

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
February 2023

FICTION

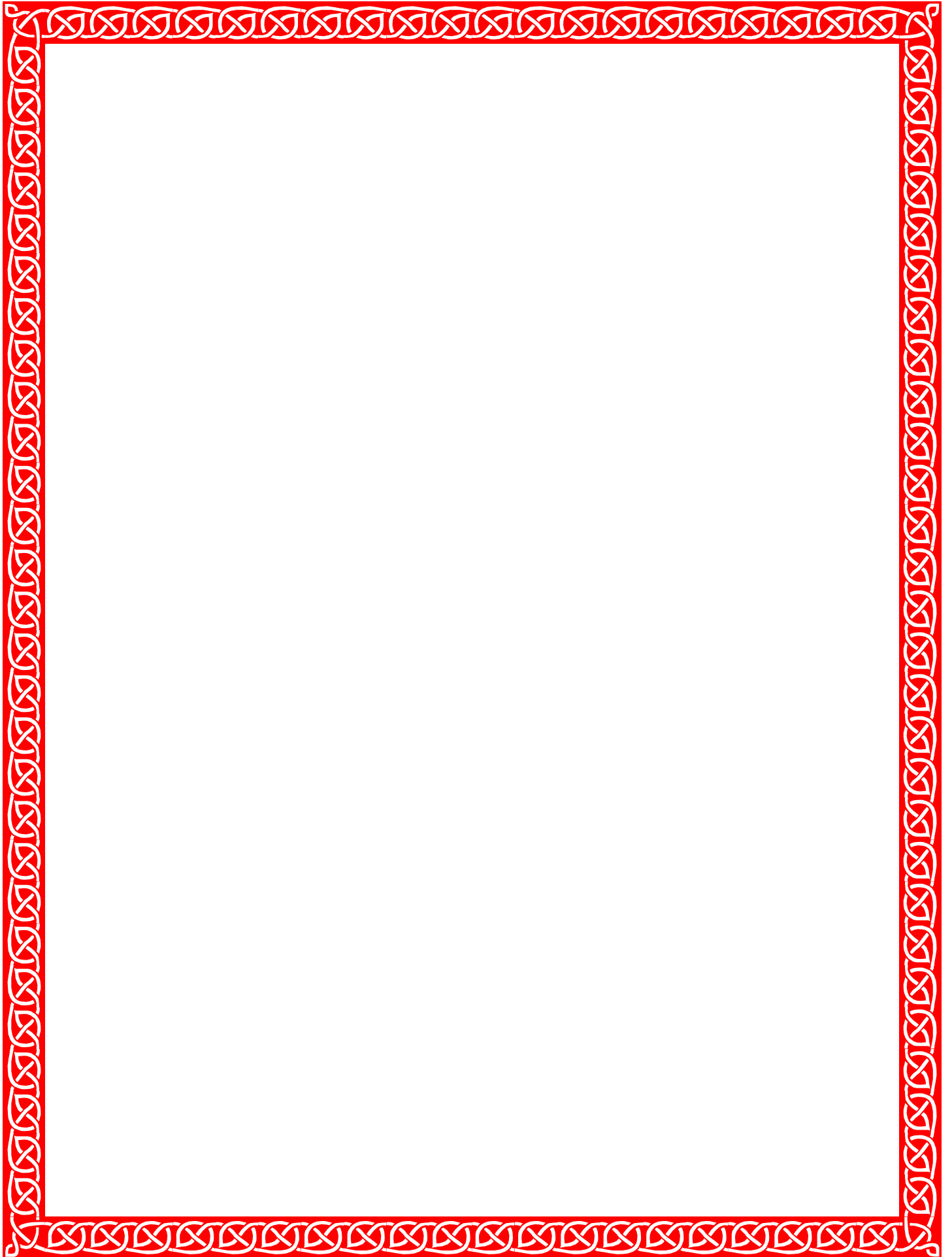
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Editorial

Our deep sympathies to The N3F Review of Books writer Declan Finn on the death in his family.

We have new writers to replace some of the old writers who have gone on their way, stopped writing, or whatever. Our current list of writers, and where they may be found, follows below.

More new writers would indeed be appreciated.

We thank A. C. Cargill for permission to reprint her articles on editing. You can see the originals at <https://mewe.com/i/accargill>



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A. C. Cargill <https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/>

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

Tom Feller <http://N3F.org>

Caroline Furlong <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

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

Bob Jennings

Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Russ Lockwood <https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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

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

Pat Patterson

Heath Row <http://N3F.org>

Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>

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

Jessi Silver <http://s1e1.com>

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

J W Stepanek <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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Fiction

Alyx: An AI's Guide to Love and Murder by Brent A. Harris

Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

It was difficult to put this one down and I burned through it in a few days. As a fan of Harris's short fiction, in this novel he proves to me, yet again, that he is a masterful author. A house with a built in AI starts to become sentient and through a series of logical interpretations begins to wreak havoc on a teenage girl and her neglectful mother that have just moved in. The characters are rich and full, believable and alive – one has no difficulty empathizing with all of them, including the sentient AI. The relationships between all of the characters are also believable and suck the reader in, mixed with a perfect blend of action and unpredictability. While set in the near future, one gets the sense that the occurrences in this book could be real challenges faced as we let AI into our lives without discrimination. The story has elements of horror, romance, and great storytelling in general. A science fiction masterpiece that readers of all genres will love. Book link: <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9781736276006>

Butterworth by Michael Butterworth

Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

This is an absolutely stellar collection of works spanning from the beginnings of Butterworth's career to more recent pieces. I am impressed by the breadth and diversity of the work and styles employed. Many of the stories are aggressive and disorienting, evoking a wide range of emotions in a truly dynamic way. The dynamics of many of the pieces are masterfully done, expressing emotions that conflict with the narrative styles in a manner that adds to the delightful cognitive dissonance of the stories.

I have so many favorites in this book that it is difficult to pick out a few pieces to highlight. One of the things that sticks out about this book to me is that it has a wide variety of themes explored while also retaining an overarching quality that makes it feel like all the pieces in the book express a larger mythos unique to Butterworth. It is a favorite quality of mine when an author's work defines its own world and creates a tonality that can only take place in this particular vision of the fabricated environment, and Butterworth is a master of this. Highly recommended for fans of the New Wave and anyone interested in more literary approaches to science fiction. <https://michael-butterworth.co.uk/>

Embers of War by Gareth L. Powell

Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

Big space opera with really neat ideas. Sentient ships, planets carved like sculptures, and strange aliens. For fans of space opera this book delivers great characters, high drama and high stakes, a proper epic to be sure- and it's book one in a series, so there's plenty more. For a few chapters I was thrown off by the multiple first person POV, each chapter being told from a different character's perspective, but once I got to know the cast of characters this stopped bothering me and the story flowed nicely (pay attention to the chapter titles to know who's perspective the chapter is from). The writing is clean and easy, rather than the dense language of some space opera and over all the story moves quickly despite its

length. Overall a great story and I look forward to reading more of Powell's work. Book link: <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9781785655180>

Fools by Pat Cadigan
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier
<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

Cyberpunk at its best! And unlike a lot of cyberpunk this book has not become dated as the years pass, the story is still fresh and plausible. Seedy style and beautifully disorienting language, this book focuses on the transference of memories, both as a sort of drug, and as a means to vicariously attempt to steal the talent of others. The entire story had me guessing and did not disappoint every time it delivered, in truly unexpected ways. Cadigan's story brings to light many accurate and horrifying aspects of addiction and portrays the street life believably and vivid. The world-building is spot on and gruesome, and had me believing that this is a world that could come to be if pharmaceuticals and surgery were taken to their logical extremes. Cadigan excels at the layered narrative, and somehow makes a really complicated story easy to follow. Not only is this probably the best cyberpunk book I have encountered, but I am dying to read another one of her books. Book link: <https://bookshop.org/a/197/9781473226029>

High Spirits by Carol J. Perry
Review by Bob Jennings

I picked this book up from the library because a review from a person whose opinion I previously held in high regard. He said he liked it and that it was an interesting ghost-ridden supernatural murder mystery.

No, it's not. This is properly a cozy mystery with a few ghosts dropped in to continue the premise the author established in her first novel. The heroine, Maureen Doherty, lives in Haven, Florida, famous for being overrun with ghosts, both friendly and vengeful. So yes, there are a few ghosts in this story, but they are Good Housekeeping Magazine story type ghosts, whimsical, friendly, perky; adding some color and good advice for the heroine who owns a run-down local hotel she was mysteriously gifted from a person she had barely met. She is slowly renovating the aging edifice, making repairs when she can afford it, coming up with interesting merchandising and promotional ideas to get people coming in to the hotel, especially to the hotel dining room, where the head chef is her barely latent romantic interest.

There is a detective mystery here; the murder of a guest at the heroine's hotel who is trying to renovate the town's closed-up movie house and run classic old films. There was another murder committed at the theater many years ago, and the ghost of the dead man is supposed to appear whenever the theater is open, sitting in the same seat where he was shot dead.

This is clearly a cozy mystery type problem story. The corpse hardly bled at all, and is swept away in the intrigue of figuring out what is happening. As with many cozy mysteries, there is no particular danger to the heroine, and things seem to just fall into place for her both during the investigation and in her ongoing efforts to renovate the old hotel. There are only a few red herrings and only a couple of minor glitches that lead to more tangible clues as to what actually happened and whodunit. The cast of suspects and friends, unlike real life mysteries, is small and contained, so the reader has a fair chance of guessing who the killer is, if not necessarily the motive. And of course the old cold-case murder and the new one are directly connected.

This was a fast, light-weight read. It was a pleasant read, but I will certainly not bother with any more stories by Ms Perry in the future. The package was just too, too tidy, with a few unexplained quirks deliberately injected that will lead directly into the next book and fill in some more background about Ms Doherty and why she inherited the old hotel. Reading this was a trivial, guilty pleasure at best.

Iron Widow by Xiran Jay Zhao Review by Tom Feller

Whether this novel is set in the far, far future or in an alternate version of China is not revealed until the very end. It does have a “Great Wall”, but the country is named Huaxia. They have been at war with an alien species called the Hundun for 2,000 years. The Hundun are essentially giant flying bugs. To fight them, the humans have created giant, transforming war robots called Chrysalises named for figures in East Asian mythology that are piloted by a male/female team. Unfortunately, the females are expected to serve as concubines for the male pilots and rarely survive their first battle, supposedly because of the mental strain.

The narrator is Wu Zetian, a young woman from a rural area whose feet have been bound. One day while looking for herbs, she meets a rich young man, Gao Yizhi, and they become friends and eventually fall in love. Unfortunately, when her older sister was eighteen, the sister joined the service and died in her first battle, so Zetian volunteers to serve. However, she intends to kill the male pilot her sister was paired with rather than one of the Hunduns. She actually survives her first battle while the male pilot dies. She then gets assigned to another male pilot, Li Shimin, an alcoholic, who, prior to his recruitment, had murdered his family. Not only do they survive together, they become friends. Meanwhile, Yizhi has pulled some strings and gotten himself assigned to the strategist (general) overseeing Zetian and Shimin. They eventually form a love triangle that is resolved by the end.

There are elements of Pacific Rim, The Handmaid’s Tale, and The Hunger Games in this novel, which is supposed to be inspired by the life of the Chinese Empress Wu Zetian. The fight scenes are quite good, and the world building is excellent. Moreover, it is quite a page turner since the info dumps are kept to a minimum. A sequel has been announced.

KTF Part 2 by Jason Anspach and Nick Cole Review by The Pulp Archivist <https://upstreamreviews>

The Story

Captain “Wraith” Keel and the Legion have ridden a bloody wave starting from the disaster at Kublar, which has carried them through the crowning of the Emperor Goth Sullus at Tarrago, the end of the Galactic Civil War at Utopion, and a myriad of brushfire wars across the galaxy. But they have never had a clear shot at the hidden hand behind thousands of years of galactic war:

The Golden King, leader of the aptly named Savage hordes.

The worst of Earth’s technological past, warped by alien technologies, the long dark of space, and that special cruelty only humans can master.

Until today, at the newly rediscovered Earth, where the identity of the Golden King is stored within a newly discovered vault. An identity that would shatter the millions of fictions the Golden King has

crafted about himself. An identity the Golden King would raze the galaxy to obliterate.

The Golden King is returning to his home. And only the brave sacrifice by the Legion and their irregular allies can prevent the galaxy from burning.

But the Legion would have it no other way, and stands ready to meet the Golden King, shouting their motto to the stars.

KTF.

Kill Them First.

The World

Jason Anspach and Nick Cole have crafted an homage to Star Wars that blends considerable inspiration from the Prequel and Original Series with the endless deployments of America's desert wars. Generally, this is a universe that has the squalor of Mos Eisley and all the dust of a Saharan outdoor market. Other environments are present, as are reshadings of Star Wars stalwarts such as starfighters, star destroyers, Jedi, and a corrupt Republic. But the heart is ground combat centered around the Legion, an elite fighting organization combining the best of the French Foreign Legion and an actually competent and elite stormtrooper corps.

The Characters

The surviving fan favorites from the last 17 stories return. And while single men in barracks might not be plaster saints, all are united heroically around the idea that the Legion is the force for good in the Galaxy—even if some commit some of the bloodiest acts outside a Savage raid to accomplish it.

The major new addition is the Golden King himself. Previous plots focused on Star Wars-inspired villains, with Goth Sullus combining Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine into a single being. The Golden King combines Warhammer 40,000's Emperor of Mankind with all the vileness of California elite culture. A psychically endowed and charismatic leader in golden armor seeking to unite Man (and the entire Galaxy) under one benevolent rule—at gunpoint, if necessary. His crusades rend the Galaxy in search of glory and perfection.

Too bad this Emperor made common cause with Chaos. And his labs have vomited forth alien races and biomechanical monstrosities to serve his pride.

The same pride that becomes his downfall.

In many ways, the appearance of The Golden King feels like it occurred too late in the story to adequately explain events. But Anspach and Cole are clever and meticulous plotters, and it would not be a surprise to see, upon a reread, the hidden hand of the Golden King as early as the first book.

Now that he has been exposed for all to see, that is.

The Politics

Galaxy's Edge as a series does not address contemporary politics in the form of Left or Right. Such concerns are distractions in the countless conflicts ripping up the skies of Galaxy's Edge. However,

within the worldbuilding is a scathing critique of California elite culture, showing how the rich, the famous, the powerful, and the technobaron use people in their hubris and how their hubris allows themselves to be manipulated in turn. The greatest threat to the galaxy has been the reappearance of these elites in the form of immense hulks filled with Savage hordes, each illustrating some perversion of culture and science that preys upon the galaxy as a whole.

Content

Violence.

Lots of it.

Galaxy's Edge is an unabashed war story. People die. Often in horrific ways. And Anspach and Cole do not pull punches with the various atrocities and betrayals committed by the various factions.

They just don't dwell on each bullet, bolt, and explosion. Loss and the capriciousness of combat, not gore, is the focus. The authors do not shy away from the terribleness of war; they just don't glory in the carnage like 2000s horror.

Who is it for?

18 books in, and this is for long term fans of Galaxy's Edge who have followed the Legion from its near ruin on Kublar.

Military science fiction and Star Wars fans intrigued by the Galaxy's Edge story should start with Legionnaire.

Why read it?

Galaxy's Edge is for military science fiction fans who have grown tired of endless A Helmet for My Pillow/Starship Troopers remixes. Instead, Galaxy's Edge uses a mixture of Black Hawk Down and The Black Company and tempers the battles with experience gleaned directly from the forever wars of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror.

Science Fiction's Great Conversation on war and warriors has changed radically, just as warfighting has changed since 2000 AD. Read Galaxy's Edge, and particularly Legionnaire and Order of the Centurion, to understand why military science fiction is no longer an Old Man's War.

At the same time, those looking for flashes of what Star Wars once was under George Lucas will find considerable inspiration and homage in these books. That said, KTF Part 2 reveals the hard SF underpinnings to its universe and where all these aliens suddenly came from.

The Lost Fleet 4 Valiant by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews>

Our hero, Black Jack Geary, still leads the fleet in an effort to reach Alliance space, even as the odds continue to stack against him. With every battle, supplies run low, the fleet loses ships, and he must fend off efforts not only to replace him and but just as many to crown him as dictator. The aliens seem to be increasing involvement in human affairs while human hackers release more com-

puter worms into the flagship system in an effort to assassinate Geary. It gets a little talky as they sit around conference tables plotting moves and countermoves, but the plot twists keep you reading.

I enjoyed it.

The Lost Fleet 5 Relentless by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews>

The Alliance fleet draws closer to home space, but the Syndics are still trying to stop Geary & Co from exiting. Meanwhile, the hypernet gates loom ever larger as a danger to humankind, even as a solution to the self-destruct and alien-destruct sequence is found. Alliance space is close, but the Syndic reserve fleet aims to intercept the ever-dwindling Alliance fleet that's running on ever-dwindling supplies.

I enjoyed it.

Victorious: The Lost Fleet 6 by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews>

With all the obstacles and losses, Geary still managed to bring the fleet home to Alliance space and spread the word about the hypernet gates. He manages to avoid being arrested for treason, but not before he has to answer to the bureaucracy for running the fleet the way he did. Still, success and a fear of Geary becoming a dictator prompts the Alliance to grant him Fleet Admiral's rank, reinforcements, and a mission to take the war to the Syndics to secure peace with truth, justice, and the Alliance way. Of course, he also secures the border of human space and then returns to secure himself a little peace and quiet. I enjoyed it and enjoyed them all.

The Lost Fleet Beyond the Frontier: Dreadnought by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews>

I'm continuing my re-reading of the Lost Fleet series. The seventh in the sci-fi series sends Alliance Admiral John Geary back to the frontier to figure out the extent of Enigma-controlled space and liberate some Alliance POWs in the process. All the members of the band remain with him to face the peril of Syndic civil war on the way to the frontier. Obviously, I bought into the premise of the original six novels and this one is just as good as any of them. One amusing point: the cover. Just about every cover illustration has (presumably) Geary in space armor with laser rifle, including this book. I don't recall him being fitted for armor, much less wearing such a suit. I enjoyed it.

The Lost Fleet Beyond the Frontier: Invincible by Jack Campbell.

Review by Russ Lockwood

<https://upstreamreviews>

The eighth novel in the sci-fi series tumbles the Alliance fleet under Admiral John Geary beyond Enigma space and into another alien-controlled empire. And these teddy bears is just as aggressive and uncommunicative as the Enigmas.

Follow up amusing point: Captain and now wife Desjani, who apparently kept her last name, joke about

Desjani writing a book with 'Black Jack' in armor on the cover. My guess is Henry's buddies needle him about the covers because the main character never wore armor in any of the books, and never carried a laser rifle. Tiresome point: As Geary and Desjani are married, it is odd they are not only in direct chain of command, but on the same ship. While a cute personal attraction trope in the first six novels, if it is an administrative taboo, then she should have been transferred to another position in another fleet or station. If not, then all this 'can't be seen together in private' is complete nonsense. Still, the admiral-eye view of spaceship action and internal and external politics continues to impress, even on re-reading. I enjoyed it.

The Lost Fleet Beyond the Frontier: Guardian by Jack Campbell.
Review by Russ Lockwood
<https://upstreamreviews>

Admiral John 'Black Jack' Geary leads the fleet home with the alien 'Dancers' accompanying the humans. The Syndic Empire is not done with the Alliance fleet yet and lays ambush after ambush. On the plus side, the Alliance fleet is towing an alien 'bear-cow' superdreadnought home for reverse engineering -- something the Syndics want as well.

If you bought into the series (this makes nine books) so far, you're going to buy into the strategic and tactical issues of running the Alliance fleet, not to mention the mixed reception awaiting our hero on return to Alliance space. The Dancers are tight-lipped (if the spider wolves have lips) about why they are accompanying the fleet until they request access to the most sacred of demilitarized human sites in the galaxy. I wonder why there hasn't been a movie, series, or space game by now. You'd think someone would want an alternative to Star Wars and Star Trek. For a while, Babylon 5 was hot... I enjoyed it.

The Lost Fleet Beyond the Frontier: Steadfast by Jack Campbell.
Review by Russ Lockwood
<https://upstreamreviews>

Admiral John 'Black Jack' Geary draws some odd assignments, including a trip back to Old Earth, apparently now populated mostly by lawyers. Along the way, he confronts the equivalent of a third-world navy, a plague moon, an assassination attempt, and an artificial intelligence version of himself.

These books are never boring, but then again, I've bought into the setting. I enjoyed it.

Mother Ship by Scott Bartlett
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews>

They're here... A ship for every city. An invasion force beyond our comprehension.

Summary:

They're here... A ship for every city. An invasion force beyond our comprehension. Max Edwards has always felt like something was wrong with the world. Like something was...off. As though his entire life was a lie. Then, it begins. From his friend's acreage outside Oklahoma City, he witnesses a giant saucer descend from the sky to hover over the city.

Countries all around the world report the same thing – mysterious vessels that refuse all attempts to communicate. As the world comes apart at the seams, Max realizes everything that's ever happened to him was leading up to this. And as impossible as it seems, he may be the only one with the ability to save humanity. Mere survival won't be enough. Humanity stands to lose everything. To fight the invaders, Max must forget everything he thought he knew.

Like most of the space opera and military fiction that I love to read, this was an action-packed novel. Seriously, it had me hooked, and I stayed up late to find out how it ended. The main story arc of this novel was expertly done in a way that was easy to follow. It never really lagged for me; the adventure was non-stop, almost too intense even. There were some lulls in the fun for the reader to catch their breath, but the overall feel of the novel was frenetic and rushed. Not in a bad way, I'm just pointing out that the novel started the intensity at 9 and kept going from there. I was able to suspend my disbelief and buy into the entirety of the premise, so I'd call that a win for Scott Bartlett. Overall, the premise was interesting, and the set-up was well executed. I couldn't ask for anything more; an excellent premise, perfect execution, and pacing that was mostly on point.

This series had just enough visualization to get the job done, enough that you could imagine yourself in this world, mostly due to being set in our own time so we could bring our own baggage to the mix. However, I honestly couldn't tell you where that baggage ends, and the book description begins. One place where I wanted to know more was about what the characters looked like. Other than Max's potential romantic partner, we don't really know what the characters looked like. When he did describe things, Scott hit the ball out of the park. He covered the entirety of the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells, and even how the world felt. Except, there wasn't enough for me. Again, I know that there's a trend where less is more for descriptions, and I hate it. For me, this is one place where I felt let down. In this category, I give the author 4 instead of 5 grenade series.

Characters:

This novel had one main character, with several amazing supporting characters. Obviously, I really liked the secondary characters, so much so that I didn't mind the draft from them exiting stage left. It was like a cool draft on a sweltering summer day. The main character alone was entertaining enough to make it worth the hassle. Each of these secondary characters were well written, and you could feel enough depth to make them believable.

Max Edwards: He's the main character in this novel, a former high school loner and space nerd who finds himself through the trials and tribulations of plebe year at the US Air Force Academy. We meet him as he's home for summer leave, which happens just as the aliens arrive overhead. Hey, this isn't a spoiler... it's the freaking cover image! He was a likable enough man-child, though his constant teen angst seemed out of place for someone fresh of the yearlong boot camp of the plebe system at the USA-FA! I hope that, in the novels that follow, we see him mature into his role as an adult and as a leader of men. While I really enjoyed watching his character grow from boy into man, I felt like that should've already happened. This was a relatively minor quibble and one that didn't stop me from reading the book. Overall, he still had that high school kid vibe to me, but I have a soft spot for nerds and so I enjoyed this character. Aside from those minor issues, he was a well-rounded character who was sympathetic and believable, precisely what you'd expect from a beloved main character.

Cynthia & Peter Edwards: They're Max's parents and helped prepare him for a life of service and duty. They mostly exist off screen and are shown through Max's angst, but they're very much a part of this novel. Paradoxically, they're the most flushed out characters and yet are still enigmas because we know so little about them. I hope that we get to see more of them as this stand-alone novel becomes a series.

This is some blatant peer pressure, Scott Bartlett, so make it happen!

Jimmy Somerton: He's a foil for Max Edwards, the sometimes-loveable pothead who peaked in high school. He went from being the popular ladies' man that always got the girl, to just another ranch hand on his dad's acreage. He's obsessed with aliens and is convinced that they exist, and that the government is covering it up. He loves all of the affiliated conspiracy theories about the little green men and their flying saucers. Jimmy originally befriended Max, the unpopular loner, because of his parent's secretive government job. When Jimmy learned that Max's parents worked for a government organization in Roswell, New Mexico he was ecstatic. He latched on to Max as a conduit for information and a friendship was born. Once Max started his plebe year at the US Air Force Academy, the friendship became strained. Jimmy was never able to process the changes in their dynamic as his best friend grew into his own. Overall, Jimmy was a mixed bag for me. He was fleshed out as a character; I just didn't like him.

Principal Ted Chambers: He's a former Navy SEAL turned high school principal who mentored Max Edwards and helped to shepherd him towards a life of service and duty. He's the sort of character who's quiet, but fully competent when things get dicey. I really liked reading about this character, he was seriously a lot of fun and someone I could relate to. He was a mix between a lovable paternal assassin and a devoted Zen warrior monk, which made him a lot of fun to read about. I honestly my story just about, it could be fun to really dive deep into his psyche. Ultimately, he served to balance out the rough angst-ridden edges of Max, and he did it well. Overall, I found him to be very believable character. He was well rounded with a fleshed-out back story that we learn about as the novel progresses.

Tara Benson: She's the female love interest for Max and serves to motivate him. There is plenty more to say about her, but that would lead into spoiler territory.

The World

This is one area where I have mixed feelings. I think that author Scott Bartlett created a world that was a lot of fun, with hints at depth, but I was constantly frustrated because there was so much left unexplored. There was a lot of things explored, but I loved the story so much that I wanted more. Always more. That said, his universe did feel real to me, and it was so gripping that I dove in. This novel sucked you in, only stopping to explain the stuff he added to the world as we know it. This worked for the most part; however, but I would have liked to know what everyone looked like. I know this is a modern trend – it is one I do not like. Obviously, you could provide too much description, but I really like it when those details are there. If you've read my other reviews, you'll know this is a constant refrain, so I'll leave it where it is. On a positive note, I never felt like I was missing critical bits of information, though I do feel like this is a universe where there's room to expand and flush out the canon. Okay, I'm hinting here, in case Bartlett is reading this, but I wanted more. More books, more characters, and more details. Overall, the world-building was done well, and I was sold on the way it happened. What was there felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe the author created. It was a fun ride, which is the goal of action/adventure authors!

Narration:

I listened this series as an audiobook, so I wanted to take a second to review the quality of the narration. This novel was narrated by Scott Aiello, which was a little strange for me because he'll always be the voice of the Gateway to the Galaxy Series by Jonathan Yanez and JR Castle. I did manage to adapt and overcome that eerie feeling that you get when the universe cracks open, and your favorite star appears in the wrong sitcom. Once I dug into this novel, I was able to forget Scott's past affiliations with other

universes. This performance was equally as amazing as his others, Scott Aiello is a consummate professional. He's one of the "why hasn't he won more awards" kind of audiobook narrator! Are there even audiobook narrator awards? If not, there should be! The narration was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did amazing! His audiobook was of a professional quality, so I had nothing to complain about. More importantly, he didn't commit the cardinal sin, which is my only real requirement; he didn't sound like a robot, he didn't bore me, and he didn't use accents that annoy the bejeezus out of me! Overall, I give him 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

Overall:

Okay, let's get into the weeds on this one! I've organized my overall assessment by putting the stuff I didn't like first so we can end on a high note. I also want to be clear that I really loved this novel. This is important, because I won't even write a book review for a novel that is less than 3 stars for me. I just stop reading those books and move on.

Alright, let's rip off the band-aide and dive in. There were many parts that I wasn't thrilled with in this novel. First, the lack of details about the what the characters looked like and about the alien technology was disheartening. I'm a guy who prefers all of the details, and I just wasn't given that in this book. I always want to know that the characters look like, every visceral detail about them and the world they inhabit.

Another issue with this book was the lack of depth with some of the secondary characters. The main protagonist, Janet, seemed to be evil for its own sake and I feel like fleshing her out could've turned this novel from great into a modern classic! We could also use some more from Tara Benson, who seemed to exist more as an idea than as an actual character in this universe. The romantic tension between her and Max seem unfulfilled in a novel that is, as of this moment, only a stand-alone book. She was a useful secondary character, but she was paper thin.

Keeping with that vein, I would also have liked to see more of the parents, Cynthia and Peter Edwards. They existed more off screen than on, but there was enough about them that left me wanting to know more. It was a bit of an enigma, these erstwhile parents of our hero character. From recent interviews that Scott Bartlett has given, I know that a sequel is in the works. I hope that as he continues to grow the universe, we learn more about some of the intriguing secondary characters.

Finally, one of the things that I found that I didn't like was how abrupt and jarring the ending felt. One minute we're fighting the Big Baddie, then BAM and the book is over. The novel was sufficiently long, it was just that the ending felt abrupt. Not quite a cliffhanger, but it was close. I think that as the second novel comes out for readers to dive into it will feel less abrupt. Speaking as a reader, I can forgive a lot if I know there is more available in another book.

Alright, now let's talk about the happy things! I chose this book because the cover stood out to me. There's something about the way that it harkens back to the classic campy science fiction that I grew up loving which calls to me. This was clearly classic Tom Edwards covers, but I'm cheating because I know that Scott uses him almost exclusively.

Speaking the classics, one of the great things about this novel was how he well Scott Bartlett was at weaving several classic tropes into his novel in a new and interesting way. The flying saucers of old were used in a way that was fun and nostalgic for the old SF art I still drool over. To see that on the cover image and incorporated into the story was a hoot. Not to say that this was a comedy, because it

wasn't, but that little nod to the ghost of science fiction past was fun.

There was a little bit in this novel for everyone; artificial intelligences, post-apocalyptic preppers, with all facets of the military science fiction that we love all wrapped up in a coming-of-age story. This action-adventure story even had zombies that weren't exactly zombies and a first contact scenario. I really loved how Scott took all of those tropes from the old science fiction stories and turned them into something new. He even incorporated the Area 51 conspiracies and the Roswell, New Mexico crash landing into his story. Seriously, Scott reinvigorated all of the classic tropes in a way that I haven't seen done anywhere else.

All of those tropes, viewed through the lens of the action-adventure story, kept the tension up the entire time. This novel was an emotional rollercoaster that kept me on the edge of my seat the entire time. While I could predict where the story was going, I was constantly surprised at how Scott got us there. This story is the perfect reminder that the journey is as important as the destination. Mother Ship definitely hit on all of the tropes that I love about science fiction, but not in a way that felt derivative. Scott carried it out in a way that was uniquely his.

Speaking of that journey, I did enjoy how Scott got creative with the tactics in his story. There are only so many ways to fight off hordes of mindless zombie-like humans. However, when we incorporate the technology into the plot things got interesting. He made tech that, through the power of handwavium, could do amazing things. He turned that into innovative tactics when the spaceships went pew-pew. It was unexpected, a pleasant surprise that had me wanting to clap for Scott! Good thing I didn't, because I was driving! I wish I could elaborate, but that would veer into spoiler territory, so you'll have to take my word for it or read the book.

I also loved how beautifully Scott turned the prose in this story. The writing was clean and professionally written, which made the amazing plotline pop and sizzle even more. I'm sure his English Lit professors are proud that he learned all the things. I could ramble on about this facet of the novel, but it would pale in comparison to Scott's work so instead I'll tip my hat and move on!

One place where Scott's fancy-pants literary skills were made obvious involved character development. I really enjoyed watching Max grow throughout the novel. I've read a lot of the author's other works, and this is an area where the author showed growth as a creator. I can't really say anything else about the specific category because that would give spoilers, but trust me, it's worth waiting for the big reveal later in the series.

My one major complaint about science fiction stories is how little the act of killing affects the characters. I've been in situations where you were required to end someone else's life, thank you Iraq, and there is always an emotional response to the action. In Mother Ship, Scott definitely didn't fall into that trap. The main character, Max, goes out of his way to avoid having to take a life and when he does it is obvious that it tears him up inside. None of that angst was overdone, though there were a few places where the sergeant in me wanted to slap the damn Zoomie and tell him to take his head out of his ass. Damn cadets, not even smart enough to be lieutenants!

One of the overarching themes of the book that I enjoyed was the classic story of good versus evil. This was your typical David versus Goliath story except you had kick ass rifles instead of the iconic slingshots. While the main character wasn't quite the everyman, given his chosen one status, he was close enough that you ended up rooting for him. A few times I almost cheered as the bad guys got taken down a peg or two. There's a certain character whose face you want to smash in, but luckily Max wants to do the same thing, and so you have the hope that you'll get a vicarious thrill of living through him.

Isn't that why we read fiction in the first place?

In conclusion, I was hooked from the first page/minute! Scott Bartlett wove the action into this fun classic space opera romp that made me lose track of time. Basically, he had me hooked from the beginning and kept it going throughout the whole novel. I would happily recommend this book. He is an author I will definitely read again.

Download this gripping alien invasion book to learn humanity's fate! Seriously, buy this novel! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money! I give these books a 5 out of 5 grenades!

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out! You won't regret it! Well, unless it keeps you up all night and you're late to work... and then your boss fires you because you became a book addict and a rabid Scott Bartlett fan. And then you track him down and climb into his window in your skivvies, and he shoots you with his phasers set to kill. Or he sicks his assassin moose after you to torment you with Rocky Bullwinkle jokes as he gores you with his antlers. Okay, the fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be warned but enjoy the high!

The Other Side of Night by Adam Hamdy
Review by Bob Jennings
<https://upstreamreviews>

Let me start this review by quoting directly from the publisher's hype---

For fans of Matt Haig and Anthony Horowitz, a “strange, compelling, and ultimately moving head-spinner of a novel” (John Connolly) in which the lives of a disgraced police officer, a prolific author, and an upstanding citizen are inextricably bound together by a series of mysterious deaths.

The Other Side of Night begins with a man named David Asha writing about his biggest regret: his sudden separation from his son, Elliot. In his grief, David tells a story.

Next, we step into the life of Harriet Kealty, a police officer trying to clear her name after a lapse of judgment. She discovers a curious inscription in a secondhand book—a plea: Help me, he's trying to kill me. Who wrote this note? Who is “he”?

This note leads Harri to David Asha, who was last seen stepping off a cliff. Police suspect he couldn't cope after his wife's sudden death. Still, why would this man jump and leave behind his young son? Quickly, Harri's attention zeroes in on a person she knows all too well. Ben Elmys: once the love of her life. A surrogate father to Elliot Asha and trusted friend to the Ashas. Ben may also be a murderer.

Quite a few people discussing this book have used the word “remarkable”, repeatedly. I think that is an appropriate word to describe this novel. This is a detective novel with supernatural influences that is solidly grounded in the tropes of science fiction while exploring in razor sharp emotional detail the pain and joy of love and loss within a family. But you have to read all the way to the very end of this book to understand how all of that could possibly get mixed together to create such a stunning tour de force. Adam Hamdy is a British writer who specializes in thrillers and thriller type screenplays, some in cooperation with mega-best selling author James Patterson. He spends a lot of time in Hollywood working with movie production companies, and teaches creative writing both in the US and in the UK. I am only dimly aware of his work, but nothing he has previously written could possibly prepare the reader for this particular work of fiction.

I can't discuss much of the plot with this novel without revealing many of the unexpected twists and turns the plot takes. And by the way, this is also not necessarily the easiest book to work thru because there are regular intersections of criminal court proceedings, personal letters, newspaper articles, book quotations, poetry, and asides from unseen individuals, plus a flashback or three, all dropped at seemingly random points into the ongoing detective story. Except we learn that all that is not random and every one of those interjections is important to understanding what is happening as the plot continues to unfold.

You should read this book. If you don't want to buy the hardback or the e-book version, then get a copy from your local library. If they don't have it, they can get it thru inter-library loan. But you should read this book to experience an unusual novel that can only be described as Remarkable, and just possibly, Unique, and certainly one of the best books to be published in 2022. I recommend this book unhesitatingly, and by the way, I would also suggest you skip the introduction pages and go directly to chapter one. Then after you finish the novel, go back to read the Introduction, which will make perfect sense after you reach the final page of this Remarkable Book.

The Romanov Rescue by Justin Watson, Kacey Ezell and Tom Kratman
Review by Jim McCoy
<http://JimboSFFreviews>

There have always been times in history where things didn't go the way they should have. Sometimes it's a matter of luck. Sometimes it's a matter of bad actors. And sometimes, sometimes, one or two moments can lead to the slaughter of millions. One of those moments happened in Russia in 1918. The Bolsheviks, led Vladimir Lenin, seized power from the Russian monarchy and, as Leftist governments always do, proceeded to slaughter millions over the next several decades while simultaneously subjecting anyone who voiced an unapproved opinion to at least Cancel Culture and possibly imprisonment. But here's the thing: It didn't have to be that way. And *The Romanov Rescue* by Tom Kratman, Justin Watson and Kacey Ezell shows an attempt by Tsarist elements within Russia to end Communist rule only months into their reign with the only symbol that could have been adequately used against them; The Romanovs, Russia's royal family.

There is a lot to *The Romanov Rescue*, and I loved the complexity of it. The authors gave us interpersonal conflict, military conflict, lots of challenges to solve, plenty of action and just a touch of romance. It's all there. The characters feel real. The conflicts that started the mess contained within the pages (IE World War I and The Russian Revolution) both actually did exist and seem to be, as far as I can tell from my limited research into both, dead on. (Now some history professor is going to read this and argue with me about the spelling of a city's name when the original name was written in another alphabet. You only think I'm joking.)

Something that you can appreciate in a tome like *The Romanov Rescue* is that all three authors are military, and this is, like most Alternate History, a work of military fiction. Tom Kratman and Justin Watson are both retired Army officers and Kacey Ezell is a currently serving Air Force chopper pilot and a Major, last I heard. I get complaints from military people on occasion, upset about the lack of a true military feeling in works of fiction written by people who haven't served. You will not have that problem here. These are people who have been there, done that and gotten the t-shirt. When you crack this bad boy open it's going to be the real deal.

It occurs to me that I'm kinda miffed because I didn't review this book for my annual Memorial Day event, but I suppose I should just get over myself.

Something I really like about *The Romanov Rescue* is that it's not just a shoot 'em up novel. I mean, you get some combat, but there's more to it than bullets and blowups. We get a good look at what it was like to plan and train for an operation at the end of the Great War. From the construction of ranges, to feeding the troops to finding horses and donkeys to haul stuff around while keeping them healthy and on and on we see the real side of things. Yes, the troops who do the shooting are important but so are the people who get them the guns and the bullets to shoot with. The authors have done a terrific job of making sure that all gets in here. That's not to say that the book bogs down. We get to be in on a few of the discussions and get a solid idea of what's needed to pull the mission off, but we don't have to watch all the paperwork get filed.

I spoke a bit about interpersonal conflict earlier, but *TRR* features a lot of inTRA personal conflict too. Some of the characters aren't sure about their assignments. Others think their assignments might be changed in a way they find objectionable. It's part of the life and it's in there. It also adds a lot to the characters because members of the military, regardless of whose military, are not simply automatons that follow their programming. They are actual flesh and blood human beings with likes, dislikes and qualms. Yes, the physical challenges are real. The mental challenges are no less real.

It feels weird typing this, but I'd recommend *The Romanov Rescue* to any military historian out there. It's not for the work's scholarly value but for what it reminds us all of: That people who serve in the military really are people. That's a point that frequently gets lost in historical writing where, at best, you might talk about one or two generals as individuals. Reading something like this every now and again is both a brain massage and a reminder to keep those people in mind. Oh, and war does make for strange bedfellows. I'm just sayin'.

The action sequences tend to be short, sharp, and violent and that's just how I like them. Some of the action takes place as part of training and functions as both entertainment and a warning that training to do dangerous things is in and of itself frequently dangerous. A bit of overt gun-geeking does take place, but in a book about a military operation, it fits. We need to know what the troops are using and how it works. If I actually enjoyed the discussion well, the point of reading the book was to enjoy it, right?

In short, I'd recommend *The Romanov Rescue* to anyone who likes to read things that are fun and interesting. I mean, if *The Scarlet Letter* is your thing, I don't see *TRR* as being for you. Dull and depressing have their place in classrooms, but I like to read things that I enjoy. I found someone I could root for (and if you're not a fan of feudalism I get it, but they were fighting Communists.) I found a group of villains I could root against. I got to spend some time with some people I'd love a chance to meet, if only they actually existed. Then again, I wasn't surprised. I've loved both Kratman and Ezell as authors for quite a while now and, if this was my first experience with Watson, I think he at least lived up to the company he was in and, from me, that's high praise indeed.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Flashbangs

We Happy Few by Edward D. Hudson

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Summary:

First, let me say that none of what I'll say in this section couldn't be found on the back copy of the novel. I wanted to provide a spoiler-free review, so here goes nothing! This novel follows the trials and

tribulations of an acclaimed Shakespearean actor, Robert Taylor Ford. He's at the top of his game, and his life is perfect, at least until his girlfriend and co-star turns up dead. And to add to this tragedy, he's accused of the crime. Narrowly escaping arrest aboard the sleek, luxurious liner called the Pegasus, he ends up on a ship destined for the outer edges of the solar system. He's finally approaching his freedom... that is until the pirates attack.

With power armor that makes them nearly invincible, the pirates easily take the ship and usher Ford and the other "useless" passengers to the airlocks. Using his unparalleled acting abilities, Ford takes on the most dangerous role of his life. If he fails to convince his new audience, his next performance could be his last...

This novel is what happens when you slam an FTL ship and all of the other science fiction tropes onto a Regency Era pirate ship on patrol in the Spanish Main. It's everything you like about both periods, a unique take on the standard pirate story.

Characters:

In this novel, we see a singular focus given to Robert Taylor Ford with the other characters in the novel given secondary status. The main character was very flushed out, and I never felt like I didn't know who he was or where he came from. I felt like I could relate to him as a person, as much as anyone really can with the snobby upper crust of a stagnating monarchal society. While most of the story is seen through Robert's eyes, there were still plenty of secondary characters who I hope we get to see more of in the follow-on novels. Also, we need more red shirts dying glorious deaths. Like novels I read from military veterans, Edward used his military service to color this science fiction action-filled space opera. Here is a brief summary of the main character.

Robert Taylor Ford: He is a Shakespearean actor, who once served his period of military service as an officer of the crown. He got involved with the pirates when he was shanghaied during the capture of his ship. We learn a lot about his backstory throughout this story, but basically, he started out as a spoiled rich kid and grew into something more.

Overall, I will give these characters 5 out of 5 Grenades and can't wait to see where the author takes this character throughout this series!

Plot:

Unlike most of the military fiction I love to read, this novel wasn't just an action-packed novel. Don't get me wrong, there was action, but it was dispersed among the world building in such a way as to raise stakes incrementally. The action was brutal, though the worst of it happened off screen. It seemed a bit sanitary for me because of that, which isn't how I'd normally prefer my action. This does, however, mean this book would have wider appeal. As an author, I can appreciate that tactical decisions we sometimes make to give the readers what they want. Also, this book was not classified as military science fiction. This novel is a cyberpunk, galactic empire, an action-adventure story, and I feel like he was solidly within those genres. Overall, I would say that the story was internally consistent which allowed me to hit the "I believe" button. The premise was interesting, and the set-up was well executed with everything believable, well, as much as we could say about futuristic tech! I really loved the premise of this plot, and more importantly, I enjoyed how Edward D Hudson executed it. I couldn't ask for anything more; excellent premise, believable execution and solid pacing! I again give Edward 4 out of 5 Grenades!

World Building:

This is the first book in a new series, and I was hooked enough to want to read book two in this series. Like in all the novels I bother to read to completion, this novel had a flushed-out world that felt complete. It was sometimes hard to follow because the information was spread throughout the novel, but in the end, you have all the information you need for the world. The world building started to get smoother the deeper into the story you got, but since this is the first book in a new series, I feel like that it was necessary to set the ball into motion. This series takes us past the world as we know and into a future that's simply amazing to think about! The changes were believable, and there was no waving of the hands to address the realities of geopolitics at the international level. It seemed like all of the governments were evil, and it was often hard to figure out who was the bad guy. Normally I don't like this, but it was well written enough that I'm willing to go along for the ride in book two. Regardless, the novel built on the modern world and pushed past it into the far future. I give the world building 4 out of 5 Grenades.

Description:

Like most of the novels that I don't drop within the first several chapters, this one was chalk full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. There was never a place where I couldn't picture the scenery and the equipment, which I enjoyed. Even the characters were given enough to form a mental image, which is a strength for Edward Hudson. Many authors push the trend of little to no details, which I dislike. I'm not perfect, and I'm sure you could find the same complaints about my own work, but I feel like books are better when there are more descriptions. This was an area where Edward Hudson showed his mettle, which is surprising for a debut novel. Overall, I give Edward 5 out of 5 grenades in this category!

Narration Quality:

This was the first novel I've listened to from the narrator, Tim Gerard Reynolds. He did an amazing job narrating this book, it was solidly narrated. He had a heavy British accent, but it fit within the story, so I didn't mind. Tim didn't bore you, or make you zone out because of his monotone, and that's very important in an audio narrator. His performance didn't feel robotic like a machine was reading the novel too me. Instead, it felt like a friend was sitting with me reading an amazing story that he couldn't put down. I bought this book in both formats but listened to it exclusively and was able to follow the story. I give him a 5 out of 5 grenades for his performance.

Overall:

I really enjoyed this book, though it wasn't exactly what I would normally read. It had pirates though, and was written by a veteran, so I had to give it a chance. I thought the blurb was well written, but the cover was a bit dark for my taste. Admittedly, I am colorblind so your taste may vary there because there's a very real chance that I do not see the cover art as it actually is. I like that the main character was a combat veteran, and I felt like that part of his internal makeup was excellently done. The brief exposure to the military culture that was shown in this book was spot on, which shouldn't surprise me since Edward Hudson is a veteran himself. One of the things that I did not like was how the backstory was introduced. Jumping around on the timeline isn't a storytelling technique that I enjoy, and it can get confusing for me to follow. In all likelihood, that's probably more an issue with my brain damage than a storytelling flaw, but I do prefer a story that is told chronologically. Once we got past the initial world building, I felt like it was smooth sailing. Yes, that pun was intended.

What can I say? It's a story about pirates! Speaking of pirates, I did like how he portrayed them. Too often the idea is romanticized in a way that does not fit reality, and we are led to believe that they were genuinely nice people. It's hard to reconcile that with the brutality many pirates performed upon their captured prisoners. In this novel, the pirates performed truly evil acts, and it was never sugarcoated. The final part that I didn't like was the conclusion. It tied everything into a knot but left enough hanging that I wanted to find out more in that book isn't out yet. I guess this officially means that Edward D Hudson is a member of the "Cliff Hanging Bastards Club." I'm not sure, but I do believe he gets the T-shirt now! On a serious note, I know another book is coming... eventually. And yes, I'll definitely read it to find out what happened next. Basically, Edward managed to keep my interest long enough to hook me and picked up speed throughout the novel. It's a fun little adventure story and is a book I would happily recommend. Also, this is an author I will definitely read again. Given that, I truly recommend this novel! Overall, I give it 4 out of 5 Grenades.

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out, you won't regret it! Well, unless it motivates you to reenact Robert Taylor Ford's desperate retreat from the law aboard an interstellar spaceship. And then you find the galaxy's first space pilot, Mark Watney, who captures your ship and shanghaies you into service. And you end up fighting under the skull and crossbones of the Jolly Roger. And then your attempts to seize your next prize ends in disastrous failure. Defeated, you're arrested and tried for piracy and hung from the yardarms of New Trafalgar. And as you take your dying breath, a clerk of the court runs towards the town square to delivery clemency orders. Yeah, it would suck to die just as you've been pardoned. Well yeah, I guess this could be bad for you. But hey, at least you got to see strange locations and meet new and exotic aliens before your neck was snapped by the executioner as you fade into nothing. On second thought, be warned, fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be wary, you were warned and if you have to go out like that at least enjoy the view from up there!

White Ops by Declan Finn
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Star Wars, but with more explosions and enough political intrigue to make the Sith green with envy.

Black moves second in chess, but in the real world, white is usually a step behind.

This time, though, the heroes plan to be quick on the uptake.

Welcome to White Ops, the team of special operatives so secretive and so far off the books, they aren't black. They're white.

The story

Like any good space opera, White Ops starts off with a bar brawl. Sean Patrick Ryan and his friend Peter Sierra arrive before evening falls, and Sierra instantly knows something is off. People at the bar are way too casual and relaxed, as if they know that entertainment is coming. Given that the place hosts bar brawls as local theater (provided the contestants pay in advance), this is disconcerting.

So Sierra does the natural thing. He asks, who is the star of tonight's floor show.

The patron next to him reveals it will be, as Sierra suspected, Sean Patrick Ryan. What Sierra doesn't learn until the opposing player shows up is that his antagonist will be a Touri – an alien lizard that

looks like nothing so much as a Velociraptor on steroids. His talons can cut through ship hallways like knives through craft paper.

Oops.

Except it isn't a mistake, or a case of an enemy coming to hunt down and deal with Ryan. Most of Ryan's enemies don't live long enough to plot ways to take him down. Sierra, Ryan, and Fe'eshar Straczyn – the Touri – are on a mission to investigate the owner of the bar. Turns out he's been smuggling weapons on the side, and that's not good...

But when they blow his operation sky high, the three learn that their target was selling Pharmakoi weapons. What the rest of the galaxy doesn't know yet is that the Pharmakoi's ordinance is more advanced than that of any other species in the galaxy. If they decide to go to war – and they do – then the rest of the Milky Way is going to have a hard time keeping up.

Ryan knows this. He also knows, when the dust from the Pharmakoi War settles, that the Pharmakoi aren't capable of creating weapons like those they used to slaughter millions of soldiers in the war. Someone else gave them these weapons for the express purpose of testing humanity and the rest of the civilized Milky Way. Which means the Pharmakoi's weapons were the least advanced ones in the enemy's arsenal.

That means that the enemy has learned humanity and the other species' strengths. Given how many people were killed in the Pharmakoi War, if the original owners of those weapons are allowed purchase in the galaxy, it will be utter Armageddon.

So it's time for a group of special operatives so secret they're white to be assembled so they can go hunting. Before humanity and the rest of the galaxy become prey for these creatures.

The characters

The characters are all fully realized and sassy. Whether it is Sean Patrick Ryan being a human wrecking ball and nuclear explosion, Peter Sierra being a Badass Normal, or Fe'eshar being a perfectly terrifying and yet exceptionally friendly Velociraptor on steroids, the heroes are all people the reader wants to root for and see succeed.

Their supporting cast is equally vigorous, interesting, and entertaining as they blast, shoot, and sometimes stab their way toward hoped-for victory in a war that hasn't happened yet.

The world

Declan Finn's worldbuilding goes to a new level in *White Ops*. The world of the series is deep enough that the first few chapters could spawn short stories in and of themselves, and a reader could be excused for wanting to just explore the galaxy the author has built.

From the meticulous detail for the weapons the heroes use to the politics to the biology of the aliens, *White Ops* is an all-one-can-eat buffet for those who want serious worldbuilding. Finn takes the novel approach of recognizing that there is an entire galaxy in which to play here.

So he invites the reader to play – and please stand clear when the pretty explosions go off. Remaining on a planet about to be nuked is very bad for one's health!

The politics

There are references to modern politics scattered throughout the novel. A few of these are rather on the nose, but the story is not affected by them. If anything, modern politics affects the story more than the other way around by giving the writer material to inspire his work.

Content warning

The enemy aliens are cannibals. A secondary war is begun, and there are atrocities alluded to and discussed, even if they occur off-screen. Beyond that, there is nothing objectionable in this book, and nothing overtly gory or disgusting described at all.

Who is it for?

Anyone who loves space opera and sci-fi but cannot find a universe that satisfies the desire to just get lost in a galaxy far, far away. Those who like thrill-a-minute plots and political intrigue will find *White Ops* has plenty of both to spare, and for anyone who just wants to see the bad guys get what is coming to them, this will be a very fulfilling read.

To get lost in a book is a treat, and this is one book it is easy to get lost in. It is a space opera with a lot of meat on the bone, and it barely scratches the surface!

Why read it?

This is how space opera and sci-fi should be written. Isn't that enough reason to buy a copy and start reading today?

Winter's Orbit by Everina Maxwell Review by Tom Feller

As a general rule, I don't care for science fiction romances, even heterosexual ones. However, this homosexual one by the nominee for the Astounding (formerly the Campbell) Award is so well written that I was able to read and enjoy it. It uses the old plot of a political marriage in which the principals come to love each other and a murder mystery to further complicate it. Prince Kiem, a minor member of the royal family governing the Iskat Empire, is ordered by his grandmother, the Emperor (all titles are gender neutral), to marry Count Jainan from Thea, a vassal planet. He is the recent widower of Kiem's cousin Taam, a rising star in Iskat's military who was killed in a flying accident. Taam's and Jainan's marriage was also political, and its true nature becomes an important plot point by the end of the novel. The marriage of an Iskat royal and a Thean noble is required by the treaty between Iskat and Thea.

However, Iskat is not fully autonomous, and by galactic standards calling itself an empire is rather pretentious. It answers to an organization called the Resolution, which protects it from invasion by larger empires. The treaty between Iskat and the Resolution is renewed every twenty years, and it is about to expire. The representative from the Resolution is called the Auditor, and if he is not satisfied with how Iskat governs itself, he has the authority to withdraw the Resolution's protection. In an off-the-record conversation between him and Jainan, he reveals that there are at least two larger empires with designs on Iskat. Moreover, he is leaning toward withdrawing the Resolution's protection.

The marriage is not consummated until the novel is more than half over, because Kiem is too

much a gentleman to force the issue with a new widower, and Jainan has self-esteem issues. Kiem has a well-deserved reputation as a playboy, which intimidates Jainan. They eventually learn that Taam was murdered and may have been an embezzler. Jainan becomes a suspect in both the murder and the embezzlement, so Kiem and Jainan conduct their own investigation to clear his name. Another complication is that there are remnants of a previous galactic civilization hanging around to be discovered, and those artifacts can be weaponized. This is a very good first novel with only major problem being the pacing, and there are engaging secondary characters such as Kiem's aide Bel and Jainan's cousin Gairad, a graduate student. I'd like to read another book set in this universe, although not necessarily another romance.

Prose Bono

Hooking the Reader
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

We're here to help other writers become even better writers, navigate their way to publication, and steer clear of the rocks and shoals of the industry.

Hooks aren't just for books. You need to be able to attract attention to your work, and that begins even before the reader starts in on the first page of your book. Hooks start with the blurb of the book, whether that is read on a sales site, or the back of a physical copy. Hooks are what catch a bored and idle browser who stumbles over your ad somewhere on the internet, hidden in the flow from the firehose of information bathing every individual who ventures online. You are competing not against other books, but all the various forms of media that exist to amuse, entertain, and offer escape. The hook to catch attention must catch fast, hard, and it can't be obvious.

When you hook in a reader, you aren't catching them like a fish, so you really don't want them to see you as a shark lurking in the shadows. Instead, think of it as luring in a feral kitten. He's curious, but he's been bitten by terrible books. You have to provoke curiosity, packing as much appeal in you can as your offering – and that includes the cover, too, but that's a whole 'other series of posts. Pick one, and start reading through them! Because once you tame a reader and show them that your books make them happy, they will come back over and over. Furthermore, they will bring other feral readers with them.

So the question was: how do I learn how to write a hook for my story? I can give some general guidelines, but the truth is that it depends. Oh, sure, you should always be writing them in active voice. Never passive! You don't want your hook to ramble, and if you're writing ad copy and have a character limit, it becomes akin to composing poetry, in that every word counts. As for the rest? It depends on the genre of your book. You don't want to lead your reader astray and try to cram them in the cat carrier right off the bat. If they come in expecting romance, and get ray guns, you'll spook them and they will sprint off into the night, yowling.

The best way to learn how to craft hooks is to read, a lot, no, more than that! making notes of punchy lines and paragraphs that pique your interest. Then, try composing some of your own, and run them by other readers of your genre and that part's important. If you write dark fantasy, and your test reader prefers beach reads of gentle drama, there's a disconnect.

Work vs. writing Professor Ornery Dragon

Yesterday and today I have been trying to get a start on my syllabi for the fall semester as well as keep up with the writing I really want to do. A colleague turned me on to the Pomodoro method. Basically, you work on something, one task, for 25 minutes. Then you take a couple minute break. I get up and walk around, pace around the circle in the office hallway, walk up and down the house, whatever. Every four Pomodoros (about 2 hours), you take about a half hour break. The idea is that you let things float around in your head and get better insights to whatever you're working on. It really is amazing. I'm far more productive when I spend my day on the Pomodoro method. Plus, it reminds you to take a break and get up from your chair so you don't atrophy.

When it comes to dividing my attention between a syllabus and a book, I find it very useful. I do two Pomodoros on the syllabus (that includes reading the book, going over notes for assignments, creating assignments, watching videos, anything to do with class prep), then two on the book. This means that I actually get in several hours of productive work. Fan-freaking-tastic! Productivity! Yay!

Seriously, though, I am a world-class procrastinator, and this method really does seem to insure that I can avoid that snake pit. Well, as long as I stay away from Facebook.... I am working hard on this book and the series. I also have ideas for another series and several short stories. I'm working on them. I will get things sold. I know it. I do wish I could keep going without the looming semester. On the other hand, the semester and its schedule and stresses will require me to be more organized and more productive in a shorter period of time. This is a good thing.

In the meantime, I keep Pomodoro-ing along getting the edits done and the next one written.

Go tackle the week!

Let Your Social Media Reflect You A. C. Cargill

Writers are encouraged by publishers and literary agents to have a social media account (usually one of the mainstream sites). This isn't just a casual thing. Your social media tells a lot about you, and it helps the publisher or agent assess your writing, personality, and even views on various issues. Some people excel at this. Others fail and harm their chances of being published.

Recently, I saw a post by a young author who had received another rejection (she didn't say if it was from a publisher or agent or how many rejections she had received previously). The post was poorly written, badly punctuated, and showed a very good reason why she had been rejected, assuming her manuscript contained the same numerous errors. Regardless of the condition of the manuscript, though, any publisher or agent going to her social media account and seeing that post (and others on her account that were just as bad) would be very hesitant about taking a chance on her.

Let's face it. Publishers take a risk every time they sign an author. So do literary agents. They're about to spend their time and possibly money on bringing that author's work to the public. Having to spend more time and money cleaning up a messy manuscript is not something most of them will accept.

As for personality, if you are constantly negative and disparaging in your posts, especially toward others on that social media site, or if all you do is repost items from others, this will reflect badly on you.

You might also want your posts, the accounts you follow, and the things you repost to be in line with the genre in which you write as well as in line with your personality. I like chocolate, classic movies, and other things, and I try to follow accounts that are about these things. I also like classic literature such as Jane Austen and Victor Hugo, great intellectual authors/philosophers like Ayn Rand, and books that celebrate the human spirit, so I follow accounts that are related. Any publishers or agents seeing this will assume such things are in my writing. And they would be correct. Make sure your social media is similarly reflective of you.

As for your views on issues, take care. If they are in line with what you are writing (which they should be, in my opinion), you will attract the interest of the right publisher or agent for you. That's a good thing. If those views are not in line with your writing, you will possibly chase away a publisher or agent who would otherwise be interested or you will attract the wrong kind of publisher or agent (in which case, you will both be wasting your time).

By the way, all of the above applies to those of you who self-publish and want to market to an audience who will like your book (and therefore leave glowing reviews on various sites).

The bottom line here is to take care when posting to social media. The world is watching.

Hope you found this helpful and have been inspired to start and/or continue writing!

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

Literary Criticism

Rejecting The False Notion That Grown-Up Books Are Grunge And Mope
— an Upstream Reviews Editorial

Graham Bradley

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Just because it sucks doesn't mean it's mature.

We men of the Bradley coat-of-arms have always been readers, despite our varied interests and career paths. My older brother, for example, has a doctorate in political philosophy from an esteemed graduate school on the West Coast, while I possess a CDL from a fly-by-night trucking school in Las Vegas that is no longer open. We both read a massive amount of books each year.

But when he takes time off to endure a Latin course at an adjunct university in Ireland so he can read western philosophy in its original languages, I'm powering through novels about Doc Holliday and Teddy Roosevelt using steampunk science against an Indian spirit demon in Arizona. From time to time, we catch each other up on our reading, and share a sensible chuckle over the other's preferred texts.

As might be expected, we make suggestions to each other on what to read, and thus he has delved into series such as Mistborn or The Grimnoir Chronicles, and I've grabbed riveting texts on things like the

history of salt.

For years he's been a huge fan of a book club podcast, I forget which one, to the extent that he's shown up to retreats in person with other listeners so they can pontificate endlessly about whatever boring stuff these people value in modern literature. I tried listening to a few episodes of the show years ago and it about drove me mad.

The fact is that popular podcasts (and YouTube channels and social media accounts) that focus on book recommendations are by-and-large pushing terrible books for the common man. Books that navel-gaze, or revel in nihilism, or ultimately leave you feeling drained of the optimism that you'd much rather have.

I was reminded of this recently when Doctor Bradley sent me an Instagram reel from a book-pimping account, run by a kid who is both a He and a Him (thanks for the clarification, dude), making Big Grown Up Recommendations for readers who liked popular series in their youth. You know, like "Hey if you enjoyed Harry Potter, read X, and if you enjoyed Percy Jackson, read Y."

The Doctor asked me if I knew any of the titles and whether they were good.

I told him I would have to write an email.

Later I realized I had actually written a piece for Upstream, and thus, here it is.

The video started simple: if you liked HARRY POTTER, you should try THE NAME OF THE WIND (Patrick Rothfuss.)

Sure, you could do this, if what you want is an epic fantasy about an orphan who goes to magic school, sprinkled with cleverly disguised analogues for high tuition rates, used car salesmen, drug dealers who have military-grade weaponry, and more.

Just be prepared for a sequel that is literally twice as long as the first book, with an aggressive, hard left turn into sexuality, as the main character discovers male birth control and is suddenly god-tier in bed. The frequently sigh-inducing text of the first (and only) two books in this "series" is not the primary obstacle to its enjoyment, though: that rests solely on the shoulders of Patrick Rothfuss himself.

If you haven't heard, the guy isn't writing the third book. Sure, he wants you to think he is. He even wants you to invest in it. Put some money up for charity and he'll release the first chapter. He's definitely got it! After all, it's been eleven years since the last book came out. (Coincidentally the same span of time since George R. R. Martin released another Ice And Fire installment.) He's had time to write, so it must exist!

What's this? You raised hundreds of thousands of dollars and gave it to charity in Rothfuss' name, expecting the release of the next chapter in the series? Ha ha! Whoopsie! He doesn't have it at the moment. He's very busy being a streamer of some sort on the Internet. He'll post it soon though guys, for real, it's totally been written.

1,842 pages of dour poverty and constant nut-kicks to the main character, who is no closer to his goal at the end of book 2 than he was at the start of book 1, and you'll never know how it ends. By all means, jump in. Revel in the childlike joy. Next: if you liked PERCY JACKSON, you should try AMERICAN GODS (Neil Gaiman.)

Setting aside that Neil Gaiman is one of the most overrated writers of our time— if not the most— all that AMERICAN GODS has in common with Percy Jackson is the presence of old deities.

Percy is the plucky, upbeat child of a single mom. He struggles admirably with ADD and dyslexia, which, it turns out, are really just demigod battle instincts and the ability to read ancient Greek, because his mom banged Poseidon! This means Percy gets to go to Hogwarts I MEAN WHOOPS “Camp Half-Blood”!

(In all seriousness these were fun books, and I read them in my 20s.)

How does Gaiman’s protagonist stack up? Well, he’s an ex-con named Shadow who is definitely a realistic person and probably even has a personality around here somewhere. He gets out of prison only to find that his wife died in a car accident when she was coming to pick him up. Aw, sad! Wait, what’s this? It turns out she was performing oral sex on his best friend, the driver, as she exited this mortal coil! That’s because this book is for grown-ups, you understand? Anyway, Shadow soon gets to work for the Norse god Odin, cleverly disguised as “Mr. Wednesday,” because whatever.

Now quick, let’s cut to another character somewhere else, who gets ripped apart after intercourse with a succubus, by tentacles that come flying out of her nethers. You will FEEL the maturity! (It feels sticky.)

If you liked NARNIA, you should try THE MAGICIANS (Lev Grossman.)

These two books are comparable because they’re about normies who discover a portal to a fantasy world, isekai-style.

One is “just” a heavy-handed allegory for naughty kids who learn lessons from a Jesus lion.

The other is post-modernist nihilism about a guy who goes to magic school, finds out it sucks, uses time travel to change some stuff, and becomes The King Of Everything at the end.

The most damning thing I can say about THE MAGICIANS is that it won a Hugo in the 21st Century.

If you liked THE HUNGER GAMES, you should try RED RISING (Pierce Brown.)

I actually agree with this, and RED RISING is an incredible book. Read the first three in that series.

And ONLY read the first three. Books 4 and 5 fall right into the same pointless dour negativity as the others on this list.

And finally, if you liked REDWALL, you should try THE BUILDERS (Daniel Polansky.)

I’ve only ever heard of REDWALL, never picked it up. I am given to understand that the main characters are all mice. THE BUILDERS has that in common with it. I tried to read it recently, and bailed at the scene where a swashbuckling rat went to a tavern and had a fat guinea pig prostitute make a pass at him.

Maybe the rest of the book got better. I was eye-rolling too hard to try.

CONCLUSION

“Critics who treat 'adult' as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence. And in childhood and adolescence they are, in moderation, healthy symptoms. Young things ought to want to grow. But to carry on into middle life or even into early manhood this concern about being adult is a mark of really arrested development. When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.” -- C.S. Lewis

Heroes don't go away just because you turned 18 and had to get a job. Yes, adulthood regularly puts you in contact with hardships that you got to avoid as a youth, and while those hardships tend to absorb most of your time and energy, they aren't the endgame of your adult life. The few moments that you get to peel yourself away from the grind and read a book should not be sullied by those same heavy things.

You can find better fiction. It's out there. We're bringing it to you right here on Upstream. Smarter, more fun, more heroic, and ultimately, more worthy of your time. We are here. We are waiting.

~Finis~