

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

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The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

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Splice: Hit Bit Technology

**Jefferson Swycaffer** <abontides@gmail.com>

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The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy  
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series  
Eye of the Staricane  
Capitulation of the Carnivores

**George Phillies** <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls  
The One World  
Mistress of the Waves  
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World  
Airy Castles All Ablaze  
Stand Against the Light  
Practical Exercise

# 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>



The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 and is distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, [phillies@4liberty.net](mailto:phillies@4liberty.net). In most issues superb proofreading support was provided by Jean Lamb. Most of our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Some of them link from their reviews on the internet to Amazon. If you buy at Amazon.com via our reviewers' web pages, they get a modest financial reward. Some of us also write novels. Please buy them. Our lead reviewers are:

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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## Cobra by Timothy Zahn Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Big, bad aliens invade the Human space empire and start to conquer planets. All looks grim until we clever humans transform special forces troopers into borg-like killing machines called Cobras. Anyway, Cobras become terrorists, er, guerrillas, on occupied planets and kill everything alien. With an armistice, the humans start colonizing planets on the other side of the alien empire, which threatens to start the space war again, until a contrived ending puts an end to the threat and to the book.

## Cobra War, Book 1: Cobra Alliance by Timothy Zahn

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

Going back is treason. Staying could end the Cobra Worlds. Jasmine and her family are stuck between a rock and a hard place....

Cobras are the ultimate saboteurs. They can hit a target and fade into the crowd more easily than regular soldiers in times of war. But this very advantage makes it hard for them to react calmly when threatened even as a prank.

So the Cobras and their dependents, along with other colonists, left the Dominion of Man and settled the Cobra Worlds.

But their new home is no longer safe....

### The Story

Jasmine “Jin” Moreau-Broom comes from a line of Cobras, soldiers given special cybernetic enhancements. Most Cobras are male; Jin is the first woman to undergo the procedure and become a Cobra. She married fellow Cobra Paul Broom, and they have three adult children: Merrick, Lorne, and Jody. Merrick and Lorne both became Cobras like their parents, with Merrick notably inheriting his father’s calm, logical approach to crises and combat. Lorne is more impulsive than his older brother and tends to be the hot head of the family.

Jody is a scientist seeking a way to help tame the sole Cobra World that seems resistant to human colonization. Both the animal and plant life of this planet tries to kill every person that arrives on it in one way or another. This world has the most Cobras stationed on it, which is both a boon and a problem. It is a boon to those trying to colonize the planet, as despite the fact that everything is trying to kill them, they have people who can defend them.

It is a problem because the colonized Cobra Worlds want to defund the Cobra program.

Cobras are expensive to make and train, so the politicians who maintain the Cobra Worlds’ governments want to end the program. Aside from the unconquerable planet, the problem is that the Cobra Worlds are literally in the middle of enemy territory: They are surrounded by worlds inhabited by the avian Trofts. Although the Dominion of Man has a treaty with the Trofts, as do the Cobra Worlds, relying on that treaty alone to keep the peace is not a good or viable idea.

Jin and her family know this better than most, and her fears seem to be confirmed when a message arrives from the human world of Qasama, a planet outside both the Domnion and the Cobra Worlds that she visited as a newly minted Cobra in her youth. The team of Cobras sent with Jin to Qasama all died to a man. She survived and got off-world, but just barely. For her to receive a message from the planet – which was convinced the Cobras were sent as spies – is not only surprising, but also downright unnerving. Certain she cannot ignore the message lest all she holds dear be destroyed, Jin sets out to answer the call.

But her family isn't going to let her go alone. While Paul joins their daughter Jody on the final Cobra World, Merrick packs a bag to go with his mother to Qasama. They manage to land safely and make contact with some old acquaintances of Jin's in the Sammon family – only to learn they never sent her a letter, nor do they know anything about a message meant for her.

Now Jin and her oldest son have to figure out who wants to start a war with the Cobra Worlds. In the midst of this, they have to worry about Qasama being invaded by the Trofts. To find any answers, they have to avoid being captured or killed, and they have to get back home. But that is easier said than done....

## The Characters

Jin reminds one very easily of Princess Leia Organa Solo, save that she is a combat veteran who stayed home after her children were born to raise them. Not much is seen of her daughter Jody or husband Paul in the book, so it is difficult to get a read on them. Other than to say that Paul loves his wife and family while Jody is determined to keep the Cobra program alive, they don't have much time in which to shine.

Lorne gets more screentime and comes across as a more loving and lovable Human Torch than Johnny Storm is usually depicted to be, while Merrick appears to be a genius who prefers the simple life with his family to being in politics or academia. He is also willing to walk into hell to keep his mother safe, which wins him extra points, as Jin is a very determined woman no one can talk down from a plan. Knowing this, Merrick simply adjusts the plans they make to do his best to be there when things get out of hand and Mom needs backup.

The Qasamans are utterly paranoid. Only Moffren Omnathi, Jin's enemy and savior from her last trip to the planet, seems to have a healthy understanding that paranoia has its limits. The Sammon family, who helped Jin inadvertently before, must ally with her again in this adventure. The senior Sammon shows a remarkable bit of sense while his son learns by the end that, more often than not, his old man is correct to do what is right, despite the risks to himself and his family.

## The World

The planet Qasama is fleshed out well, as it is where most of the action takes place. Readers are given enough of a glimpse of how the Cobra Worlds operate to have an idea of the culture the main characters come from, but these planets are not explored overmuch in this book. Even with that, the universe feels real in a manner that only Timothy Zahn could make it.

## Politics

There are no politics in the book that do not relate specifically to the story.

## Content Warning

The book is PG-13 and easy to read for any age.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who likes space opera and commando fiction will love Cobra Alliance, as it has plenty of high-powered action on the ground and enough worldbuilding to leave space opera fans chewing over the implications for days. Readers who want to follow a loving family into adventure will enjoy the book as well, as the Moreau-Broom clan has family love and honor in spades. Those who want to see a family standing up to the universe and saying, “No, you move,” will have reason to keep this book on the shelf for years to come.

Of course, if a reader wants intricate plotting, then this Timothy Zahn book is a good choice. Between the Troft invasion, Qasaman scheming and paranoia, and Jin and Merrick’s desire to unravel the whole mess before escaping certain death, the entire plot is a grand chess match. It is just a matter of discovering who the players are – and who is being played!

## Why buy it?

It is a good family adventure by a great writer. What’s not to like?

## The Dream God by Brendan M.P. Heard

Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

## What If Rome Never Fell?

Some have theorized that if Rome had never fallen we’d be a far more advanced society. Yet given Rome’s institutional paganism, what might remain unchanged? The Dream God explores these ideas and runs with them to the far reaches of the galaxy. Humanity has colonized every planet of the solar system and many of the moons, ruling them as Rome would. However, a discovery on Neptune could usher in a new age. Or it could bring about unfathomable destruction.

## Amazon

## The Story

We start on Terra as Auric tutors his sorta-relative Telesterion (cloning makes things complicated) in philosophy as they tend a garden on their floating island home. His other duty is protecting Telesterion’s father Oedimum and escorting him to Neptune, a journey that will take years while they travel in stasis. Something found on Neptune could bring the Romans closer to god-status, but there’s a fear that instead it will bring the gods into man’s realm and destroy him. So to determine their next step, representatives from across the galaxy are called to a council.

Coincidentally, the council occurs at the same time as the equivalent of the planet’s Olympic Games. With so much activity, certain parties decide it’s the opportune moment for a political coup. An “insurrection” if you like. Caesar Automedan is technically dead, ruling as a psychic simulation for a designated amount of time before a new caesar is named, so he/it won’t care if Neptune’s ruler is over-



thrown. And what concern would the gods have in the affairs of men? It's a good question, that may not be entirely rhetorical.

The reason for all the fuss, called the Ætherium, is a fungus that kills some, drives others mad or comatose, and gives supernatural abilities to others. The full extent of what it can do is a mystery, but it's clearly powerful. Each council member is given a chapter to argue for or against its use, based on his theological and philosophical perspective.

I'll be honest, I'm not steeped enough in ancient anything to really appreciate the depth and nuance of the arguments or the world. Fortunately for me, the violent overthrowing of the government provides plenty of opportunities for spectacular assassinations, chthonic, galactic, and psychedelic horrors, and Auric to become a sword and planet hero with whom John Carter himself would fight back-to-back in the gladiator pit.

## The Characters

This is one of those books where everyone gets a name and backstory, making it difficult to discern who is actually significant. Arguably, they're all significant, just to varying degrees. I'll mention a few that stood out or interested me more than others.

Auric is a tutor, bodyguard, and deeply wounded skeptic. He failed in an earlier battle, now wearing his shame and doubt like a cloak. I was a little slow to realize it, but he's the hero of this epic.

Oedimum, representative of Terra, is Auric's responsibility to protect. A wise and doting father, he may be a little too trusting of his peers. As long as we're identifying archetypes, he's a major mentor.

Ptolemaeus Rex is the leader of Neptune. He's not a wise father and too trusting of his son, Eurgetes, who is vain and power-hungry. It's Eurgetes' scheme to usurp his father's throne that causes all the trouble. Assisting in the coup is Grand Vizier Newef, who simply oozes evil.

Uath the Butcher isn't really a main player, but the ox-headed rage-monster gets a mention just for being an awesome ox-headed rage-monster.

Thoth-Azoth the Egyptian magician dies early on, but that doesn't mean he stops guiding the unfolding events. The Ætherium had a powerful effect on him. Just how much we may not find out until the sequel. It becomes Auric's mission to move Thoth-Azoth's body to where he can reach his ultimate potential.

## The World

It's a brutal world, full of mysticism and wonder. The governmental structure is Rome's on an interplanetary level. There are no aliens, but genetic splicing has created monsters like Uath the Butcher and others not so dramatic. Like ancient Rome, the architecture and spaceships are described as being as beautiful as they are functional. Nightmarish horrors lurk under the surface of the moons, but mankind's evil desires are the true threat.

## The Politics

If there are any parallels to our current situation, they went over my head. Which isn't to say that there are no politics, just that they are ancient Rome's and not those of today.

## Content Warning

A young priestess is introduced in the nude, and Auric gets it on with one of Thoth-Azoth's maidservants. Severed heads are thrown at bad guys, and innocent people are torched with flame-throwers. But all-in-all, it's pretty tame. You'd find much more lurid stuff in a history book.

## Who is it for?

Like the Romanesque elements of Dune but wish there was more? This is for you. Lovers of classical philosophy will probably appreciate The Dream God on another level. But there's also enough sword and planet sex and violence in the final chapters to satisfy our desire for baser entertainment.

## Why read it?

The Dream God blurs the lines between heady sci-fi and action fantasy with its psychedelic take on both. The ancient myths lurk in the shadows, and even Lovecraft gets a nod. If those aren't reasons enough, it's the story of a man who finds redemption in a time of political upheaval.

**Fantastic Schools, Vol. 2, edited by L. Jagi Lamplighter**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

## Spells, Homework, and Adventure await!

Tired of Hogwarts? If so, then this collection has the school for you. Magical schools of all shapes and sizes set in worlds known and unknown await discovery in Fantastic Schools, Vol. 2, and although the students may wield wands, no two magic systems here are alike. Step into a world of magic and mundanity – enter the world of Fantastic Schools.

## The story

J.F. Posthumous starts the collection off with a bang as her hero heads to a school out in the middle of nowhere. He understands it will not have wi-fi and that it is old-fashioned, but when he arrives, he finds there has been a snafu in the hiring department. This is a magical school...

...and he has no magic. He is a normal human teaching a "normal" subject. How is he going to survive here? The school cannot afford to let him go, and he needs the job.

The better question might be how his students will survive, however. Some are from the mundane world, but for those raised in magical families, their contact with the hard sciences and history of the outside world is minimal. Perhaps there is room for a magicless teacher at a magical school after all!

The tale by James Pyles takes place in a magical pre-school. What happens when the protagonist, a powerful magician, finds her granddaughter being held by a villainous old enemy disguised as a teacher? Someone is going to pay, and it will not be the little girl!

Patrick Lauser's story appears to follow a changeling, but who has been switched with whom soon becomes hard to discern. For the boy is not what he seems, and neither is the world around him. As the twists and turns continue, one is left wondering just what is going on – making the finale a surprise indeed.



In Audrey Andrews' story, the heroine is attending magical college when a beast moves into the grounds. The mystery deepens as the intriguing young groundskeeper offers his help, but is he an ally? Or is he the monster?

L. Jagi Lamplighter adds more to her magical school universe in her tale of Rachel Griffin trying to help the magical staff at the school, while David Breitenbeck's story could be considered the equivalent of the X-Mansion – save that the students are all cursed. Magic has its price, and these kids have all paid it. And their teachers are real monsters!

No matter what school one wishes to see, this volume has something that will appeal to everyone. Enter the grounds, meet the teachers, and find out which school is most appealing by checking the list of protagonists. After all, one of the best ways to judge a school is by the behavior of its students – and even by magical standards, none of these young mages are average!

## The characters

Every character is well-drawn and believable, though some are naturally more appealing than others. Whether one is dealing with the protagonists, the side characters, or the villains, they all act in credible ways. One of the standouts has to be the normal human teacher dealing with the surprise of being hired by a magical school. It is highly unorthodox not only for him and the school, but for the genre – and that makes his tale one of the best ones to read.

## The world

The worlds are all rather limited, as they focus mainly on the school campuses, which are naturally secluded both for the students' safety and to help them focus. Nevertheless, several authors manage to give readers a peek at the wider worlds outside the schools, allowing one to guess what the rest of the magical universe may look like. Mr. Lauser, Mr. Breitenbeck, Ms. Lamplighter, and Ms. Andrews in particular allow readers to look beyond the grounds to glimpse the worlds in which their tales are set.

## The politics

There are no politics in this volume.

## Content warning

There are some scenarios where teenage sexual meetups are mentioned or considered, and one story mentions magical drug use. Beyond that, though, there is nothing objectionable in this book and none of these items are deal-breakers for mature readers.

## Who is it for?

Those who love magical schools and wish to attend them, as well as those who think Harry Potter's Hogwarts is imitated too closely by other writers or was not as thoroughly considered as it could have been. Anyone who has "outgrown" the genre of magical schools may want to see if this volume rekindles their interest in it, as the tales are all distinct and do not fit the conventions seen in most versions. Readers seeking viable escapes from the madness in real schools will doubtless find this thrilling, as the kids get to use magic and fight or flee from villains great and small. The book would make a great gift for any mature young reader and more than a few adult ones as well.

Why read it?

It is a collection of fun romps in schools outside the norm. Why not read it?

**The Futurological Congress – Stanislaw Lem**

**Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier**

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

At first I wasn't enjoying this book but it was one of those stories that got stronger and better as it progressed. Absurd and satirical with tons of interesting word play (how did the translator do it?) all of which paint a picture of a world fully controlled by pharmaceuticals. I can't help but think that some of the satire was culturally over my head, but none the less the book was quite funny. The first half almost seemed stream-of-conscious, and I didn't think it was going to go anywhere, but Lem ties it all together and we see, as the story unfolds, that it was deliberate after-all. Having read a handful of Lem's books I am impressed by the variety of his themes and subjects, proving again and again that he is a writer who can smoothly transition between styles. One has to wonder how the Soviet writers were able to slip their criticisms through the walls of censorship, and it makes me think that science fiction was probably the perfect platform for dissent since it imagines "other" societies. Worth a read if you want something different and strange.

**Genesis Fleet: Ascendant by James Campbell**

**Review by Russ Lockwood**

[Lockwood https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews](https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews)

The second book in the prequel to the Lost Fleet series continues the efforts of Geary, Darcy, and a variety of other characters to maintain independence from the rest of the autocratic empire builders in the galaxy. Good action in space and on the ground.

Lost Fleet fans can already hear the chant "Alliance! Alliance! Alliance!" filtering through the narrative.

Enjoyed it.

**Hell Spawn by Declan Finn**

**Review by Caroline Furlong**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

When the devil comes calling, answer the door armed!

Everyone loves a saint – except the devil. And the devil has Tommy Nolan's name, number, and physical address.

This wonder worker (wonder workers are saints who are still alive) is about to walk smack into trouble with a capital T!

The Story

Tommy Nolan is a New York City policeman living the good life. He has a wife and son, he has a good job, and no one dislikes him. Even the men he puts behind bars often think highly of and like him.

There is not a person in New York who doesn't...

...until Tommy stumbles across a strange smell no one else can pick up. On his way to work this morning, he has a strange experience when he grabs a purse-snatcher. Said purse-snatcher is a regular troublemaker named Anthony Young, a boy Tommy has nabbed many times in the past for minor crimes. When the kid grabs a purse right in front of Tommy, he takes off to catch him.

Surprisingly, Tommy then sees himself coming at the kid from the opposite direction and clotheslining him. He can't explain it, but Anthony saw him pull off the trick as well. Neither of them knows what to make of it, but realizing that the detective has him, he does not fight Nolan as the latter cuffs him and take him to the precinct to book him. That's when Tommy first notices the scent of overpowering death and decay.

The scent belongs to a recently caught criminal who, when he sees Tommy, goes berserk and attacks him without reason. No one in the precinct is more surprised than Nolan, as he didn't do anything to provoke the guy, who is not on drugs. While he isn't perfectly clean, was found surrounded by dead animals, and using bloody clothes as a pillow, no one else has noticed the smell that Nolan scented on him.

Soon after this incident, Tommy is up to his neck in trouble. One of his son's friends, a girl of thirteen, is found dead and dismembered in her home, to be followed shortly after by a neighbor. Then he and his family start experiencing hauntings that keep them up at night and prevent them from sleeping. If that weren't enough, gangsters and other criminals start coming out of the woodwork to assault Tommy's home, his police precinct, and those closest to him.

The pattern soon points to demonic possession of the killer, as the strange scent is detectable to Nolan in various crime scenes and attacks. Even the hauntings occasionally leave the nasty smell in his own home. Threats in gibberish and strange symbols add to the creep factor at the same time they complicate the case. How on earth are the police supposed to lock up, let alone prosecute a demon?

But Tommy is not the type to cut and run, and neither are his friends and loved ones. "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" is the unspoken refrain as he and his family set out to do battle with a demon intent on murder. After all, wonder workers are alive...

...everyone knows that saints are DEAD.

### The characters

As a character, Tommy has a dash of Dean Koontz' Odd Thomas mixed with John McClane, making him far gentler than the Die Hard star while being more ready to react with violence when threatened. As he himself notes, he lacks cynicism, but that does not mean he is naïve. He knows very well the depths of human evil and that there are Bad People out there. He just does not see a reason to let that knowledge get him down or make him give up.

Tommy's partner Alex Packard is a great counterbalance to him. Cynical, jaded, and altogether worldly in the sense that he has seen too much of the worst of mankind, he keeps Nolan on his toes at the same time he provides a good look at how normal people would react to the frightening exposition of the devil manifesting in the world. With more grit than most, Alex faces the darkness at Tommy's side without flinching, wisecracking his fear away so he can shoot straight and protect his friend.

The rest of his family, friends, and co-workers are likewise stalwart in the face of the increasing craziness of their lives. Even the criminals that he has thrown in jail or who are in jail on account of his arrest of them stand by and help him out. The only person surprised to learn he is a saint is Tommy; everyone else hears him explain it and says, “Yeah, that makes sense.” It is unutterably refreshing to see such an attitude from the ensemble for the hero as, rather than freak out at his powers, they simply shrug and roll with it because “That’s just Tommy.” If more urban fantasies did this, the genre would be far more entertaining than it is at present!

## The world

The world is both saner and crazier than the present-day. Most of the best scenes surround Tommy and his family, who are unabashedly and wholesomely American. Stan Lee would be proud, as Finn evokes the same sense of the hero and his loved ones living the American Dream in the Big Apple that the owner of Marvel Comics did during his lifetime.

Between the gun fights and MS-13 attacks, taking time out for a meal with a happy American family is exhilarating.

## The politics

The author lambasts a variety of sacred cows throughout the narrative. It is all meant in fun, but some may find it off-putting or irritating if they have had their sense of humor surgically removed. Otherwise, the story is not particularly political.

## Content warning

The author describes graphic murders in PG-13 language. A reader has to stop and think to realize just how horrible the death he is describing actually is. There are also moments of impalement, dismemberment, stabbings, shooting, and death – lots of death.

That being said, the book is PG-13 and readable for any mature audience who wants a rollicking good story to enjoy.

## Who is it for?

Hell Spawn is for readers who like thrillers such as Die Hard and want a good, meaty adventure with lots of pretty explosions and gun battles.

It is also for fans of Odd Thomas and Dean Koontz, as the book has a strong spiritual thriller vibe as well.

The horror is delicious without being overwhelming or putting a reader off, mainly because the continuous action gives one no time to stop and think about the darkness too much. For some readers, the spate of action to break up the horror will be a Godsend, as it keeps the story rolling and does not leave one wallowing in mortal terror and dismay.

## Why read it?

Why not? It’s fun, fast-paced, and would be tooth-rottingly wholesome if there was less action in the narrative. No need to take this reviewer’s word for it – check out these other reviews [here](#) and [here](#), as

well as reviews of the sequels here, here, and here!

Hello America by J.G. Ballard  
Review by Jean-Paul L. Garnier  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Another feverish nightmare vision of post-apocalyptic landscapes and characters filled with obsession and confusion. This time Ballard takes on a picture of America one hundred years after an environmental collapse. The grandchildren of refugees who have fled the U.S. to Europe return on an expedition to determine the cause of radioactivity in the atmosphere. One of the things I found most interesting about this novel is that Ballard altered his style drastically for the narrative. Where usually his style is British to the core, in this book he abandons his usual voice and for the most part writes in an American style. This shift in voice is further proof to me that Ballard is a true master of the English language. While many of the themes in this book are similar to those found in his other novels, this one differs in that it is an exploration of the insanity of the American dream. It even features a madman who has modeled himself after Charles Manson and declared himself the 45th President of the United States. Well worth a read.

Hollow Kingdom by Jordan Allen  
Review by Trevor Denning  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The once great city Altburg is a festering wound in the kingdom of Lochmeria, and its exiled prince returns on a quest to find his father and brother. A few humans remain, but most of the residents are shambling demons, and as Greston grows in wisdom and ability he makes it his mission rid his home of evil.

## The Story

When Prince Greston was a child the city of Altburg was overrun by demons, so he and his mother fled to an island haven. All he knows of his father and twin brother, Germund, are rumors. Now a man, Greston approaches the city with more questions than answers. Where did the evil come from? What happened to his family? Can the city be redeemed? While a few humans remain, eking out a living within the city walls, they are severely outnumbered by monsters.

Greston goes through a series of trials, escapes, and battles, and as he does so he doesn't gather much information. But he does learn something of magic and combat. As he progresses, his quest changes from finding his father and brother and shifts to ridding the city of the demons. Along the way he encounters many allies and enemies, and though he's bold, he's also naïve. If he's going to survive, Greston will need to learn how to operate in a brutal environment.

Author Jordan Allen clearly draws inspiration from videogames and chivalric romance, which gives *The Hollow Kingdom* an unusual flavor. At times it feels like watching someone else play *The Witcher 3* (which is fine by me, since I suck at videogames), and at other times it's like reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* set in a fantasy land. Whether or not this novel will appeal to you depends on how much you like those things. But for my time and money, I appreciate some good, old fashioned, heroic adventure with clear-cut good and evil.

## The Characters

Many, many characters come and go (and come back) throughout the course of the story. Most noteworthy, of course, is Prince Greston. He's brave and strong-willed but lacks street smarts. Fortunately, he's anchored by a strong sense of purpose and dignity, which allows him to grow without losing his way.

Also worth mentioning is Hurm, who serves as Greston's guide. The cursed, masked man appears whenever Greston needs direction, information, or a swift kick in the motivation, but may have ulterior motives.

## The World

It's your traditional medieval fantasyland, though we only see a very small part of it. Much like the world of *The Witcher* (the game, more than the books and TV series) Lochmeria has monsters lurking in every swamp, shadow, and shack. There's magic, but we aren't dealing with Sanderson levels of precision or lit RPG laziness. Good is good. Evil is evil.

## The Politics

None per se, though the demonic infestation feels like an analog for wokeism.

## Content Warning

Lots of violence, severed limbs and stomped demon heads. But nothing stomach turning.

## Who is it for?

Like I said before, *The Hollow Kingdom* is for videogame aficionados with a taste for Arthurian romance. It's also for readers who aren't interested in moral ambiguity and want a simple story of good and evil.

## Why read it?

It's a quick read, with a hero who isn't a Mary Sue, but is noble. The frequent battles are creative and well-written, while a few illustrations enhance the overall experience. More than that, there's a sincerity between the lines that keeps the pages turning.

**Imperial Stars, Vol. 2: Republic and Empire by Jerry Pournelle and John F. Carr**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The stars are mankind's! But do they represent freedom, or tyranny?

What is the difference between a Republic and an Empire? Is an Empire the only type of government prone to corruption and destruction, or is every type of régime susceptible to it? What does tyranny actually look like – and what does freedom actually mean?

## The Story

This collection includes a variety of sci-fi stories and several essays. The first tale is "Outward Bound" by Norman Spinrad. It follows the titular *Outward Bound*, a generational freighter, as the crew travels



between Terra's colony worlds. Space travel takes centuries of Earth time, so the crew must be put into cryostasis to preserve their lives during the long years of travel. Rather than use hard currency, the Outward Bound trades technology and scientific models with the colonies they visit.

Their latest customer has nothing of equal value to trade except for a fugitive scientist from Earth. Since the Terran government almost never chases a man this far out into the colonies, whatever knowledge he has must be extremely valuable. After a little haggling, the captain trades the knowledge he has for the scientist, who does indeed have something that will be a game-changer for the galaxy. The question is, how can they get it to the people who need it with the Terran Navy breathing down their metaphorical necks?

Eric Frank Russell's "Minor Ingredient" follows young Warner McShane when he enters the Space Training College as a pilot-navigator. Unfortunately, he soon finds he has an unwelcome accessory: He has a batman named Billings to assist him. McShane does not want a "nanny" and so dismisses Billings, who is not at all happy to be sent away.

Soon, McShane learns that if he wants to stay in the college, he needs to have Billings at his side. The officer in charge of his dorm points out that the school has serious etiquette requirements – all of which Billings knows intimately and which McShane does not. Despite his anger, McShane has to take Billings back...and thus is a great man made out of an upstart cadet.

"Minor Ingredient" is the best story in the collection, though there are other good ones, such as Philip K. Dick's "The Turning Wheel." On an Earth that has been blasted almost to the Stone Age, the ruling caste of Bards run the remaining civilization according to a strange admixture of Christianity and Buddhism. They are feeling threatened by the heresy of the Tinkers, who are made up of the lowest caste – the Caucasians. Bard Sung-wu, more concerned about atoning for past sins than dealing directly with the heresy, soon finds it might be better for him to listen to the Tinkers than to try to take them down.

"Custom Fitting" by Vernor Vinge is a fun, thought-provoking piece about a tailor hired to make a suit for an alien, while "Conquest by Default" looks at how an anarchic government would lead to tyranny. D.C. Poyer's "Into the Sunset" has a happier ending than Orwell's 1984, but unfortunately, the main characters do not get to see the world they saved.

All these and more await in Republic and Empire: Imperial Stars, Vol. 2. What is an Empire? What is a Republic? Read the volume to find out!

## The Characters

The characters in each story are well drawn and, while they are not always likeable, they are believable. Norman Spinrad's hero in "Outward Bound" is one of the most enjoyable of the group, being an elder spacer who likes staying out from under Terra's thumb yet still wishes for more freedom. Something of a Daniel Boone-style character, he feels he does not have enough "elbow room" even on a generational trading ship. When he has the opportunity to make sure others have that freedom, then he becomes a truly heroic character.

Warner McShane of "Minor Ingredient" is particularly memorable for showing up to school as something of a self-assured brat. Following him as he learns humility in school from his batman is thus both a great character study and a fine illustration of how people improve in such an environment. It takes a lot to make an officer, and Billings knows just how to do it! There are other characters as or more likeable, but these are two that stand out to memory.

## The World

Every world is memorable, if not precisely pleasant to visit. No two are alike and all illustrate the difference between tyranny and freedom poignantly. They are not didactic or pedantic but visceral and alive in their own ways, taking a reader on a serious journey and leaving them with much to contemplate.

## Politics

There are no politics to speak of in this book.

## Content Warning

Some stories have content – sex, gore, etc. – that would not be good for immature readers.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who wants good sci-fi which tackles tough themes and is still entertaining will want this collection on their shelf. The essays in the book are worth reading as well, and they all leave their mark on a reader. Not every story has a happy ending, so those who prefer such tales should treat this anthology with caution. The episodes are not all of triumph, as the dividing line between freedom and tyranny is thin – and easily crossed, to the detriment of those who fight.

## Why buy it?

It asks important questions and looks the answers straight in the face. How many other science fiction anthologies or novels do that these days?

## The Iron Princess by Barbara Hambly.

Review by George Phillis

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

Hambly began writing stories set in worlds with a certain modest amount of magic, has gone in all sorts of directions since, and with *The Iron Princess* returns to a magical world. Various readers will recall a series of novels with the gentlemanly vampire Don Ysidro, mystery set in 19th-century New Orleans with the detective Benjamin January, several *Star Trek* novels that became *New York Times* bestsellers, the *Windrose Chronicles*, and, of course, at the beginning a series of books set in magical Darwath. We note that publishing has now been transferred to Open Road Media, so her books are available again.

The level of magic is limited, something is going wrong, and the heroine realizes that she has to fix the matter. She was indeed born as a princess, has apparently been disinherited twice, never sleeps in her own bed for fear of assassination, and has the modest difficulty that she has no magical talent of her own. Interlaced with the plot and conversation are beautiful pieces of description “Beyond the mists that usually covered the low-lying town, chill starlight washed the land, and waxing moonlight showed them the road into the hills.” Barbara Hambly, however, can write that in paragraph after paragraph, never becoming dull, without obstructing the page-turning nature of the book.

Lightsinger by NR LaPoint  
Review by Declan Finn  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

NR LaPoint does like his Isekai

Upstream Reviews has covered the works of NR LaPoint before. Both Michael Gallagher and I have covered his Chalk and Dusklight, even Gun Magus.

Today we cover LaPoint's first novel, Lightsinger, yet another fantasy novel where our heroes are falling down a rabbit hole.

Or in this case, it's more of a portal.

## The Story

Mina Violet's new job is odd, but it should pay the bills. Or it would, if the basement fallout shelter didn't have a magic sword that sucked her and her friends into another realm. In the parallel realm of Dirt (yes, really), Mina and those she cares for are being hunted by the puppet of a Lovecraftian horror that—if it has its way—will destroy both Dirt and Earth.

As usual, LaPoint has fun along the way, putting different twists on genre tropes that make his work unique and original... and slightly batty, but those are usually the most awesome parts.

Lightsinger is an interesting departure for LaPoint. Chalk, Dusklight, and Gun Magus were all largely single-person perspectives on the story. Here, not so much. The reader gets to see the story through everyone's eyes, even the villains. There is even a fair amount of head-hopping in individual scenes; while initially confusing, I found that it was easily overcome as the story went on.

While Lightsinger is LaPoint's earliest novel, it is clear from the outset that he doesn't do small plot, or small stakes. World destroying evil is his go-to option. Even at this point of his writing, he pulls it off really well.

This is all one story, but the threads diverge at points, allowing each of our protagonists to have their own moment in the sun. But like a Tom Clancy novel, eventually, the sequoia will hit the submarine (see: The Sum of All Fears, the book).

## The Characters

This one is like a very odd D&D campaign. There's a pirate elf who should be played by Robert Newton (see: Treasure Island) who carries a semiautomatic that shoots fireballs—and has an airship, because this is an NR LaPoint novel. There's an old hero who thinks he's Doc Savage and has a slight death wish. There's even an informative talking buzzard.

And that's just the secondary cast.

Our three primary heroes are all those who fell through from our world to the world of Dirt.

Mina Violet, much like LaPoint's heroine of Chalk, is offbeat and quirky, and might have to be played by the lead girl from Ghostbusters: Afterlife. She has a fondness for philosophy and metaphysics and

has no problem talking for hours at people holding her prisoner.

There is the flighty and sociable redhead who is Mina's friend as well as the boy who likes Mina and has to work up to it. And all three of our heroes go from wanting to just click their heels and say, "there's no place like home" to deciding "screw it, we're going to save the world, because who else is going to do it?"

## The World

The world is both standard and unique at the same time. Dwarves still carry battle axes, but they live in trees like Ewoks, and their axes are carried in knitted sheaths. Elves are still pointy-eared sharpshooters, but the few who are still around are big, burly, and carry guns. This is a world teeming with varied, vivid creatures, and none of them can be taken at face value.

In short, no one here is exactly what they seem.

## Politics

None. Zero. Move along.

## Content Warning

There is Lord of the Rings level violence here. There will be blood. And missing limbs.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Larry Correia's Grimnoir novels will enjoy this one, especially when you get to the teleporting badass who has echoes of Faye. And no, no spoilers.

Do you like the magic of Jim Butcher? Do you like the action of epic fantasy? Do you like epic fantasy worlds?

Then why haven't you bought this book? Already

## Why read it?

Because everything that NR LaPoint writes is just plain fun.

**The Lost Fleet Beyond the Frontier: Leviathan by Jack Campbell**  
**Review by Russ Lockwood**  
Lockwood <https://www.hmgs.org/blogpost/1779451/Historical-Book-Reviews>

Admiral John 'Black Jack' Geary faces his most difficult opponent: an AI version of himself loaded with all his tactics from all his past battles. Yet help dealing with the 'cold mind' comes from an unexpected source to make the pattern whole again.

Another fine effort with a man vs. machine focus. Maybe the geniuses behind Defense Dept. research programs using AI tanks, aircraft, drones, ships, and dog-like robots armed with guns give this a read...because users never, ever, ever suffer from programmers' bugs and end up with blue screens of death. Or being chased by Terminators. Right? Right?

This ends the Beyond the Frontier cycle of books. Yep. After 11 books, I still buy into Lost Fleet series.

Enjoyed it.

**Lost Fleet Outlands: Boundless by Jack Campbell.**

**Review by Russ Lockwood**

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

The start of a new trilogy follows Admiral John 'Black Jack' Geary back into space...after a few assassination attempts. Then it's onward to Midway and beyond. Binge reading keeps all the little details in mind that make the novels worth reading.

Yep. Vintage Henry. At least the cover ditched the armor. Henry's buddies can now needle him about why the hero has not armor.

Enjoyed it.

**Out of the Dark and Into the Light by David Weber and Chris Kennedy**

**Review by Graham Bradley**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

An unconventional idea turns out far better than expected.

This review necessarily contains some spoilers.

In 2010, prolific sci-fi author David Weber released the first book in a series called The Terran Empire. While I'm not the biggest consumer of your average Baen/Del Rey/Tor paperback, I feel confident in saying that Weber took the most unique approach to an alien conquest story that I've ever seen.

The Story

There's a Galactic Hegemony out in space, made of all the advanced and enlightened alien species. Whenever they find a new species, they make an assessment as to whether they should be welcomed to the club, or conquered and subjugated.

The Hegemony shows up on Earth during the battle of Agincourt (1415 AD) and decides to put humanity in the "conquer" category. They send their newest group of aliens, the Shongairi, to do the job.

Unfortunately, because of time and space and relativity and all that, by the time the Shongairi roll into high orbit, Earth is in the 21st Century. But the Shongairi are a bunch of jerks and say eh, hell with it, conquer 'em anyway.

To which Earth replies "Oh ho ho, no sir, #%\$@ you, let's do this."

What follows is equally hyper-technical and comically hilarious as the Shongairi constantly underestimate human psychology. They don't understand our altruism towards our loved ones, our deep-seated commitment to avenge the dead, and our "unreasonableness" when it comes to alien rule.

Basically, they destroy the coastal cities with space weapons and relegate their ground invasion to the

survivors, only to have to face off against red-state Appalachia, and it goes about as well as it sounds. Plus, our tech has advanced a hell of a lot farther than they expected in the six centuries since the Hegemony found us.

And I haven't even gotten to the best parts yet. Because David Weber uses one very simple premise in these books: if an alien invades Earth, they must face everything on this planet. And some things live in the dark, and they are colder than the dark... and hungry.

## The Characters

Weber's main cast have a few key things in common: military veteran status, prepper mindsets, and lots of guns. Stephen Buchevsky is a Marine stationed in Afghanistan when the Shongairi arrive, Dan Torino (callsign Longbow) is a USAF pilot in an F-22, and Rob Wilson (USMC Sgt., ret.) has a bug-out complex in the hills where he takes his family after the initial attacks.

The survivors in a situation like this would need a certain combination of skills, from military coordination to resource gathering, and Weber knows how to convincingly write the kind of men who would thrive here. He's also very good at writing cool and mysterious rogues, like a Romanian named Mircea Basarab, who has a WICKED reveal in the final bit of the book.

Here comes the aforementioned spoiler. Ready?

After the Shongairi have harassed Earth for a while, and have set up numerous bases and outposts on the planet, they suddenly start getting killed off in brutal, untraceable ways. It all leads back to Basarab...

...who, as it turns out, is actually Count Dracula. He's been hiding for 500 years and now it's time to come out of the dark and push back against the aliens.

Yeah. I had to pause the book and sit down for a minute, as I was listening to the audio edition at work.

It was an absolute bat-crap-crazy thing to do, and it shouldn't have worked, but man... Weber pulled it off.

## The World

Our world, with roughly the same geopolitics and the same tech-level.

From there, Weber has a little fun with integrating alien technology into human creations. For example: when the Shongairi need to access the Internet and upload a virus to all the world's computers, they know human intelligence agencies will trace the virus back to its point of origin, so the Shongairi decide to upload it from a nation nobody likes. As a result, the virus piggybacks onto the Internet when a dissident youth downloads a Lady Gaga song from a cyber cafe in Iran.

Later, when the Shongairi start their ground occupation of Earth, they are short on vehicles and decide to use human semi-trucks for their logistics. This turns around to bite them when none of them can figure out how to drive stick.

It just goes on from there. And it's hilarious.



## The Politics

It's "right-wing" in the sense that it's pro-military and pro-survivalist, but these are just practical matters. Nothing from modern politics plays an overt or inappropriate role here.

## The Content

R-rated for violence and language.

## First Versus Sequel

Weber published *OUT OF THE DARK* in 2010 as a solo operation, and then published *INTO THE LIGHT* in 2021 as a collaboration with Chris Kennedy. The time between volumes, the addition of another writer, and the natural changes in the story—Earth gets invaded, versus Earth post-invasion—make for two somewhat different reading experiences.

Book 1 was heavy on action and felt more grounded, since it was closer to our world to begin with, while book 2 spends time running around in outer space as diplomats from Earth go out to make contact with other alien races. The sequel was 50% longer than its predecessor and at times you felt it, but it's still good.

Plus there is a very inventive explanation for Dracula and the vampires being in the story, and I found it satisfying.

## Who's it for?

Sci-fi fans, military veterans, and preppers who like to stress-test their plans in the safe space that is the printed page.

## Why read it?

It's a well-crafted blend of imagination and real information when it comes to surviving a devastating attack on society. I laughed at plenty of parts, and I kept wanting to pick it back up. This is a good series.

Phoenix by Lori Janeski  
Review by Declan Finn  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

## From Sci-Fi espionage noir to 80s action thriller in one book

Phoenix is a difficult novel to introduce. It is the first (and so far only) novel by Lori Janeski. It goes through several genres within a well-developed sci-fi setting. We start with a buddy cop genre as mismatched as *Lethal Weapon*, an initial terrorist mystery that looks like *24*, until it turns into a battle royale and running shootout during a motorcycle chase.

## The Story

Division 7 cop David Carter has strayed too close to the line once too often, so he's saddled with rookie agent Veronique de Tournay to observe him and see just how over the line he is. What starts as a stop-

ping a single terrorist incident spirals into a rabbit hole that bounces around five different planets, fighting off multiple threats, stalked every step of the way by a Bond villain masterminding everything behind the scenes, as well as his pet psychopath.

It's fun.

The book is written very much as a police or espionage procedural with two primary points of view, both from our leads. There are occasional asides to the primary henchman, who is cocoo for Cocoa Puffs. Janeksi's characters tend to think through and observe everything. While she never reaches the level of depth that Tolkien does, it's clearly what she's shooting for.

There are elements of the first half of the story that feels like if Robert Ludlum or Mickey Spillane wrote scifi cops instead of spies and PIs. Go to planet A, get shot at, stop terrorists, get information; go to planet B, repeat. Then we get halfway through the novel and it turns into an 80s action movie. We even get a motorcycle chase.

Frankly, my only complaint with the book is that the third act drags a little. But it's also the end of a 200,000-word book, so I may have been the one dragging. Whatever you do, don't drop this one on your foot.

## The Characters

Take the buddy cop genre but IN SPACE!

David Carter at first glance looks like your standard burnout with a tragic past (either that or Dirty Harry Callahan) but it's not the standard tragic past. He has a fondness for classics, and old technology. He prefers physical books to readers, and he prefers his 1911 to plasma guns. Background? Basic blue collar.

Veronica de Tournay is a rookie who reads people's faces like others read a billboard. She comes from a French wealthy family on her mother's side, and her father used to be the spymaster of Department 7. She's the scalpel to Carter's lead pipe.

The fun part is what each ends up learning from each other. And it's a lot more than Riggs and Murtaugh ever learned from each other in Lethal Weapon.

The secondary characters are all vivid, down to the Bond henchman Ludendorff, who is in a battle of doing the dozens with Carter ... only they do it with trading insults from Richard III.

Even our Bond villain is entertaining, in a deranged psychopath sort of way.

## The World

The world here is built as the story goes along, but this story goes along for 200,000 words and thus there is a lot of world building to go with it. From the Manichean terrorists who speak in Aramaic to weather control satellites to the new technologies that could level entire cities if things go wrong.

The culture is also interesting, including the world government painted as being heavily libertarian, as well as very Dominican (the Order of Preachers, not the Dominican Republic).

It was almost Tolkien deep but avoiding all of the pitfalls of diving too deep. There is a whole collection of little details along the way, like the IRA (Independent Republic Armada). Or the J Carter Irish Pub (With the Warlord of Mars lunch special). The future of New Orleans is darkly entertaining, but I am a sick, sick man.

## Politics

There is some in-world politics that is almost analogous to modern politics, but there are maybe five pages of it. Then things blow up again and we can all get on with our lives.

## Content Warning

None, really. There may be some cussing, but not much. There is limited bloodshed. Heck, one bad guy gets taken out with a headshot by a Colt 1911, and there isn't even a description of a gory mess afterwards.

## Who is it for?

Do you like smart science fiction stories that think their way through problems, like Timothy Zahn?

Do you like John Ringo levels of action?

Do you like solid world building like David Weber?

If you answered yes to any of the above, then you should have bought this book already.

## Why buy it

If Robert Ludlum wrote a scifi noir mystery that turned into an 80s action film, with a depth of writing on par with Tolkien and romance subplot that looks like Castle. Add a touch of the film Magnum Force. Tell me that doesn't sound like fun.

**ReInception by Sarena Straus**

**Review by Jason P. Hunt**

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Have you ever had one of those days where you wish you could just push a button and change how someone behaves?

In a world where people have access to technological enhancements and genetic manipulation to erase bad habits and change certain aspects of your personality, society has become stratified into a caste system of "haves" and "have nots" in a New York that has suffered a post-apocalyptic disaster. It's here, in 2126, where college co-ed Leandra finds herself trying to find her place. Unmodified, unsatisfied, she and her friends go down to the rally against the ReInception protocols, and that's where her life takes a distinct turn.

It's a story of young people getting in over their heads, and in typical YA fashion, there's a budding romance motivating some decisions. There's the good boyfriend, the bad boy who knows more than he's telling, and caught up in the middle is a young girl with ideals but not too much life experience.

Leandra finds herself having to grow up quickly when she finds herself pulled into a web of intrigue and suspicion.

What I like about Leandra is that she's not perfect. She questions the circumstances, but she also questions her motivations for allowing herself to get caught up in them. Is she having a personal awakening? A realization that the system is broken and there's oppression to be fought? Or is she just caught up in the heat of the moment, trying to impress her friends?

And when circumstances get so big that they're out of Leandra's control, the story moves along quickly enough that there's no lag, but not so quick that details get missed. The use of news headlines at the beginning of the chapters serve as breadcrumbs to another aspect of the story, one that Leandra discovers organically, and it doesn't feel forced, even though it's one of those "well, of course" moments that could come off as contrived if handled badly.

Those headlines also speak to the layers built within the story. There's the top-level straightforward pursuit story following the events at the rally, but there's also the carefully crafted artifice that's been built around the Proles, the Citizens, the Unis, and the Wards occupying the different levels of what's left of the city. Even the characters that seem to be straightforward "types" turn out to have a few unexpected depths to plumb.

Stewing in the background, of course, is the concept of ReInception, this idea that as a society we've arrived at the point where we use genetic engineering and technology to modify behavior, sometimes against a person's will. Got a bad habit? Code it out. Terrible personality? Reprogram it. Need to learn a particular skill? Just download it into the chip in your head. And all the while, the technology connects you to everyone else and tracks everyone everywhere. It's the natural progression of both social media and the surveillance state implanted into your very person. And it's chilling to think of just how close to this we actually may be in the next few years.

ReInception has echoes of 1984 in its DNA, with a budding relationship growing out of a society where everyone should stay in their respective places within the stratified system. Sarena Straus' background as a lawyer peeks through from time to time, with certain hints at a society that's become a little too enamored with its "perfect" system of rules and behaviors. Just how easy is it to do away with due process? How simple is it to force someone into reprogramming? Just how far can a regimented society push until the people push back?

Of course, those questions can be asked now. How much free will do you have? How much does society force you into suppressing that free will to fit into the world around you? How much are you willing to tolerate? Might not be what Straus intends, but it's a natural progression of thought because of the questions that Leandra is forced to confront.

Which has me wondering what questions will crop up in the sequel...

**Return to Glory by Jack McDevitt**  
**Review by George Phillis**  
<http://books-by-george.com>

Return to Glory is an anthology of three dozen of Jack McDevitt's short stories. They are all fine tales. We have people who do inadvisable things, staying up all night when they should have been sleeping soundly, rescuing the cat while putting their own lives at great risk, and the like. We encounter several

people who are trying to become great scientists. Some of them fail. They go through lives, marriages, divorces,... One manages to become the astronomer whose name will be remembered until the end of time, exactly as he wished. Readers will call “he got his wish” is not necessarily a favorable outcome, and that is surely true in this case. If you are fond of short stories with strong scientific content, characters who may or may not succeed but are making a best effort, interesting characterizations, and people who make decisions that don’t turn out as well as they had hoped, you may well enjoy the volume.

**Shadow of Tomorrow -- Anthology by Frederik Pohl**  
**Reviews of Stories by Heath Row**  
<http://N3F.org>

Cyril M. Kornbluth’s “The Marching Morons,” mentioned below, was first published in the April 1951 *Galaxy Science Fiction*. Pohl’s commentary preceding the piece mentions Kornbluth’s time working at a news wire service in Chicago that also employed Merrill, Asimov’s brother, and the editor of this anthology. The story details the revivification of a real estate broker buried in a preserved state after being dosed with an experimental anesthetic. He wakes to a world in which intelligent, productive members of society have experienced downward trends in reproduction while other people have experienced a population boom. The more accomplished professionals are effectively enslaved by the duller masses to keep the world running, and they enlist the Rip Van Winkle to upend the balance of power. Despite the story’s uncomfortable proximity to eugenic ideas, it’s a clever piece, humorous in its execution.

“Transfer Point” by Anthony Boucher, then editor of *F&SF* with J. Francis McComas, first appeared in the November 1950 *Galaxy*. Creatures that appear as yellow bands have succeeded in taking over the world by replacing its atmosphere with agnoton. There are three survivors: a scientist, his daughter, and a writer. He discovers a collection of pulp magazines that include stories eerily similar to their present situation. He then discovers a way to escape their isolation—which leads to the very writing of the stories he’s been reading. It’s a delightful time travel tale infused with a love of the literature.

Robert Sheckley’s “Watchbird” (*Galaxy*, February 1953) is particularly timely given its decades-ago consideration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and autonomous drones. It’s a cautionary tale about unintended consequences and what might happen when we encourage a predator’s predator’s predator.

“To a Ripe Old Age” by Wilson Tucker, who was a faned (*Science Fiction Newsletter*) before he went pro, focuses on a soldier on leave who sleeps through an alien invasion. The story was originally published in the December 1952 *F&SF*. Upon awakening, he finds that he’s been passed over by the Hunters from Glissix and befriends a shape-shifting Follower. Its companionship proves irritating, but in the end, the survivor realizes that any friend is better than no friends at all.

Michael Shaara’s “Orphans of the Void” first saw print in the June 1952 issue of *Galaxy*. On an alien planet, astronauts discover ruins 15,000 years old. On a neighboring planet, they encounter more abandoned cities, as well as the robot servants of the long-dead race that once populated the planet. Continuing the theme of loneliness, the stakes are somewhat higher—and costs greater—in this piece.

“The Old Order” by Lester Del Rey is a retitling of the 1951 “The New Gods Lead” and might be the only original so far in this anthology. Teleportation has made space travel—at least to move goods—obsolete and outmoded, and those who plied their trade as interstellar shippers need to seek new professions. Or do they?

H. Beam Piper’s “Genesis” adopts a relatively commonly used title but proves an uncommon story.

Originally published in the September 1951 edition of *Future*, the piece tells the tale of spaceflight, an emergency crash landing, and the steps undertaken by the surviving colonists to populate the planet. The revelation at the end comes at no great surprise, but it's a pleasant journey getting to that arrival.

"Halo" by Hal Clement dons another common title for an uncommon tale. First appearing in the October 1952 *Galaxy*, the story personifies the forces that might have led to intelligent life in our solar system. I found the ending dissatisfying, though it revealed what I expected, and thought the piece could have concluded with a bit more punch given how strong the rest of the story was.

James Blish's "Common Time" might be another original to the anthology. In it, the author considers the psychological impact of time dilation on astronauts, shades of Daniel Lang's article above.

Heath Row also published this review in *Telegraphs & Tar Pits* #53

**StarBound by Joe Haldeman**

**Review by Russ Lockwood**

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

This is the sequel to *Marsbound* and in 300 pages, not a heckuva lot happens in this tale about a human-Martian diplomatic mission hoping to convince *The Others* not to try turning Earth into a cinder. That said, Haldeman offers an interesting study of characters (two alien Martians and seven humans) stuck in a spaceship. No laser swords, starship phasers, clones, or alien bars, just motivations and expectations of a diplomatic mission for human survival. Enjoyed it.

**Tress of the Emerald Sea by Brandon Sanderson**

**Review by Graham Bradley**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The first of Sanderson's four Kickstarter novels is out. How is it?

Last year Brandon Sanderson put Tor Books on suicide watch (ha ha! not really! but maybe?) with his \$45M Kickstarter project. Four books, no descriptions, his readers could back them and buy them blind.

He's had such a hardcore production record over the last 16 years that his loyalist fans said hell yes and nuked his most optimistic predictions by a factor of 9. The results of the campaign raised a lot of questions, most of which have been answered, except for one: are the books any good?

Well, the first one just landed at the beginning of 2023. Let's check it out.

### The Story

This takes place in the larger *Cosmere*, Sanderson's huge realm of shared novels, novellas, and forest-slaughtering epics. According to the novel's afterword, he got the idea after watching *The Princess Bride* with his family, and his wife remarked that Princess Buttercup didn't take a lot of initiative when she found out Westley was missing at sea.

And so we get a *Cosmere*-flavored adventure where the homely love interest decides to take to the high seas in search of her beau who, supposedly, is dead. She has reason to believe he isn't, and she's about to find herself in the middle of a contest between some serious power-players in order to get him back.



## The Characters

Tress is likeable as a protagonist. Don't let the description of the story fool you; she's not going to throw on pants and screeeee against the patriarchy and declare that she Don't Need No Man. She's a 17-year-old girl who's very much in love with the local prince, Charlie, and he's in love with her, they just can't be together because he's royalty and she's with them scummy working class types.

Along the way she's going to meet a roster of rogues, like pirates, sailors, dragons, sorcerers, talking animals, and more. Stuff that pops up regularly in fairy tales and feels natural in this Cosmere adventure.

The entire story is told through the eyes of Hoid, a traveling demigod-type guy who pops up all across the Cosmere, on various planets and in various roles. In addition to being the narrator, he's also a character, and has a unique role to play. His voice gives it a lot of warm humor that elevates it beyond the plain occurrences of the story.

## The World

We get a cool new setting where the seas are actually huge bodies of treacherous sand, inflated from beneath with "seethes" of air that come up from the deep. Seething sand can be traveled by sailing vessels, but the seethe can randomly stop and leave you stranded. You don't want to get out and walk though, because they can just as randomly restart, and then you're screwed.

Another danger is hydrosensitive spores that fly around on the wind and explode into vines when they contact water. Sailors have to be careful of these spores in a Dune-like way, and different ships factor that into their naval warfare methods.

As for the governance, you get a typical kings-and-princes-and-dukes structure for the nations that live on the sparse islands in the seas.

## The Politics

Nothing from our world, nor any allegories. Sanderson is consistently committed to his craft for the sake of his craft, he doesn't fart around with that stuff.

## Content

PG. Some naval warfare, some monsters, some swordplay, all good and harmless entertainment.

## Who's it for?

Readers who like fairy tales, good YA adventures, and naturally, completists who want to explore Sanderson's Cosmere.

## Why read it?

Well, ostensibly because you were part of the forty-five-million-dollar success campaign. Does anyone need to tell you why to read a Sanderson book, if you've already tried him out? It's good and I'm looking forward to the next one in April.

## Vanguard: The Genesis Fleet by Jack Campbell

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

The Lost Fleet and the Beyond the Frontier are two of my favorite science fiction series, so I figured I would enjoy this prequel. In general, I did, although 'tis a bit jumpy in introducing all the characters up front. Still, superb writing, the disintegration of authority as humans expand throughout the galaxy feels right, and the heroes are suitably heroic.

A good start to the new series. Enjoyed it.

## Village in the Sky by Jack McDevitt

Review by George Phillies

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

We have here another Alex Benedict novel featuring Alex Benedict, an archaeologist who is apparently the spiritual heir of Lara Croft, and his trusty pilot Chase Colpath. McDevitt is a very famous short story writer, sufficiently famous that he has an asteroid named after him. He has been publishing since 1981, was repeatedly nominated for the Hugo, Nebula and John W. Campbell awards, and indeed did win the Nebula award. His biography indicates that he must now be in his 87th year. For Benedict and Colepath one might reasonably expect that this novel is their valedictory, their adventuring having come to an end. It is a fine end, too.

There are mysteries to solve. There is an ongoing disaster that the protagonists manage to bring to a reasonable and positive conclusion. The author comes up with a clever and to the best of my knowledge entirely unique application of force fields. It helps that his force fields can have sharp edges and corners. Interstellar travel, faster than light, is possible, but not incredibly fast, so the people who are going from here to there have much time to be read, be bored, or whatever. Intelligent life is rare; we are in the twelfth millennium and apparently this we are only seeing the second or third intelligent species to be encountered by human beings. This includes the species that had a small town on one world, and when people returned to look at it the small town had vanished as though it had never been there. The volume is told in first person from the point of view of Chase Colepath, who in addition to being the pilot looks for interesting collectible artifacts, the artifacts incidentally serving to hint at the history of the past ten millennia, reaching back almost our time. The writing is excellent, but not florid.

## Warlord by Doc Spears

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Modern firepower goes to Mars and picks up where John Carter left off!

It's been 11 years since Disney shot a hole in John Carter's boat before pushing it out into the River Iss, deliberately dooming it to failure (because Bob Iger only knows how to buy things, not create them.)

Readers of Edgar Rice Burroughs' spacefaring Confederate swordsman were highly disappointed, as well as a new wave of fans who actually enjoyed the movie (Hi!). Without more John Carter content to fill the vacuum, plenty of indie authors have thrown their hat into the ring, and right here Doc Spears makes the best effort.

While doing so, he plays to his strengths as a sci-fi author and a US military veteran, giving us the best of both worlds in a story that goes to Barsoom by another name.

## The Story

Ben Colt is a Green Beret and a drill sergeant. It's his job to find minute mistakes in his cadets, magnify them, and correct them. This has affected his personal life and made it hard for him to have relationships because he's always finding fault. While he could find fulfillment in the military, the fact that he doesn't have active field combat experiences makes him feel like less of a soldier, so he's failing on multiple fronts.

And yet he has a lot virtuous qualities, he just needs the chance to put them on display. That chance comes when Earth gets invaded by some generic aliens, known only as "the Hairlips" or "the Guests." One of those the-real-name-doesn't-translate aliens. The Guests share their tech with Earth, only to later unleash a virus that destroys all human machines and catapults mankind backward by hundreds of years.

Before the virus can hit America, Ben Colt and a bunch of other special forces operators are selected to enter a time portal with some Guest technology, including a Star Trek-esque replicator device. The plan? Have the SF guys come out of the portal in two years when the virus has destroyed America, and use the replicator to rebuild all the wiped-out tech.

So far so good. Ben and the others go into the portal.

They come out somewhere...far weirder.

Plot twist, boys! They end up on Mars! A very familiar Mars, especially to readers of the original John Carter books. How did this happen? Where are they? When are they? These questions form the crux of the story, as Ben follows in John's footsteps—befriending four-armed aliens, getting a space dog, and falling in love with an extremely hot and well-endowed woman in a metal bikini.

It's almost a little too 'John Carter,' and I'll admit, I was a little nervous as I read it. Where was he going with this? What was happening? Ben Colt was a guy who liked his pop culture references, so why wasn't he making more Barsoom quips? What was Doc Spears doing?

There's an answer to that and I don't want to spoil it. I'll just say that the faithful and attentive reader is rewarded, and the answer is satisfying.

In the meantime, Ben's SF team has a falling out, and in addition to following in Jeddak John's footsteps, he also has to duke it out with some of his old teammates. It gets spicy.

## The Characters

The Burroughs characters who come into Ben Colt's life are quite similar to their original iterations. Tars Tarkus is there, Dejah Thoris is of course there, and even Woola has a role to play. They just all have different names and slightly different descriptions, but it's them.

The human characters, like team leader Ben, team rival Mark, team tech dude Carlo and more...they form a very realistic cast of characters that show you the mind of modern-day warriors. As I was reading this, I kept thinking of the other Spears book I've read, TIER 1000, and decided that this is where Doc Spears' strength lies: he makes the reader see how a warrior ticks.

## The World

Earth? Ours, slightly in the future, after first contact with aliens.

Mars? Pretty much exactly how the Notorious ERB wrote it. There's just a bunch of modern weaponry there now, because special forces arrived with a replicator to make whatever they wanted.

The Politics

Not really a factor, unless you count the inter-tribal stuff on Mars.

Content

Very mild in the PG-13 range, only a handful of profanity in 19 hours of audio.

Who's it for?

Classic sci-fi fans who like Frazetta covers, and present-day military bros, or anyone who likes the stuff they like.

Why read it?

Because I love the same things about John Carter that Doc Spears loves, and I liked this story that he set in that world, with a modern warrior's look at it all. A very satisfying read.

**What Price Victory? An anthology from David Weber.**

**Review by George Phillis**

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

We have stories by Timothy Zahn, Thomas Pope, Jane Lindskold, Jan Kotouc, Joelle Prezby, and, of course, David Weber.

We have space battles, a land battle inside a very large building, a murder mystery in a place that hasn't bothered to set up police forces yet, a senior space naval officer considerably isolated from support, a tale set on the planet Grayson which is in considerable part a comedy of manners with the young man who keeps making unfortunate decisions, and at long last a tale by David Weber. The tale by David Weber is entirely a comedy of manners in which there are no exploding spaceships, no combat, no infodumps or economics in the usual sense, and a perspective on marriage from the standpoint of people on the planet Beowulf. The latter is complete with someone's mother expressing shock that her daughter was going to commit to monogamy. But while it is clever maneuvering, the maneuvering is not fleet battles but personal relationships, done with the usual ingenuity that David Weber reliably gives us.

**White Ops by Declan Finn**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

What do you get when you mix Star Wars, James Bond, The Hardy Boys, Chuck Norris and The Manchurian Candidate? Honestly, I get excited, but if you're Declan Finn and you mix all of those things you get White Ops. What a thrill ride. Seriously, this was a really good time but it's really hard to classify outside of being a Science Fiction novel. There is a lot here though.

Sean P Ryan (descendant of Sean AP Ryan from Finn's Pius Trilogy) is the baddass's badass and the main character of White Ops. Not only does he come from a long line of "Rangers" in the space sense, but he is pretty much unbeatable in hand to hand and small unit combat. He has a reputation and people (not all of them human by any stretch of the imagination) like to test him, but it goes further than that. Ryan has a tendency to find himself at the heart of trouble. And when he finds himself looking for something that he just knows has to be there...

Yup. The fecal matter hits the rotary air impeller at a high rate of speed. The mess gets all over everything. Ryan doesn't seem to care though. He finds himself just as worried about what it takes to get the job done as Captain Benjamin Sisko does in ST:DS9 Episode "In the Pale Moonlight." Which is to say, not at all. You could say he just doesn't give a...

Never mind. This is a family blog. I won't go there. Let's just say that fornication is not high on Ryan's list of priorities while considering the costs paid by those who have crossed him. As such, he shall distribute zero coituses.

Or sumfin'

Wait...

Did that make any sense? Probably not. Too bad. I'm leaving it in.

So anyway...

Listen

You need to check White Ops out. I was kind of surprised, actually. See, even if I have read a lot of an author (and both of my longtime fans will be aware that I've read and reviewed a ton of Finn's stuff for this blog) it can be kind of hard for me to get into a new series with all new characters. Seriously, I often struggle through the first probably one to two hundred pages of the average new series while I try to figure out what's going on, who all of these people are, why any of this matters and where any of this is going, but for whatever reason, I was into this thing from the second it started. Seriously, it took me the better part of a night to read the first, like, fifty pages of David Weber's *On Basilisk Station* and about half an hour to read the first hundred pages of White Ops. I'm not sure how Finn did that, but he did.

Speaking of White Ops (which are actually Black Ops, but done for the purpose of good) I have to wonder about something. See, I've got a degree in history and the universe that White Ops is set in obviously has a lot of history to it. So, like, who wants to team up, raid Finn's house and steal all of his notes? I'll let you read them after I get done. I mean, this is a well-crafted story and there's enough backstory listed to make things make sense but I need more. I know this is going to be a trilogy and we'll probably get more later but it's not later yet and I'm like that spoiled little girl in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I don't care how. I want it now.

This is definitely a departure from some of Finn's earlier work. Ryan is most definitely not a saint. He was raised by a Catholic order and educated accordingly, but there is no prayer in the books that I remember. I will give Ryan this much though; As Father Mulcahey once said, his "Heart was in the right place, even if his hands weren't." I'm all for supporting the church but I'm not at all certain that's how God told us to do it. I must've missed that day of Sunday School. I think. Or maybe...

Yeah, nobody's perfect and that's a pretty good system if you subtract the laws of God and man, I guess. It certainly works. At any rate, if you're here looking for Tommy Nolan, you're not going to find him. You won't even find Marco Catalano. Sean P Ryan is his own man, and he stands out well.

Of course, I haven't said a word about all of the different types of aliens in White Ops. There are oodles and bunches of them, each with their own culture, history, temperament and physical appearance. They're well thought out. Finn has obviously studied some real-world cultures. He includes bits and pieces here and there and that helps the stuff he created kind of stick together.

The technology in White Ops is pretty awesome as well. Some of it is familiar. A lot of it is not. At least one tech is new to me as a science fiction reader. I'm pretty excited about that. I've been reading SF since the Eighties and I know all the tropes. I like seeing something that's fun but doesn't quite fit with anything I've seen before. I also like a bit of fantasy with my SF, so it works that Finn throws in a bit of psychic activity as well.

Finn himself has stated that this was the first novel he wrote. That does make sense because I can see a lot of the enthusiasm of the newbie in his writing here. That much having been said, I'm glad he waited to publish it because I don't think he could have told the story this well as a newbie. This one took some panache to pull off. I'm guessing he's edited this thing approximately 0876876897689768768769876986897689698768769869868967 times. As quickly as he writes, it's not like it took him that long to get it on paper. It all works and it makes too much sense to be something that was written by someone their first time out. He definitely rocked it out here.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Mystery Aliens

**Woods Runner by Gary Paulsen**  
**Review by JR Handley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Summary:

Samuel, 13, spends his days in the forest, hunting for food for his family. He has grown up on the frontier of a British colony, America. Far from any town, or news of the war against the King that American patriots have begun near Boston.

But the war comes to them. British soldiers and Iroquois attack. Samuel's parents are taken away, prisoners. Samuel follows, hiding, moving silently, determined to find a way to rescue them. Each day he confronts the enemy, and the tragedy and horror of this war. But he also discovers allies, men and women working secretly for the patriot cause. And he learns that he must go deep into enemy territory to find his parents: all the way to the British headquarters, New York City.

This story was short and singularly focused on a coming-of-age story for a 13-year-old boy who reached manhood at the cusp of the American Revolution. The story arc was a steady adventure through the time and space that was the frontier of the Colonial American War for Independence. There were tense moments that were age appropriate, but I wouldn't call this an action-packed tale either. Overall, I think that this story was easy to follow and written for its target audience of young kids around the age of the main character.

I felt like the author, Gary Paulsen, gave the reader plenty of details to flesh out his novel. He mainly focused those details on setting the scene for readers, focusing on the surroundings. It was geared to-



wards students who were just learning about this foundational era in American history. With that in mind, I felt like he described things that were age appropriate. He told us what the woods would've been like before urbanization and westward expansion had conquered North America. He described the dangers of everyday life in a way that was both entertaining and educational. I could definitely picture everything he described and so could my sons. More importantly, my boys are not as dialed into this era as I am. I needed to check my bias here and he passed.

## Characters:

The main character is a 13-year-old boy named Samuel Lehi Smith. He's a child of his environment, the product of the wild Pennsylvania backwoods. His upbringing made him more at home in the untamed woods than he is among urban colonial life. He was very relatable and represented the "everyman" for the time and place where he was from. Samuel was just like the backwoodsmen I studied in graduate school when I studied Colonial American History. Well, except he was a kid and I tended to focus on the grown-ups who were the movers and shakers of their time. I felt like he was a good example for my 14 and 16-year-old sons, an aspirational goal of self-confidence and self-reliance.

## The World

Like many of the stories written for young readers, this story relied on the presence of an adult to help boost the educational value of this book. First, Gary Paulsen seemed to rely on a basic understanding of what life in this era was like. It was almost as if this book was intended to be read as part of a larger curriculum in a school setting. However, this wasn't essential because it had plenty of inserts to explain the finer points that were glossed over in the actual narrative. Given that this book written for young kids with a bent towards education, I had no complaints with how the world building was handled. The author, Gary Paulsen, wrote this book in such a way as to intrigue young readers while being factually accurate. More on this one in the final review. The adult reader, that would be me, would've preferred a deeper exploration of the world, but I'm not the target audience. For what it was, I think the author did an outstanding job. The world was very fleshed out, and I had no problems envisioning myself there. However, as I've previously mentioned, I study this in school, so I'm already dialed into this era.

## Narration:

While I read this book, and didn't listen to the audiobook, I did check out the sample portion available on Audible. The narrator, Danny Campbell has a voice that was easy to listen too. I'd definitely give him a shot if he was narrating a book that I was interested in.

## In Conclusion

This was a fun book to read with my kids as we talked about the history of America. A nice romp through Colonial American with plenty of points that served as segues into larger themes. We delved into the nature of conflict and morality during times of strife. Even more importantly, we looked at how to be at one with your surroundings. It was also a lovely little coming of age story for young boys on the cusp of manhood. This last one was especially important for boys being raised in a digital age that labels all things masculine as toxic.

What I especially loved was that Gary Paulsen didn't sugar coat the horrors of warfare. While this book was age appropriate, no facet of the horrors of life for the colonialists was glossed over. We saw the brutality of the natives attacking the Europeans living on the colonial frontier. We also saw the cruelty

of the Hessian troops as they senselessly slaughtered the locals, committing war crimes I didn't learn about until I studied the era in graduate school.

While it wasn't specifically covered in this novel, I choose to elaborate the narrative with other resources. I pointed out examples where the same tactics were employed by raiders fighting for the fledgling nation. I didn't want to sugar coat what it took for America to be free, war is hell and soldiers on both sides made decisions that we would prefer they didn't. The Hessian mercenaries tipped the scales against the British on this one. This allowed us to pivot the discussions to how civilians fared during this multi-year conflict. I pulled in some of my own library of first-person accounts to help them understand things, though maybe I went overboard?

As we read this story, we had a neat talk about spying during the Colonial American War for Independence. We used one of the author's many factoid inserts as a way to talk about what James Bond would look like in the 1770s. We even conducted an experiment, making and using disappearing ink. We found this resource on the Mount Vernon Historical Site's website. If you love learning, I think you should try this fun project with your pre-teen or teen kids.

Finally, I am too much of a history nerd to let this one slide. This book did have one inaccuracy that jumped out at me. The author has Samuel wearing "smoked buckskin clothing," but this isn't the most accurate. By 1750 a woods runner would've been wearing clothing made of wool, cotton, or linen such as the Native Americans wore. Finally, while I am not an expert on period weaponry, I doubt that he could down a bear with a lightweight .40-caliber rifle. In the narrative, he'd already done this on multiple occasions. It sounds like it would be too small of a round, but if you have real life experience on this one, please tell me how I got this part wrong. What stood out to me the most was the clothing because my graduate advisor was a stickler for those finer details.

Overall, the only real complaint I have is more of a caution to parents. This novel does have some darker points and addresses violence from the era. It wasn't graphic, but it was something to consider. Bottom line, you know your kids, but I wouldn't let readers below the age of 10 or so read this unsupervised. This wasn't really a complaint, though, it was more of a word of caution. I didn't find much not to love about Woods Runner, I'm sure you'll reach the same conclusion in due time!

I will happily recommend this book to anyone, young or old! I highly recommend this adventure story so you should give it a read! Five Stars! This is a great book to read with your sons and daughters. Seriously, you won't regret reading this one!

Until next time, stay frosty and don't forget to keep your powder dry!

**Wraithkin by Jason Cordova**  
**Review by JR Handley**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, hope you're enjoying this lovely weather! Here's another fun book review, anything we can do to help add to your TBR list! This one was a good one and I think I'll circle back to see where the series shook out. I read this on launch week, so it's been a while!

Rating: 4/5 Grenades

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. Heck, I cribbed this summary from the back, and then I added my own twist! And not even much of one, since most of the books I read have kick butt descriptions (aka blurbs). If the blurb doesn't catch my eye, then I tend to skip the book unless a friend recommends it. Generally speaking, my goal is to provide a spoiler-free review, so here goes nothing!

Fate is a cruel, fickle mistress.

Torn away from his one true love, Gabriel Espinoza will burn the galaxy to get her back. But doing so first means joining the enigmatic Wraith Corps, where he is thrust to the forefront of a terrible war against an alien threat. The only path to saving her is over the dead bodies of the invaders—if he survives.

Light-years away, his brother, Special Agent Andrew Espinoza, is recruited by a clandestine intelligence agency known only as Project Jericho. He must go deep undercover to find a dangerous threat to the Dominion of Man and eliminate it before it's too late.

One brother fights to save his love, another to defend his nation, and both to save human civilization.

Characters:

The two main characters are Gabriel and Andrew Espinoza, who are both citizens in the Dominion of Man.

Andrew Espinoza: I found that I liked Andrew a lot, mostly because I could relate to him – he would fit with many of the grunts I served with. Hard when he needed to be, but able to be one of the guys when things were less kinetic. I can't speak to his time as a spook, but his characters were certainly believable. If he showed up on my doorstep, I'd drink a beer with him no problem. I can't describe him, other than shorter and stronger than his peers from other planets, which left me filling in my thoughts on his looks. I would have preferred a better description of him; however, it didn't keep me from reading the rest of the book. He was insanely loyal to his Emperor, which seemed odd since his nation was actively discriminating and discarding his younger brother and others like him. That part was hard to swallow, but I get the impression that it will be addressed in books two and beyond. Overall, the character was very well rounded, and I liked him!

Gabriel Espinoza: I initially disliked this character – I saw him as a spoiled brat. As he grew throughout the story, I came to at least understand him. His woe is me approach didn't last long enough to make me throw my iPod, where I read with the Kindle App. That's a plus! Again, as with his older brother, I don't have a firm handle on what he looks like. I prefer to be able to visualize him, but if that's my biggest complaint we're okay. As for his believability, I never quite bought his obsessive loyalty to the Emperor and the system that was actively discriminating against him for his genetic impurities. It felt off, hollow somehow? Maybe it will become a thing in book two, answering the question once and for all? I can say that I will buy his books to find out! At least I will when my memory reboots! One good thing in Gabriel's favor was that he was a sympathetic character. He lost his whole world when the genetic test said he wasn't "Perfect." It had to suck to be forced to open your eyes and see the harsh reality of the world around you. It instantly gave him the feeling of being more well-rounded, but again...I didn't particularly like him.

## Plot:

This was an action-packed novel, it never really lagged for me. I read it from start to finish in one setting because I couldn't put it down. I believed that the tactics worked for the novel, the action was believable, and the story flowed seamlessly from one plot point to another. Wraithkin was easy to follow, and I was never confused by what was going on. The only real part of the plot which I didn't quite buy was the obsessive loyalty, despite the foul treatment from the system. I would like to think I would rise up and be an agent of change, rather than just accept the status quo. Who knows, either way it was a part of the plot that didn't hit the sweet spot for me.

## Worldbuilding:

I found the worldbuilding to be well done, there were parts I didn't like but it was believable. I desperately wanted the citizens to rise up against the system of Perfects vs Imperfects, but it was unfulfilled. Who knows, maybe the author wanted us to hate that part of the Dominion? I could envision myself in this world, but I'd probably be kicking the applegart over in a hundred million ways. The only part I couldn't buy was the obsessive loyalty to the Emperor. I know, I sound like a broken record but that's the thing that I just couldn't accept.

## Description:

Other than the lack of descriptions of how people looked, the rest of the world was very easy to visualize. This one section the author got right!

## Narration:

I read this novel, so I couldn't personally attest to the narrator's skills. However, based on the reviews a lot of other people love Rob Saladino's work! I tried the sample and I'd definitely give this guy a go, when I can afford audiobooks again!

## Overall:

In a nutshell, this is a book about family... no matter what. The Espinozas believe that in the end, family is all that remains. It was a theme throughout the book and was very believable, the author executed this well. There was also an underlying theme of loyalty to country versus loyalty towards one's own interests. It became increasingly clear that the author felt that duty above all was key, which fit nicely into the world he created.

Fundamentally, Gabriel Espinoza's story arc is about his man's undying love for the woman of his dreams. While I wouldn't call it a traditional love story, Gabriel's love for his fiancée is one of the driving forces of this novel. She is the be all, end all, of his existence and the impetus for his story arc. When he fails a genetic purity test, they decide to head off to the outer planets where the discrimination is less onerous, and the laws are less strict. The hope was that they could remain in peace, but that wasn't meant to be. War loomed on the horizon, as you would expect for a novel like this! But seriously, would we have it any other way?

One thing that I liked about this novel was how the character arcs were portrayed by the author, Jason Cordova. One that I dug the most centered around the character of Andrew Espinoza. He was a clandestine government operative for The Dominion of Man. His arc was a bit more complicated than Gabriel's, it left me wondering throughout the book which path he'd take. He's torn between his duty to

his Emperor and his familial loyalties. During the course of this novel Andrew must infiltrate a rich and powerful clan to determine if they are plotting against the Dominion of Man. Naturally, while undercover he discovers something far darker and more dangerous is lurking in the shadows. All of this ties in with the rest of his family, but I couldn't explain it without putting out spoilers. If Andrew interests you, you really should read *Wraithkin*!

I particularly loved the fatalism of the plot, this tale of two brothers. In the end, one brother must save himself; the other must save the universe. But can either survive long enough to achieve their goal? That question launched an awesome book!

Lest I ramble on, I think that the easiest way for me to explain my thoughts, is to tell you how I received the novel. I was given a free ARC (advanced reader copy) eBook a week before the novel went live. In return, I was to post an honest review on Amazon for the author on the day it launched. I loved it, gave it 4 out of 5 Grenades because he hooked me. I went on to buy a copy, because I liked it enough that I wanted to support the author. It's an amazing romp through Jason Cordova's sick and twisted imagination, and I found I was a fan. In all honesty, this is a book I would happily recommend. I know, I know, tis easy to spend other people's money. But seriously, I really enjoyed this novel!

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 Jason Cordova fan. Okay, the fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be warned but enjoy the high!

Until next time, stay frosty and don't forget to keep your powder dry!

## Prose Bono

A Process for Publication  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

We have been talking about the process we use for publishing, over at Raconteur Press, as we streamline it and work in having more than one person doing it all. Which is very interesting, and actually relevant to the Indie authors as well. For myself, having done this for years, I hadn't really sat down and worked through all of the steps on paper. I just know. And sometimes I do them out of order, and I've made mistakes. So many mistakes, over the years... but we were writing down our process, to be able to figure out an optimal flow (as I'm the illustrator, CV Walter is the chief editor, Lawdog is the publisher, and there's another editor involved now, plus bringing on a project manager to manage, well, us) that wouldn't leave any one of us heaped under work and moaning slightly with the overwhelmed.

The process that follows is likely missing a step, as I haven't yet done a walkthrough of it with a project of my own (I should prep and publish a short story, then revisit this topic!). It is also focused on Amazon, although most of it is equally applicable to publishing wide through Draft2Digital or another distributor. However, it should give you an idea of what all you need to get done before you can press the 'Publish' button and set your book free into the wilds of roving herds of readers, to be devoured.

Presume starting with a complete, and edited, manuscript. I'm not going to worry about how you get there, in this post.

Process for Publication:

- Final, edited manuscript
- Proofread it again
- Style Sheet (nice to have, particularly for a series, recording fonts used, formatting details, and so on)
- Formatting for ebook – epub version
  - Front matter – need not be as extensive as print, but you do need it
  - Body of Manuscript
  - Table of contents (is required for ebook)
  - Colophon
    - Don't forget platform-friendly links to your other books, especially series, at the end of the book. Vellum can insert these automatically.
  - Call to action for reviews
  - Teaser for the next book in series (if applicable)
- Research genre covers to get an idea of what's hot and selling (do this even if hiring an artist)
- Create front cover/ebook cover (or give your artist input while allowing them artistic freedom if they know what they are doing)
- Format the book for print
  - Page count, paper type (cream or white) and cut size (ie 6×9") for the print spread template
  - Front Matter (copyright, dedication, etc)
  - Table of Contents
  - Body of manuscript
  - Colophon
    - Author Bio/Where can they find you?
    - Other books by...
    - Please leave a review (call to action)
- Write the blurb (can also serve as back cover description)
- Choose categories (not only the two you can manually input, but up to ten to send separately through Author Central)
- Decide on keywords
- Format the back cover and spine on the print spread
- Set pricing for both ebook and print versions
- Upload the final files:
  - Interior
  - Ebook
  - Front (ebook) cover
  - Print Spread
- Press the 'Publish' button on the print book at least 24 hours prior to the ebook, to allow for a slower process and any issues with the files.
- Press the 'Publish' button on the ebook.

If you'd like a printable, checkable list of this, you can use mine at this link.

Questions? Ask them in the comments! I suspect there are many variations on this process, and I'm curious what works for you.



Tactical Farmhand  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

This post is expanding on a topic that CV Walter, Jonna Hayden, and I discussed on Episode 3 of the Broad Cast. The Broad Cast is presented by the Three Moms of the Apocalypse, and it's a podcast spun off from the livecast run by JL Curtis. Three women, all highly creative, sitting and chatting about everything in the universe (we don't confine ourselves to just one planet). Two of us are writers, and the other has been an avid reader and longtime Fan, so the topics will often veer into what we write or read, and why. I will note the style is highly conversational, there's a lot of giggling, and it is very much NSFW (or children, or husbands...)

If you don't want to listen to the whole thing, the conversation about tactical farmhands starts at the one-hour mark. We had been talking about writing romances, then relationships, and wandered into talking about the appeal of a man who has both cowboy and military backgrounds. I pointed out that I've written tactical farmhand without necessarily connecting the dots, under my Liliana Begley penname. CV responded that her second alien romance book, *Bound to the Alien Engineer*, also has a character who fits the type. Dorothy Grant's AJ is another good exemplar of the type.

The question then arises, why are some archetypes more attractive than others? We talk earlier in the 'cast about how a single word descriptor in a book blurb creped me right out, as I associate it with underage relationships and don't like to see it used, ever, and it will put me off buying a book or even anything from the author. That had come from talking about the different kinds of oddball shifter romance stories, and why they exist. They aren't about humans desiring relationships with, say, a cuttlefish (no, that's not a random joke example!). They are instead about ways to convey personality types through the use of anthropomorphic tropes. It's weird but can be effective if you like that kind of thing. The cuttlefish, by the way, shows how important communication is in a relationship, as he used his bioluminescence to signal his attention to the object of his affections. Again, weird, but when you take it apart as metaphorical, it can work.

Which is of course where the concept of the tactical farmhand comes in with plotting a romance novel. Most of us have a picture in our mind as soon as we hear the phrase. Rather a lot of us have known a person(s) and some of us, many, who would fit this rather neatly. It has deep roots. From the cavalry, to the legend and ethos of the American West, to the farmboys who laid down their plows and picked up machine guns in the world wars right up through Vietnam. It only fell from grace in that last conflict, as the culture shifted hard against respect (or, in the case of women, selection for mates) for the soldier boy. As much as that has ever been a thing... Kipling now and always!

When it comes to writing a romance novel, it's a powerful trope. The strong, competent man who is willing to lay down his life for his country, good with animals, and knows how to work hard? Why wouldn't that be attractive? We're not talking individuals, here, this is looking at the archetype of many aggregate impressions. Yes, you can have a guy who goes from farm to war and back again and he's not worth a plug nickel. But that's a whole different literary genre. Romance is pure distilled wishes, looking for the blacks and whites in life. There's no shades of grey in this genre.

The fun thing about using tropes and types in writing is that it seems like it would be lazy. But it's not. You know what you're doing, putting a tactical farmhand in for your heroine to fall for. Neither your reader, nor your MC, should see what you're doing. Sleight-of-hand on that level is difficult to pull off, and takes a deft hand to write in such a way that the reader cares about the character and you bring



them to life in a three-dimensional way for them. I don't read enough romance myself to know if the hero is supposed to be perfect, but my preference is for imperfect. Not stupid, not weak, not malicious – no one chooses those characteristics in their life partners. We want someone who is competent, can challenge us to be a better person and grow alongside them. We want strength, and loyalty, and that patience with dumb brute beasts that shows us the kind of father they could be. So, yeah, tactical farm-hands have a place in our hearts.

## Write Short, Get Paid Twice

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I jokingly suggested to Lawdog and CV Walter (Publisher and Editor at Raconteur Press, respectively) that this should be the unofficial motto of Raconteur. I think the official one is 'Have Fun, Get Paid!' but that's just their attitude about writing and storytelling in general. And I join them in that, as well as being the house illustrator for that up-and-coming press.

So what do you do with short stories? I keep seeing this question. It's a good question, coming from new writers. If you have a fanbase, using a short as a freebie to feed newsletter subscriptions is a good idea. Doesn't work as well until you've already got some people to send it to, though, and eventually you'll have more than just that one short. Sending shorts off to anthologies is a good idea, because then you'll be exposed to a broader fanbase than you could muster on your own. Anthologies are the new magazine, when it comes to SFF short stories. It used to be you sent out your work to the mags, and that was how you both honed your craft, and built a fanbase for the time that you started releasing longer (note: not necessarily novel, but I'll come back to this) works as standalone titles under just your name.

Short stories are a great challenge for a writer, both the new and the working author. Learning to write a clear beginning, middle, and end; that's not always easy. There are many ways to form a short, and that's not what this post is about. What I'm going to lay out is how to deal with it when you have a folder full of short stories in your Documents File, and you have no idea what to do with them. Or if you're one of those authors who just doesn't write long-form, and that does happen, there's nothing wrong with you.

Fully color-illustrated anthology of micro-fiction, publishing soon from Raconteur Press. 50-word stories are a challenge to do well!

First, see if you can get paid. Send your stories off to strut their stuff in an anthology. Right now, Raconteur Press has several open, as does Three Ravens Press, and there are places where you can hang out (like Book Club with Spikes, or the Writer Dojo group on Facebook) and find more when they open. The other advantage to learning about anthologies through a group is the ability to discuss and vet the publisher: you should never have to pay to have your work published. That's not a publisher, that's a vanity press and NO. Do not. The other red flag is a lack of transparency about upfront costs before royalties begin to be paid out in a royalty-sharing anthology. Many small presses use Royalty-sharing, like the two I named above, and there's nothing wrong with it. It's a good way to set up a small trickle of income consistently coming in if you are pushing shorts out regularly. However, if there's not a clear point where the royalties begin to be paid – then ask questions. If you don't get answers, look elsewhere for a home for your story. Raconteur I can speak for, as well as Sanderley Studios (because that's me), and we're unusual in that the illustrator and editor take a royalty share just like the authors, so from the beginning, royalties are paid out 100% to the participants after Amazon (generally 30%)

and the accountant (PubShare, who takes 10%) get their cut. There's no hidden cost, it's all going to get authors paid, because we're passionate about that.

For a longer shot in getting paid for writing short, you can use the Submission Grinder to search for magazines (they do still exist, just not as many) that are accepting stories. Same caveats apply. You don't want to send off to a 'for the love' market, here, because that does not pay. Remember, artists! Exposure kills. Working for exposure does nothing for you, exposure doesn't pay bills (there are rare exceptions to this, and I do emphasize rare).

Anthology with a very specific theme: Hope and healing from PTSD. Out now, from Sanderley Studios

One good thing about showing up to the anthologies where there are open calls? You get noticed after a while as being reliable, good, and easy to work with, and you'll start getting invited to other anthologies. That's a nice compliment, right there!

Most reputable contracts (read the contract!) allow for reversion of the story to the author in a set, limited time. Average seems to be a year. Sometimes it might be less, but I wouldn't accept a contract holding the story exclusive for more than about eighteen months unless there was something exceptional going on. Certainly never sign over the rights without an escape (reversion) clause, and a clear end date of some kind. You want to get that story back into your hot little hands.

Here you are. It's been at least a year, your rights have cleared the exclusive-to-anthology period, you have some short stories you wrote for the love of writing and haven't sold, maybe a short that you rotated out of the newsletter freebie stack. You pull together several of them (I like to shoot for no less than 50 K words collected, which is generally 7-8 stories for me, but your mileage certainly will vary), you come up with a cover, and you put that thing up on Amazon at no less than \$2.99. Since you now have a small fanbase, if you didn't already, you'll be able to market this, and sell it, and voila! You're being paid the second time for some of those stories. You'll have some fresh material in there, so fans who read all the anthologies won't be disappointed. But you'll have fans who didn't read all of them, because they missed them, they didn't like the overall theme even if they love you, they were waiting for you to put something out they could buy to have you sign at a convention... so many reasons.

Write, and get paid. If you're persistent, get paid twice!

The Blank Page  
By Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I finished writing an extraordinarily difficult story last week. It took far longer than it ought and affected me far more in the real world than I wanted it to. I had to write it, though. Not just because it's going into But Not Broken, which is scheduled for release on Valentine's Day (and oh, yes, am I ever cutting it close on that deadline!) No, I had to write it because a long time ago, when I was a different person, I made myself a promise. I swore that I'd use what I'd gone through to write, and to help others who might find themselves caught in the same trap I had. If I can give someone the tools to escape... and it begins with the internal work, which fiction has a unique ability to model for the reader through the characters as they think, speak and act.

Having done that, I'd promised my brain 'something fun and light and fluffy!' to write next. However, I also have deadlines. Yesterday, after a short writing break, I opened the file of the story I need to finish by the end of the month. I stared at what I'd written before. Ok, brain, time to make with the words.

Nope.

So.

Time to try the blank page trick. Amanda Green taught me this years ago. You open a file in your preferred writing software (I tend to write in Google Docs, because I can then access it from any device, up to and including my phone. Why yes, I do occasionally write on my phone, thumbs flying. It's not ideal, but if it gets the story safely out of my head and into electrons, I'm going to do it). You stare at the page for a minute, but no longer! Then, you start typing. No stopping now to edit, just write whatever flows from brain to fingertips.

Lizzie took a deep breath, the rich scent of coffee filling her nostrils. Now that she was awake enough to process, she could hear the gurgle of the coffee maker. It always did this as it finished a pot, a death rattle and then a curl of aromatic steam that would summon her from the other side of the house...

She sat bolt upright in her bed, her blood freezing in her veins as the adrenaline of fear rang through her entire body. She was alone in the house. Who had started the coffee brewing?

From the darkest corner of the room, she heard a warm chuckle of amusement, followed by a dark, velvety voice, "Good morning, bubbaleh."

His voice was as thick as cream, but that twang of old New York in his accent. Elizabeth Maximovna Panchenko flopped back into her warm blanket with all the grace of a beaching walrus.

"How did you find me?" She demanded of the ceiling, looking up at the pale blur over her head.

There was a sniff worthy of any Jewish mother, conveying all the pain and sorrow her progeny inflicted on her.

"Never mind, that was a stupid question to ask. I should ask instead, why did it take you so long? I moved into the house a week ago. I closed on the house a month ago! I thought a domovoi was supposed to move in right away, nu?"

Well, that gets me started! I have no idea where that came from... no, scratch that. I know what was going on in my head, at least a little. Russian fairy tales have seeped into my bones from the first – literally, the first book I owned was a Christmas gift of illustrated Russian Fairy Tales. I love that book, and have managed to hold onto it, a feat in itself as I've moved a lot. The house spirits, the domovoi, I've written into several tales at this point. So those are both kind of my 'default' setting. Coffee, also, because I'm writing this while listening to the pot gurgle.

Some of the rest of it is me playing deliberately with tension, or at least attempting to. Happy, fear, annoyance, a cascade of emotions in less than 250 words. Now, what I can do with this hook? Don't know yet. Might not do anything other than using it as an exemplar for the blog. Might run with it for the Pinup Noir anthology. Remains to be seen. I should probably plop it into a proper file instead of just abandoning it here in this post, though.

I can tell you that the images I've rendered will be a part of this woman's story. As disparate as they are! So, try this next time you're stuck. Take a blank page, an empty screen, and start writing words. Don't worry about what you're doing. You'll figure it out once you let the top layer of anxiety break free and release your subconscious, also called the Muse.

~Finis~