution of Cori and the “bad luck” around her is ... entertaining. The luck that is inflicted upon her and people around her is very Rube Goldberg in nature.

I only have one question. Are the students of George MageTech still considered rambling wrecks?

Part of what Mel does with this is a trick I’ve only seen used with Nero Wolfe novels of Rex Stout — she gives us the answer to a major question of the book ... only the answer comes before the question. The answer is “Ronin.”

Once again, Mel does cops so well, I’m surprised she doesn’t do any research for them. They feel very much like cops I’ve known. Also, some of the situations are analogous.

The comedy is right up my alley. Then again, I laughed out loud when someone asked, “We have a serial killer?” and the immediate reply was “Please. That’s an Atlanta Thing. Probably.”

### The politics

The politics here are largely libertarian. Cori’s best friend since forever is gay—but in this book, if you blink, you missed it. So unlike most stories, the “gay best friend” isn’t shoved in your face. You really could miss it.

Cori is all about making her way in the world by pulling herself up by her bootstraps. She works at a coffee shop to make ends meet, while she tries to get her degree. The focus of a lot of Cori’s world is centered on family of varying degrees. There is a positive view of (local) law enforcement...the Feds are a different conversation for another book.

### Content warning

The book does not get gory with its description, but the opening corpse is decapitated. And Cori has a relationship with her parents that borders on abusive. Again, it’s lightly touched on, but it’s still there.

I wouldn't give this to teens or younger, unless you really want to depress them.

Who is it for?

For anyone who longs for the good old days, when Laurell K. Hamilton was a fun read, and could tell a story without turning it into a hundred-page orgy. Looking back, this is probably even better than early Anita Blake. Imagine Kim Harrison, only with less angst.

Why read it?

Because it's a fun fantasy alternate history, with fantastic, awesome world-building that is almost unparalleled.

### The Necessity of Stars by E. Catherine Tobler Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was nominated for the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. It's 2148, and Bréone Hemmerli, Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, is semi-retired and living on a UN property called Irislands in Normandy, France. In the next house lives her long-term friend Delphine Chefridi. Earth has been ravaged by climate change to the extent that most of it is becoming uninhabitable, but this small section of France appears to be surviving remarkably well.

That might be because of the alien that Bréone discovers in her garden one day. Or does she? She can't be sure of what she has seen because she is suffering from ongoing dementia, losing her short-term memory, and sometimes unable to differentiate between reality and dreaming.

This novella is a story about a silent alien invasion, the usefulness of older people—especially women—and the role of friendship and love in our later years. Tobler writes in an interesting, atmospheric style that perfectly suits the story, though the ending is a tad problematic. She is a prolific author—with about 120 short sf pieces published since 2000—whom I hadn't come across previously, as I recall, and whom I'll need to start seeking out. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

### A Psalm for the Wild-Built by Becky Chambers Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was nominated for the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. The first in this author's new series under the overall title of "Monk and Robot." Sibling Dex is an ungendered monk who, after some time in a monastery, decides to leave and start new work as a wandering seller of teas. They struggle for a while but gradually become an expert in their new craft, yet they still feel a sense of unease.

Then, one day, they decide to take a step off their usual scheduled track and journey into the forest wilderness to a distant ruined building. Along the way, they encounter the robot Mosschap, which has decided to re-acquaint itself—and robot-kind—with humans well after the robots developed a form of consciousness and left humans a few hundred years previously.

The book is a quiet, unassuming novella about the journey of two beings searching for some under-

standing of themselves and each other. It is also some of the best writing Chambers has done since her debut novel, although there are some structural devices that some readers might find a tad confusing. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #21.)

## Responsibility of the Crown by G. Scott Huggins Review by Pat Patterson

I have read a lot of Scott Huggins' work over the years with delight. This was not one of those experiences.

On a world dominated by a great ocean, three different cultures are brought into conflict: The Consortium, a technologically advanced, expansionist civilization, with both land and sea power; the Grove, a merchant nation with massive trading ships, that journey for decades between stops at the home port; and Evenmarch, which blends dragon and human citizens with reliance on supernatural forces. These are not the only forces at play, but they form the background against which the characters play out their own drama.

I found two bizarrely disruptive changes from what I have come to expect of this author: first, there are huge gaps in the narrative; second, the protagonist has an irritatingly lumpy progression in her character arc.

The first gap in the narrative comes at the very beginning. Without ANY preparation, we are tossed into an action scene involving Responsibility and Zhad. We are clued in to the fact that Zhad is blind, by the statement that his eyes are white, and his demand that Responsibility tell him what she sees, but we are given NOTHING to tell us about who, or what, or even where Responsibility is, or the significance of her name. In the "Acknowledgments" section, the author mentions two prior works involving the character, and perhaps all the necessary back-story is contained there. However, none of that was available to me, and I had to collect the history in minute amounts as it was doled out in the narrative. Had this been an author I was not familiar with, or less favorably inclined toward, I would not have bothered.

There is a similar gap, although not as severe, in the narrative between chapters 7 and 8. At the end of Chapter 7, Responsibility, now known by her true name of Azriyqam, has just faced a death duel, and has been given significant instruction on aspects of loyalty and unity. In the very next page, with no transition given at all, we read that she is drowning, followed by a confusing narrative about her instruction in the supernatural arts. I found this to be utterly disorienting; it took me entirely out of the story.

The second significant glitch I encountered was the inconsistent progress that the protagonist makes during the story. Admittedly, there is much she has to adjust to; initially, she is a much abused and neglected prisoner, always fearing for her life. Very early in the book, however, she discovers that she is the daughter of the ruler of a powerful kingdom. The whole of the book deals with her spiritual journey to accept and emerge into her new role.

However, she is both poorly instructed, in some cases, and then often resistant to what instruction she is given. For example, we learn that she is unable to pronounce certain phrases of power correctly, as long as she clings to her learned accent. However, if she intentionally mimics the speech of one of her antagonistic characters, her pronunciation is perfect. Despite learning this trick, however, she refuses to im-

plement it. She seems to shift from acceptance to rejection at random.

Her stubborn refusal to accept the need to adapt is mirrored perfectly in another character, who is forced by circumstances to become an ally. In her case, though, she has her intransigent behavior stuffed into her face:

“Are you going to keep underestimating us, Captain? Or will you consider that you may have something to learn?”

And, who is the wiser person who forces this realization? None other than Responsibility/Azriyqam. So, if she can preach it, why can't she live it out?

I really liked the culture clashes possible with the three distinct civilizations. The great world-spanning oceans might be exactly what permits each grouping to go its' own way, with civilizations based on water at a technological disadvantage to those with access to mineral resources on land. The story of the Lost Princess/Prince is a good one and can be enjoyed in many permutations. I also appreciate the various aspects of sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic being used in the story; at one point, radio is explained by one character to another as sorcery, because the tech is too confusing.

Although much of the main storyline is resolved, there are many threads that can be followed in the future. I hope that in those theoretical future volumes, the author will provide the reader with enough history to prevent the disorientation that I experienced. I certainly remain a fan of his work and hope to see more on the way.

## The Ruin of Kings by Jenn Lyons Review by Tom Feller

The main character is this fantasy novel by an author nominated for last year's Astounding (formerly the John W. Campbell) Award is Kihrin who at various times is an orphan, thief, prince, and wizard. The first part of the book consists of two stories told in alternating chapters. In the first, Kihrin is a thief who breaks into a house and witnesses something he really doesn't want to see, a cruel murder. This eventually brings him into contact with Talon, an evil shape shifter who becomes his jailer. At the beginning, Kihrin is a 15 year old orphan having been raised by a blind minstrel and a brothel madam in the slums of a city named Quur. He later discovers that he is really the missing son of a noble household. In the second, he is a 16 year old slave on the auction block, where he is sold to a trio of wizards named Taraeth, Kemezra, and Kalinda. In his adventures with them, he becomes a wizard in his own right as well as a swordsman while being pursued by a kraken and making an enemy out of dragon. The two story lines come together toward the end. This is a very impressive debut novel, and the first of a projected five book series. The characters are interesting, there are enough plot twists to make you want to keep reading, and the world building is excellent. The only problem I had was keeping up with all the characters, sort of like reading a Russian novel.

## Servants of War by Larry Correia and Steve Diamond Review by JE Tabor [UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Illarion Glaskov is a big, nearsighted farm boy living in the northern reaches of Kolakolvian Empire, far from the never-ending war with the Almacians. But when monsters attack his village, he discovers

that it was because the men of the village forsook their pact to serve the Tsar. Now, Glaskov must fulfill his part of the bargain or perhaps suffer an even worse fate.

Glaskov finds himself conscripted into The Wall, a unit of soldiers who pilot suits of armor built from the parts of dead golems. Through his training and combat experience, he learns what it means to sacrifice for country: that it's not all it is cracked up to be. But he also comes to understand that what really matters are having the backs of his comrades beside him and protecting the people he loves.

## The story

*Servants of War* begins as a coming-of-age story with basic training at The Wall – a unit of magic powered armor soldiers – and ends up going straight to Hell. Literally. By the end, the heroes enter another world that can only be described as hellish. And there are plenty of battles, both internal and external, along the way. The authors break up the intensity of over-the-top trench warfare with glimpses of the intrigue that goes on in the halls of power in the Kolakolvian Empire.

Seemingly disparate narratives are pieced together to reveal a plot more nefarious than Almacian super-weapons and more dangerous than a 100-year war. Throughout the story, there is plenty to keep the reader guessing while still feeding enough information to feel like the author is not hiding the ball. I often find myself frustrated with stories that keep information from me to preserve the mystery, and I never felt that way with *Servants of War*.

## The characters

Illarion Glaskov might be the only decent human being in the Empire. But the hero of *Servants of War* does not come off as a Mary Sue, nor a self-righteous prick. His decency is tied with a rustic naiveté that he must shed to survive in the trenches, but his struggle is to retain his humanity at the same time. That becomes more and more difficult to do when he becomes entangled with the plots of Kristoph Vals, one of the top men in the Tsar's secret police. Vals is a great antihero, at once amoral and compelling, and his clashes with Illarion create a clear contrast between their values and methods.

If Vals acts as the devil on Illarion's shoulder, Natalya Baston is his angel, though a ruthless one who is a crack shot with a sniper rifle. As a Rolmani, Baston is not an ethnic Kolakolvian. She only acts as a scout and spy for the Empire against her will, only doing so because the Tsar holds her family hostage. When she meets Illarion, she realizes that not all Kolakolvians are evil bastards, just most. When the two of them are drafted into a suicide mission, they learn to rely on each other and to protect each other from the machinations of the Empire.

I found the characters of *Servants of War* to be both engaging and relatable, including some of the minor players and foils. Illarion's opening tragedy could have had more bite if the authors had been given more time with the village before, but that is the tradeoff between a gripping opening and connecting to background characters. To be honest, the subject matter is grim enough, and it is thankful that the reader does not have to fully experience Illarion's pain.

## The world

The world of the *Servants of War* is what happens when you take the denizens of Eastern and Central Europe from their homes, drop them into the trenches of World War I France, and throw in magic powered armor suits and corpse-eating ghouls. The real-world mythology of Slavic and Eastern Europe is true in this world. There are the equivalents of Orthodox Christians and Jews, as well as Slavic Pagan-

ism. This confused me until it was revealed that all of the inhabitants of the world in *Servants of War* originated from our own world and is now populated by those who had crossed over into the magic realms and were lost to our own forever. Thus, you get clear analogues to the Germans with the Almacians, the Russians with the Kolakolvians, the Czechs or Jews with the Prajans, and the Roma with the Rolmani. Baba Yaga and her two sister witches or goddesses play a prominent role in Illarion's story. It felt like I only had a glimpse of the world hinted at, as if there were vast territories and mythologies to explore in future books.

## The politics

There is nothing in the way of real-world politics in *Servants of War*, but one might draw some inferences given the consequences of Illarion's draft-dodging village, the ethics of using chemical weapons of mass destruction, and the persecution of minorities in the Kolakolvian Empire.

## Content warning

The world of *Servants of War* is a grim place, and there is plenty of horror to be found. Soldiers are shot, decapitated, blown to pieces, and torn apart by dogs. People and animals are dissolved with corrosive chemical gas. There is probably more that I am forgetting, but you get the idea. Violence and gore aplenty.

## Who is it for?

*Servants of War* is for anyone who likes fantasy, horror, and military fiction and a gritty World War I aesthetic.

## Why read it?

*Servants of War* brings equal parts combat and horror in a grim and unforgiving world, but it manages to avoid hopelessness and nihilism, instead embracing human virtue and self-sacrifice. In this day and age, that is certainly an accomplishment.

## The Star Beast by Robert Heinlein

### Review by Chris Nuttall

[ChrisHanger.wordpress.com](http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com)

So be yourself, Knothead, and have the courage to make your own mess of your life. Don't imitate somebody else's mess.

## -The Star Beast

I was actually reluctant to pick up *The Star Beast* again for the reread, although my memory of the book from when I first read it was nowhere near good enough to write a review. *The Star Beast* was my favourite Heinlein, back when I was a kid, and I didn't want to have those pleasant memories tainted by a reread that would reveal issues I missed when I was younger and less cynical. Thankfully, *The Star Beast* is Heinlein at the top of his game, a story that is alternatively humorous and deadly serious; a story that, in so many ways, pleases both adults and children alike. If you never read any other books by Heinlein, read *The Star Beast*.



In what appears, at first, to be present-day America, a young boy – John Thomas – lives with his widowed mother and LummoX, an alien pet of unknown origins. (Apparently, LummoX was smuggled onto Earth by John's grandfather, a deep-space explorer who later vanished somewhere in the interstellar gulf.) Unfortunately, LummoX eats practically anything, ranging from a pet dog and prize roses to iron, steel, and a car. To add insult to injury, 'he' is effectively indestructible. After LummoX's latest hungry rampage, the townspeople want the beast destroyed before it can do more damage. John finds himself doing battle in court, aided by his girlfriend Betty, knowing that he might have to sell LummoX to the zoo before the beast can be killed.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a harassed UN bureaucrat – Mr. Kiku – finds himself confronted with a demand from a powerful alien race, passed through an alien interpreter-intermediary. The aliens believe that Earth is harbouring a missing princess from their world, and they want her back, or else. They threaten to destroy the planet if the princess is not found and, as far as anyone can tell, they are perfectly capable of backing up that threat. Every alien race seems to be scared of them.

Eventually, the two plotlines converge. LummoX is revealed to be the alien princess, just in time to keep her from being killed by angry locals. The UN is ready to return her to her people, but there's a hitch. LummoX has been enjoying raising human children and wants her latest pets, John and Betty – referred to rather explicitly as a breeding pair – to accompany her. And so, once diplomatic relations are established and there is a hasty marriage, John and Betty find themselves on their way to the alien homeworld. It is, for all four of the main characters, a happy ending.

It really is astonishing to see just how much Heinlein crammed into a relatively short book, almost all of it focused around growing up and accepting responsibility. John Thomas accepts responsibility for LummoX and steps out of his mother's shade, Betty accepts responsibility for John and LummoX accepts her responsibility to her people (although both Betty and LummoX scheme to get what they want out of the deal.) Even Mr. Kiku, who is an adult when the story opens, has his moments, successfully overcoming his horror of an alien ambassador's snake-like form.

Indeed, the story shows all of humanity growing up. Humanity is a young race, despite its apparent importance in the local sector (shades of Babylon 5) and it still has problems with racism and xenophobia, although human-on-human racism appears to have been left in the past with the discovery of actual aliens. The KKK has been replaced with the Keep Earth Human League, which is one of the groups demanding that LummoX be destroyed. Heinlein neatly undermines racist agreements by allowing them to be made (rather than silenced) then pointing out the problems:

"Order, please," Greenberg said mildly. "We have here another petition [for LummoX's destruction], but for different reasons." He held up the one submitted by the Keep Earth Human League. "This court finds itself unable to follow the alleged reasoning. Petition denied."

The core of the story rests on the three human characters: John, Betty and Mr. Kiku. John is a solid, steadfast boy, the idealised American teenage boy. He isn't the brightest bulb in the box, but he has a hard core of honour and true devotion to his friends. It is his misfortune that he spent most of his life without a father figure, leading to endless conflicts with his mother and the development of a mild form of misogyny. (This is far from uncommon: men who have to deal with an overbearing female figure, in their youth, often develop misogynist traits that can be quite hard to overcome.) He likes Betty, but he is unwilling to allow her to lead him by the nose too far. And he isn't actually wrong in his arguments. He knows what he wants – which isn't what his mother wants for him – and he's prepared to do whatever it takes to get it. This stubbornness sometimes gets him in trouble:

“He had pointed out that he could not get the courses he wanted at State U. Betty had insisted that he could and had looked up references to prove her point. He had rebutted by saying that it was not the name of a course that mattered, but who taught it. The discussion had fallen to pieces when she had refused to concede that he was an authority.”

Betty, by contrast, is a great deal smarter than John. She’s certainly a great deal more imaginative. She cheerfully sets herself up as LummoX and John’s defender when they are forced to go to court and comes very close to winning the case, until her case is (accidentally) spoiled by LummoX himself. (Ironically, as one of the adults notes, it might have been better for all concerned if Betty had lost, as there were already plans to take LummoX to safety.) But then, Betty has no reason to trust adults. She divorced her parents – we aren’t told why, but John found the reasoning convincing – and fights like a tiger for her cause. In many ways, she is the most competent female character in Heinlein’s juveniles. Where John is straightforward, Betty is cunning and perfectly capable of working her way around a problem until she finds a way to overcome it. She also has a talent for cutting to the heart of the matter that most teenagers lack, as well as an eye for a good man. It’s clear she’s interested in John – and they marry at the end of the book – well before John himself realises this.

Mr. Kiku is older and wiser than the two teenagers, although he is a bureaucrat (a rare positive presentation of bureaucrats by an author who tended to regard them as pointless parasites). He is from Kenya and, while his race is never clearly stated, it’s clear from text evidence that he’s black. At one point, he mulls that he no longer has to worry about racism because the racists now have aliens to hate; at another, he tells the story of how his distant ancestors thought they could destroy the invaders, until they ran up against an ‘outside context problem’ in the form of machine guns. Mr. Kiku spends most of his time trying to keep his superiors happy while smoothing out interstellar diplomatic problems and looking for a successor. He is the first person to wonder if there is a connection between LummoX and the missing princess, although – for what seem like valid reasons – it looks unlikely at the start.

Indeed, Mr. Kiku may be the smartest person in the book. At one point, he offers good advice to John, Betty and John’s mother, ranging from dryly advising them never to take anything written in a newspaper at face value to telling John’s mother that her son is already rebelling against her and, the more she tries to mould him, the more he will resist. At another, he resists the suggestion that the government should pay attention to a proto-SJW mob, pointing out that giving in to the mob and paying Danegeld means that they will never get rid of them:

“Any organization calling itself “The Friends of This or That” always consisted of someone with an axe to grind, plus the usual assortment of prominent custard heads and professional stuffed shirts. But such groups could be a nuisance . . . therefore never grant them the Danegeld they demanded.”

Much of the book’s humour rests in the courtroom antics, as various ‘concerned personages’ push for LummoX’s destruction. The use of a lie detector reveals that one old biddy – a Mrs Grundy-type – provided exaggerated and dramatised testimony, allowing Betty to make a case that many of the petitioners are motivated by spite. (Heinlein was all too aware of the flaws of small-town America, even though he also idealised it.) And yet, other petitioners raise a serious point: if LummoX is not responsible for his actions, if John Thomas is not responsible, if no one is responsible . . . then who pays? Who compensates the people who have suffered real and serious losses because of LummoX? And can you reasonably blame them for wanting LummoX gone if his mere presence is a liability?

Heinlein was careful to ensure that no one, with the possible exception of the spiteful Mrs. Donahue, is presented as acting from malice. Being unaware of certain pieces of data, data they have no reason to possess, they draw the wrong conclusions. Their narratives are flawed, but not – based on what they

knew at the time – wrong. The people who want LummoX gone have good reasons, even the KEHL. And John’s mother, presented as an overbearing harpy, only wants what is best for her son. She goes about it very poorly, in a manner that will either drive John away or crush him, but she isn’t motivated by malice.

That said, the book also presents a contrast between childish and adult views of the world. John sees the issue in simple terms, issues of right and wrong; John’s mother – and most of the other adults – see things as being more complex (like the issue of who pays for the damages, mentioned above.) Mr. Kiku does his level best to keep his superiors from becoming too involved in diplomatic matters, fearing that they will be influenced by emotions (and others who are emotional) and thus make resolving diplomatic issues impossible. This has an uneasy resonance in our world, where people demand quick solutions and refuse to accept that some matters are more complicated than they appear and, therefore, don’t have simple answers.

It’s interesting to see how Heinlein blurred our world, one that would be recognisable to a teenager from his era, with a futuristic universe. It isn’t quite as oddly alien as the universe of *Have Space Suit, Will Travel* or flat-out futuristic as *Citizen of the Galaxy*: indeed, in many ways, *The Star Beast* escapes most values dissonance. The small-town America blends well with the interstellar travel and the existence of aliens. The world of *The Star Beast* is familiar enough to be comforting, even with fifty years of hindsight, and different enough to be fantastic. Heinlein also got quite a few things right about the future, including celebrity politicians and spokespeople and mass campaigns that predated Cecil the Lion by decades.

Yet, at the same time, it has some odd moments. When Betty suggests that she and John (and LummoX) go camping together:

John Thomas looked at her reprovingly. “And get me talked about all over town? No, thanks.”

“Don’t be prissy. We’re here now, aren’t we?”

“This is an emergency.”

“You and your nice-nice reputation!”

“Well, somebody ought to watch such things. Mum says that boys had to start worrying when girls quit. She says things used to be different.”

Heinlein was well aware, of course, that girls had to watch their reputations. A girl of his era who got pregnant out of wedlock would be in deep trouble, something he would explore in most of his later books. It’s an interesting switch here, one that – again – has an uneasy echo in our society. Mike Pence was roundly mocked for the ‘Pence Rule’ – never be alone with a woman who isn’t your wife – and he was accused of making life harder for professional women, but in the wake of #METOO it’s clear Pence will have the last laugh.

*The Star Beast* also touches, briefly, upon cultural differences, both human and alien. It is hard to get a picture of LummoX from her race, because they don’t have photographs (which is unfortunate, as the near destruction of Earth could have been averted if someone had a photograph to work from.) Her race, indeed, has a massive superiority complex and an isolationist streak, one that may be about to end. Meanwhile, on Earth, Betty responds to Mr. Kiku’s arranged marriage with horror. Slavery, she calls it. (And her reaction makes you wonder precisely what her parents did to force her to divorce them.)

In many ways, I would recommend *The Star Beast* to anyone worried about toxic masculinity, as Heinlein captured the male mindset – particularly in its teenage form – very well. John reacts badly to people pushing him to do things, from his mother to the police chief to a zookeeper who wants to buy Lummo. They might have right on their side, but it weighs poorly against emotion. Loyalty to friends is a strongly male virtue, one that is highly prized; John could not sell Lummo, or let him be destroyed, without feeling as if he'd done something terribly wrong. The absence of a father figure in his life doesn't really help, although John doesn't go really off the rails. And yet, he feels pushed into a final desperate bid to save his friend even though cold logic should tell him it's useless. John is a hero because he keeps trying. He never gives up.

There are many lessons in *The Star Beast*, from the importance of standing up for one's friends (John, Betty and Lummo all stand up for each other) to the importance of standing your ground diplomatically and the need to be aware of cultural issues that may lead to outright war. And as these issues are timeless, the book is timeless too. It is a fun read that will leave you with much to ponder, as well as being clean.

Like I said, this is the best of Heinlein's juveniles. Go read it.

## Thunder God of Mars: A Superhero Prose Novel Review by Trevor Denning [UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

Ancient powers do battle, and the fate of the first colony on Mars hangs in the balance. In the not-too-distant future Ares challenges Thor to a duel on the red planet, with the intention of making his Norse counterpart protector of the humans struggling to survive both the elements and other supernatural forces.

### The story

Ares, the Greek god of war, challenges Thor, the Norse god of Thunder, to a throwdown on Mars. The competing gods have already thrashed each other all over Earth, but Mars is Ares' planet, so he should have the upper hand. Not that a little thing like that will stop Thor, who is as brash and impulsive as both the ancient legends and the recent pop culture iterations have portrayed him. After a short but intense battle, however, Ares fades from existence in what turns out to be an act of self-sacrifice.

The duel was just a ruse to get Thor to Mars, where a group of humans have set up a colony. Lacking the resources to provide for the struggling colonists, the god of war knew that the god of thunder could be persuaded to look after them if he saw their need. Now Thor finds himself fighting enemies from multiple pantheons and looking for assistance from unexpected allies.

### The characters

Thor, obviously, is the reason anyone will pick up this book. The portrayal here is drawn from mythology and pop culture in ways that pay equal homage to both. All of his allies and enemies receive similar treatment, though readers familiar with the Norse mythos will probably find more to appreciate. The colonists themselves provide a nice counter balance to the supernatural goings on, though none of them really stand out.

### The world

Since the story opens with a Greek god facing off with a character from the Norse pantheon, virtually anything or anyone from mythology can appear as friend or foe. The old gods' power and very existence hinge on their relevance in the mortal world, and they are all interested in a getting a foothold on the red planet or going out in a blaze of glory.

Mars, as portrayed here, is slowly being made habitable for humans and the story spans decades and generations of colonists. For the time being, they have to remain in their buildings and ships if they want to survive. Meanwhile, Thor and his ageless, supernatural counterparts aren't affected by the alien atmosphere. Able to travel between realms with ease, Thor can call up anyone he wants, whether that be Hela the goddess of death to gather new Valkyrie, or frost giants to build him a house.

As Thor intervenes on behalf of the colonists, some of them become suspicious of otherworldly goings on. Not wanting to be sent back to Earth on a psychiatric discharge, they keep their observations to themselves.

The politics

No real politics to speak of. This is more of a silver age comic book with prose instead of pictures than the agenda driven drivel leaking into mainstream comics today.

Content warning

Some colorful language and comic book violence, but nothing graphic or even approaching gratuitous.

Who is it for?

It's for anyone who misses silver age comics and when Star Trek was bright. It's also for fans of Norse mythology.

Why read it?

Why not? Thunder God of Mars is lightweight, colorful entertainment. It's comic book escapism in prose, which is even more fun than it sounds. Taloni takes a chance on risky concept (I mean, it's a superhero comic without pictures!) and makes it work.

## We Dare: Semper Paratus: An Anthology of the Apocalypse

Edited by Jamie Ibson

Review by Pat Patterson

All of these stories take place after The End Of The World As We Know It (TEOTWAWKI; I think I got that acronym right). No particular cause was stipulated for the writers, so we get a blend: some are from futures already established, such as Chris Woods' "This Fallen World" universe, while others are brand new disasters. However, fear not; these cloudy worlds all come with some semblance of a silver lining.

THE DAUGHTER, by Chris Kennedy. Set in "This Fallen World." One of the distinguishing marks of TFW is that the technology existed, prior to the fall, to imprint an entire personality onto/into a subject. While the imprinted subject may need to develop some muscles, all of the reflexes and knowledge that

were in the imprint are transferred over. However, only one personality can be dominant at a time. That means that as long as the imprint is in control, the original is (more or less) dormant. The plot, characterization, and action of this story are well-developed. However, we are given something else to think about, and we might be thinking about it for a long time: what are the ethics of keeping a subordinate from suffering?

RESPAWN, by Robert E. Hampson. Any right-thinking resident of the South knows that Waffle Houses are rightly the center of culture and goodness and may very well be the center of the universe. Well, portals, at least; or, they are in this story, even if given an alternative title. When an active playing character gets killed, they are returned to existence in these blessed locations, where there is always a refill for your coffee. Everything else in the universe might vary, though. So be careful.

BOB, FROM LOS ANGELES, by Brent Roeder. Soren Kierkegaard wrote “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” If that is true, then Bob, from Los Angeles, has the purest heart imaginable. Don’t expect him to engage in much idle chatter, but if a job needs to be done? Bob is your man.

NOR WAR’S QUICK FIRE, by Rob Howell. A person with great wealth arranges to have a small contingent of employees be evacuated to the fledgling colony on Mars, just as war spasms on Earth. It’s amazing how many different perspectives can be held in a group of intelligent people. What’s more amazing is that some perspectives are subject to change.

WHY 2K, by Jon R. Osborne. Now, THIS is the apocalypse we were promised! What if the prep to eliminate the fallout from using only two digits to record the year hadn’t worked, and all the doom and gloom about Y2K had been realized? That’s what THIS story is about; it’s about time!

THE FALLOW FIELDS, PART I, by Jason Cordova, and THE FALLOW FIELDS, PART II, by Christopher L Smith. Confession: I was so caught up in the story, that I kept reading, and didn’t realize until NOW that parts I & II were written by different authors. I suppose an accomplished reviewer would notice the stylistic changes, and have something clever to say about that, but THIS reviewer was simply engrossed in the adventure.

I don’t know how much chaos reigned in the land that became the Soviet Union during consolidation after the Bolshevik revolution, but I do know that the US military was involved in two separate campaigns, North Russia and Siberia, in the post WWI period. To that chaos, add a zombie apocalypse, and then follow the crew of a tank as they fight their way through the worst that can come at them.

THE RESERVOIR, by Kevin Fritz Fotovich. First Contact didn’t go so well, and big rocks got dropped on our heads. It didn’t take much to disrupt nearly everything. Still, a determined people can rebuild, particularly when the former enemies can lend help. Other people are determined as well, though.

WARLORD, by Christopher Woods. Books have been written about the exploits of Matthew Kade, deservedly so. The imprinting of personalities went somewhat wrong with him, in the same sense that the Atlantic Ocean is somewhat damp. Somehow, he has managed to find a way that all of his many personalities can get along. He really hates people who keep slaves. And he is always on the lookout for new talent.

TEN BREATHS, by Marisa Wolf. Don’t think that magic will prevent the world from ending. It will just end in a different way, with different options. Still, resolute people can fight back. In this universe, the darkness is on the way, and the people must prepare to fight, and to endure.

MOMENTS, by Kevin Ikenberry. It's bad enough that the world ends. However, when the world ends just after the worst night of your life, you don't get an opportunity to make up for a momentary failure. And that turns what SHOULD be a moment, into an eternity. Maybe another moment will come; but don't bet on it.

YOU HAVE TO GO OUT, by Philip Wohlrab. Here's the deal: in the Army, you can catch your breath during peacetime. Yes, there is still training, and it is demanding, and people can die in accidents, but at least, in peacetime, nobody is actually shooting at you. So, there's that. HOWEVER, in the Coast Guard, the enemy is the sea, and the sea NEVER is willing to sign a peace treaty. And it doesn't make any difference to the Coast Guard if people are shooting at you or not; they still have to do their job, and that means going out.

EIGHT OUNCES A DAY, by Kevin Steverson. In the aftermath of an engineered extinction event, protein is hard to come by; the terrorists did their sums wrong and killed the animals as well as the people. Still, some survive, including a janitor at Kennesaw State University. Too bad their mascot is an owl; a turkey would have been more convenient.

WRAITH, by Marie Whittaker. Fairly soon after the wraiths appear and start eating people, June Bug discovers that salt will kill them dead. It's not until much later that things get really weird.

DUST TO DUST, by Jamie Ibson. The most intriguing aspect (among the many delights) of this story is that the reason for the apocalypse is not revealed, until it shows up as a part of the Final Answer. Until then, we start with a near-standard tale of the Old West, with a pleasing young lady from Back East arriving to take ownership of the family estate. However, she is no tinhorn, not a shrinking violet who must rely on the protection of strong-but-silent, etc. From Western, we shift to a mystery, complete with strangers acting strange, and clues to be found. It's really a great story, and one that could easily fill the pages of a novel.

## When Valor Must Hold

Edited by Rob Howell and Chris Kennedy

Review by Pat Patterson

I found some of the stories to be excellent, and this despite the fact that fantasy really is NOT my cup of tea. Of the rest, all, with the notable exception of Shard's Fortress, were quite palatable, and worth the read.

Darkness Before the Dawn by Christopher Woods. Things haven't worked out for Zaro. He has an affinity for each of the elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, but none of them selected him for training. So, he was left without a career, and separated from his true love, who was bound to Water. Rather than give up, though, he sets his hand to do what he can; and he does his duty, with each new day.

The Game's Afoot by Christopher G. Nuttall. The people at the top do this and that and believe that their whims rule reality. It's always left up to the grunts to get the job done, though.

The Ogre's Brownies by RJ Ladon. Dogumrik is a brownie warrior, fierce and brave; but: tiny. The measure of the heart is far more than stature, though.

Dust in the Mouth by William Joseph Roberts. Draven is independent, before he is anything else. Even so, he willingly pledges his service to travelers he meets in the forest. But there are more dangers than

sword and beasts to overcome.

Hanging by a Thread by Benjamin Tyler Smith. What a strange place to set a story! Some folks are dead, though still moving around; others are maybe not. But regardless of their status, it seems that without good policing, the mighty will ever persecute the weak.

Shard's Fortress by Dexter Herron. This anthology contains 82 f-bombs, by Kindle count. 79 of those are contained in this selection. Is there a story, in addition? Possibly, and that's a shame, because anything worthwhile is lost in noise. I gave up, in disgust, after the third or fourth page. I don't think it's funny, and I really don't know why someone with the authority to do so didn't point out that 79 f-bombs gets tiresome.

Horse's Heart by Sarah A. Hoyt. When it looks like all is lost, a myth turns out to be true. The tale of multiple heroes, but mostly of one who conquered his own death.

Island of Bones by William Alan Webb. The magicians hitch a ride with the smugglers, and snark at each other; the dialogue is worth the price of admission. Finding faithfulness in the treacherous is also quite pleasant, but I don't think I understand what happened at the end.

Goddess's Tears by Cedar Sanderson. Strip away the magnificent language, and the adventure, and you have the story of an abused and neglected woman who has had enough. Because she faces supernatural opposition, she has supernatural support; it's her determination that makes liberation possible, though, and there is nothing supernatural about that. Magnificent, but not supernatural.

Hold the Line by Kevin Steverson and Tyler Ackerman. This is the story of the scouts. Circumstances deprive them of their role, but they report for duty anyway, and do what is needed.

What's in a Name by Rob Howell. The protagonist begins the story disoriented, and I joined him in that; I didn't have any idea WHAT was really going on for quite some time, which isn't something I enjoy. It turns out to be a tale of conflicting loyalties.

The Errand by Jon R. Osborne. Vikings are jerks, and Vikings with magic are REALLY hard to kill. Even a ferocious Irish archer can use some magical help, from time to time, in order to fight back.

No Trade for Nice Guys by D.J. Butler. I'm not familiar with Indrajit and Fix, but they seem like a lovely pair of sell-swords. They have a way of making things work out, even if they aren't playing with a full deck.

Fistful of Silver by Quincy J. Allen. Rellen is a sort of bounty hunter, or roving problem-solver. Magic is nicely limited in application in this story, by factors we can understand: if we haven't LEARNED a language, we can't read it. Getting to the root of the problem requires some serious detective work.

## Year of the Unicorn by Andre Norton Review by Caroline Furlong

[UpstreamReviews.com](http://UpstreamReviews.com)

The war with Alizon is over. High Hallack – the western continent of the Witch World – is finally free. With the loss of the alien Kolder's machines, the men of the Dales of High Hallack put their unified



forces to good use, driving the Hounds of Alizon back across the ocean. In spite of the damage wrought by years of war, the Dales belong to Dalesmen once again.

But victory comes with a price. Pushed to the limits of their strength, the Dalesmen made a pact with the mysterious Were Riders. Able to assume the form of animals, the Were Riders agreed to help the Dalesmen on one condition: When the war ended, they would be provided thirteen brides. For there are no female Were Riders, and if the “Pack” is to survive, they need mates.

When one of the prospective wives-to-be refuses to accept her assigned marriage, another girl sees the opportunity of a lifetime. But will her choice bring good fortune, or a fate worse than death?

The story

The heroine of the novel, Gillan, begins the story working in an Abbey of the Flame in Norsdale. Run by the Dames (nuns), the Abbey served as a shelter for refugees from various Dales during the war. Having come across the sea as a captive of the Hounds of Alizon, Gillan was rescued by a nobleman named Lord Furlo. He and his wife, Lady Freeza, fostered her until the conflict began. Furlo died in the war and the strain of fleeing to Norsdale, coupled with the loss of her husband, cost Freeza her life.

From that day to this Gillan has remained at the Abbey. While grateful for their protection she has also begun to chafe at the confining routine of the cloister. It is a good life, but not the one she desires. So when guests arrive at the Abbey to collect a pair of young noblewomen to fulfill the bargain with the Were Riders, Gillan takes notice.

One of the women chosen, Marimme, becomes hysterical at the idea of marrying a man who may or may not be human. The Were Riders’ magic allows them to shift between human and animal; no one among the Dalesmen knows for certain whether they are human, animal, or some mixture of the two. Thus, Marimme has good reason for her fit of panic.

Unfortunately for her, she meets the requirements the Riders set: She is of an age to wed, has no blemish or illness, and is quite pretty. Moreover, her uncle is the man tasked with delivering the twelve and one brides to the Throat of the Hawk, the place where the Were Riders await their women. A nobleman of no mean intelligence, he has political ambitions which Marimme may have helped to further, but the fact that they need brides for the Were Riders has put those plans to flight. Marimme’s screaming fails to move him; it simply embarrasses him.

It does, however, give Gillan an idea. Marimme has no stomach for the unknown – send her to the Were Riders, and she will likely die of fright before she even arrives. Gillan, on the other hand, has no family and no future in the Dales. She uses a sleeping potion to knock out Marimme and takes the girl’s place, setting off with the other women to the Throat of the Hawk. By the time her deception is discovered, sending her back is not an option, and there is no time to seek a replacement.

At the Throat of the Hawk, the women select their husbands. Gillan chooses Herrel, the youngest Were Rider and the only half-blood in the group. Realizing his new wife can see through the magic he and his fellows use, Herrel cautions her against revealing this fact. Due to his half-blood status, he is considered the weakest of the Were Riders, some of whom will stop at nothing to hurt him – even if they have to go through Gillan to do it!

Will the newlyweds survive the journey to the Were Riders home? Or will the Pack – and their own misunderstandings – tear them apart forever?

## The characters

By far, Gillan and Herrel are the most interesting characters in the narrative. Unaware of her Witch heritage and what it means, Gillan nonetheless has all the willpower and tenacity of her people. She chooses Herrel freely and despite the misfortunes that befall them, she does not waver in her determination to remain by her husband's side.

For his part, Herrel is every inch the knightly beast. Berated and abused for most of his life by the majority of the Pack, he holds a very low opinion of himself. That being said, he will not stand by and let his wife be mistreated or taken from him. It is one matter if she chooses to leave him of her own free will, but those who try to drive them apart will find they have bitten off more than they can chew.

Among the side characters in the novel, the one who has the most to do with the couple is Lord Hyron. Leader of the Pack, Hyron's animal form is a white stallion. He holds firmly to the laws of his people and does not play favorites, even with his own son. Detestable as he may be, you have to respect the fact that he knows how to lead and will not back down from a position he decides to take.

## The world

With characteristic aplomb, Andre Norton builds the continent of High Hallack. Subsequent novels in the Witch World series would explore this part of the world and its lore further, but Year of the Unicorn is undoubtedly one of the best places to enter the continent. The monsters, ancient ruins, and wild landscapes that may or may not exist in the mortal plane of the Witch World are all presented with a deft touch to draw readers into the story.

## The politics

Beyond a few references to female empowerment that are fairly banal by modern standards, no politics appear in this book.

## Content warning

There is a case of wife-stealing and body/soul splitting, as well as discussions of rape, but those are probably the worst things to happen in the entire novel.

## Who is it for?

Fantasy lovers, Andre Norton fans, and anyone who likes retellings of Beauty and the Beast. Ms. Norton cited that story as the inspiration for Year of the Unicorn, and this rendition of the original fairy tale will be quite satisfactory. Romance readers will enjoy the love that blossoms between Herrel and Gillan, cheering them on while booing their enemies as the two fight all attempts to separate them. There is also enough action and adventure to keep a reader guessing, wondering what will happen next, while hoping there is a way to get out of it so the hero and heroine can have their happily-ever-after.

## Why read it?

It is a beautiful romance in a fantastic setting written by the Grande Dame of Science Fiction and Fantasy herself. How could anyone resist purchasing it?

# Non-Fiction

## Fandom: Confidential by Ron Frantz Review by Heath Row

This memoir details a portion of comic book fandom with which I was unfamiliar. While I recognized some of the names and fanzines involved (The Rocket's Blast–Comicollector!), the bulk of the story takes place in the mid-1970s and involves an organization I didn't even know existed. Regardless, it's a fascinating read and is relevant to this day.

Frantz, the author, wrote the book between 1978-1980 before setting it aside for almost two decades, eventually returning to it about 20 years ago. At the time, the story he wanted to tell was still somewhat painful, perhaps political, and certainly controversial. When the book was finally finished and published, the memories were slightly less painful and likely to raise a ruckus among still-active fen.

Before the advent of eBay and other fandom sales platforms, buying, selling, and trading comic books through the mail was a potentially risky endeavor. You didn't know who someone was. You didn't know whether they actually possessed what you thought you were buying. And there was little recourse for deals gone wrong. (Some might say that that is still the case even with eBay!)

A man named Stanley Blair founded comic book fandom's first adzine and first trade association to help buyers and sellers engage in their trade with greater competence and confidence. The adzine, Stan's Weekly Express (WE), launched in 1969 to help network the business side of comics fandom. During its first year, Blair developed a mailing list of almost 20,000 nostalgia collectors. The WE Reporting Bureau (WRB) helped record, report, investigate, and persecute mail fraud within the hobby. And the WE Seal of Approval (WSA) helped identify which buyers, sellers, and other tradesmen—and women—were trustworthy and worthy of business. Its logo—and a seller's WSA number—was intended as a badge of honor.

Like the National Fantasy Fan Federation, WE, the WRB, and the WSA were an attempt to organize fandom, to connect practitioners of a hobby and business, and to establish group norms and standards for their interactions. (The N3F even merits a definition in the book's "Fandom Glossary.") Similar to sf and fantasy fandom, comics fandom faced its own challenges. Frantz served as administrator of the WSA for more than two years, and his book is a wide-ranging exploration of comic book history, comics fandom, the rise and fall of the WSA, and other developments in the hobby. Not all of it is rosy.

Given the nature of comics fandom, Frantz focuses more on collecting and the commercial side of things than sf and fantasy fans might, generally. Literary and media fen aren't necessarily collectors in the same way as hardcore comics fen might be. Regardless, there's a lot of interest adjacent to sf fandom. Frantz briefly retells the history of comic books, its fanzines, and fandom, drawing parallels to other modes of publishing that yielded their own fandom under the umbrella of nostalgia fandom (pulp magazines, old-time radio, and the like).

He considers the history and controversies surrounding the first comic book price guides—and the impact they had on the hobby. He considers the development of local comics fan clubs such as the Oklahoma Alliance of Fans. He looks at the evolution of The Nostalgia Journal into The Comics Journal, as

well as *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom* into *The Comics Buyer's Guide*. He details the controversial introduction of *Fandom Directory*, which continues to this day online. And he looks at the occasional collisions that comics fandom experienced with other forms.

Along those lines, Frantz takes a look at the impact that the emergence of media fandom and *Star Trek* had on the nostalgia and collectibles trade. As the television show and its resulting fandom grew in popularity, fen began buying and selling collectibles related to the program, occasionally drawing the attention of the WSA and its mail fraud division. In 1976, for example, 25 percent of the mail fraud cases under investigation by the WRB involved *Star Trek* fen.

In several cases, members of the *Star Trek* Welcommittee itself even got involved in an attempt to hamper investigations. People operating the *Star Trek* Association for Revival weren't honoring paid memberships, and Welcommittee members operated individual chapters of STAR. A fan club for Nichelle Nichols became unable to meet its obligations to members, in part because of a printing imbroglio involving the Welcommittee newsletter and a misplaced contract. And a member of the Welcommittee misrepresented himself as a friend of Isaac Asimov while corresponding with a young writer, encouraging her to write stories of a sexual nature for a supposed anthology and asking her to share a hotel room during a con. The results of that investigation were published in a number of *Star Trek* fanzines, attracting the ire of the Welcommittee.

While the fan feud stories make for juicy reading, the book remains largely the tale of WE, the WRB, and the WSA. Its rise and fall also make for juicy reading. While the worthy business it undertook is notable, so is its own experience with internal divisions, personality conflicts, and controversy. To quote Depeche Mode, "People are people, so why should it be you and I should get along so awfully?"

Frantz himself offers a clue: "Historically, science fiction and comic book fans have difficulty seeing eye to eye." That can be true even within one specific fandom. "[M]any people forget why they became fans and collectors," Frantz wrote. "Activity that begins as a means of recreation and pleasure is prone to change when avocation becomes vocation. ... [I]t has an unfortunate tendency to bring out the worst in some people."

I think that's the rub. Stories like those in *Fandom: Confidential* occur when the idealism and passion of fen become overwhelmed by a fan's caring too much about something that takes up too much of their time, energy, and attention. Regardless of whether you believe FIAWOL or FIJAGH, don't lose your sense of wonder. If fandom becomes just another job, we're doing it wrong.

## My Memoirs of the Dark Shadows Conventions by Anthony Taylor Review by Heath Row

This very brief ebook (29 pages) focuses on *Dark Shadows* conventions on the east coast between 1993 and 2016. A presumably Black fan who grew up watching the television show in the 1960s and 1970s—enamored by Lara Parker, "??a sexy, beautiful ... white woman"—discovered fandom several decades later by way of a video tape advertisement for a convention. Taylor attended *Dark Shadows* conventions in 1993, 1995, 2001, 2004, 2006-2007, 2009, 2012, and 2016.

In a sequence of brief chapters, the author shares personal recollections of the cultural importance of the program, the impact of the show's supernatural elements, and the many actors he was able to meet

and obtain autographs from. Taylor also comments on various aspects of attending cons through the eyes of a newcomer: the speakers and screenings, the openness of the featured cast members, the dealers' rooms, con literature such as the 50th anniversary album, and other attendees: "Most were rich, and from the Caucasian race."

He details his favorite actors, recognizes the deaths of Dan Curtis and Jonathan Frid, and credits his involvement in the Dark Shadows Fan Club in part for his success as a trustee at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn. The ebook ends with several personal photographs of what might be Lyndhurst Mansion in Tarrytown, New York.

I was surprised to find this multi-year con report available on Amazon, and I'm glad that Taylor wrote it. I'm also glad he found lifelong enjoyment and involvement through Dark Shadows fandom. His memoir ably communicates its personal importance and meaning.

## The Politics of Fandom by Hannah Mueller Review by Heath Row

If you recently read Jeffrey Redmond's article "Politics in Science Fiction" in *Ionisphere* #34 (<https://tinyurl.com/Ionisphere34>) or my piece "Fanatique: The 'New' Fan Etiquette," you might also be intrigued by this book, published just this year. Originally offered as a dissertation at Cornell University, the book explores in depth the kinds of conflicts that can threaten and sometimes unify the various people and communities involved in fandom.

Similar to most recent fandom studies texts, the book distinguishes between literary or affirmational fandom (those who like to read and publish fanzines) and media or transformative fandom (those who like to watch and create). (I know that's an oversimplification, but I'm suspicious that transformative fan terms are mostly used by transformative fen and academics. Affirmational fen have an opportunity to discover new forms of fan activity and new ways to communicate.) The book, written by the managing editor of *Diacritics*, considers both types of fandom through a transformative view and offers several ideas for those interested in bridging the older generations of fen and newer, younger fen. Those opportunities for bridge building are welcome and inspiring to at least this fan, who increasingly feels at home in both camps.

Over the course of the book, Mueller considers a handful of case studies offered as instructive examples of political conflicts dating back to the earliest days of fandom. In fact, there are at least two issues of *Tightbeam* included among the citations, as well as Donald Franson's 1962 *N3F Fandbook Some Historical Facts About Science Fiction Fandom*. The *N3F* also shows up in the index.

The conflicts considered by Mueller include the Great Exclusion of 1939, in which the Worldcon organizing committee ostracized politically outspoken participants. That con lobby skirmish led to the formation of New Fandom and eventually the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Mueller does well to compare the two groups' approaches to considering the role of politics in sf, fantasy, and horror. She also considers the Breen Boondoggle in 1964, in which fen decided to exclude Marion Zimmer Bradley's husband Walter Breen from *Pacificon II* and the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (or its wait list, at least). While less explicitly political in nature, that controversy again highlighted aspects of inclusivity and exclusivity in fandom, focusing on how adults interact with children in fannish and other settings.

The book then fast forwards to several more recent political movements within fandom, including RaceFail '09, which took place primarily on LiveJournal rather than in fanzines—highlighting transformative fandom's move online to platforms such as fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own—in which fen and professionals alike considered the role of race (and by extension, the working class, the poor, and women) in literature and media, as well as within fandom itself. Of special note in this chapter is Mueller's consideration of fan-pro relationships and the role of authority, hierarchy, and power in political conflict within fandom. While several newly popular authors have emerged from RaceFail, the pros challenged at the time didn't necessarily hold their own with grace and charm.

Also considered in the text: Puppygate and its impact on Hugo voting; how an influx of Twilight fen affected cons and fandom; the role of cosplay and other transformative fan activities; Glee fans and their criticism of the television show when it started to stray from topics and themes that initially attracted fen; and the transmedia marketing of *The Hunger Games*, which enabled fen to participate on both sides of the novels'—and movies'—narrative politics, introducing questions about and concerns with the commercial aspects of fan activity.

All in all, Mueller does well to examine the cohesion of community and ideals of tolerance within fandom, the tensions between hierarchical organization models and looser online networks of fen, and the desire for entertainment as well as social change. “[T]ransformative fans are starting to appear as equal to, and in some ways even more influential than the affirmational fans of literary science fiction and fantasy,” Mueller wrote. “[T]he divide between politically progressive and politically conservative fractions of fandom has in fact deepened once more, and the feuds that are carried out between different camps in the fannish sphere are more directly and openly connected to national and global political developments than perhaps ever before in fandom history.”

What's missing in the book, through no fault of the text itself, is a solution—or solutions. One of the things that struck me is that requests to not discuss politics in fannish spaces are often arguments for the continuation of traditional politics, even if not positioned explicitly as such. Perhaps it's not whether we talk about politics in fandom but how we do so. This book is a lively, wide-ranging first step toward finding such solutions.

# Prose Bono

## Character Analysis: A Tale of Two People by Chris Nuttall

This started as a result of a discussion about conventions and, perhaps more importantly, me waking up in no state to write.

As a general rule, there are two sorts of people – mostly, although not always, male – who will push the boundaries to the point they make other people feel uncomfortable. Call these guys the ‘Socially Awkward Guy’ and ‘Really Creepy Guy.’

The Socially Awkward Guy has had very few opportunities to learn social interaction by doing. He may have been socially excluded at school – the nerd who got dumped on by everyone else – or there may have been something in his background that made it hard for him to interact with other people; he might be autistic, for example, or simply very shy. It is a struggle for Socially Awkward Guy to open a conversation with anyone and, when there are several people in the conversation, Socially Awkward Guy tends to slink out of everyone else’s awareness. He may have good points to make, but never sees an opportunity to actually speak. Socially Awkward Guys like fandom – nerdy fandom – because it provides something they can use to get social interaction.

Socially Awkward Guy is not particularly empathic, not in the sense that he is capable of understanding how he comes across to others. They simply don’t realise that they say or do things that make people uncomfortable, largely because they have problems understanding that people can find them threatening. (Remember, they were the ones who got dumped on by everyone else.) At their worst, Socially Awkward Guys curdle; they become so resentful of the way they are treated, which barely registers on everyone else’s radar, that they go looking for a way to hit back.

The Really Creepy Guy, by contrast, knows precisely what he’s doing. His every act is designed to push the window of acceptable conduct, at least for him; if you give him an inch, he’ll take a mile. Everything he does will be surrounded by layer upon layer of plausible deniability – “oh, she was overreacting” – and he will have neither compunction nor trouble in manipulating everyone into supporting him. Really Creepy Guys like fandom because nerds are instinctively opposed to excluding anyone, no matter how creepy they may be.

Really Creepy Guy is often very empathic, in the sense he understands just how far he can go. He often understands the rules of social interaction very well, to the point where he can manipulate authority – however defined – into supporting him. He’s good at reading people, allowing him to tell who will stop him and who will refuse to take a stand. Really Creepy Guy can be charming and funny, but also toxic. His mere presence drives people away.

The problem facing convention organisers is two-fold. First, it can be hard to tell the difference between Socially Awkward Guy and Really Creepy Guy. Second, Really Creepy Guy tends to have more social capital than Socially Awkward Guy, which makes it harder to take action against him. (This is probably why Harvey Weinstein got away with it for so long.) The organiser may discover that there are people who will threaten to walk, if Really Creepy Guy is banned. These people either don’t understand just how much of a drain Really Creepy Guy is or simply don’t care. Remember, Really Creepy

Guy is good at getting people to support him.

What makes this worse is that using the wrong approach can be disastrous.

Socially Awkward Guy has had, almost certainly, very bad experiences with bullies. If you come down on him like a ton of bricks, humiliating him in public, kicking him out of the one place he feels comfortable and blacklisting him so he can't go anywhere else, he will see you as yet another bully and hate you. He'll be so focused on his pain that he won't be able to see – or care about – anyone else. And, as many nerds will take his side, they'll come to see you as the villain. The convention will lose attendees from the class that actually keeps it going.

Really Creepy Guy, on the other hand, will not respond to anything other than a metaphorical punch in the snout. He will see warnings, however expressed, as a sign of weakness, as a sign that you are not prepared to push matters to the brink. He'll take heart from your weakness and carry on, which will – obviously – cost you more attendees. Really Creepy Guy, again, drives away the sort of people you need to run a convention.

So how, then, do you tell the difference?

Socially Awkward Guy will be grateful, almost pathetically grateful, if you take him aside and gently tell him – in private – that his behaviour is unacceptable. Don't be threatening; be calm and reasonable and at least try to be understanding. He will be embarrassed and apologetic and, because you had the talk in private, will not feel humiliated by you. (You may even discover that he asks you for advice.) And he will try to do better.

Really Creepy Guy will not get any better. Like I said, he'll see it as a sign of weakness and carry on. At this point, you can lower the boom; ban him from the convention, make it clear that you banned him for repeated misbehaviour, do your best to put together a case proving that Really Creepy Guy is a real creep. If someone tries to argue in his defence, you can ask them if this is the behaviour they really want to tolerate. He was warned, he carried on; you no longer have any reason to be nice.

The problem, of course, is that Really Creepy Guy is good at dancing along the line without quite crossing it. There will be people who will argue "I never saw him do it, so he didn't do it." That's why you need to put together a case proving that he's a drain on the convention; you have to not only do the right thing, but make it clear you did the right thing. The last thing you want is to convince people that you were picking on a Socially Awkward Guy when you were removing a Really Creepy Guy.

But, if there's one thing I've noticed over the years, it is that it's really easy to pick on a Socially Awkward Guy and quite hard to remove a Really Creepy Guy.

## Trimming Out the Story by Cedar Sanderson

I don't mean cutting bits. I mean adding them. The little finishing touches that really tie everything together. Today we begin the final stage of the home improvement and we will be installing wainscoting and trim. The walls are painted, the carpeting is 90% gone, the gorgeous oak floors are showing for the first time in, likely, decades. It's still a mess, and it still looks sloppy at the paint lines. Given my house



became my son's school project? I'm expecting imperfection. But when the finish is done, those will fade into the background of fresh clean paint and white trim lines, and it will all be beautiful.

It's the same for a story. Once you have your rough draft, you'll read back through it and see all the flaws. The timeline that just isn't true throughout the plot. The character whose hairline slipped... ok, maybe not that. But still, you follow my metaphor. It's time to take the story and trim it out. For me, who flies through the plot by the seat of my pants as I'm writing it, feeling the fundamental shifts of pace and character only when the words hit the page, I find that I have to give it some time before I can read back through with enough distance to start seeing where the trim needs to be nailed up to hide the rough edges.

It's easier in a house, of course. You have the baseboards, and they go at the bottom of the wall to hide the slight waviness of the cuts on that wainscoting. In a story? There are likely no convenient ninety-degree angles to apply the same concept to. There will be, on the other hand, narrative threads that are drawn through the story, and there, that's where you put your trim. You want to draw the reader's eye to that area. Nothing too much – well, unless your story is the equivalent of a Painted Lady, with the gingerbread and all that swirly twirly carving on the corbels. My house? Well, we are simple people. Our baseboards are starting as 1x4 pine furring strips, and after much application of white semi-gloss, will reflect our understanding that very few people will see them behind all the book cases.

The story equivalent is word choices, and phrasing. They set the reader's expectations. If you use cerulean, rather than blue, that's a trim selection. If you switch up "She took to her company like a duck to water" with "She took to her new friend like a puppy to new shoes" there's a difference, immediately. Readers bring expectations to stories, just like someone walking into a house for the first time is unlikely to notice the trim unless it's jarringly wrong... like my simple square pine in a Painted Lady, for instance. It works in my modest home with the wood floors and what my son calls 'easter egg' colored walls. You might not even be able to verbalize what's sticking out of the story, it's not like the trim is shocking pink across dark cherry paneling, after all. If readers are having that little vacant smile and 'oh... my...' reaction to the story, you may want to review your words and phrases to make sure they harmonize with the overall plotline and character development.

One of the things I'm trying to teach my son about the project of size, is something I've learned about a novel as well. Clean up as you go along. The Kid wants to focus on a project-within-a-project (say, stripping the cheap paneling off the walls) and overlook the messes he makes as he goes. You want to watch this, particularly if, like me, you are unable to sit down and write the whole thing in a matter of weeks so it's all fresh in your head. If you don't get a chance to read back through, you'll overlook that pile in the shop until suddenly you need that space to lay out the trim for priming... Oh. Er, in a story you may miss that you set up some situation, say, a shopper for a used spaceship, cheap, seized her chance to pick up that strangely worn ship with the eerie whispers for a song... and then you never again mention the whispers.

Besides which, if you make sure to sweep up as you go, take the time to put all the food in the pantry as you aren't renovating the kitchen, it's less work at the end. As long as you don't get bogged down in editing and re-editing the story so each part is perfect... because that's what trim is for. It's to come along later and make it all look sharp and contiguous. Make it all level in the beginning, do your best, and then in re-writes and edits, make it shine.

~Finis~