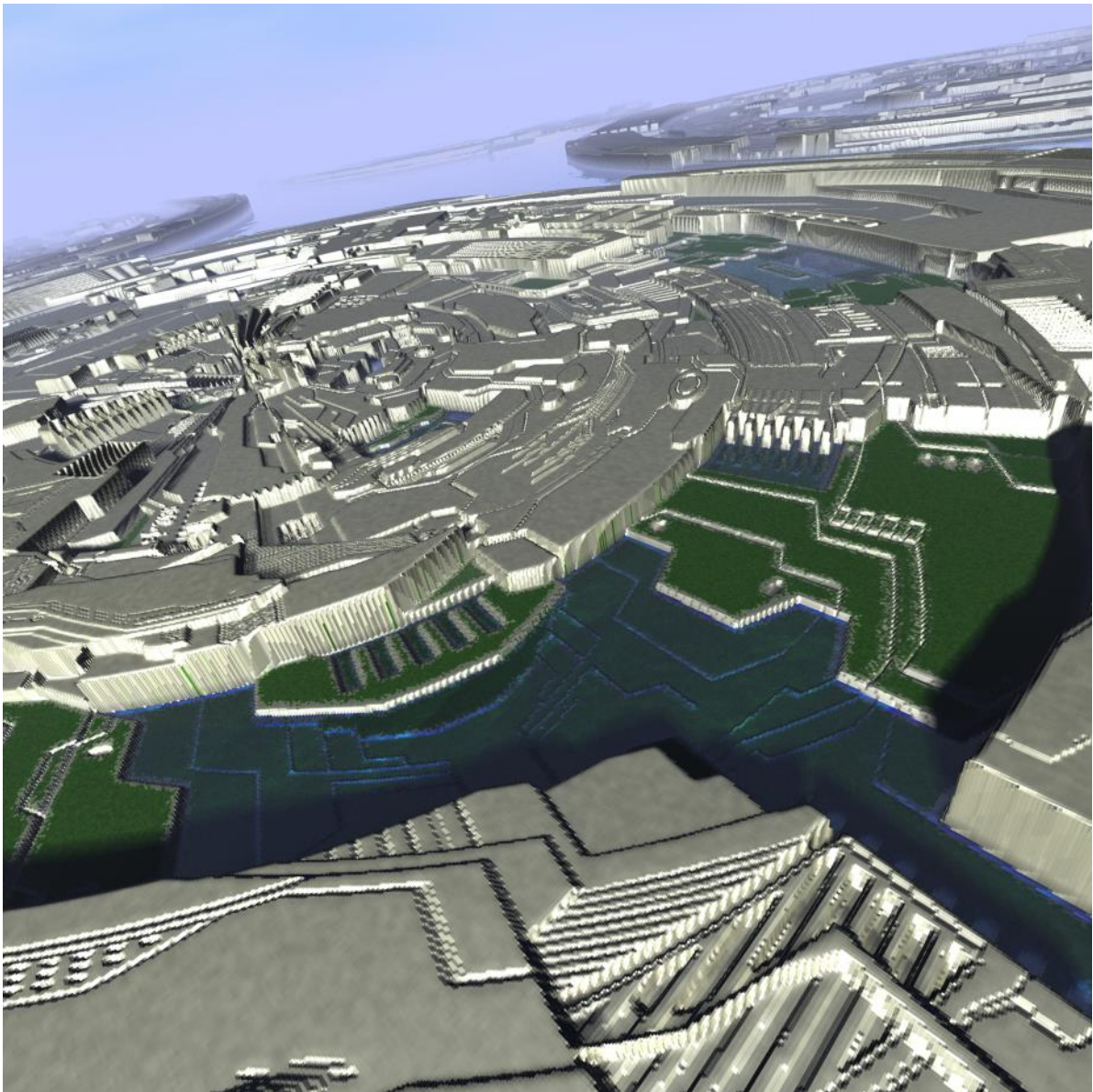


Tightbeam 343

April 2023



Hippodrome City by Tiffanie Gray

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What is Tightbeam? We are the N3F literary fanzine, not the novel and anthology fanzine, but the fanzine that tries to cover all tastes in fandom, such as anime, comics, cosplay, films, novels, biographies, poetry, music, short stories, food, ...

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Editorial

First, we are making a slight editorial experiment, namely we are trying to widen the range of sf/fnal topics that we include. When Will Mayo was alive, width was readily available. In this issue we are trying a bit more, including a film critical analysis, a movie review, one novel review that could have appeared in The N3F Review of Books, and an anthology review.

The N3F Pro Bureau is offering a new service in support of Neffers who are actual authors. It's a trade arrangement. Promise to write a review for Amazon or Goodreads or wherever (but don't forget the N3F Review of Books, and keep your promise. In support fo your promise, an N3F-member author will send you a free book of your choice from the free book list, ready to be read and reviewed. You can see the list at <https://tnfff.org/free-books-to-review/>

Letters of Comment

Dear George and Jon:

I was preparing to get a letter of comment ready to send out on issues 340 and 341 of Tightbeam, and then, 342 just arrived. Three issues...shows you how busy I have been. Time to remedy that with a three-fer loc on these issues.

340... So many writers have passed or moved on to other interests, and the desire to write seems rare these days. We attended a funeral last week for the passing of a friend, married to a local SF poet. The last suit I purchased was a black suit...I figured that at my age, I'd be going to more funerals than weddings. I didn't want to be right, but I am...

I recently saw the announcement that the play, Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, will be made into a movie. I wrote last issue that perhaps the Wizarding World has run its course...this movie will probably see if I am correct.

Have not read of the anime or comics listed here, or seen the movies. With the costs of such entertainments, we haven't seen any movies in more than four years now. With streaming services beyond what we can afford (and what we want to pay), there is little we watch. However, YouTube does come to our rescue. One of our favourite CBC shows from the late 1980s, The Struggle For Democracy with Patrick Watson, is on YouTube, and seeing I paid a few bucks for a licence to download from YouTube, all 10 episodes are downloaded and ready to watch.

341... The previous issue, I did not react to the work of Patricia Highsmith because I honestly hadn't heard of her, even though several titles were familiar. Now, here is Richard Wilson, and I have heard of him, I think mostly through his time as a Futurian. And, I admit, perhaps the only book of his I remember is The Girls From Planet 5.

Vale Ray Nelson, the reason we know about propeller beanies. He was also a busy cartoonist, and his work was in demand, almost as much as Rotsler's was.

342... The letter from Heath Row. Thank you, Heath, the best egoboo in some time. I did win those five FAAn Awards in those years, but I was never at those Corflus to receive them. I have only attended three Corflus, one in Las Vegas, and two here in Toronto. Being the editor-in-chief of Amazing will probably mean dropping fanzines altogether, given that as of right now, my main job is to assign stories to our slush readers, and have them send their choices for good writing to me. Should we ever get the magazine going again, I know I will be swamped for submissions, and may have to spend every waking moment getting through them.

I did not know that Bjo Trimble working on *Flesh Gordon*! (Yes, I saw that little movie a long time ago.) It's great to see more information on Cyril Kornbluth, so well known as one of Fred Pohl's writing partners. I very much enjoyed *The Syndic* and *The Little Black Bag*.

And just as I go to the second page of the document, I find I have run out of comments, and zines, too. I hope that I won't let this doing one loc for three issues carry on, but my time is at more of a premium than ever. At least I am not bored. Thank you for these issues, and see you with some more.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Dear Guys,

I have been trying to get a handle on what Tightbeam is for – a newsletter? A review zine? A letterzine? (The focus, if any, wasn't specified in the masthead.) It was interesting to read the book, TV and movie reviews, especially the short biography of C.M. Kornbluth, but I wasn't sure where the comment hooks were.

If my humble fanzine offers any news of interest or importance to your readers, you may reprint the news items, by all means.

Yours,

Garth Spencer
Vancouver, Canada

Anime

ACCA: 13 Territory Inspection Department Review by Jessi Silver

In a world separated into 13 wards, with each ward having an observation division controlled by the organization known as "ACCA." Jean is known as the craftiest member of ACCA. – ANN



Streaming at: Crunchyroll
Number of Episodes: 12
Source: Manga

Summary of Episode 1: The Dowa kingdom has been experiencing a period of unprecedented peace for many years. The king is celebrating his ninety-ninth birthday and there are no signs of political unrest. This makes the government's observational division, known as "ACCA" obsolete, or so say those in charge; without a need to utilize the employees of ACCA to help maintain political control, why not just trim the budget and get rid of them? Jean Otus is one of ACCA's most recognizable members, known as the "cigarette peddler" for indulging in a smoke here and there while on the job. ACCA's imminent closure doesn't come as a surprise to Jean, and he has the family business to fall back on. But after being sent out on an audit and discovering some hints of low-level corruption within his organization, he learns that ACCA is to remain open. Jean also begins to notice that he himself is under observation.

What could possibly be churning behind the scenes to prompt the change?

Impressions: Though my interest in anime and manga tends to be pretty broad, I do have a small stable of creators whose work I follow more closely. Most of these are the more auteur-style anime directors, such as Masaaki Yuasa, or Akiyuki Shinbo (though his actual directorial involvement is questionable – I just really like the Shaft aesthetic so take that how you will). Natsume Ono is one of the few manga-ka whose body of work has really resonated with me, though unlike Yuasa her particular style is a bit harder to define. Aside from her character designs, which most people can identify by their general lankiness and round, almost protruding eyes, the settings for her stories run the gamut from Asia (modern and historical), to Europe, to the fictionalized nation depicted in ACCA. The unifying trait between her many disparate works is difficult to point out from the surface, but it's definitely there in the pacing and feel of her stories – they all tend to depict adult characters involved in often mundane, slow-burn drama (romantic or otherwise). This type of character-based drama is something I seek out, and it appears that ACCA will likely demonstrate that sort of structure. In short, ACCA, with its lackadaisical pacing and (currently) low-stakes drama is (maybe counter intuitively) just the kind of thing that gets me going. That said, this is also the type of opening episode that's likely to turn away a large portion of the anime-viewing audience, because it doesn't have a lot to offer upfront.

Very little happens in this episode, plot-wise. We're introduced to the setting via a fairly standard "as you know..." info-dump, presented to a sub-set of characters who would likely not need to hear the basic breakdown of how their society works. I'm always a little bit amused when this happens, as the Japanese language is based so much around inferences and indirect, implied meaning; it's always



seemed odd to me that the plots of so many anime are blurted-out awkwardly rather than revealed organically. In any case, we're introduced to Jean Otus, a protagonist with a cool demeanor who leads a relatively unassuming life. He shares an apartment with his sister; their family serve as landlords for their luxury apartment building, which they'd otherwise be unable to afford. Jean is good at his job as an ACCA observer, and he's also known for his smoking habit (tobacco is an expensive luxury in their society).

The primary bit of drama in this episode comes as the result of one of Jean's audits, during which he discovers some low-level illegal activity cropping up from within the organization. The resulting kerfuffle isn't huge – even the highers-up don't appear to be all that concerned about it – but during the fallout it's revealed that Jean is actually surrounded by an air of suspicion and that there are some people in positions of power that suspect him of some sort of wrongdoing. He remarks that he feels as though he's being watched, and while it's not quite obvious whether or not anyone is yet, it's at this point that the show establishes an unsettled feeling in the viewer. Is this setting really so peaceful and bland? Will the entire series be just a serialized account of Jean's travels with bureaucratic commentary thrown in? I doubt it. There's also an odd sort of separation between the audience and Jean right from the get-go. While he's ostensibly the focal character, it feels as if we're looking at him from the outside, seeing him from the POV of the other characters around him. It's a bit disorienting, but I can't help feel like it's intentional.



This seems to me like the type of anime where the viewer really has to be willing to read between the lines to gain a sense of what the story might involve. I've seen quite a few complaints aimed at ACCA about how "nothing happens in the first episode," and yet to me the entire set up seems inherently intriguing and I feel like the groundwork is solidly in place. I also admittedly enjoyed watching Jean perform his mundane job duties, since my day job sometimes involves auditing and performing tasks in line with strict pro-

cedural outlines, so there's a certain familiarity there that I'm guessing maybe a lot of anime fans might not connect with as well. This isn't to say that I think I have every detail of the show nailed down simply because I'm an adult with a compliance-focused job – I'm definitely left with a lot of questions on my mind, too, and I feel like there are still a lot of hidden details that haven't come to light. But rather than being frustrated about that or feeling as though the show hasn't provided me something to which I'm entitled, I feel drawn in by the mystery and even just the sheer openness of the various directions the series could take. I've never been shy about saying that I find very few anime series directly relateable, since most anime just isn't made to directly appeal to adult audiences. When something like this comes along that seems to be aiming for more mature appeal, I just don't feel bad about it.

If I had to point out something that I did find frustrating, it would probably be the occasional tonal shifts throughout the episode. The bulk of the episode reads as tonally serious to me, not in the sense that major things of gravity are happening all the time, but this definitely isn't meant to be a funny series. There are a couple of scenes, though, that read more like an office ensemble slice-of-life comedy, since several of Jean's coworkers are very focused on their ten o'clock break time and eating cakes from the local patisserie. These scenes do a good job of establishing how mundane things currently are, but I find that it's rare when comedy and drama in anime truly mesh, so



while it wasn't a complete turn off, it was a little eye-rolling.

If I haven't made it clear by now, I've pretty much already bought into what this anime series is selling. That's a confidence that only really comes as a result of having meshed with the author's style many times in the past and appreciating being in the target demographic for once. I will say, though, if I were trying to trick an apprehensive fan into giving this show a try, I'd definitely mention that the series director also directed the (also quite excellent) *One Punch Man*. It's a bit tricky, since the shows otherwise have nothing to do with one-another and are profoundly different in plot and style, but I'm admittedly kind of hoping that we might get some moments of very neat, more subdued character animation out of the deal. From what I understand, people like working with Shingo Yamamoto, so we'll see.

There are times where I get kind of bummed that other fans don't seem to get much out of certain anime series as I do (*cough* *The Lost Village* *cough*), but there are also times where I completely understand, and I'm not too torn up about it. This is one of those times. I really appreciate the slow pace and the little mysterious bits floating beneath the surface, but a lot of people likely won't. I'm looking forward to seeing the story unfold.

Pros: It has a unique look and setting. There are inklings of unrest beneath the calm exterior. There's a level of separation between the viewer and the main character that feels somewhat intentional.

Cons: There are a few tonal shifts that seem unnatural. There's some "as you know..." info-dumping. The episode is slow-paced and not very much "plot-y" stuff happens to draw people in.

Grade: B

Con Report

Gallifrey One Report by Heath Row

It turns out that media cons might not be my bag, as much as sf, comic, and gaming cons seem to be. I'm just not very interested in the actors, show runners, and other production aspects of television shows, so

much of the programming didn't appeal to me. I loved seeing so many people dressing up—or not—and enjoying the diversity of Doctor Who fen. And I enjoyed seeing some people I know from LASFS, even if I didn't make a point to say hi. After checking in and providing my proof of vaccination, I mostly stuck to the dealers room—and the video room, which seems to be the best seat in the house. I also checked out the art show and identified several potential cover artists I'll reach out to.

The dealers room offered a lot of Doctor Who-related material for sale: clothing, crafts, toys, roleplaying game items, and a wide array of media-tie-in books and audio dramas, mostly representing Big Finish Productions. Multiple vendors also sold newer Doctor Who-related magazines and comic books, and I found one seller—Jim Rondeau—who had older Doctor Who prozines and related periodicals on hand. I picked up a few issues of *Fantasy Empire* and *Files Magazine*, but he had no Gallifreyan Home Companion back issues on hand. (Rondeau was interviewed for the academic paper “The Effect of Commercialisation and Direct Intervention by the Owners of Intellectual Copyright—A Case Study: The Australian Star Trek Fan Community” by Susan Pamela Batho. Interestingly, Batho mentions Maureen Garrett, below, in a footnote.)

I spent most of my remaining time at the con in the video room, as one should. Because being there made me want to watch Doctor Who. Saturday afternoon, I watched “The Stolen Earth” and “Journey's End,” the last two episodes of 2008's series four—with David Tennant—originally airing June 28 and July 5, 2008. Sunday morning, arriving a little earlier after only one person showed up for my Doctor Who game at OrcCon, I watched “The Name of the Doctor,” the last episode of series seven—with Matt Smith—which originally aired May 18, 2013.

All three episodes were wonderful, and I enjoyed watching them with other Doctor Who fen present. But I wanted more control over which Doctor Who I watched, so I went home to continue watching Doctor Who at home. Once back at the Globe, I watched “The Aztecs,” the sixth Doctor Who serial, which aired May 23 to June 13, 1964, featuring William Hartnell as the first Doctor. Then I watched “The Space Museum” (second season, seventh serial, April 24 to May 15, 1965) and “The Time Meddler” (second season, ninth serial, July 3-24, 1965)—both also with Hartnell. They feel much more like Doctor Who to me, and they serve as the foundation for the later, more popular and mainstream examples.

So I might have learned something about myself and Gallifrey One! Maybe I can serve on staff for Poliner next year, because if I'm not looking at old magazines or books in the dealers room—or watching the actual show in the video room—there's not much else I want to do. Except watch older episodes of Doctor Who, of course. That seems to be where my Doctor Who fan interests lie: not in the celebrity and mainstream energy surrounding the series, but in its history, older episodes, and surrounding fandom over time. I think I would have liked the Time Meddlers. I wonder how much of that energy remains.

The review previously appeared in Heath Row's APAzine Telegraphs and Tarpits

Films

Musings on Star Wars by Chris Nuttall

When he devised Star Wars, depending on which version of the story you believe about how much Lucas planned before he started making movies, George Lucas set himself an unusual challenge. Deliberately or not, he opened in the middle of the story with *A New Hope* and followed up with *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* – episodes 4-6 of the overall 9-movie story. This had both advantages and disadvantages. *A New Hope* started with no fans and no following, so Lucas could afford to paper over the cracks in the backstory without upsetting the more nit-picky amongst the audience.

The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi had the relatively simple task of building on A New Hope. The disadvantages, however, were two-fold.

First, the prequel trilogy had to build up to the original trilogy.

Second, the sequel trilogy had to build on both the original trilogy and the prequel trilogy.

This was not an easy task. A New Hope is a relatively simple story, centered around the power trio of Luke, Han and Leia. Lucas established their characters in broad strokes, either leaving the other characters to the side (Vader, Chewbacca, Wedge, the droids) where they served as plot elements rather than characters in their own right, or killing them off to suit the story (Ben Kenobi, Tarkin). The Empire Strikes Back allowed more focus on Vader, as well as introducing Lando and the Emperor, because the power trio were already well established and both Lando and the Emperor were relatively minor characters for most of the movie. Return of the Jedi culminated this trend by bringing the Emperor front and centre, allowing him to drive Vader's plot and giving Lando a much bigger role. It also introduced a handful of minor characters that loomed large through the Expanded Universe/Legends canon.

Luke himself served as our viewpoint character for most of the trilogy. It's important to realise that Lucas painted Luke as a simple farm boy, dangerously inexperienced as he crawls into a wider universe. His character and skills develop as we watch. He makes mistakes, from getting into a bar fight to abandoning his training to save his friends, but his mistakes are understandable. Han and Leia have less development – Leia certainly comes across as far more mature, even older, than her twin brother – but what little we see makes sense. Han grows into a hero, almost despite himself; Leia takes control of her surroundings and, when she is put in chains by an alien slug, uses them to strangle him. Leia is a feminist icon for a reason. Neither she nor either of the other two are Mary Sues.

The movie series might have worked better if Lucas had moved straight to crafting the prequel trilogy. Instead, Star Wars lay fallow for a few years before giving birth to the Expanded Universe/Legends. This ranged from the extremely good – the Thrawn and X-Wing books – to the shockingly poor and problematic The Courtship of Princess Leia and the deeply weird The Crystal Star. The canon grew into a colossal universe set between A New Hope and massive interstellar wars deep into the post-ROTJ era. This was both good and bad for Star Wars. On one hand, it kept the flame alive and gave birth to all kinds of source material that could be mined for the later movies. On the other, it created a fandom that had emotionally invested itself in the Expanded Universe/Legends canon, which would be very hard to please when – if – the next set of movies were ever made. The real problem facing Star Wars Aftermath was not the gay character, but the simple fact that the book was competing with the brilliant Heir to the Empire and lost badly.

Lucas eventually did make the prequel trilogy. However, to some extent, his vision was competing with the Expanded Universe/Legends canon too. (Notice the version of the Clone Wars presented in Heir to the Empire, which has little in common with Attack of the Clones.) This alone might not have been a major problem. The Phantom Menace, however, had too many weak spots to please the fandom. Jake Lloyd, like most child actors, couldn't live up to the demands placed on him. (Personally, I'd have started with an older actor and declared Anakin to be in his early teens.) Add this to a comedic character who isn't funny – Jar-Jar – and a plot that makes little sense (although it does in hindsight) and you have a recipe for trouble.

These flaws spread into Attack of the Clones, which had a bad guy of little impact (personally, I like the Darth Jar-Jar theory) and cast a baleful shadow over Revenge of the Sith. The third of the trilogy is the best, but the actors were unable to cope with the script's demands they play the doomed romance as true love rather than two young people making a series of mistakes and being unable to cope with it. That said, the movie does wonders for the Emperor and the trilogy as a whole shows why the Jedi were falling to the dark side long before the Emperor effectively wiped them out. (If they were stupid enough not

to realise that bringing ‘balance to the force’ was probably bad news for them, as they hugely outnumbered the Sith, they probably deserved to lose.)

Still, the flaws in the prequel trilogy didn’t overshadow the original trilogy. The important characters were amply justified (save Jar-Jar) and relatively few of them survived into the next series. Those of us who disliked the movies could afford to ignore them. Not everyone did, of course. Lucas might have recovered from the problems of *The Phantom Menace*, but his stock had slipped. He was no longer seen as a genius by his fans. *Star Wars*, in a sense, had outgrown him. His decision to sell the rights to Disney was, generally, taken as a good thing.

I still don’t understand how they managed to mess it up.

I do understand one part of it. They were trying to please both the fans – some of whom became known as the Fandom Menace – and new viewers. The latter would not be steeped in *Star Wars* to the point they’d understand elements that grew out of the Expanded Universe/Legends canon. If they’d gone with a movie version of the Thrawn books, they would have had to explain a lot to new viewers. And yet, they wouldn’t need to do that much explaining. Luke, Han and Leia are known characters; Mara Jade, Thrawn and C’baoth could be introduced relatively easily (Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman as Thrawn and Pellaeon). It wouldn’t have been that hard to go through the Expanded Universe/Legends canon, take whatever they wanted and discard the rest. The Marvel Cinematic Universe did that and it worked very well.

Instead, they discarded practically all of the Expanded Universe/Legends canon.

That was, for me at least, the point where I decided I wasn’t going to get invested in the Disney Wars canon. I was already irked that some of my favourite comics were being steadily rebooted, time and time again. I wasn’t going to read the books unless the new post-ROTJ canon really grabbed me. I’d thought the original Expanded Universe/Legends canon did well enough. But even that wasn’t the real killer.

The sequel trilogy had to build on the original trilogy, at the very least. Instead, *The Force Awakens* proved to be – largely – a beat-for-beat reprise of *A New Hope*. There is a Rebel Alliance – the Resistance – fighting the remnants of the Empire (aka the First Order.) The First Order has an even bigger Death Star, plus they’re searching for a droid with a map to Luke Skywalker’s hiding place. (And why did someone who wanted to hide go to the trouble of drawing a map?) The overall story arc is very much like *A New Hope*, with Han playing the role of Ben Kenobi (his death was easy to predict).

The characters had potential, but that was largely wasted. Poe didn’t get enough screen time to be a really developed character. Finn, the best of the new characters, had too many cowardly lion moments for my tastes. He comes across as weak, where Han looked cocky in the original trilogy. And Rey is very much a Mary Sue. She’s too good, given where she started from (Mara Jade, by contrast, had her awesomeness very clearly explained from the start). The movie denies us the chance to watch her grow, as we watched Luke grow in the original trilogy. I sometimes feel that the writer gave all the pratfalls to Finn, who isn’t the type of character who can handle it. In conclusion, *The Force Awakens* is good for nostalgia, but bad for character development. It’s tissue-thin and falls apart when you look at it too closely.

Leaving aside *Rogue One*, perhaps the best of the Disney Wars movies, we move on to *The Last Jedi*. Again, it draws heavily from the original trilogy – in this case, unsurprisingly, *The Empire Strikes Back*. However, it is unable to justify itself as well as the original. The plot makes little sense, practically assassinating all three of the main characters as well as both Luke and Leia. (Kenobi and Yoda hid from an entire empire. What was Luke hiding from?)

Worse, it lacks the original’s compact storytelling. Instead of a united plot that diverges and then recom-

bines, there are three separate plots. The power trio are split up – after having been separated at the end of *The Force Awakens* – and sent on different missions for various plot reasons. One of them should really have been eliminated, preferably Finn's. As much as I like him, and I do, his plot is the least useful. Finn and Poe should have been kept together, if only because Poe and Finn have a lot more chemistry than Finn and Rose. (Rose herself is completely surplus to requirements, although she's a better character than her detractors say.)

It's fairly clear the writer knew little about the military, let alone character development. Poe is bashed for being wrong, when it's blatantly obvious he was pretty much right. (If that dreadnaught hadn't been destroyed, the Resistance would have been taken out instead.) This bashing continues as Leia is put out of action, which throws command to Vice Admiral Holdo ... who we are told is a great commander, but rapidly shown that she's nothing of the sort. Poe clashes with her repeatedly, ending in a mutiny (hell, the only real charge that can be levelled against Poe is that he left the mutiny too late.) Leia talks everyone down and the plan goes ahead, leading to utter disaster. Finn, in the meantime, is completely wasted on a side plot that does nothing more than lecture us on war profiteers ... a pointless lecture, given that the Resistance couldn't exist if it wasn't being supplied by ... war profiteers.

Rey, in the meantime, continues to develop far faster than either Luke or his father. The movie continues the tradition of not letting her show weakness or taking a pratfall, even after she's yanked into the Dark Lord's chamber and fights beside Kylo Ren. She develops at astonishing – indeed, impossible – speed. This alone might not be a problem, but her development comes at Luke's expense – remember, Luke was the hero of the original movies – and makes her look like she's been shrilled, rather than developed naturally. The temptations she faces are different, but – in a sense – they're the temptations we've already seen in the first two trilogies. It might have been better, from a story-telling point of view, if Rey and Ben Solo had switched places midway through *The Last Jedi*.

As a piece of Star Wars canon, *The Last Jedi* is largely a disaster. It kills off Luke (and effectively Leia, as well as a handful of others) without building a proper legacy for their successors. As a movie in its own right, it isn't any better. Gross incompetence on one side is countered by gross incompetence on the other side (see the *What An Idiot* page for details). Snoke, Hux and Finn suffer negative character development, the former being killed off midway through the movie and the middle turned into a walking joke. What little development it does is soundly wasted by *The Rise of Skywalker*. There were only two good points in *The Last Jedi* – Ren becoming the Supreme Dark Lord and Rey's parents being nobodies – and both of them are thrown away.

It also suffered from a desperate case of trying to be all things to all men. 'Shipping' wasn't a thing when Star Wars came out. There wasn't much, as far as I know, debate about who Leia would wind up marrying. (And this died, obviously, when Luke and Leia were revealed to be siblings.) The prequel trilogy had it's one relationship set in stone from the start. *The Force Awakens*, however, birthed a whole universe of ships, from Rey/Finn to Rey/Ben Solo and Poe/Finn. Pretty much everyone who cared about this was a little disappointed by the outcome. Worse, perhaps, it gave too much – and also too little – time to minor characters, a mistake neither of the other two trilogies made. For all their importance to the rebellion, Mon Mothma and Ackbar never steal the show. Holdo and Rose try to. It doesn't work.

This led to an odd problem. On one hand, Disney tried to be diverse. On the other hand, it didn't give its diverse characters a chance to shine in their own right. (Finn and Poe got undermined, Rey got everything handed to her on a silver platter.) That undermined the push for diversity, ensuring that Disney would be bashed for both pandering to the SJW demographic and not being diverse enough.

I never watched *Solo*. But from what I've heard about it, the movie suffers from the same weaknesses as the successor trilogy as a whole. It simply doesn't live up to the source material (and would probably have worked better following a new character, like *Rogue One*, or becoming a stand-alone set in a differ-

ent universe).

And now, we have *The Rise of Skywalker*.

It didn't surprise me that they followed the beat of *Return of the Jedi*. The return of the Emperor did surprise me, if only because it invalidated everything that happened in both *Return* and *The Last Jedi*. The new Dark Lord gave up his position and submitted himself to the Emperor ... why? The one good thing to come out of *The Last Jedi* and they threw it away? (Not to mention the boneheaded reveal that Rey is the Emperor's granddaughter ...)

I could go on about this for hours. But, really, the successor trilogy had sunk itself.

The biggest problem, as I see it, is that there was no one with the authority to sketch out a story arc (either copied from *Legends* or newly-devised) and stick to it. There was no real overarching plot – I recognise the signs – and a great deal of hasty modification to the movies that annoyed everyone. Beyond that, there was a simple failure to recognise that *Star Wars* is not a romance series, but softcore science-fiction with laser swords that had a vast fanbase ... one that would be easily pleased, as long as the producers stuck to the themes that made *Star Wars* popular in the first place. Instead, the fans felt insulted and decided to withdraw their support. For this, they were blasted as racists and sexists.

The smaller problem is that there were too many new characters and too little development. Rey, Finn and Poe either take steps backwards in *The Last Jedi* or progress in leaps and bounds that are not justified within the movie itself. Ben/Kylo does better as a character in *The Last Jedi*, but this is undone by *The Rise of Skywalker*. Holdo, Rose, Hux and Snoke do relatively little for the plot, yet they get too much exposure to be purely minor characters (and the former two get blasted for being 'diverse' without any competence and/or importance.

In short, much like *The Last Jedi* itself, Disney tried to appeal to everyone and failed.

I've seen this happen more than once in books and it rarely ends well. The problem is that most creative works only have a very limited audience. Very few of them break into the mainstream. (*Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* are the two biggest examples.) A fantasy book may appeal to the entire world of fantasy readers, but rarely to anyone beyond (and, of course, not every fantasy book manages as much.) The more you move away from your core focus, the greater the chance of losing readers without actually picking up replacement readers. The point is not that you cannot have 'diverse' characters, or open a field for 'shipping' debates, but that you have to remain aware of what you're actually doing. Your 'diverse' characters have to be given a chance to be more than just diverse. If you pull this off, it works wonderfully. Disney did not pull it off. And, from the way things developed between *The Force Awakens* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, I don't think Disney ever understood why.

I think it's fairly clear the three trilogies fell into a pattern. The prequels focused on the decline and fall of the Old Republic and the rise of the Empire. The originals focused on the rebellion against the Empire, ending with the Emperor's death. Logically, the successor trilogy should have focused on the rise of the New Republic and the fight against the remnants of the Empire (like I said, *The Thrawn Trilogy* covered that very well). However, *The Force Awakens* and the rest chose to hit the reset switch. Everything important – Han and Leia getting hitched, their kid going dark, Han and Leia splitting up – happens off-screen, leaving us with complete newcomers. This worked in the original series because there were no preconceptions. This (sort of) worked in the prequels, because we knew who Kenobi, Anakin, Yoda and Palpatine would grow into. It didn't work in the successor trilogy because there was an established backstory and the vast majority of the fans wanted and expected Luke, Han and Leia to be the stars.

In fact, if you watch the movies in order, you can see the prequel characters giving birth to the original characters (both metaphorically and literally). There's no immediate connection, however, between the

original stars and their successors – and when the connection is made, it involves too much shrilling for my tastes.

How would I have done it, I wonder? Assuming simply filming *The Thrawn Trilogy* wasn't an option – I'd need to hire lookalikes for Luke, Han and Leia – I might skip forward fifteen years or so after *Return of the Jedi*. Leia would be serving as a New Republic Ambassador, Luke would have his Jedi Academy and Han ... I'm not sure about Han. He could remain in the military, if he wishes, or – if he splits from Leia – remain exploring the fringes of explored space. The new threat would be a revitalised empire, led by one of the Emperor's surviving students.

Ben Solo would be one of Luke's students, tempted to fall to the dark side; Poe would be involved in the first skirmishes, giving him a chance to meet Finn and urge him to deflect from the Empire. Rey would remain a desert girl, lured into the dark side by the big bad, or another of Luke's students. The first movie might end with a battle over the Jedi Academy, the second with the Empire seemingly posed to win; the third with a final desperate strike at the big bad before he could win the war. By the time the series ended, the old characters would have gone out in style and the new characters would be firmly established.

In the end, Disney Star Wars will go down in history as something akin to the DC Cinematic Universe. A concept with much great promise, based on a well-known and loved franchise, that was effectively wasted by its owners.

Movie Review

November -- Review by Heath Row

In early March, a friend and I watched *November*, a 2017 black-and-white Estonian movie that blends *Brothers Grimm*-style fairy tale, folk horror, and magical realism to portray a world rife with age, class, and gender role divisions. That world is also full of love, magic, and tragedy.

The living hold on to the wealth of the dead and welcome them into their homes, where they feed them and prepare saunas for them. In fact, the living gather in graveyards waiting for their loved ones to parade by, to be welcomed—or neglected. Living quarters seem cramped, perhaps the upper stories or attics of other people's homes.

People sell their souls to the devil to animate constructed assistants called kratts. One flies, abducting a cow. It later becomes flummoxed when instructed to construct a ladder out of bread, and another, partly constructed of snow, proves quite poetic, having seen much as water around the world. The devil is particularly comically portrayed and was a highlight of the movie, as was the crossroads at which people meet him.

And the young struggle to free themselves from the attention and expectations of the aging and dead. One woman falls in love with a young man smitten by a wealthy but ill baroness. A laborer falls in love with the baron's maid and, on the advice of a witch, bakes her a small loaf to win her affections. And the kratt made of snow tells many tales of loves won and loves lost.

There might be shape changing or lycanthropy in the movie. There might be vampirism or the embodiment of a plague in human or porcine form. And the film is full of strange wonders and whimsies that seem internally consistent even if they don't make immediate sense to the viewer. There's even a joke at the expense of Latvians. It is a beautiful movie and one I'd recommend.

The review previously appeared in Heath Row's *APAzine Telegraphs and Tarpits*

Novel

The New Empire by Alison McBain
Reviewed by Robert Runté



You might not be able to tell from the cover, but *The New Empire* is speculative fiction, a parallel world whose timeline diverged from ours in the 1400s. What if the great Chinese explorer, Zheng He, had sailed east to discover America, instead of west across the Indian Ocean to Africa? The real Zheng He's fleet of over 300 ships and 28,000 crew dwarfs Columbus' meagre expedition of 90 crew on three tiny ships--and Zheng He set sail 90 years before Columbus. The proposition is a wonderful thought experiment for any historian and McBain works through the major implications to reveal that world 350 years later, in which the Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] Confederacy, armed and horsed by the Chinese a hundred years before European incursions, dominates Turtle Island/North America.

McBain's universe is no utopian paradise, however. Slavery is still a thing (though the slaves are Chinese deportees rather than Africans); the continent was still depopulated with the identical diseases that wiped out 90% of the Indigenous population in our world (just introduced via China in this timeline, rather than from Europe); the Spanish are still trying to push up from Mexico; the English are still fighting to cross the Appalachians; and the big landowners have still developed a plantation mentality.

Into this world comes five-year-old Jiangxi, a princeling raised in the Forbidden City, purged by his royal brother and sold into anonymous slavery among the Amah Mutsun. Surviving the hellish voyage to the New World, Jiangxi is bought by Onas, a spiritual leader of the Kukus religion. The novel is the story of their evolving relationship and the social changes brought on by the distant wars against the would-be colonial powers.

McBain creates a persuasive narrative exploring the setting and the ways that limits, pushes, and ultimately shapes both Jiangxi and Onas. The story is compelling for its examination of cultural, social, and moral issues—indeed, the timeless fundamentals of human nature—as the slow-burn of the plot lends a sense of inevitability to events. This is no simplistic fairy tale of good vs evil, of the young hero and his old Jedi master righting wrongs and defeating the evil wizard/vizier. On the contrary, both characters change and grow in complexity as events unfold and they are confronted with their own moral shortcomings. Both manage to disappoint the others' expectations, and the big moral and social issues remain largely unresolved.

McBain's thought experiment of Chinese influence on undefeated Indigenous cultures is painted in a mix of architecture, philosophies and trade. The Chinese tradition of suzerainty (trade and non-intervention), contrasts sharply with European mercantilism (where colonies exist only as resources for the colonial power) in our timeline. I confess to some initial doubts about McBain's depiction of slavery as mirroring that in our history, given that traditional Indigenous practice was usually more focused on adoption and absorption than the creation of a perpetual slave class. But of course, this is not our Haudenosaunee's timeline, and exposure to the Chinese desire to dump exiled criminals, rebels, and outcasts on the Confederacy as slaves could indeed have produced a plantation-style slavery over 350 years.

The tone and style of the novel reminded me somewhat of Matthew Hughes' magnum opus, *What the Wind Brings*. Both are historical novels on the literary end of the spectrum, both are sympathetic portrayals of flawed individuals responding to the conflicting worldviews of the 'other', and both revolve around issues of slavery, colonialism, and leadership. I highly recommend them both.

SerCon

James E. Gunn Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

N3F Historian



James Edwin Gunn (1923 - 2020) was a science fiction (SF) author, editor, scholar, and anthologist. His work from the 1960s and 1970s is considered his most significant fiction, and his six "Road to Science Fiction" anthologies are considered his most important scholarly books, although he won the Hugo Award for "Best Related Work" in 1983 -- and was a finalist in 1989.

Personal Life

Gunn was born in Kansas City, Missouri, on July 12, 1923. He married Jane Frances Anderson in 1947, and they had two sons together. He was educated at the University of Kansas (B. S. in Journalism, 1947; M. A. in English, 1951), where he later became a professor of English and journalism. He was also the Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction (CSSF) at the University of Kansas.

Publications

First published SF story: "Communications" in Startling Stories (September, 1949) [as by Edwin James]; First Solo Novel: This Fortress World (Gnome Press, 1955); First short story collection: Station in Space (Bantam, 1958).

His other novels included Star Bridge (1955) [with Jack Williamson], Station in Space (1958), The Joy Makers (1961), The Immortals (1962), The Witching Hour (1970), The Listeners (1972), The Burning (1972), The Magicians (1976), and Kampus (1977).

Excerpts from his MA thesis were published during 1953 – 1954 in Dynamic Science Fiction.

Awards/Honors/Recognitions

Locus, 1975; Pilgrim, 1976; Hugo (Nonfiction) for Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction, 1982; J. Lloyd Eaton Memorial Award (Lifetime Achievement), 1991; Grand Master, SFWA, 2007; First Fandom Hall of Fame, 2009; other awards.

He served as president of The Science Fiction Writers of America (1971-1972), and of The Science Fiction Research Association (1981-1983).

He was named the 24th Grand Master of the SFWA in 2007.

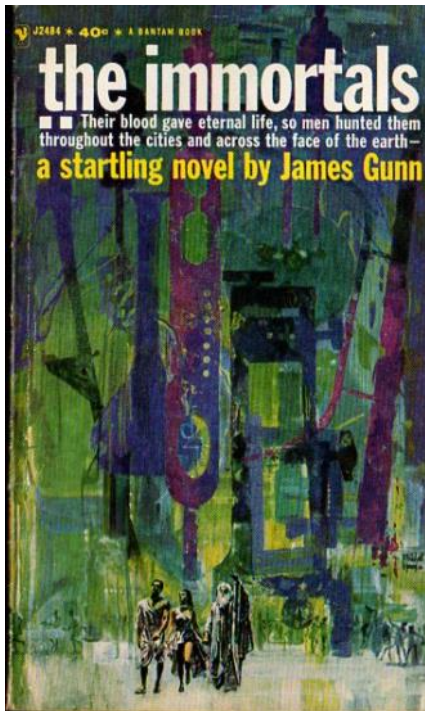
His story, "The Immortals," about a group who discovers the secret to immortality, was made into an ABC movie of the week in 1969 and become a 1970 - 1971 hour-long series.

Four of his stories were adapted for radio, and were broadcast during 1955 - 1957 on X Minus One, the popular SF radio program that followed Dimension X on NBC.

Early Career

Early in his career (1951-1952), he was an apprentice editor for Dell Books in their Western Printing & Lithographing Division in Racine, Wisconsin. While there he worked on Robert Heinlein's Universe (#36 in the Dell 10¢ series), contributing the cover idea and the anonymous introduction.

From 1977 to 1998 he edited six volumes of his highly praised "Road to Science Fiction" series of anthologies.



CSSF at the University of Kansas

The Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction (CSSF) was established by the Kansas Board of Regents in 1982 at the University of Kansas. Although its administrative home is in the Department of English, it draws from the expertise of faculty, staff, and students throughout the university as well as SF aficionados from around the world.

In 1991, a generous endowment by Dr. Richard W. Gunn, James Gunn's brother, allowed further expansion of CSSF's activities and prompted its re-naming as the J. Wayne and Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction, in honor of the brothers' parents.

Some Concluding Comments

Gunn's autobiography, *Star-Begotten: A Life Lived in Science Fiction* told of his personal and literary life, with a focus on his many years of active involvement in the SF field.

According to at least one critic, Gunn's favorite story length was the novelette.

He is sometimes confused with the screenwriter James Edward Gunn (1920 - 1966).

James Edwin Gunn died on December 23, 2020, in Lawrence, Kansas, of natural causes. He was 97 when he died, and was survived by his son Kevin.

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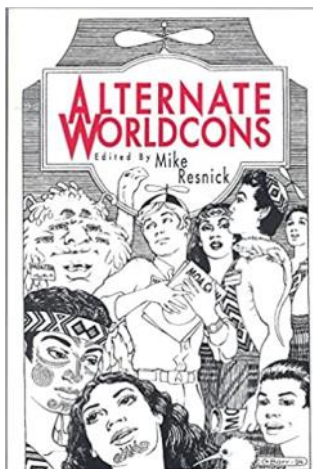
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Note: In addition to the above works, various Internet sites were consulted, including Fancyclopedia 3, ISFDB, and Wikipedia.

Short Stories and Anthologies

Alternate Worldcons, edited by Mike Resnick

Review by Heath Row



Inspired by recent patron saint Mike Glycer's authorship of a short story (T&T #53), I obtained a copy of the Mike Resnick-edited anthology *Alternate Worldcons* (Pulphouse, 1994). I read Glycer's story, "The Men Who Corflued Mohammed," an alternate 1992 Worldcon, first. It's a solid piece of faanfiction—rather than fanfiction—and carries a strong message: Fringe fandom is a component of fandom, and we shouldn't mourn aspects of broader fandom that emerge as fandoms all their own. We certainly shouldn't strive to keep an element of fandom from pursuing whatever natural lines of development might present themselves. "[J]ust because they like it doesn't mean I don't get to enjoy it anymore," Glycer wrote. Hear, hear. This advocate for One Big Fandom agrees completely!

Don't just check out the volume for Glycer alone, however. The book, an anthology of stories speculating on alternate Worldcons, was inspired by the 1993 ConFrancisco, or ConFiasco, as some call it. After offering a brief timeline of Worldcon-related historical moments, mishaps, hoaxes, controversies, and hoaxes, Resnick serves up almost 20 alternate Worldcons ranging from 1939-2107.

So far I've read seven of the stories, including Glycer's—1992—and 1939-1969. Anthony R. Lewis's "In the Beginning..." (1939) considers what might have happened if the Futurians had denied entrance to representatives of New Fandom—instead of the other way around. As it occurred, those barred from entering did just fine, while New Fandom is largely forgotten.

"Gemutlichkon I" by Mark Aronson (1943) posits the mainstream popularity of L. Ron Hubbard, who pursues writing espousing humanity's focus on improving the world rather than Scientology (which, to be fair, proponents suggest does just that). So doing, he ends up the figurehead of a global movement that avoids World War II and unites humanity in global peace, scientific development and space exploration—as well as the mainstreaming of sf fandom.

Dick Spelman's "The Forgotten Worldcon of '45" focuses on Ray Palmer, *Amazing Stories*, and the Shaver mysteries.

"The Best Little Worldcon in..." by Terry McGarry (1964) considers what might have happened if the gag bid for Tijuana had succeeded. This is one of the more fun—and funny—stories so far in the anthology. Its somewhat ribald nature helps, for sure.

Gene DeWeese and Robert Coulson's "Queen of the Timies" (1966) might be one of my favorite stories so far. What if Bjo Trimble had focused her attention and efforts on saving *The Time Tunnel* instead of *Star Trek*? What if *The Time Tunnel* had risen to national fandom to the extent that *Trek* has? This is a very fun and affectionate piece.

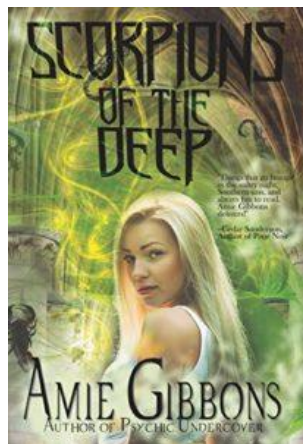
And "Hail, Hail, Rock and Roll" by Frank M. Robinson (1969) considers an sf con within walking distance of Woodstock—and how each gathering might have affected the other.

This is an excellent anthology of alternate history faanfiction, and I look forward to reading the remaining stories. It's a hoot that, for example, Glycer's story incorporates Andy Hooper, Harry Warner, Ted White, and Art Widner.

The review previously appeared in Heath Row's *APAzine Telegraphs and Tarpits*

Food of Famous Authors

Cooking by Cedar Sanderson with Author Amie Gibbons



This time, she's back with a new book and a Southern feast! Amie's newest is out, and she came asking me if I'd do Pulled Pork, biscuits, mashed potatoes, and green beans to go along with the Southern flavor of her story. The First Reader heard about this and 'yes, please, do it soon?'

Scorpions of the Deep is her first novel out in a while and she's excited about it, as she should be. Here's the blurb:

The police blamed the attack on a bad acid trip. Turns out, it wasn't a drug, and the destination is even worse...

Sarah Blakely retreats home after her world goes to hell, looking for the peaceful refuge she remembers from her teenage days. While making new friends, one snaps and attacks.

Sarah knows there's no gods or ghosts or evil things that go bump in the night...

But there are more things on Hell and Earth than are dreamt of in her philosophy, and something out there has her in its sights.

So if that whets your appetite, pick up a copy while you start the pork, you'll have plenty of time to read!

I've done a pulled pork recipe on these pages before, so that's not what I'm highlighting this meal. No, what I'm going to talk about are those bastions of Southern cooking:

Buttermilk Biscuits

First of all, I have made biscuits so many times, that although I do measure some (you have to, when baking) I don't always look at a recipe. And there are steps in here where you are doing it by 'love' because sometimes things change up a little and you have to add a little less milk, or a little more flour... so I've included a bunch of photos of the process.



Preheat your oven to 400F and have a cookie sheet (ungreased) ready.

In a large bowl:

2 1/2 c flour (pastry, if you have it. The lower gluten makes a more tender biscuit) Sifting the flour does make a difference, and it mixes it nicely with the other dry ingredients.

Sift the flour together with:

2 1/2 tsp DA Baking Powder
1/2 tsp Baking Soda
1 tsp salt



Then cut in: 1/2-2/3 c lard (bacon grease if you've got it, but that's more than I usually have on hand)

I use a pastry cutter. I learned this way, and although you can do it with knives, forks, or fingers (rub the fat into the flour) I like this.

and finally: Lard!

Absolutely the best for biscuits and pie dough. I was a full-grown woman before I had access to this and it's been a game changer.

1 c buttermilk, added slowly. If you do not have buttermilk on hand, as I usually do not, you can acidulate the regular milk with a teaspoonful of lemon juice. The acid is needed to fully activate your leavening agents.



You want your dough to be firm and somewhat dry if you want shaped biscuits. If it's sticky, just drop spoonfuls onto the pan – those are easy biscuits!

Mix gently until your dough comes together and forms a ball. You may not need all your milk, especially not if you put in the larger amount of lard (which makes the biscuit even more tender, almost crumbly, if you like it that way). So go slow with the milk, mix, and add a little extra flour if you have sticky dough. The less you handle this, the better. I pinch and pat to form the biscuits, rather than roll them out and cut them to precise shapes. They're going to rise, and they'll be flakiest and best if you don't wake up that gluten.

Put your biscuits in the oven at 400F for 15-18 minutes, checking during the last couple of minutes. They should be golden-brown on top, and firm when touched with gentle pressure on the center. Big biscuits, to use for sandwiches!

I did my pulled pork this time in the slow cooker, and then put the mashed potatoes in the instant pot – 10 minutes under high pressure and a quick release did the trick and they were beautifully done. The First Reader prepared the country green beans, that's one of his specialties in the kitchen. This made a relatively fast and easy dinner, for all the moving part in it, but it's nice enough for company or Sunday Dinner. Which is what it was at our house.



So grab Scorpions of the Deep for a little chill down your spine to offset the summer heat, and make some biscuits to catch the flavor of the South while you're reading!

Eating a low-carb version of this meant I was deprived of biscuit! But it was still filling, and the First Reader greatly enjoyed the whole thing.

Pulled Pork, on a Buttermilk Biscuit, with Loaded Baked Potato Mashed Potatoes, Country Green Beans and slices of fresh ripe tomato. Feasting!



Run, Rake! Run! by Jose Sanchez