

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
June 2022

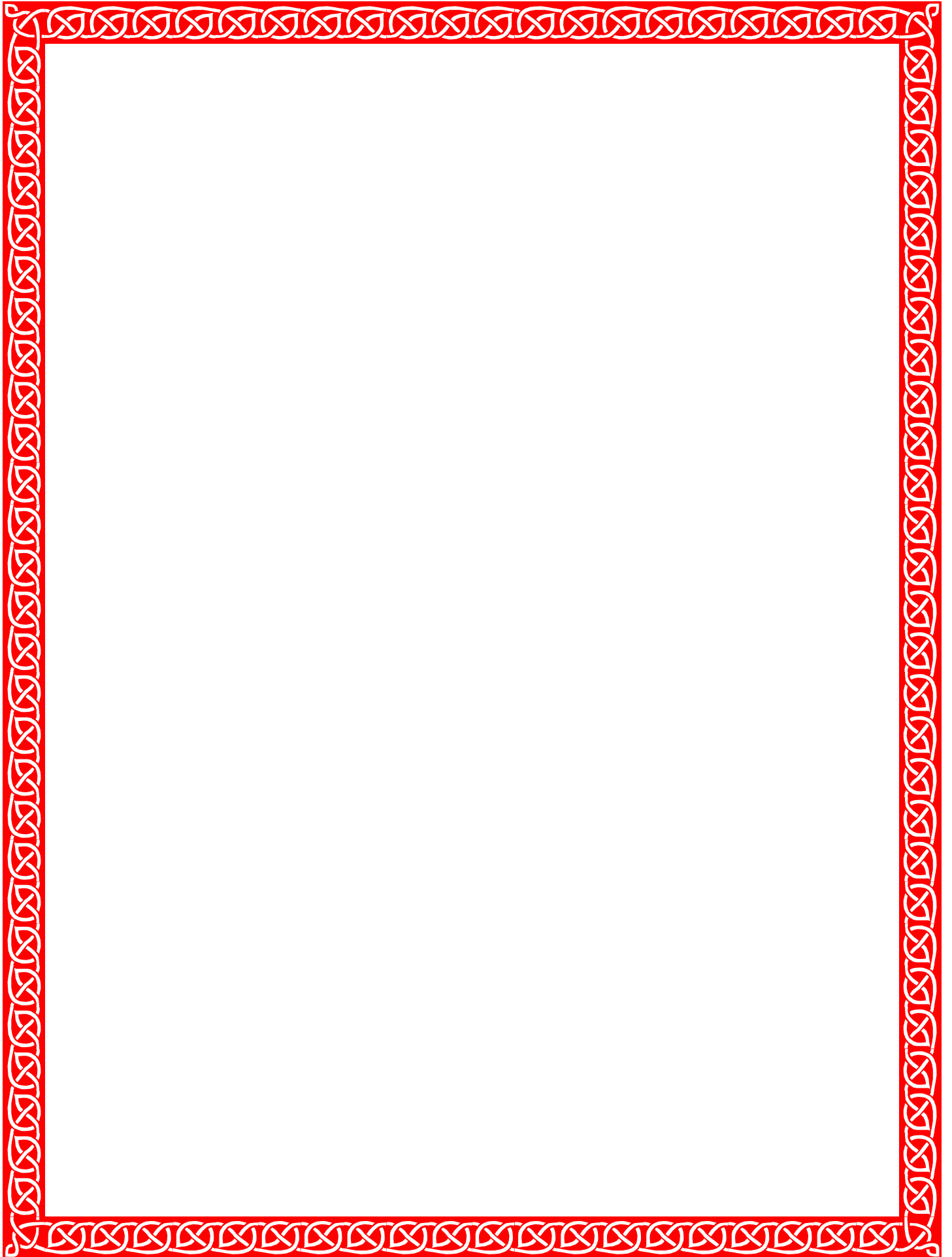
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Editorial

Last month, we had a fine, very long issue. This month Summer vacations are in full swing and we have a much shorter issue. Indeed, without the fine work of Robert Kroese and Upstream Reviews, and the writing skills of Jim McCoy, we would have had to skip an issue.

Please write for us. Unlike many other places, we are open to reviewers of all political persuasions, so long as you can focus on the book, not the author's politics.



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Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

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

George Phillies <http://books-by-george.com>

Jeffrey Redmond's writings also appear in the N3F zines Origins and Ionisphere

Cedar Sanderson <http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>

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Fiction

Contact: Book One by Hank Quense

Review by Jim McCoy

JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com

What do you get when you cross ugly, smelly, dirty aliens in control of both spacefaring technology and magic with dwarves who own battleaxes and can toss spells of their own? No, not Spelljammer, as much as I enjoyed that. You get Hank Quense's Contact: Book One of the Zaftan Troubles. You also get a rocking good time.

One thing that has always driven me slightly bonkers in fantasy fiction, going back to Tolkien, is that dwarven society is often ignored. I mean, sure Gimli played a major role in The Lord of the Rings but at no point do you really get to see him in his home setting. He is clearly excited to get to the Mines of Moria but, by the time the Fellowship gets there, everything is gone. Everyone is dead. There are no dwarves left to interact with.

Quense takes care of that problem right off the bat. His story is set in a dwarven society. In Contact we see the problems and advantages of a dwarven society. Dating is apparently even more of a problem than in human societies. Property rights are a big thing. Hard work is valued. Those who don't work don't get a whole lot of respect. It's the kind of society I would love to live in.

And make no mistake about it: Dwarves are, in my humble opinion, the greatest thing that ever happened to fantasy literature. I don't mean just Gimli, son of Glain. Bruenor Battlehammer and Flint Fireforge are age old favorites. The Dwarven Nations Trilogy is one of a very few good series about dwarves being dwarves. Another good one is the series by Markus Heitz. Quense has a way to go before I can add him to that list, but he's certainly taken a step in the right direction.

It also seems to say a lot about Mr. Quense's politics. His government is dominated by people looking out only for their own best interests. The local governor is a product of a political dynasty. Taxes are not necessarily seen as a good thing. The needs and wants of the people are viewed mainly as a way of getting re-elected. Just as I was about to label Contact a conservative work though, I get an eyeful of "pipe-weed" use and a hatred of corporations that wouldn't fit a classic conservative. Therefore, Contact must be a work that is Libertarian in nature.

This is a good thing. There is way too much leftist drivel on the market these days. It's good to see someone with some good old-fashioned values and not a bunch of preachy, incoherent, identity politics fueled crap being fed into my Kindle. The best part about it is that Quense shows instead of tells and I, for one, was not able to find anything that looked like a sermon. Quense did a good job here.

The Zaftan themselves, are vicious corporate industrialists. They either conquer places or use corporations to undermine their societies. I kind of don't like these guys, but then again, I'm not supposed to. They're the evil foreign invaders out to take everything of value. In a way, they're almost a caricature of the great colonizers from history, to include Romans, Japanese, Ottomans, Mongols, the Moors and lots of others. In a way they're not though. Very rarely in history has a conqueror come to help the people they're conquering. The might makes right theory of conquest has historically been very popular be-

cause it works. When the Zaftan don't recognize property rights in the sequels (this is planned as a seven-book series) it's going to get ugly. I'm sharpening my axe in anticipation.

The Zaftan are not exactly the universe's most lovable people otherwise either. Some are cranky. Others are lazy. One may very well be the death of his crew in a most literal sense. They're all focused on personal advancement at the cost of everyone and everything other than themselves. These guys are less trustworthy than my ex-wife. The captain is a woman with an attitude problem, although she may very well have an excuse.

They also appear to be very hard to kill. I'm thinking of my Dungeons and Dragons party from the late Nineties and our first encounter with a troll. Fortunately, my DM allowed me to get away with some meta-gaming and our party didn't wipe, but I'm guessing that the characters in Contact won't be as lucky. The next book looks like it might just get ugly for our dwarves.

I don't do spoilers but I'm looking forward to the sequel (which I have already downloaded) for another very important reason as well. I'm not going to say what it is, but it's a reflection of something that either reflects pop culture or is made fun of by pop culture, depending on your point of view. I want to see how this turns out or if it changes over time. I have a sneaking suspicion it just might because reasons.

Contact is a work of humor but sometimes it can be hard to tell when Quense is being funny and when he's actually making a point. That's actually a good thing though, as it keeps things from getting too preachy and we all love to laugh, right? I mean, that's a great thing. There was a lot here story-wise but it's always good to have a good time.

My only complaint about Contact, if you haven't guessed it already, is that it's not as long as I'd like it to be. I get that many authors are starting to come out with books more quickly now. And with a price point of ninety-nine cents, I've got no complaints there, but it seems to be over awfully quickly. It takes a bit of time to get started as well and by the time things start moving, we're already a third of the way through the book. Don't get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I just wish it was a bit longer. Then again, a good author leaves their audience wanting more. I'm really looking forward to reading the sequel because the first one was so good. I just wish I hadn't gotten there so quickly.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Braided Beards

The Family Business by Mike Kupari Review by Graham Bradley UpstreamReviews.com

What happens in an alien invasion story after humanity wins, and we're left to pick up the pieces of civilization? THE FAMILY BUSINESS puts us alongside a military veteran who makes his living hunting down pro-alien collaborators and bringing them to justice. When the Feds hire him to a particularly dangerous job, things will get...interesting.

The story

You don't have to look very far to find a story about aliens invading Earth, and humankind uniting to pound them back into the cosmos. What made THE FAMILY BUSINESS cool was that it showed us the world a few years after the human victory, when our planet is trying to recover from population

loss and damage to our infrastructure, to say nothing of our government or legal system.

It was also a fresh take on a bounty hunter story, where the focus is on bringing people in alive instead of constantly hunting dangerous fugitives. Our protagonist, Nathan Foster, has been at this for years and while he's a veteran of the war, he's not entirely jaded or downtrodden. He believes in the system and in what he's doing.

That makes him the right guy for the job when the Feds hire him to capture an escaped prisoner. He uses his wits and his contacts before he uses his guns.

I'll always have a soft spot for a good shoot-em-up sci-fi, and I kind of expected that from THE FAMILY BUSINESS, but this story wasn't afraid to show a little more creativity than that.

The characters

Nathan Foster is our main guy. He was a tank commander in the war with the Visitors, and the other three guys in his unit all died. His business partner, Stella, is a hot secretary who's good at keeping his paperwork in line, cutting through the red tape that still exists even after an alien invasion. (Bureaucracy, man. It's the underwear rash of the civilized world.)

Rounding out Nathan's staff is his teen nephew Ben, who was orphaned during the war. He had a little bit of "Wesley Crusher" to him, in that he was a young kid that all the adults turned to with tech problems, but he wasn't annoying or anything. Just eager to learn and share his skills.

Then there's Emmogene Anderson, a former collaborator with the Visitors. They experimented on her, but she doesn't know how because they wiped her memory; one such experiment left her with a device in her brain that can control other people. The other experiment, well...that's for you to discover, dear reader. It's pretty interesting.

Rounding out our principal cast is Swiss super-commando Anthony Krieg, a collaborator diehard and Emmogene's lover. Dude's got a few screws loose and he's not afraid to leave a body count behind him. He wants to retrieve Emmogene and get her help to bring the Visitors back to Earth. I kept seeing Dolph Lundgren in my head when I read this guy, even though he's Swedish. Kind of a paint-by-numbers 80s movie villain, though he has a unique motivation.

While there's a good handful of characters in this book, it's really the plot that moves things along. The first half is pretty linear—a few days here, a week there—and then there's a jump of several months about halfway through, which I was fine with because it kept things moving. The action scenes were swift, yet the in-between stuff didn't drag, and I liked that it was easy to keep the pages turning. That's important in a sci-fi novel.

The world

In the not too-distant future, humanity repelled an alien invasion. On their way out the door, the aliens dropped a few meteors on major cities around the world, leaving millions and millions of people dead.

Despite all of this, a lot of developed countries are almost back up and running, they just need help from independent contractors to perform certain tasks, at least until critical infrastructure is rebuilt.

Kupari's handling of a post-invasion Earth is utterly believable, especially since the government wasn't entirely destroyed. All of the government bureaucracy stuff feels very familiar and realistic—not even an

alien war can really kill the administrative state.

There were the odd infodumps here and there, but in keeping with Kupari's pace throughout the book, they weren't overly long. Half a page here, maybe a whole page every once in a while, and they were easy to digest. I got the feeling he cared more about only putting in the relevant info, and not copy-and-pasting his worldbuilding notes into the text. It did slow down a little near the end, because it had to switch gears from a combat climax to a diplomatic closing. That said, I was still intrigued to the last page.

If I have any complaints, it's that there were certain parts of this fictional world we didn't get to see very much, namely the fauna. We're told that the Visitors brought some life-forms with them from their own ecosystems and introduced them to Earth, where they took over in some areas, but we only get one real scene with the humans going up against an alien animal. While more of these scenes could have slowed the story, it would have been cool to see some variety on that front.

Oh, and the cover—while very cool—was rather misleading. Nathan never hunts an actual alien. His focus is on the collaborators. You'll see when you read it. I think it sells the general concept decently enough, though.

The politics

Since we see most of the story from Nathan's POV, we get plenty of “independent man can do, while bloated government cannot do” stuff. Other political considerations have to do with what the Visitors want and what mankind wants, and whether those two objectives can be reconciled without war.

Content warning

Plenty of R-rated language and violence. Some talk of rape, and a little bit of consensual sexy-times, but not in excessive detail.

Who is it for?

I could see an audience consisting of military fiction readers, sci-fi fans, and people who like bounty hunter stories. It's a little bit western, but not too cowboy. It's set mostly in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

Why read it?

I was most impressed by how real it felt, and for an alien invasion story, that's saying something. This is my third foray into Kupari's writing and his military experience always comes through strong in his books. He's walked in the main character's footsteps, and he knows how to include the details that take you down the same path. It wasn't just the plot and the worldbuilding that gave this book a unique flavor.

Hell Spawn by Declan Finn
Review by Ginger Man
UpstreamReviews.com

Detective Tommy Nolan, NYPD is a badass living saint.

Just don't tell him that.

The story

Detective Tommy Nolan is having an interesting day. He starts by taking down a purse snatcher...by seeming to teleport in front of him. While at the local precinct shortly after, he sees what looks like a normal junkie getting booked. Things get strange though when the addict sees Nolan and loses it, attacking Tommy with animal-like ferocity and displaying superhuman strength before finally being put down.

It only gets worse as he and his partner, the decidedly ruffled Alan Packard get called to a murder scene. The murder is ritualistic, and before long it's clear they are dealing with a serial killer, one with a fetish for killing people close to Tommy and doing so in a brutal, gruesome way that is also strikingly familiar.

Before long, they realize they are not dealing with an ordinary serial killer but one who has abilities that no human should have. Tommy develops a few of his own, putting him on a more level playing field. Throughout the course of Hell Spawn, the detective learns he can bi-locate, smell the presence of evil and more besides.

If this sounds like a superhero origin story, it is in a way. Though again, you would never want to tell Tommy that. His ability to do all of these things is tied directly to his prayer life and he's careful to correct anyone who even hints that the abilities he shows actually come from him.

The characters

Thomas Nolan fancies himself an ordinary cop. He has a wife and a young son. He volunteers at his local parish as much as he can and generally lives his life in the best way he knows how. He not only doesn't think of himself as a living saint, but rather as a sinner who needs help with his anger problem. Yet, he doesn't come off as a holy card come to life. He really does just seem like an ordinary guy. At least until he has to take down an MS-13 gang that tries to kill him. Then he basically turns into someone that might scare Rambo.

His partner is Alex Packard, who is a little more worldly than Detective Nolan. Rough around the edges and little jaded after all that he's seen, Packard makes an excellent foil for Tommy, ribbing him about his newfound abilities and his confusion about having them in a way that only a close friend can.

There are plenty of supporting characters as well, particularly Tommy's wife Mariel who is a perfect match for him, humble and tough in all the right ways. And there is of course the 'not-quite-a-gangster' known as 'D'. The large black man operates on the fringes of the law and has maintained a friendly relationship with Detective Nolan for years and becomes an important part not only of this book but the entire series.

The world

The world of Hell Spawn is our world. There are no laws of physics that particular characters have the ability to break. Every ability Tommy has is clearly a divine gift and the supernatural aspects of the primary villain are of demonic origin. Given that Finn bases all of these off actual accounts, we really are operating in the real world. Normally, all the good detective has to concern himself with are gangs and random purse snatchers. Demonic serial killers feel as out of place as they should in what is otherwise an everyday world with everyday concerns.

The politics

Finn makes no secret in the book of his disdain for the political left. Nolan goes up against MS-13 and others that are at or near protected class status by the left. Not that Finn ever indulges in preaching, he simply states the facts as they are and then St. Tommy lays down the law. No one is safe either, not politicians, defenders of brutal gangs, or the obvious Planned Parenthood analog.

Content warning

This is not for the faint of heart or the young ones. The violence is graphic as is the description of the bodies left by the serial killer. There is also a scene at the end that involves a young child and his mother being physically threatened.

Who is it for?

This is definitely for anyone teen and above, but especially young men who need an example of someone who is both pious and an ass-kicker to help jumpstart their own male protective instincts. This book is part Exorcist, part Seven, and part Lethal Weapon.

Why read it?

Because St. Tommy is one of my favorite characters this millennium. I've read Hell Spawn and all of the subsequent books as well and Declan Finn never struggles to give his readers an action-packed story in which evil is punished and the good guy never stops to wonder if he really is the good guy. He might wonder if he could have done things better, if he might have punched a demon in the face harder than he needed to, but there is never any doubt as to who the good guy is. That alone is refreshing in time when most franchises have become brooding, moribund, navel-gazing drek.

Infernal Affairs by Declan Finn
Review by Michael Gallagher
UpstreamReviews.com

The Story

Death Cult ended with a massive suburban fire fight against a Moloch-worshipping cult. With Detective Thomas Nolan having thrown a wrench into their using baby parts for rituals, the book ended with one hell of a twist. Despite being thrown into a raging fire pit, the smooth-voiced nemesis Bokor Baracus was not only alive but dutifully employed with a cozy spot in City Hall.

Infernal Affairs picks up months later, with Nolan enjoying a stretch of pleasant home life. Having set-

tled into his new house, his son is getting along with new friends and he and his wife are enjoying their newfound free time together.

The idyllic times are short-lived, of course. One night after a dream of a gigantic angelic figure demands he rise up and act as Judge and Executioner against the forces of Satan, he rouses from his sleep just in time to engage a team of heavily armored gunmen.

After one of Finn's most brutally described firefights to date, he's shocked to discover his attackers were corrupt members of SWAT. Then the really bad news arrives--there's a ten-million-dollar bounty on his head; "They don't even want you alive. It's dead all the way down."

The characters

This novel, closing the arc of Nolan's fight against the various and sundry forces of evil at the top of the city's political ladder, focuses its finale on Mayor Richardo Hoynes and his right hand man Bokor Baracus. The ride up until there also welcomes back MS-13 gang member Rene Ormeno from the first book, newly released from a mental asylum and souped up on diabolical strength.

Nolan's loyal partner Alex Parker is by his side until the very end, and his grenade lobbing arm is a lot more limber this time. No new characters are introduced from outside the previous two books; a suitable choice for wrapping up the long and protracted battle that had been waged so far. It's for this reason, I think, that the dialogue is probably at its best here, as familiar personalities all make their appearances re-entering the ring against Tommy and Alex. I especially found the banter between those two to be especially good this time around.

The World

Finn's New York City of the previous books returns. The biggest difference in this entry are the sheer number and brazenness of the supernatural elements that come roaring out of the gate as the pitch of the battle picks up. The bounty on Nolan's head has gunmen scrying to find his location, fire-breathing wyverns sprout from traffic drones and hellhounds whose paws singe whatever they touch bound across rooftops to chase him down.

It's eventually discovered a powerful warlock is the one behind the bounty. It turns out the heat rising on the intensity and frequency of the attempts on Nolan's life are tied to something deeper as well; the warlock requires an increasing amount of blood sacrifices be made to keep the dark forces bestowing his powers happy. This leads to broad daylight attacks by mythical creatures along major highways, open gunfights with literal truckloads of enemies, and collateral damage being cranked up to fifty as the attacks become more desperate.

The Politics

The particular politics of Hell Spawn and Death Cult falls off the radar in *Infernal Affairs*. As this novel is stuffed to the gills with action, the plot focus is on the far more primal goal of survival rather than any nuanced issues.

However, as the mayor's agenda becomes increasingly radical—or more mainstream, if you like—we see a series of new policies and attitudes playing out. Of course, the city is toying with the idea of harassing the Catholic church for its bigoted stances on gay marriage and abortion, and a few details that were no doubt written to seem over the top in 2018 (like sex education for first graders taught exclu-

sively by trans teachers) impress from their sheer prescience in 2022.

Perhaps this was my only significant criticism for the book; I'm all for a good political dragging, especially by anyone with wit to really pull it off. I can laugh at those on my side of the aisle and Lord knows I enjoy roasting progressives extra crispy. There are times though, when it feels like Finn does visit this well a bit too often, especially towards the end. The final conflict is an adrenaline bomb so chaotic and fiery I'm convinced it could never be put to film but delivers on its promised thrills and ends satisfyingly. The villain monologuing sprinkled in and some of the closing scene dialogue did begin to border on grating a bit however but stops short of ruining anything.

Who's it for?

If you're on *Infernal Affairs*, you, like me, are likely a Tommy Nolan fan; it's definitely for those invested in the story and have already read the first two books of the series; a LOT of the impact of the plot and character appearances will be lost on you if you haven't read *Hell Spawn* and *Death Cult*, which you absolutely should. You can check out my reviews for those particular titles [here](#) and [here](#). Why read it?

It's a huge, two-fisted culmination of the escalating battles between the forces of good and evil that's been brewing for two books. Despite my above criticism, it does tie a satisfying bow on this leg of Tommy Nolan's enlistment on the side of good before starting an intriguing new leg of his journey in the next novel, *City of Shadows*.

Into the Real by John Ringo and Lydia Sherrer Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Some years ago, when the augmented reality game *Pokemon Go* first came out, I mostly heard about it from its biggest fan: John Ringo.

Like every good author, Ringo took something from his life, and weaponized it for a novel.

And, it being a John Ringo novel, that requires weaponizing it on multiple levels, including as a real weapon.

In the case of *Into the Real*, written with Lydia Sherrer, they took *Pokemon Go* and turned it into *Ender's Game*.

The story

Larry "The Snake" Coughlin is an internet mercenary, a top tier game player for hire. Hire him to rid yourself of annoying opposition in your online video games. Except "Larry Coughlin" is really Lynn Raven, a 17-year-old high school girl. When the CEO of the biggest video game company in the world reaches out to her to beta test his new Augmented Reality game, she is hesitant. An AR game means she has to go outside and deal with ... people. Even worse, Lynn eventually has to work in teams, especially when the company offers a contest where the grand prize is five million dollars and a guaranteed job in the game industry.

I must admit, "John Ringo" and "YA" do not fit easily together in the brain. But it's executed perfectly

well here. I have no idea how much is Ringo's concept or Sherrer's execution. Either way, it works perfectly.

Despite the fact that there are no mortal stakes involved here, Into the Real keeps up the pace admirably. There is no threat to life and limb, and a very rare threat of bodily harm, but for the most part, there are no slow bits. Sure, some fight scenes drag on too long, mostly because the reader understands that there is no genuine threat to our characters... that we know of.

If there is one big problem to the novel, it's that the reader knows what's going on, though the characters haven't put it together. When the monsters of the Into the Real game feed on electricity, and there are power fluctuations and blackouts throughout the entire country, it's easy for us to put two and two together before a third of the way into the book. It ends on a To Be Continued without more than hinting at what the reader suspects.

And only 40% of the way into the book, we get an exchange that goes

"When we say these entities.... are unknown, we mean we don't even know what they are. The data is encrypted and how the AI assigns them is also unknown."

On top of everything else, all one can think is "Gee, what can go wrong?"

Trust me, these aren't spoilers. The overall story of the "Trans Dimensional Hunter" novels is advanced entirely by seeing Lynn on her journey from gamer to leader, and it's quite fun. It suffers a little from feeling like it is only the first part of a novel... until you realize that there is no way the events of this book could have been handled any other way. You're just going to have to buy another Ringo novel to see how the story pans out.

The characters

Lynn Raven is an unusually likeable teenager. The daughter of a widowed single mother, Lynn has long ago monetized her video game exploits, generating a steady income via microtransactions. She is smart, capable, and even her foibles are relatable. Seriously, who likes interacting with teenagers or people?

It is also fun watching Lynn's character develop over the course of the book, going from gamer physique and finding out how sunburns work, to someone more formidable.

The second main character is Hugo, the AI that comes with the Into the Real game, and is basically Jarvis from the Marvel films, complete with British accent and snarky dialogue.

As for the other characters, there are none of the usual YA formulas in Into the Real. The school bully isn't some copy and paste reject from Mean Girls, she is her own unique brand of psychotic.

The only thing that felt formulaic may have been the introduction of Lynn's friends. Mercifully, they turn out to be deeper than they appear.

The only irksome protagonist is one character who insists "Girls can't game," despite all evidence Lynn presents to the contrary. (As I grew up having to fight my mother and sister for control of the Game Boy growing up, the stereotype never made sense.) Push through these sections, and you will be rewarded. Like the rest, he is no shallow stereotype, as one might expect from a YA novel.

The world

Easily half of this book is world-building. Lynn's beta testing involves a lot of explanation as she pulls and prods the inner workings of the game in her attempts to push it to its limits... and as Lynn tries to find glitches to exploit and hacks to the game, like every other gamer. Lynn's exploration covers both the technology of gaming as well as the world-building of the game. Of the first 20% of the book, easily 14% of the book is the game and the mechanics.

If you're not into technology or the world-building... then why are you reading science fiction?

One of the major, obvious Ringo touches is that the book gets into the nitty gritty of just how things work. The game AI monitors the gamer and can contact emergency services if things go wrong. There are a lot of details on weapon classes and armor sets, and how microtransactions now work. It's also a game that comes with customer support and tactical support.

The world contains an element that pisses me off in that it has long-lasting impacts of Coronavirus lockdowns--all modern theaters are dead, replaced by VR movie cafes, half of education includes VR automatons, and doctors are always looking for the next novel virus. I don't hate that Ringo and Sherrer have this view of the future, I hate that they might be right.

And some of the game is cute. Healing capsules are called Oneg, The werewolf-like monsters are the Varg (paging Jim Butcher). There is a shotgun referred to as the Abomination, which I think is the second Larry Correia reference (the first being, I believe, Larry Coughlin).

The politics

As this book does not spell out anything too clearly by the end, you can garner a message if you squint really hard, tilt your head sideways, and stretch like a pretzel: That big business and civilian individuals can do a job better than the federal government.

Also, part of the moral of the story is that you should pay attention to current events.

Content warning

You can tell that John Ringo didn't write the bulk of this novel for the simple reason that it is obviously YA, and this includes the content.

If you're worried about "video game violence" ... then I deeply worry about you, since there is no correlation between video games and violence. Since a third of American households own a game console (not counting PCs) if video games meant violence, we'd be hip deep in blood.

Who is it for?

If you liked Ender's Game, or even video games, you're going to enjoy Into the Real.

Why read it?

Ringo and Sherrer have created a modern-day Ender's Game using the technology of Pokemon Go. The characters are vivid and interesting, and the action is strong enough to carry you along.

Minister's Shoes by Celine Rose Mariotti
Review by Will Mayo

This is a different kind of mystery. Reverend Castle drives throughout the American South with the Good Lord seated beside him in his Thunderbird, seeking answers to a missing husband, a murder and a casino deal gone bad, all as his deity feeds clues into his waiting ear. Of course, the reader wonders if the Lord is as all knowing as those who praise him say, why, then he doesn't give the Rev. Castle the answer to the whole mystery right offhand rather than leading him on a merry chase in the Southland. But, oh, the Christians' god is one that works in mysterious ways and no mystery novel would be complete without its chase. So the chase is on. All for a brand new pair of shoes. And, refreshingly, this is a preacher that leaves the holier than thou types trembling in their tracks. All in all, a fun kind of read. I enjoyed it.

Monster Hunter Files
Edited by Larry Correia and Bryan Thomas Schmidt
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International has been going strong for over a decade now. He's built up a solid world and had made enough money to buy himself a mountain stronghold... which he has done.

So the next step was to do what every other successful author does with a world: invite other people to join the party.

The stories

“Thistle” by Larry Correia Owen and his team take on a new kind of monster in Arizona -- This first story in this particular volume is by Larry himself, starting with our usual main character, Owen Z Pitt. It starts as your usual, straightforward monster killing story. Then Larry does a twist at the end of this one that makes Rod Serling proud. I didn't see it coming, but I should have. The action is solid, and it's Larry playing in his own universe.

“Small Problems” by Jim Butcher MHI's new janitor has to deal with some small problems -- This short story is brought to you by Jim Butcher. Do I have to say this one was awesome? However, I will say that this feels like he hadn't recovered from all of his Roman legion research from Codex Alera ... while watching The Secret of NIMH.

“Darkness Under The Mountain” by Mike Kupari Cooper takes a freelance job in Afghanistan-- The Chinese have dug too greedily and too deep... and that's a line in the story. And this time, there really are a lot of older, fouler things in the earth. It's almost a Monster Hunter procedural novel, with a soup-con of MCB BS.

“A Knight Of The Enchanted Forest” by Jessica Day George (Trailer park elves versus gnomes TURF WAR!) -- A straight up comedy from the first page, with the redneck elves versus a collection of hippies. It's straight up funny

“The Manticore Sanction” by John C. Wright (Cold War era British espionage with monsters) -- This

one was dark. Very British. Also, very Universal monster movie... the black and white version, not the new crap with Tom Cruise. This one was ... surprisingly powerful. The conclusion had a twist that hit so hard I'm sure it left a mark.

“The Dead Yard” by Maurice Broaddus Trip goes to Jamaica on some family business-- It was okay. It needed more meat to it. It was awkwardly paced and finished very suddenly. I think it needed more room to work.

“The Bride” by Brad R. Torgersen. Frank wasn't the only thing Benjamin Franklin cut deals with-- This one was awesome. In MHI lore, we know that Benjamin Franklin made a deal with Frankenstein's monster, but here is something else again. And yes, Ben Franklin is a point of view character, and Brad writes him perfectly. I can hear the actor from 1776 when I read the story. Also, Franklin's bit of a badass. Who knew? Though this one pissed me off ... it was over too soon. I wanted it to run another ten pages. Dear Larry: Can Brad write a novel on the Revolutionary War history of monster hunting? Please?

“She Bitch, Killer of Kits” (a Skinwalker Crossover Tale) by Faith Hunter Jane Yellowrock teams up with MHI -- This was okay. I have seen Faith Hunter on panels at DragonCon, but having read her work here, I honestly think the author is more interesting than the story she wrote. Which is odd, because the inverse is usually the case. If you're a fan of her work, this one may be for you

“Mr. Natural” by Jody Lynn Nye An STFU mission in the 70s has to deal with plant monsters and hippies! -- The government's Special Task Force Unicorn has assembled a dirty dozen of mythological creatures to take down the Not So Jolly Green Giant. It was hilarious and fun as heck. Though the bunny ex machina ending threw me.

“Sons Of The Father” by Quincy J. Allen Two young brothers discover monsters are real and kill a mess of them -- Quincy is apparently a newb author, but I couldn't tell from the story. It was very Supernatural, if they focused more on being badass than soap opera. Had Quincy Allen wrote Supernatural, it wouldn't have become boring.

“The Troll Factory” by Alex Shvartsman Heather gets some help from MHI for an STFU mission into Russia -- Yeah, this was fun. A post-MHI: Siege story. It has a nice setup of a newbie hunter, and it has an awesome, awesome punchline.

“Keep Kaiju Weird” by Kim May. A Kitsune may have already earned her PUFF exemption, but she's not going to let some monster squish Portland -- I really enjoyed this one. I was having flashbacks to the better episodes of Grimm, though. This one stars Franks, his government sidekick Grant, and taking on Godzilla.

“The Gift” by Steve Diamond. Two of the Vatican's Hunters from the Blessed Order of Saint Hubert the Protector on a mission in Mexico -- I wanted to like this one more. It felt like someone condensed a novel with a lot of background information left out. Perhaps this would work better as the first five chapters of a full novel.

“The Case of the Ghastly Specter” by John Ringo. While studying at Oxford, Chad takes a case -- Was Ringo watching old Sherlock Holmes movies? There were moments when Chad sounds like Basil Rathbone. I might like this one better in the full novel of Sinners, as downtime in an action-packed novel. But here, in this anthology, it just feels like "the slow bit." The difference is jarring. It's still good.

“Huffman Strikes Back” by Bryan Thomas Schmidt & Julie Frost Owen’s vacation gets interrupted for some monster revenge-- This was part comedy, part action scene. Either way, it was awesome. Owen's first kill was his fat slob of a boss that Owen threw out the window of the 14th floor of his office building. The fat slob was a werewolf. The fat slob also had a brother.

“Hitler’s Dog” by Jonathan Maberry It is WW2 and Agent Franks really hates Nazis-- Prisoners in a concentration camp make a golem to fight the Nazis. However, there's only one available animating spirit that can make this clay man walk. And everyone's favorite monster, Franks, is cranky on a good day. When he's hijacked to animate their golem, he's as friendly as ever. But at least he has Nazis to take it out on. Good story, but I think it needed a little more fleshing out.

The world

Each story does a nice job fleshing out Larry Correia's world just a little bit more. Some more than others.

The politics

Monsters need to be squashed, and to do that, you need guns, lots of guns.

Content warning

Sexual situations. Horror elements. There should probably be a language warning tagged on here, if only for the dick pic mentioned in one short.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who likes the part of Supernatural where they hunt monsters, or for anyone who likes a good fantasy action world

Why read it?

It's a fun collection of playing in Larry Correia's world. You should try it if only for the best of the bunch, which stand all on their own.

Monster Hunter Vendetta
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Today we continue the review of the Larry Correia Monster Hunter International series.

By the end of the first Monster Hunter International novel, all is right with the world. The villain was finished. Our hero, Owen Pitt, got the girl, and while there were a few residual hiccups along the way involving some of the crew becoming vampires, everything is perfect...

Except for one niggling little detail.

The story

At one point during the final battle of MHI, the government accidentally dropped a nuclear bomb through an interdimensional portal, getting the attention of a Cthulian elder god, who decides that only one human creature is to blame...

Owen Pitt.

Yup. This guy has Murphy's own luck.

Pitt is now being hunted by a death cult known as the "Church of the Temporary Mortal Condition," led by necromancer known as the Shadow Man. They all want to feed Pitt to their monstrous, world-devouring deity.

The (n)ever-helpful government wants the Shadow Man. They give Pitt his own troop of government bodyguards, including one Monster Control Bureau man-like thing known only as Agent Franks. It's the MHI versus the army of darkness, only they're better armed than Bruce Campbell ever was.

Monster Hunter: Vendetta might arguably be better than MHI. We need little to no setup for the action, the plot jumps out at you and never really leaves you alone, and we can't even have a nice, simply plot-starting exposition without it being menacing (when the two people telling Pitt that he has to save the world ... again ... are vampires, it's hard to have a relaxed conversation).

Since there is no such thing as a slow Larry Correia book (with one rare exception), this just speeds along with all the pacing of a Mickey Spillane. He consistently gives a pulse-pounding story almost every time.

The characters

Vendetta really proves that Correia has assembled a strong cast, and a great sprawling universe out there. There are no cardboard cutouts as characters, even the ones that you're not supposed to like.

Interestingly, despite Correia's attitude on government in general, while he could have left the MCB crew as a bunch of mindless government automatons, even they get character development in this book.

The world

Each book in the MHI series continues to expand the world. Usually, just enough world is explored to make the plot run. But there was a lot of plot in this one, so there was a lot of additional worldbuilding.

The politics

Libertarian. "Why, yes, there should be private ownership of attack helicopters. Why do you ask?"

Is the government completely useless? No, not completely, they're missing parts.

I kid. The government agents here are slightly more useful than they are in real life. That is to say that they do actually aid our heroes from time to time.

Content warning

There are horror elements, up to and including body parts being ripped off. In one case, that's okay, he'll just sew them back on.

No language issues popped out at me, but that pales next to dismemberment.

Who is it for?

Fans of Harry Dresden would definitely enjoy this. This is for anyone who has ever seen a horror film and wondered what it would be like if all the heroes had an arsenal at their command... or, at the very least, if the protagonists were smart.

Why read it?

It's basically epic urban fantasy with guns. Think of the later Dresden novels, where Harry needs a small army to deal with a massive, world-destroying threat. That's every MHI novel.

Off to Be the Wizard by Scott Meyer Review by Graham Bradley

The Venn Diagram of computer hackers and fantasy geeks has a LOT of overlap, so here's a story about a guy who uses his hacking skills to become an actual wizard in the Middle Ages, almost by accident. The thing is, he's definitely not the first one to figure out how...

You have probably seen some of Scott Meyer's webtoons over at basicinstructions.net. He brings that same level of dry humor and quick wit to his debut novel series in OFF TO BE THE WIZARD. After a hiatus of about seven years, he started doing new cartoons on the site again.

The story

What's that Japanese word? Isekai? It's used to describe "portal fantasy" novels where the protagonist jumps from our world into a different one. OFF TO BE THE WIZARD kind of feels like that, though it's more like a time travel book. I really liked the mechanism used by Martin to jump from the 21st Century to the Middle Ages. Meyer introduces it quickly and neatly, so there isn't a ton of exposition that explains how the whole concept works.

It starts out as a "nerd walks around a setting he only ever daydreamed about" kind of book, only to develop into a "wow, I bet he never predicted THIS problem or THIS problem or THIS problem..." kind of book. From the get-go we learn that Martin is a hacker, he pokes around in corporate databases, and he loves fantasy novels. When he stumbles across a parcel of data that happens to have his name in it—along with numbers like his height, weight, and SSN—he modifies some of the entry, only to realize that doing so literally changes the world around him.

Martin does some other experimentation with the data parcel, called the Repository, only to end up bringing the Feds down on him, and soon he has to hide. I liked how Meyer found a way to get Martin to hide in the past without making it feel forced. I mean, the premise of this book is a hacker becoming a wizard, right? That's really where we want to go and have some fun, and he gets us there without dragging it out or contriving anything. It's good, quick, tidy writing.

The characters

Martin is our focal character, but we're soon introduced to a bunch of other time-traveling hackers who've done the same thing he's doing. The first is Phillip, who defeats Martin in "magical" combat, then takes him under his wing to show him the rules of the time and place.

There are other time travelers posing as wizards, nearly two dozen of them, and they've put rules in place to prevent their fellow "magicians" from screwing up the timeline while they play around in the 12th Century. The important one is a wizard named Jimmy, who isn't afraid to buck the rules and tweak things that he shouldn't mess with.

It's Jimmy's actions that lead to the main conflict of the story, which are worth the price of discovery for the reader. It's a more interesting conflict than I would have predicted when I first picked up the book.

The world

Our world, with computer code-based magic. The "wizards" from the future debate whether the 12th Century in which they find themselves is even real, as opposed to being a digital construct where no action can have any moral consequence.

As mentioned above, this is where the divide between the main wizards and Jimmy comes into play. Big philosophical and moral questions have to be asked, as Jimmy starts messing with the lives of innocent people to create his own fantasy world.

The politics

Joyously, deliciously, there really aren't any. The story asks a moral question but doesn't bother with any of our real-world politics. I really loved that.

Content warning

Literally nothing! That was another surprise, and a welcome one. All of the focal characters are in their twenties and thirties, and yet this is a PG-rated story. No language, sex, or graphic violence. I quite liked this piece of sci-fi/fantasy for that reason.

Who is it for?

Due to its lightheartedness, clean content, and actual moral substance, I'd recommend this to anyone. Young readers could sink their teeth into it for a challenge above their grade level, and the seasoned sci-fi consumer can be entertained by its easy accessibility and surprise factor.

Why read it?

Meyer has created a fun world to play in, a bit of lighthearted escapism that isn't afraid to have a big moral conflict play out in the third act. Once I finished the first book, it didn't surprise me to learn he'd written five more after it; there's obviously a hunger out there for a book of this particular profile, and I'm excited to read the next one.

Omim by Michael McGruther
Review by Trevor Denning
UpstreamReviews.com

In 2024 the planet Omega sent a message to Earth. In 3024 a rebel group assembles the resources needed to leave the solar system and visit our alien neighbors.

Adam McShane, tasked with stopping their spaceship, is instead an unwilling passenger on the long journey, arriving with the beautiful Lilith. She says they come in peace, but when they arrive, they find anything but.

The peaceful Omegans live in constant fear of Omim and their leader, The One. Is Adam their prophesied savior?

Adam McShane has dedicated his life to the service of his planet. Now, six months away from retirement, he just wants to finish out in peace. The morning after a night of lonely debauchery, he gets called in on his birthday for a major mission. A group of Saganites are prepared to launch a ship and make first contact. For a thousand years Earth has been divided on whether or not to respond to the message it had received. So far, the powers that be have managed to prevent that despite constant conflict.

This isn't the first time Adam has fought Saganites, but this time things don't go according to plan and he finds himself trapped aboard their ship. The only other passenger is Lilith, an idealistic young woman from one of Mars's wealthiest families. When they crash land on Omega she expects to bring peace, science, and reason. Adam, with some Catholic-Christian faith, though in tatters, has a different view of human nature.

Clearly neither character is a Mary Sue, with Adam (even in first person) coming across as somewhat pathetic. Author Michael McGruther knows his craft and uses that to make Adam's arc that much more satisfying. Lilith's arc is a little more ambiguous, even though all of her ideology is stripped away.

The Omegans, who learned Earth languages from the 1977 Voyager Golden Records, welcome Adam and Lilith with open arms. In fact, they believe that Adam will deliver them from the terror of the Omim. Since the arrival their dark oppressors, the Omegans have lived in hiding as the Omim abduct them use their bodies and souls for dark purposes. Forced to confront this overwhelming evil in order to rescue Lilith and prevent the Omim from finding their way to Earth, Adam must become the hero he never wanted to be.

One wishes that McGruther had a better editor, as the story deserves more polish. The descriptions are breathtaking and the plot has brilliant twists. If the book has a fatal flaw it's in the presentation, certainly not in the raw material.

The characters

Adam is a broken man. Whatever faith he once had was shattered with the murder of his fiancé. So he poured himself into military service, meaningless sex, and alcohol. With just six months left in his contract, he hopes to finish out in peace. A reluctant hero, he doesn't want to save anyone, even himself and certainly not an entire planet (or two). It's only when Lilith is taken captive by The One that he digs deep, both into his own abilities and a nearly forgotten faith.

On the other side is Lilith. Young and beautiful, she's an idealist, feminist, scientist. She left her life on Mars to bring enlightenment to Omega and become the mother of the first humans on the distant planet. While she soon finds herself used for procreation, it's not in the way she anticipated, and she has no means to comprehend pure evil.

The leader of the Omim calls himself The One. A soul-consuming wraith, he offers Lilith eternal life. But in exchange for what? With the ability to warp perception his manipulation abilities are unfathomable. Yet unable to create, he must use other methods to spread his evil across the galaxies.

The world

Omega is a sort of paradise, filled with creatures and characters that will look familiar to any fan of 80's fantasy films. But whether we're in our home galaxy, on a spaceship, or a distant planet, McGruther excels at cinematic description. If he leans on tropes, it's to make the story more easily play out in our minds.

The politics

While the story is seeded with cultural and political allusions, they never take center stage. Adam holds to traditional values, while Lilith is extremely progressive, but this isn't really that sort of story on the surface.

Content warning

To a certain degree, the whole story is about sex and reproduction. Both Adam and Lilith are stripped naked on their respective journeys, and Adam has a vision of Lilith being raped (it's just an illusion). There's the sort of violence that you'd expect in any sort of sword and planet story, but nothing too graphic.

Who is it for?

OMIM is for fans of old-school science fiction and the more out-there episodes of The Twilight Zone but written in the spirit of C.S. Lewis's Ransom trilogy. It's also for anyone who likes their stories filled with symbolism to unpack. I had to dig deep to figure out what "Omim" really means, but once I did it made perfect sense.

Why read it?

It's a story that both entertains and makes us uneasy. It draws us deep into its world, and makes more aware of our own, challenging us to stand firm in our convictions.

Other Rhodes by Sarah A. Hoyt

Review by Pat Patterson

I'm slow. I get there eventually, but I'm slow.

The cover of "Other Rhodes" CLEARLY designates this as "Rhodes 1." You'd think that I would know that this is first of a series, right? And yet, somewhere after the first half of the novel, I'm doing a frantic-bookworm plea: "Oh, this would make for a WONDERFUL series! I hope she has a series set up! This HAS to be a series!"

Well, duh. It's first in a series. Therefore, always assuming that the Beautiful-But-Evil Space Princess doesn't turn her hand to some other endeavor, we have delight ahead.

Delight, that is, for those who enjoy such delicacies as the Hard-Boiled Detective, Nero Wolfe, Mickey Spillane, Sherlock Holmes, Damon Runyon, and Robert Parker. You know; like that, but different. Because all that IN S-P-A-A-C-E!!!

A Professor of Literature who read the above paragraph would immediately foam at the mouth, exclaiming "THOSE ARE ALL DIFFERENT! You can't lump them into one category!" Well, I just did, and the category was "Written Stuff I Enjoy." So there.

A silly/dumb/gorgeous secretary. Except she's NOT silly or dumb (she is gorgeous); except she IS silly and dumb (or, at least ignorant) in the beginning. She's a hothouse flower, you see. You've heard of gilding the lily, meaning that you put needless decoration on something that doesn't need it? Well, her maiden name is Lilly Gilding. By her own admission, her early education taught her how to dance and look pretty. In that condition, she married Joe Aster (thus acquiring ANOTHER flower name), a private investigator totally unsuitable for a young lady of her status. Her super-wealthy father responded by cutting her off from support, perhaps hoping to bring her to her senses.

It actually worked, though not in a way Daddy had anticipated, and not in a way Lilly recognized. Forced into the world of work, Lilly became part of Joe's investigative operation. Silly and dumb people can't do what she did, and I can only suppose it was because she had never been allowed to overcome challenges that she fails to appreciate all she accomplishes: "merely" a receptionist, she masters typing and accounting, and gets her Investigator license. She becomes an integral part of Joe's work. All of that, without realizing that she has become far more than ornamental.

That's the ignorance that is her greatest limitation.

Joe has patterned his practice on a popular series of detective stories. Even their home base/space ship is christened "West 35th Street," after the locale of the stories. These are presented as immersive experiences ("mersi") featuring fictional and flawed detective Nick Rhodes and drop-dead-gorgeous partner Stella D'Or.

Joe loves them; Lilly does not. However, when Joe shows up transformed and incapacitated, the silly/dumb Lilly realizes that the solution lies in the mersi story.

And she takes appropriate action. Excitement and intrigue ensue. The foundation for a series is laid!

Apropos of nothing, the real West 35th Street in New York is home of the Church of the Incarnation, celebrating the appearance of the Divine in another form. But that is a topic for the Professor of Literature.

Don't ignore the glorious cover art. It's almost photo-realism and would make a GREAT wall poster.

Primordial Threat by M.A. Rothman

Review by Jim McCoy

JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com

We've all read stories with surprise endings. There's nothing new there. It's not like O. Henry was born last week. As a matter of fact, there are few things less surprising than a big plot twist at the end of a book or movie. It happens a lot. If it's done well it works, but it's been done to death.

What's a little more surprising is reading a book (I suppose it could apply to consuming any type of story, actually) and being surprised by your reaction to it. I mean, M.A. Rothman's *Primordial Threat* is a great story. It's well named. Things are constantly happening. Just when you think you've got a handle on the situation, things get worse. The primary threat has the potential to be world-ending. It's a miniature black hole that comes cruising right through the middle of the Solar System. It's going to end all human life and there is nothing we can do to stop it from going where it is going. The secondary threat is a group of religious fanatics that want to keep humanity from surviving the menace. It's a romping good time and oh my god is it intense.

The part that surprised me though, at least about myself, is that I love a good villain. I like to root against someone I can hate. Think about it. Have any of you read *Dragons of Spring Dawning*? (Spoilers, I guess. I mean, the book came out in 1985, so it's not like you haven't had the chance to read it yet.) Takhisis (queen of evil/Satan analogue) is about to arrive on the world of Krynn to commit genocide on the elves and enslave everyone else. Life sucks. We've spent three books leading up to this moment and our heroes are going to lose and let this evil bitch take over the world. Except it doesn't work out that way. The world is saved, and the psycho hose beast is dispatched back to the Abyss where she belongs. Partly, I was happy that the good guys won. But I was freaking ecstatic to see that wench get hers. And that's the thing that surprised me about *Primordial Threat*.

The primary "villain" isn't a villain. It's a black hole. I'm not usually a fan of books with a mindless threat. There's a reason I don't talk much about the *Dragonriders of Pern* series. That reason is simple: It sucked. The threat from thread falling mindlessly from the sky was just not enough to keep me interested. I mean, the main characters are cool and it's fun watching old and new interact but UGH! Get a real villain.

Somehow, Rothman manages to make his black hole work though. I mean, you can't really hate the thing. It's a force of nature just doing what it does. On the other hand, you find yourself rooting for those plucky little humans anyway. Somehow, some way, a black hole is not a dud for a villain the way thread was. The threat is real. It's immediate and it's nasty. It just works.

Of course, a cast of heroes is necessary to any successful story and this book has just enough of them to work. I really feel like *Primordial Threat* could have turned into some world spanning, nine hundred and seventy-three thousand character book with a *Dramatis Personae* at the end but it didn't. Listen, I'm as big a fan of David Weber's *Safehold* series and I love just about everything that Harry Turtledove has ever published. The fact remains that not every story works like that, and I don't think this one would have. Rothman gave us just the right amount of people to move things along and avoided using too many and bogging things down.

These characters all not all the perfect type either. We've got one legitimate nutcase, the guy who helped her escaped from the psych ward, a president that doesn't tell the public the whole truth because it's in their best interests to not be informed and all kinds of weird problems. It provides me with an in-

interesting conundrum: I wonder if all of these people could work together if the literal extinction in the human species wasn't in the offing. If this were an attempt at doing everyday research and possibly winning a Nobel Prize, could they all hold it together? I'm not sure and honestly, it's probably a more entertaining story this way anyway.

I don't have the background in science or engineering to really make an evaluation of the tech in this book. It sounds pretty well grounded in the hard sciences, but I'm the guy who only completed one year as a chemistry major and this is all tech that would be better evaluated by a physicist anyway. Suffice it to say that it seems to work, and it feels right. There are a couple of major scientific advances featured, but it all seems to work the way it should from a layman's point of view. Part of it is even based on work by a scientist that I'm somewhat familiar with. I don't want to reveal more than that.

I do have one complaint about *Primordial Threat*. There is a real *Deus ex machina* moment that I find a bit annoying. I mean, here we are with this all-star team of scientists and engineers and that's what it takes to get the job done? It adds a lot of tension to the story, but I still find it annoying, especially since it kind of comes out of left field. Parts of it are foreshadowed, but parts of it are not. I found myself shaking my head for a minute at one point. As a plot device, it kind of works and it does get things to where they need to be but, yeah. It's taking things a bit far in my opinion. Honestly though, *Primordial Threat* does work up to that point and it's nowhere near being a story ruiner.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 *Wandering Asteroids*.

Primordial Threat by M.A. Rothman
Review by Graham Bradley
UpstreamReviews.com

A small black hole has been traveling through space since the dawn of time. It's only two miles across, but that's more than enough to destroy Earth—and it's headed right for us.

The story

Nearly five decades into the future, NASA spots a tiny black hole headed straight for our planet. Despite all of our advanced technology, there's nothing that can deflect it or destroy it. It may be small, but it's an absolute death sentence for the third rock from the sun.

Then again, there was a "crazy guy" a few years ago who said this would happen...an otherwise brilliant scientist...maybe we ought to see what his ideas were...what's that? He's gone? Well, find him! Ah crap...where did Dave Holmes go?!

When I first read *THE MARTIAN* in 2014, it blew my mind that hard-hard-hard-science could actually be that entertaining. I didn't exactly go out in search of similar books, but when I find them, it's always a joy. *PRIMORDIAL THREAT* is really similar because it melds a world-ending thriller with the gritty laboratory math that makes it seem dangerously real.

I also liked the balance between the headstrong protagonist who was determined to save the world no matter what, and the bloated administrative state antagonists who tried to thwart him because he threatened their power. I'm always cynical enough to appreciate books that cast government as a hindrance to the people.

The characters

The main character is Dave Holmes, a former NASA scientist who was originally tasked with running a program called DefenseNet, which would allow humans to use satellites to defend Earth from big scary space rocks and stuff. He was later replaced by Burt Radcliffe, who now runs DefenseNet, and soon learns that Dave was not crazy, and we've all got to do something or we'll die.

Dave's also got himself a lady, and her name is Bella, Communicating with her is a challenge at first, because she's got some mental and social barriers, but since he's smart—and motivated, because she's pretty dang cute—he figures out how to speak with her, and she goes on to play a key role in his journey.

There are other people on the cast to fill out the roster, sure. Politicians, scientists, military leaders, the whole nine. But it's Dave and Bella who carry the emotional weight of this thing, in between the scientific lectures.

The world

Ours, but fifty years down the road. There's some new tech, a few new international borders and what-not. The real difference is a few key advancements in technology. It's hard to say more than that without giving away some of the payoffs of the hard science.

This book is more in the vein of *THE MARTIAN* or a Michael Crichton piece, in that Rothman put a lot of thought into the hard mechanics of it all. It helps that he's got a brain the size of Jupiter and he messes around with astrophysics in his spare time, so for a layman like me, this story reads as highly plausible.

Which is kind of scary as hell, at least until the third act.

The politics

Since I already invoked Crichton, I'll put it this way: *JURASSIC PARK* was a warning against the human tendency to use power before we truly understand it. We made huge leaps and bounds in genetic science, and some dude wanted to capitalize on that to make an amusement park. Chaos ensued.

Rothman's *PRIMORDIAL THREAT* can read the same way: a man makes leaps and bounds in energy science and space travel, but the Political Machines of the world want him to ask permission before he saves everyone. Dave Holmes has a little bit of John Galt in him, minus the fifty-page radio broadcast.

Content warning

There was some language in it, up to the F-dash-dash-dash word. Dave and Bella have relations, but we're not "in-scene" for it. Other than that, it's a somewhat tame hard science thriller.

Who is it for?

Nobody's ever going to accuse me of holding a bachelor's degree, and yet I found the hard science portions to be accessible enough. I assume that if you're into that field, you'll have a lot more to chew on and digest. Rothman has had a few comers on his social pages trying to challenge the plausibility of the "tiny black hole will destroy Earth" premise, and he's always got answers for them.

Why read it?

I'm one of the Upstream writers who beats the drum of "READ THIS IT IS FUN," and that's usually my answer here. Which isn't to say PRIMORDIAL THREAT is boring, however it doesn't exist to be a "fun book." It's a smart book, and a book that thinks hella big.

It's got characters you can root for, antagonists who deserve to be slowly shoved through a barbed-wire fence, and a mind-blowing conclusion that made me sit back in the truck as the audiobook finished, wondering about the cosmos overhead.

It's intelligent, it's cool, and it'll expand your mind. Grab a copy.

Red Rising ... And Falling by Pierce Brown Review by Graham Bradley

Pierce Brown's incredible Red Rising series has been a welcome shot in the arm to the mainstream sci-fi genre over the last decade.

However, after the end of the initial trilogy, the most recent installments have me asking some hard questions about its future.

In 2014, wunderkind author Pierce Brown, then 26, burst onto the scene with his debut novel RED RISING, which promised us a protagonist on par with Ender Wiggin and Katniss Everdeen--a hotheaded young rebel who would turn an established power structure on its head, leaving the world forever changed. Readers were treated to the exploits of Martian miner Darrow of Lycos, a machine operator relegated to a short life of underground labor so that Mars could be terraformed for future generations.

Only the problem is that Darrow learns the surface of Mars is already terraformed, and he and billions of other laborers are basically enslaved dupes who will die without ever seeing the vast civilization over their heads. He ends up joining a secret rebellion with the purpose of infiltrating the ruling class, working his way into their upper ranks, and eventually taking them down from the inside.

It's a simple enough premise on its face, but Brown wowed his readers with a complex yet accessible world, showing us familiar elements and exciting twists. In this future--800 years ahead of our own--humanity has been recast and genetically re-engineered into different Colors, basically assigned a role (and a fate) depending on how you're born. If you're a Gold, things are good, you get to stay at the top and rule the empire. If you're a Silver, well, you'll be a rich banker and you'll keep the finances in order. Greens and Oranges? Engineers and mechanics. Yellows? Doctors, etc.

But if you're a Red, well, sucks to be you. You're at the bottom of the food chain, the grunts, the uneducated idiots, designed to live fast and die young, crushed under the weight of sixty-hour work weeks from puberty until death. Somebody's gotta keep the toilets running and it sure as hell ain't going to be the Golds.

The rebellion hires a surgeon to remake Darrow into a Gold. Now he's taller, stronger, has denser bones, and is all-around physically superior. They give him a fake backstory, minor noble lineage, and a modest bank account, then send him off to the uber-secretive Institute, where teen Golds are taught how to keep the empire moving in perpetuity. Even his handlers don't know what it looks like inside the Institute, but they prepare him with the broadest education they can give him beforehand.

Surprise! The Institute is basically the Hunger Games on Mars. The only difference is, instead of killing 23 other kids, you have to conquer 11 other Houses and form a miniature empire of your own, with scant resources and fellow House members who may have ambitions of your own. It's just like real life, only worse. The point is to make the young Golds learn firsthand just how hard it is to build an empire, so that when they eventually assume control of the real one, they don't piss it away like every other empire in human history.

Fascinating concept, and utterly Roman in its practical brutality. As hard as the Institute is to navigate, Darrow has to do so while also concealing his true origins as a Red, as a future mole in the empire. RED RISING was a high-speed thrill ride and I was pleased to read it again and again.

The next two sequels, forming the original trilogy of books, are called GOLDEN SON and MORNING STAR, in order. I won't say anything about them because if you read RED RISING, chances are good you'll keep going. In several spots my expectations were subverted (but in the right way, and not the way that Disney might subvert the hopes of Star Wars fans.) Brown demonstrated a daft hand at storytelling that many writers twice his age couldn't do.

I've read this whole trilogy multiple times. It challenged numerous others on my bookshelf for supremacy. And I guess that's why the next leg of his publishing journey was so damned disappointing.

TFW you delved too greedily, and too deep.

MORNING STAR had a tremendously satisfying third act and conclusion. The series could have ended there without any problems. Call it a "happily ever after," in a sense. (Although the bumpy road to get there is 100% worth the trip to read it every time.) For me, personally, I keep the trilogy on my shelf, and I don't worry about what came next.

Or at least, I try not to. Because it was...not great.

Don't get me wrong: I understand the urge to continue the story. Brown appears to be a man with a strong classical education and an understanding of human nature, based on the decisions that his characters make in their never-ending quests for power. When you're telling a story about a revolution against an evil empire, most times they end nice and tidy, with the good guys beating the bad guys and riding off into the sunset.

But the real world--and real history--shows that not to be the case. You can topple a tyrant, replace a dictatorship with a republic, and give people rights they deserve, but there are always complications. Nascent republics struggle to keep their footing, and the ones born in the middle of a war have no shortage of enemies trying to move in on them. It makes sense that Brown would want to show that story, show the complexities of living in a post-revolution world.

I just wonder why he chose to go the route that he went. While RED RISING and GOLDEN SON were no strangers to coarse language, and MORNING STAR had half a dozen F-bombs in it, the next two books (IRON GOLD and DARK AGE) were on another level altogether. It felt like Brown was trying to channel Game of Thrones into his trilogy, with heightened violence, a severe shift in attitude and tone, and a smattering of new first-person POV characters running in different directions around the solar system.

The poetic overtones of his prose were still intact, making the writing itself beautiful to read, but the substance and subject matter were much, much more dour by comparison. Gone were the optimism and

hope of the first three books. Now we got treated to long speeches on how the rich didn't give a damn about displaced refugees, the traditional families looked down on homosexuals, and the military leaders who won the revolution in the original trilogy were now bungling the ongoing war effort, killing millions of people pointlessly.

It was as if you, the reader, went from Return of the Jedi to The Last Jedi in about a two-year span. Heroes were deconstructed, relationships were shattered, real-world social agendas were rammed into the text, and hundreds and hundreds of pages concluded with ultimately nothing happening. You got the same feeling that you'd get if you sat down to watch the entire Afghanistan War campaign (2001-2021) in a couple of hours: "Why the \$@%# did it go in this direction?"

And for me, a devoted fan to those first books, that was a frustrating question to ask. Brown had shown that he knew what he was doing, so what was the point in derailing it all? In dumping on his hero and making him a terrible person? In threatening characters with rape and dismemberment on the battlefield? In killing off beloved side characters almost as carelessly as J.J. Abrams discarded Han Solo? In DARK AGE, we even got treated to a near-mirror version of George R.R. Martin's "Red Wedding," killing off most of the Solar Republic's Senate in a single chapter.

An exciting series, in a dynamic world, with incredible characters and magnificent insights into forms of man-made government, had swiftly and needlessly devolved into Big Boy Epic Fiction, slapping the reader over and over again with hollow R-rated content that meant nothing. Violence and death for the sake of violence and death. It almost hurts to think about.

In a world where every major intellectual property is pinned down and smothered with the Pillow of Post-Modernism, it gave me a nice respite to know that this great sci-fi trilogy--placed with a major publisher, gaining traction with large amounts of readers--might provide an alternative to the general mood of popular entertainment. Then, at the peak of its success, it said "to hell with this" and cut a hard left, steering the bus straight off a bridge and onto a puppy shelter.

I don't get it. I don't understand the need to take properties in this direction. It didn't have to be this way--a sequel, even with these characters, exploring these post-revolution themes in an unstable new system of government, was totally worthy of exploration. There were great ideas in that concept and the author had shown he could develop great ideas. What we got instead was proof that too much of a good thing can too easily become a bad thing.

I guess my point in all of this is that as a reader, I wish I had a more reliable channel toward good, exciting entertainment. Books that challenge me, teach me, and ultimately uplift me. In a sense that's the goal of Upstream Reviews, to find those gems and get them in front of you, so you can keep finding your next favorite read.

And as a writer, stuff like this is still instructional, it just becomes a literary Janus, where the one face says, "learn how to write this well," and the other face says "be careful not to go this way." I would love nothing more than to find out that the sixth book in Brown's series, tentatively called LIGHT-BRINGER, ends as well as MORNING STAR and finds a way to make all of this suffering and darkness and death mean something. I might revisit books 4 and 5 if that turns out to be the case.

Right now though, hope is in short supply. God speed, Mister Brown, and good luck. I want to be excited again for the future. Take us there, like you have before.

The Revenant and the Tomb by Herman P. Hunter Review by Trevor Denning

When Drahm is approached by the golden-haired young man, he assumes it's another foolish treasure seeker rushing to his demise, and he's not far off. Halsedric and his companions are looking to take that treacherous path, though treasure isn't his objective. While he has taken parties into the mountains before, Drahm warns, none of them have ever returned. Or if they have, it's as bloody and broken shells of their former selves.

Naturally, it wouldn't be much of a story if Halsedric was dissuaded. Nor would it be very interesting if this group of adventurers was anything but ordinary.

Story

Like any good fantasy adventure, *The Revenant and the Tomb* opens in a tavern. Drahm, the old guide, is disturbed by a handsome young stranger in search someone to show him the way to the mountains of the southern reaches. Many have gone there in search of treasure, and as long as they pay up front Drahm isn't above showing them the way. Most of them never come back, though.

But Halsedric isn't a typical treasure seeker. It turns out, he's not interested in riches at all. He, along with his companions, the Wodeman Tulvgir and Herodiani of the Elanni, are on a quest of much greater importance. The trio is obviously inspired by a third of Tolkien's Fellowship. However, the opening chapters also reminded me Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd* and the *Gray Mouser* stories, sans wenching.

The nature of Halsedric's mission isn't dissimilar to Frodo's, in that it's almost the opposite of a treasure hunt. Yet there's a clever twist to Herman P. Hunter's story which makes it stand out from the other imitators. While the writing style is arguably overwrought and flowery, this twist, the inventive action sequences, and religious symbolism kept me invested.

The characters

Drahm is both the guide for our heroes and the audience. He knows, or thinks he knows, everything about his world and surroundings. Not a religious man, he doesn't rule out the power of the gods either. Halsedric, however, opens him up to new worlds of possibilities.

The Revenant of the title refers to Halsedric, who appears to be an ordinary mortal. However, he's actually received a holy calling from the Allfather, the eternal God of the West, and is supernaturally equipped for its pursuit. There are many things he still doesn't know or understand, about himself and his God, and I'm sure future installments in the series will tell us more.

Wodemen are the dwarfs of Hunter's world. Tough and hungry, Tulvgir is the team's muscle. Meanwhile, Herodiani is elfin in her attributes. The least developed characters in the story, their respective races offer some interesting storytelling possibilities that one hopes Hunter will eventually flesh out with some original ideas.

The world

This is your fairly typical fantasy realm, with all the expected Medieval technology, flaming swords, hordes of the undead, and so forth. The balance leans a little more toward Robert E. Howard style pulp

than Tolkien's pastoral visions. Most of the story takes place in the wilderness, not in the small villages, so it's difficult to get a sense of the society.

The politics

No politics to speak of, as the author is more interested in religious symbolism than in making political points.

Content warning

In order for good to have a great victory, the evil must be very, very evil. This story isn't afraid to go to some dark places, with all the accompanying gory violence. No sex or language. Just lots of death and destruction.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone looking for a quick, fantasy adventure. Fans of Tolkien, Howard, and Leiber should find something to like. There's no overbearing message or nihilism, just nifty escapism. While it may not be the most original story, there's something to be said for the familiar.

Why read it?

At under 200 pages, the book only asks for a small amount of our time and moves at a good pace, with some solid narration and colorful images. Just because *The Revenant* and *The Tomb* leans heavily on familiar tropes doesn't mean that *Hunter* isn't willing to take some chances, which generally pay off well. There's a germ on a good idea here, and one hopes it's further developed and explored.

The Romanov Rescue by Kratman, Ezell & Watson

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

While there have been many people who have played "What If" games around World War I, most of them have been academic.

This is the first time I've seen an alternate history novel tackle it from a different approach-- not by changing the outcome of the war but working out how to save the Russian Tsar and his family from being butchered by the communists.

Unlike most alternate history, this does not require the intervention of aliens, or the introduction of magic. In this case, all it takes is a series of normal, human decisions that one is surprised no one made the first time.

The story

In 1918, a German General looks to the east and sees that Germany has done something unconscionable: they unleashed Lenin and his communist philosophy on Russia. Looking at the havoc and terror waged on the Russian people, In *The Romanov Rescue*, there is also a plan to fix what is broken. After all, Germany has so many Russian prisoners from the war, surely Germany could send a few back... on a mission to save the Tsar and the rest of the Romanov family. Cue the Lalo Schifren music, because

we're about to launch Mission: Impossible.

Much of *The Romanov Rescue* focuses on training for an operation unlike any other. This is 1918, before the invention of any special operations forces. To us, it would look like reinventing the wheel. In the case of our heroes in *The Romanov Rescue*, they're designing the wheel without knowing what it looks like. They're inventing the flashbang, urban warfare operations, their own codes, and operating at night without night vision goggles, as well as navigating a ton of logistical difficulties. We even get to make fun of military food.

The writing is detail heavy. How heavy? I already knew that Tom Kratman is the master of military minutiae, because he's well aware that the little things can kill you in real life. Apply that level of detail to historical times and places, and you have a sense of how much detail is here. The sections involving the zeppelin are wonderfully claustrophobic, almost feeling like it's a submarine thriller out of *Run Silent Run Deep*--only instead of crush depth, the risk is falling out of the sky. There's a whole section on the care of military animals, occasionally making me feel like I was reading a militarized *All Creatures Great and Small*.

I will admit to being surprised by the lack of a lot of historical figures outside of the Romanovs. Trotsky, Lenin and de Gaulle appear, but are essentially cameos in the overall plot. But there wasn't a real need to focus on them. At the end, we have a subtle subplot come to a head as intelligence resources come into play. And then, that's when the fecal matter hits the rotary impeller.

The characters

While we do not have a cast on par with *War and Peace*, it is sizeable. I did not count them, but we have more characters than *Lord of the Rings*. If this puts you off, I submit that their sections are broken down into manageable chunks sizable enough, so you remember who's who when it's necessary.

But our major focus revolves around a few people. Daniil is the head of the rescue operation as well as training, who has his own stake in the operation. The German General Hoffman is introduced in a way that makes it impossible to dislike him.

Another POV character is Tatiana Romanova, one of the Royal family, as well as two of the soldiers assigned to guard the Tsar and company. These sequences express just how vague and confused the situation on the ground was in 1918, to the point where some people barely know what side they're on, or what sides are there. This plot line is almost pure character development, showing just who is at stake ... until it culminates into a sudden twist. And let's just say that Alexei Romanov, who, historically, is best known for his hemophilia and being an entry point for Rasputin to enter royal circles, has one of the best moments of the book.

My personal favorite characters in this book revolved around the recon team sent to fight where the Romanovs are being held. Lt Turgenev is humble and smart enough to listen to sense when it's brought up the first time; he is noble and honorable, almost a paladin, but less D&D and more *Have Gun -Will Travel*. Turgenev and his recon team keep this book moving on at a nice, clipped pace. His Sargent Mokrenko offers an interesting, entertaining perspective on things, and there is a third character they pick up along the way who is also amusing.

I will admit that there was a brief moment early on where this felt like it could become on par with *The Dirty Dozen* -- but none of our heroes are slated for the firing squad, and they're not motivated by a de

facto pardon, they're out to save their country. While every named character has a character moment, this isn't character heavy. Everyone has enough to deal with already.

The world

Alternate history, or even just plain historical novels, require the same amount of world building and level of detail that any fantasy or SciFi world does. The Romanov Rescue meets that standard and exceeds it.

This does not go into insane, Tolkien-level detail on historical events, As a historian, I knew that the details weren't going to become overwhelming once the narration lacked any mention of the Allied Invasion Force of Archangel and Murmansk in January 1918 (which was supposed to fight against the Bolsheviks). While I do not exclude the AEF appearing in a sequel, it would have been irrelevant to the events of this novel... also, including the AEF would have probably broken the narrative flow. There is a piece of dialogue that suggests "What if there are other plots to save the Tsar?" which may have been directly address the AEF mission.

At the same time, there are no broad sketches of information here. Like every good technothriller, we get into insane levels of detail on the technology, as well as training and tactics, and just how things get done.

Though I do like the detail that local newspapers are always on the opposite side of the home country, even in 1918. The more things change, the more they remain insane.

There's even an entire page on Russian Orthodox theological impacts on the care and feeding of troops.

As an added bonus, this alternate history has footnotes.

The politics

It is less a matter of "Better dead than red," but more a matter of "Reds are better off dead, why haven't we killed them all already?"

Content warning

There is violence, but nothing gratuitous. Rape happens, but not on the page, so the reader never has to deal with it in detail. There are some righteous executions which may not sit well with some people. I recall no language issue that stood out.

Who is it for?

There is a lot packed into this. This is for fans of Tom Clancy technothrillers, historical novels, military history, Guns of Navarone, Where Eagles Dare, and even All Creatures Great and Small thrown in for fun. To be fair, there are heavy dramatic elements of The Great Russian Novel, unexpected romance,

Why read it?

If you are a fan of reading just "how things get done," with a heavy dose of history, and killing lots and lots of dirty commies, you should be reading this already.

Stand Against the Dark by Denton Salle Review by Becky Jones

Stand Against the Dark is the fourth book in Denton Salle's Avatar Wizard series where the myths and magic of Eastern Europe come to life. Jeremy, the panda-shifting volkh wizard has passed his Third Level tests and is becoming more powerful. He is powerful enough to attempt the ritual to call the Lord of Winds and Winter to ask a favor – a ritual that others have died attempting.

Master Anthony has reason to believe that a plague outbreak in the port city of the heron shifters is the work of necromancers and the return of the Dark. Jeremy's love, Galena has been there with other healers attempting to solve the mystery of the plague and save those who fall to it, without any luck. Under the guise of sending more supplies to the healers, Master Anthony sends Jeremy and his friend Bolgor, another healer, to uncover the source of the plague.

The port city of Venetsiya is filled with politics and power struggles all underlaid with a sheen of Dark magic and the deceptive manipulations of necromancers. Jeremy gets a taste of the fear and hatred others have for the volkh. Yet Jeremy and his companions must find and stop the necromancers behind the plague before this key city falls to the forces of the Dark, with or without the residents' help.

In the Avatar Wizard series, Salle brings to life the legends and myths that stalk Eastern Europe and parts of Texas to this day. His descriptions bring the keep of the volkh, the cities, and other locations to life and do so within the context of the action of the story without resorting to long descriptions. You experience the sights and sounds of the city as Jeremy explores the market square and discovers the Sheban merchants.

In Stand Against the Dark, the political machinations at the superficial level (a plot to take over rule of the city) combined with the more manipulative and nefarious plans of the agents of the Dark work together to create a rich context and connection with the previous books. The entire tapestry of work is starting to come together, and readers are getting glimpse of what lies ahead for Jeremy and the other volkh.

I powered through this fourth book in less than a day (yes, I did read it non-stop) and now I'm going to go back and start at the beginning of the series and read all the way through. Then I will eagerly await book number five.

If you are not familiar with the myths of Eastern Europe, do yourself a favor and start with Sworn to the Light, book one of the Avatar Wizard series, and go from there. If you are familiar with those stories, you will truly enjoy Salle's use of them to bring the world of the Avatar Wizard to life. I promise you won't be disappointed. Watching Jeremy and his panda avatar grow and mature into a powerful, yet still human, wizard is a lot of fun and a great adventure.

The Talisman by Stephen King And Peter Straub Review by Will Mayo

The Talisman, that fantasy novel Stephen King and Peter Straub authored together from their homes in Maine and England in cross-Atlantic fashion in the early '80s, had a large-sized influence on me as a writer. Featuring a boy and a werewolf that cross the country together in a multidimensional way and ending at a tower that would feature in many of Stephen King's subsequent novels, it made it possible

for the reader to imagine worlds beyond this one. And, just now, philosophers, scientists and artists are coming to grips with the implications of King's and Straub's assumptions. If you haven't read this wonderful novel yet I urge you to do so today.

TIER 1000 by Jason Anspach and Doc Spears

Review by Graham Bradley

UpstreamReviews.com

A soldier in the American Special Forces dies during a war with China in the near future. When he wakes up in the afterlife, he learns he's been selected by ancient gods of war to join an elite combat squad called the Ultimates, in preparation for a world-ending threat.

The story

While this concept is not altogether unfamiliar, I really liked this particular take on it. TIER 1000 is the kind of book that I've branded as a "training camp novel," where the protagonist and the reader are simultaneously walked through an initiation into a larger world, specifically via the mechanism of a school or boot camp. At times this can slow the story down, as Ragnar goes through exercise after exercise, because the outcome is kind of a given—he'll learn something minor, and then hit the barracks for some sleep.

But I liked that he wasn't idle, that he eagerly wanted to peel back the curtain of the afterlife and see what this whole mess was really about. I also liked the addition of death-gods and war-gods from mythologies around the world, which established the potential for lots of exploration in the future. Very cool world and a satisfying first step into it.

The old gods of Earth may have stopped dealing with humanity at large, but they haven't gone away. Maybe they're gods, maybe they're hyper-advanced mortals, maybe they're space aliens. The reader goes on a journey of discovery alongside the protagonist, Ragnar Beck, whose soul was plucked from death and dropped in Valhalla, where he gets to prepare for the war to end all wars.

In Valhalla, Ragnar meets a lot of other warriors from different times and places in Earth's history, most of whom are from his past (downtime.) There are very few people from "uptime," (Ragnar's future), leading him to believe that time passes differently in Valhalla, and that some kind of world-ending threat is coming to Earth in the very near future.

It'll be up to men like Ragnar and his company to train with different weapons and different tech from around the world, shaping themselves into the most fluid fighting force ever known. Such is the demand of their new god, Mars Augustus, the literal Roman god of war.

But not all is as Ragnar has been told. As he struggles to trust his superiors, he'll make even stronger alliances with his new friends, and before long he'll have to decide who he actually trusts in this strange new existence.

The characters

Ragnar Beck, a Special Forces soldier from the somewhat-near future, who dies in war with a new Chinese nation. He's the first-person main character, and we experience most of this book through his eyes.

Will Jensen was a soldier in World War 1 under Blackjack Pershing. He becomes Ragnar's first friend in Valhalla.

Mars Augustus is the Roman god of war, and he's in charge in Valhalla.

Michael and Gabriel, the angels from the Bible, are also in Valhalla. They serve under Mars.

Then there's Mictlantehcutli, the Aztec god of death, who just might be up to something really sinister...

The world

Our world, another generation or two down the road. The United States and China no longer exist by those names or their present banners, but they're still engaged in the same conflict over culture and resources, which has now become all-out war.

The politics

Like today, plus a few more decades of Mandatory Sensitivity and Forced Equity stuff pushed onto us by our moral superiors. The Armed Forces have been fully neutered by political and cultural forces that demand "inclusivity" at the expense of combat efficacy, right up to the moment when the free Western world is attacked by an emboldened China that expects little resistance. It's under these conditions that Ragnar initially dies, and he has plenty to say about it.

That said, the perspectives put forth in this book have very little to do with politics at all. Anspach and Sears have some observations to make about the Armed Forces from a practical standpoint, and whether you're right- or left-wing will heavily influence how you receive those observations.

Content warning

Nothing above a mid-range PG-13 as far as language is concerned. Abundant combat violence, though the most grotesque examples are reserved for the final battle against the main enemy.

Who is it for?

This is definitely a book for fans of military science-fiction, as it's heavy on details about a soldier's mindset, coming from a family of soldiers, and living a soldier's life. Anspach and Sears also dedicate a fair amount of page space to describing the mechanics of Mars' organization, and the day-to-day life of someone who was resurrected to fight in an eternal war.

Why read it?

Initially I asked myself the same question. I've read plenty of "training camp" novels where the reader spends a lot of time following the MC around so the author can explain everything to them in context. I sensed that this might be the same thing, but I was relieved at how light the treatment was. Sure, you've got some ropes to learn, and you get to do it while enjoying plenty of dynamic movement along the way.

Ultimately, I kept reading because there was a good balance between answering old questions and re-

vealing new mysteries, letting the reader see this well-developed plot and well-developed world reveal themselves in good time. In addition to being a good genre piece, I think TIER 1000 has a lot of interesting subtext about the need to be prepared for war, no matter who you are.

Prose Bono

Writing Death Cult

A How-To Look

Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Death Cult, as a sequel to Hell Spawn, needed to go faster. We didn't need five pages of introduction.

Heck, with the current rerelease, everyone can read every book one right after the other.

But when I first wrote it, I had to up the ante. I even had to go back and rewrite part of the end to Hell Spawn so I could best segue into it. This is a rewrite I don't even think anyone else knew about, because I had Death Cult coming to me as I wrapped up Hell Spawn.

This is in part because there are two ways demons go trolling around the world.

One: someone is open to being possessed by ... vulnerable. When your brain becomes an open house, you never know what will wander in. The original case upon which the Exorcist was based had someone playing with Ouija boards and such. Leading to my line in Demons are Forever: you don't play with demonic crap, demonic crap does not play with you.

The second way? Summon demon. Deliberately Hilarity ensues.

While the killer in Hell Spawn is certainly the type for #1, it had been suggested by my wife that book #2 should have a cult involved.

Well now, wouldn't it just be easy to tie the two together?

Which led to book 3 being tied in with all of them, based off of a suggestion by yet another friend.

I didn't quite mean to make it a trilogy where everything was tied together, but it happened.

And, frankly, it's awesome.

Yes, I will grant you, Death Cult, like Hell Spawn, was not much in the way of a mystery. Both were horror novels with a police procedural thrown in. And I made certain to have a lot of dead ends, but even the dead ends fit together at the end of the day. If not in Hell Spawn or Death Cult, then in Infernal Affairs.

City of Shadows is book four, and that's a completely different story... but everything was all eventual-

ly tied together. Even the last six books could be seen as fallout from the first six.

But still, Death Cult wasn't much in a way of a mystery, but I have been reliably informed by my editor (and later, early readers from the kickstarter) that not only are these things awesome and bad ass, but also "creepy as f**k."

So, yeah, I was happy with this one.

One of the major problems was developing a villain after the demon of Hell Spawn. How do you top a demon-driven serial killer? Any villain we get is going to be fairly limp in comparison...

That's an easy step one: make it more than one villain. Make it a group.

... No, that's not a spoiler, just look at the title.

Ooooh, how about we make it people who raised the demon? Wouldn't that be fun? (No, that's not a spoiler, it has no impact on Hell Spawn, and if you've read it already, you know it happened)

Of course, there are plenty of suspects already before the book even begins. Hell Spawn saw our hero piss off many many people. He wasn't even trying. He was just doing his job. And when Tommy Nolan says he does his job without fear or favor, he means that he doesn't fear anybody except God, and if he knows you're guilty, he's not doing you a favor.

This will lead to pissing off plenty of people if you get too close to the entitled elite.

And this is New York City, anyone who makes more than seven figures feels entitled. Probably comes from paying so much in taxes (or paying the accountants to hide the cash). Either way, there are plenty of people who want Nolan's guts for garters.

It's strange making a character who's hated because he's good, and not because he's a weapon of mass destruction...

Though frankly I think my biggest accomplishment was getting Nolan to be a good man without being obnoxious.

Or worse, too "Hallmark special."

~Finis~

