

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

## **FICTION**

- 2 ... The Books of Alexandria Book 2: The Between by J.H. Nadler ... Review by Jason P. Hunt
- 3 ... Codex Babylon by Robert Kroese ... Review by Trevor Denning
- 4 ... Darkest Hour by Mark C. Jones ... Review by Graham Bradley
- 6 ... The Earthsea Trilogy by Ursula K. Le Guin ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 7 ... The Fae Hunt by Nicholas Woode-Smith ... Review by Declan Finn
- 8 ... Fractal Noise by Christopher Paolini ... Review by Mindy Hunt
- 10 ... The Fragrance of Orchids and Other Stories by Sally McBride Forward by Peter Watts ...  
Review by Robert Runté
- 11 ... Ghastly Glass by Joyce and Jim Lavene ... Review by Heath Row
- 12 ... In Ashes Born by Nathan Lowell ... Review by Jim McCoy
- 13 ... The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 13 ... Lucky Starr: The Oceans of Venus by Isaac Asimov ... Review by Russ Lockwood
- 14 ... Mask of the Vampire by Stormy McDonald and Jason McDonald ... Review by Jim McCoy
- 15 ... Riptides by Blain L. Pardoe ... Review by Graham Bradley
- 17 ... Swim Among the People by Karl Gallagher ... Review by Declan Finn
- 19 ... Tearmoon Empire ... Review by Chris Nuttall
- 21 ... This Alien Shore by C.S. Friedman ... Review by Heath Row

## **LITERARY CRITICISM**

- 22 ... Howard Andrew Jones: New Edge Barbarian King ... Interview by Michael Gallagher

## **PROSE BONO**

- 26 ... Sequels and Other Such Difficulties by Cedar Sanderson
- 26 ... Writing to Formula by Cedar Sanderson
- 29 ... When Using Passive Voice Works by A.C. Cargill

## **FREE BOOKS**

See Next Page

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The Thug Acrostic  
What You See  
Painterror  
Adrift on a Foreign Sea  
The Silver Crusade  
Each Shining Hour  
Gravelight  
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>

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# Editorial

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# Fiction

The Books of Alexandria Book 2: The Between by J.H. Nadler  
Review by Jason P. Hunt  
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Jason Nadler calls this his Empire Strikes Back for the series, and while it's not quite that much of a sequel, *The Between* does raise the stakes quite a bit in the on-going battle between various factions of magic users vying to dominate and gain absolute control over magic itself.

The story picks up with an expanded chapter that was included in the first book, as Alexandria and Abby are recovering from their last battle. New threats immediately present themselves, and we're on a path to new confrontations and new questions as Alex learns more about the power she has and how to control it. And as she learns more, she starts to get a sense that not everything is as it appears, and that maybe everyone she trusts may not be that trustworthy.

We spend quite a bit of time in *The Between*, where Alex encounters all manner of spiritual manifestations of witches from around the world. Sort of an astral plane, where witches can project themselves outside of their bodies to commune and communicate with others from various points on the globe. It's here that Alex learns more about what kind of power she has, how to control it, and thus begins making plans to do battle with Jeremiah and Matthew to save her cousin Billy. It's also here where it's established that if your spirit is destroyed in *The Between*, your physical body also dies.

*The Between* is an intriguing concept, actually. It seems to be a space that is neither Heaven nor Earth, where astral projections of people can meet, congregate, even build whole societies of support groups and communities. One can communicate with the dead here, as there's no real difference between the souls of the living and the souls of the dearly departed. It's here in *The Between* that Alex gets time with her Mother, learning a few things about circumstances to hand and trying to figure out what to do about it. And when Alex's presence in *The Between* gets noticed by nefarious forces, she has to again face the notion that while she has quite a bit of magical power, she's still a long way away from being able to control it with Jedi Master level skill.

And this time, the Book Club — that coven of ladies who didn't really realize they were a coven — now gets more to do, and they realize that the stakes are much higher than they ever imagined. Alex leads them to the Library, where she confronts Jeremiah and gets a little more than she bargained for. This is also where Rose gets a bit of a showcase as we head into the third act with the next book. There are some new "alliances" in this Act II, as well, with Alex attempting to destroy the Library and absorb the magic trapped there so that Matthew (her adversary) can defeat Jeremiah (her greater adversary).

Alex also finds out more about the role her father played in all of this, which goes back to the overall question of who to trust and who to hold at arm's length.

As with the first book, the pace and narrative flows along smoothly, and while there may have been one or two extra side trips into *The Between*, they ultimately served to set up the confrontation at the Library and what I assume will be the overall Big Bad Battle that's coming in the climax of the next book. If I had anything that could be considered a "complaint" for this outing, it's that the point-of-view switches. The first novel was told from Alex's perspective throughout, and this one started that

way, until the narrative flips to Alex's cousin Rose, who gets a taste of what it means to wield magic in a way that sets her on a course for a destination I suspect will be emotionally taxing for them both. The switch in POV is likely necessitated by the events of the story, but it still felt a little jarring because of how the story's been told up to that point. It's still third person limited, but the limit has just expanded to a second character. My guess is that this will continue through the course of the third book and end in tears.

Overall, though, I've enjoyed these first two books in the trilogy, and I'm looking forward to the conclusion. And I have no qualms about recommending that you add it to your reading list.

**Codex Babylon by Robert Kroese**

**Review by Trevor Denning**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It's the year 2023 (okay, you know that—I mean in the story) and a demonic cabal threatens to topple civilization (still talking about the book—I think I'm still talking about the story). Humanity's best chance of weathering the coming storm is the Codex Babylon, a book of demonology, and the only place it can be found is sometime around the 12th century. And I know that's a time, which is not a location, but getting there requires travel too. The first man to go back in time disappeared, and time in the present is running out. An unscrupulous and unconvinced lawyer has the psychic abilities to make a second trip to the past, but when it comes to knowledge and skill, he's woefully unequipped.

## The Story

Global Risk Assessment and Insurance, Limited (aka: GRAIL), an offshoot of the Templars, has worked for centuries to protect the world from demonic forces. Unfortunately, thanks to the increasing power of technology, the demons are gaining the upper hand. GRAIL's only potential resource to survive a second dark age is the Codex Babylon, possibly Solomon's notebook for dealing with demons, which hasn't been seen since the Crusades.

Several years ago, GRAIL sent a brilliant scholar, Benedict, back in time to search for the book, with his wife Gabrielle serving as a telepathic tether. Unfortunately, after a few years Benedict's communications became erratic before stopping completely. Now GRAIL thinks they've found a new man with the right set of abilities and gifts to go back and try again. The only problem is Martin doesn't believe in any of this and resents their attempts to draw him in.

The story moves back and forth between past and present, first as we observe Benedict on his quest, and then the present as GRAIL works to manipulate, persuade, and finally prepare Martin for his trip to the past. In part two Martin is in the past, while Gabrielle and GRAIL search for the Codex in the present. At both ends, it becomes apparent that there's a traitor inside GRAIL and there's growing concern as to how much damage he's done when no one was looking.

Anyone familiar with Templar conspiracies will be right at home. Kroese doesn't try to overexplain or overcomplicate his time travel. It just is. The main focus in the first book of the trilogy is establishing the stakes and throwing every possible complication in the way. There are hints of Kroese's trademark humor ("All the demons I know are in middle management"), and twists, turns, and setbacks aplenty. Basically, everything you could want in a novel like this.

## The Characters

Benedict (aka: Cormac) is introduced as a priest in the Middle Ages. He was one of GRAIL's best and brightest, but searching for the Codex takes a massive mental and physical toll. When he stops communicating with his wife Gabrielle in the present, GRAIL identifies Martin as a replacement. But he's a family man, who is reluctant to accept the idea of demons, much less work against time and travel it. Gabrielle understandably has some resentment for GRAIL, though she still believes in the mission and agrees to be Martin's connection to the present.

GRAIL is headed by Ian (who I couldn't help but imagine as Ian Holm), who may be the most forthright person on the payroll.

In the past we meet various historical and imaginary characters, including Pepin, a young man with a secret sin from which he hopes to find absolution through holy war. He becomes Martin's squire and guide through the unfamiliar world. Meanwhile, Gabrielle and Paulo (Martin's first GRAIL contact) travel to Egypt in hopes of finding the Codex in present day, and instead only find more trouble. I actually liked the present-day chapters as much or more than those in the past and look forward to spending more time with Gabrielle and Paulo in the sequels.

## The World

There's no forward time travel here, so it's either 12th century Europe and the Middle East, or the present.

## The Politics

None

## Content Warning

A few bad words and some PG-13 violence. No ceramic baboons were harmed in the making of this novel [citation needed].

## Who is it for?

Imagine if Michael Crichton's Timeline and Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code had a baby. If that sounds like an attractive offspring, this is the book for you.

## Why read it?

Robert Kroese fans rejoice! We have new stories. Here he gives us conspiracy, adventure, and time travel, with none of the woke concessions of a Netflix show. Given Kroese's penchant for prognostication, who knows? Maybe read it to see how right he is about the near future.

**Darkest Hour by Mark C. Jones**

**Review by Graham Bradley**

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

First in the "Tin Can Tommies" alt-history series.

One of the better film directors of my lifetime is Joe Johnston, a guy who probably gets less credit than

he deserves for his work. He directed such favorites as *The Rocketeer* for Disney, *Captain America: The First Avenger* for Marvel, and *Jumanji* for TriStar. He also helmed *Jurassic Park 3*, so they're not all winners, but the point is the guy has major pulp chops, and more importantly, he knows how to put heart into a spectacle.

I kept thinking of those Joe Johnston films as I read *Tin Can Tommies: Darkest Hour*, a novel that I'd picked up as a cheap eBook forever ago and finally got around to reading. Once I dug in, I started kicking myself for not grabbing it sooner. It's so much fun, and it takes itself just seriously enough to transcend its low-effort peers in the pulp-alt-history genre.

Lamentably this title is no longer available in the ebook format no matter where I look. Not sure what's going on there, but the paperback is available most everywhere.

I mean damn dude, dig on that cover. Soak that up for a minute. You good? Cool. Flip it open and let's see what's inside.

## The Story

The eponymous "Tommies" are a squad of heavy robots originally sent into military duty in World War One. They saw action at the Somme. While they were somewhat effective, their development was expensive and protracted, so by the time the war ended there was no need to make more. The project was shelved and nearly forgotten.

Then World War Two broke out, Dunkirk happened, and suddenly England needed an army. That would take too long to assemble (thanks, Chamberlain) so Churchill decided on new tactics: needle Hitler wherever possible, slow him down, and hinder his ability to wage total war on the British Isles until they could commit real martial power to the fight.

And wouldn't you know it, we've got this unit of dusty old robots lying around from WW1, maybe we can whip them into shape...

Now, that's a solid enough premise for me. I've read enough history to know that the real Churchill signed off on the Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare (which is about to get a film treatment from Guy Ritchie, starring Henry Cavill) and that's a cool enough story all on its own. Still, pushing that aside and throwing in mother freaking dieselpunk robots is exactly my speed and I'm here for the ride.

But it's impossible to tell you more about the story without first telling you about...

## The Characters

The Tommies themselves used to be more in number, but they don't all function. We have to get by with just four, and they have names: Lancaster, who's a ranked sergeant; Spitfire and Hurricane, who are dutiful little soldiers; and Mosquito, who's a little more cunning than the rest.

They have distinct enough personalities to tell them apart, while still being mechanical enough to seem not-quite-human. You get a little bit of the "Do I have a soul?" stuff from them, which I think is usually interesting to address in robot stories, but the author doesn't waste too much time on that, which I appreciate.

Really though, the Tommies are subordinate to their human officers, Jack Stone and Billy Bragg, both survivors of Dunkirk who have to learn how to work with the idiosyncrasies of robots. They get help from Hot Female Mechanic, the ‘Agent Carter’ of the book, Cammy. She’s a very likable character though; she knows what she’s doing as far as the robots are concerned, and she’s not afraid to get dirty with power tools as part of her job, but she doesn’t surrender her femininity either.

While the Allies have Churchill and the Axis has Hitler (both appearing in the story), the real power-player is a Nazi officer named Morder who had his skin burned off in battle. As a result he can no longer feel pain, and this makes him an obvious terror in combat. The Tommies make progress against the Axis, so Hitler sends his secret weapon Morder against them, and the real clash of the book takes shape there.

By the end, I really loved these characters. They were all well done and had meaningful motivations, including the robots. Their story is a fun romp through real historical events, culminating in a showdown between Morder and Jack Stone, with the robots dividing their loyalties along the way.

## The World

Ours, in the 1940s, with a few obvious technological differences, but nothing overwhelming. The Tommies were a secret project of WW1, and that’s all.

## The Politics

Nothing, really. Allies versus Nazis, that’s it.

## Content

The odd swear word here and there, nothing worse than a middling PG-13.

## Who’s it for?

Fans of dieselpunk, Churchill, WW2, robots, alternate history.

## Why read it?

For the same reason I recommend anything to you: it’s fun, and it moves very swiftly. Also, there’s been a sequel in development for some time? The eBook suggests that it was due out 2022 but I haven’t found it yet, and ‘Mark Jones’ is a common enough name to make it difficult to track him down. Hopefully this review sends all y’all running to pick up a copy so the sales boost gets his attention. Check it out!

[The Earthsea Trilogy by Ursula K. Le Guin.](#)

[Review by Russ Lockwood](#)

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

The slipcase version contained three novels: A Wizard of Earthsea (1968), The Tombs of Atuan (1971), and The Farthest Shore (1972). All have chapter illustrations and maps.

It’s been a while since I read these and they hold up relatively well over the years, although sometimes the descriptions of every rock and leaf got me skimming ahead. Still, these books are entertaining



enough as they follow Ged from the boy wizard who learned magic and dabbled with resurrection with unintentional consequences, to the 'thief' who looted a tomb and saved the girl Arha, to the Archmage Ged who embarked on a quest with Prince Arren to save magic.

Enjoyed all three.

**The Fae Hunt by Nicholas Woode-Smith**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

## Urban Fantasy Epidemiology

Being the offspring of a medical educator and a laboratory tech, I have a disproportionate fondness for fantasy medical situations. Most of the standout episodes of Grimm had a solution right out of The Andromeda Syndrome, and about as innovative.

The Fae Hunt, Kat Drummond book #9, wasn't as good as all that, but it may be the best book of the series to date, making use of every single element from previous novels.

## The Story

After felling The Silver Brotherhood (no, I did not review that one. My mistake) Kat Drummond has put together an interesting team, and has made friends with orcs and werewolf packs, and even friends in other dimensions.

When a warning comes from one of those dimensions that a great evil from the North is coming, that doesn't narrow it down much. There are more horrors in this world's Africa than are dreamt of in your philosophy. And with the novel set in South Africa, the warning narrows down even less.

But soon, a plague hits, and then the excrement hits the air impeller. When the government concludes that the fae are responsible, everything really goes sideways. It's up to Kat Drummond and her people to come to the rescue of the city, and probably the world.

As I said above, this must be one of the better Kat Drummond novels. The solution is less hack and slash, and the book is more of a detective procedural than an urban fantasy thriller. Frankly, I think that added to the story, and allowed for more worldbuilding. Even elements that are blind alleys in the investigation end up adding to the overall plot.

## The Characters

Since this is book #9, Drummond is well-developed at this point. She would rather be a hack and slash heroine, but her problems insist on making her use her brains, even though she'd rather not. Granted I do miss her interacting with college classes while holding down the day job, but killing a necromancer on the campus will put a damper on things.

## The World

It is quite clear that Nicholas Woode-Smith has a Tolkien-level about of world-building but is doing it out only as the plot requires it. The reader is not buried alive under appendices, nor is anyone left con-

fused by what's going on at any point. Heck, even world elements from previous books come into play in the finale.

Frankly, the world of Kat Drummond may be the most interesting character in the books.

## Politics

Most of the politics of this book are in-world. Kat Drummond hates government so much, she will go on beyond the point of endurance. I agree with her, but we only need a few pages at a time.

Though it is amusing that she learns how to play her own kind of politics. It's definitely part of her evolution and I want to see how it develops in future novels.

## Content Warning

There are some horror elements. And the epidemiology involves a disease that has people coughing up blood. I'd say give this to only mature teenagers at the earliest.

## Who is it for?

Take the open world of the Witcher, the world building of Tolkien, and the firefights of Harry Dresden.

## Why buy it

Because The Fae Hunt is a smart, tightly written novel where even "the boring parts" are still enjoyable.

**Fractal Noise by Christopher Paolini**

**Review by Mindy Hunt**

<http://SciFi4Me.tv>

I have not finished a book this fast in a very long time. I could not put it down. And now I'm sad about this. But let me back up a little or like the TV shows do "4 days earlier...."

Fractal Noise is the second physical book of Christopher Paolini's Fractalverse. The story takes place 23 years before To Sleep in a Sea of Stars. However, there's currently a third story in the Fractalverse called Unity. It takes place a little after To Sleep in a Sea of Stars and is online at Paolini's website. So once I finished the first book, I hopped over there and kept reading. I'll give a little review of that first before I jump into Fractal Noise.

Now that the Unity space station has both humans and Jellies cohabitating peacefully, a murder occurs with no real clear clue on who did it. Each species has its own areas as well as common areas and both sides claim innocence. Any possible recordings of the area show nothing except the implant recordings from the murdered human (contacts they wear that are basically overlays that act like computer screens). What it shows points one direction but is it misleading?

What is interesting about Unity is that it's a "choose your own adventure" style. The reader is the specialist trying to discover who did it. You read and then choose what path to take, go left or right? Get food and rest after your journey or go talk to the bureaucrat on the station right away? Your decision triggers different answers. But eventually you get to the end, learn a few secrets, and find out a few

truths about the human and jellies situation that will most likely lead into Paolini's next book on this path in the Fractalverse.

I'm not saying that the end was a surprise but a good reality check that Paolini is thinking about the long term in this new series. It is one more log he can throw into the fire to keep it burning for more stories in the future.

But back to the past.

Fractal Noise takes place 23 years before Kira's discovery when an anomaly is discovered on the uninhabited planet Talos VII – a 50-kilometer-wide round pit that is not natural but a design. A small team lands and travels on foot to the pit to survey and learn who or what made this hole. Even if this is the dream find of a lifetime, the solitude of the journey and bareness of the land takes a toll on each of them with their own ghost to keep them company.

This is an amazing change of pace for Paolini. His books have had heavy undertones in the stories, but this book takes it to a whole new level. Our protagonist is Alex Crichton, a xenobiologist on the *Adamura*, the ship that discovers the hole. He's in a dark place after losing his fiancée. So when presented with the opportunity to be in the landing crew to survey, he figures he has nothing to lose if things go south. He is past that point of caring.

It is the constant question of what Layla would have done or how could he make her proud that push him through the slow travel and insanity building with an endless thud sound and tremor on the planet's surface. His emotional and, at sometimes, physical reactions to both are very similar and disturbing. You could almost compare the thud to the ticking of a clock, a reminder to snap back from his thoughts. However, it's not snapping him back to reality, but out of reality and deeper into the depths of his mind. Each thud transports him to another memory or dark thought. And they get faster as they group gets closer to their target.

The group is such a diverse group that it would be hard to not have friction between them. There's a religious believer who constantly has philosophical arguments with a non-believer and the passive observer who just wants to stay out of it. Like the thud, the emotions run higher, and the down periods are shorter as they move closer to the anomaly.

Like Alex losing control of his own internal struggles, eventually any logic within the group gets left behind which leads to the climax.

This is where Paolini sheds every ounce of light he has carried in his tales and drops one on the reader.

It's breathtaking.

I could not put this book down. I read it in under a week. I felt that thud every day when I was supposed to be doing other things but my mind could not leave the story alone. I was on a break at work when I finished and had to sit for a while to let it sink in. The impact of the end and my desire to know more has me not liking Christopher Paolini right now because I remember how I felt waiting for *Inheritance* after *Brisinger* in *The Inheritance Cycle*. I know this will be worse because I don't know where his next tale will lead us in the Fractalverse. Will we follow the tale of the anomaly on Talos VII or the future of the humans and jellies years in the future? Paolini has really done a number on his readers by leaving us hanging on what direction he'll choose.

But I'm ok with this. Now being a part of his jump from fantasy to science fiction, I know that the wait and the story will be worth it. I guess he is now my own personal thud.

**The Fragrance of Orchids and Other Stories by Sally McBride**

Forward by Peter Watts

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

Brain Lag is a Canadian small press joyously defying conventional wisdom by publishing brilliant single-author short story collections. Everybody 'knows' those don't sell (unless by a Stephen-King-level 'name' author) but here again we have a collection from a dazzling author who for over thirty years has been toiling in the obscure fields of Canadian speculative fiction. Sally McBride has always deserved a much wider audience for her subtle, emotionally engaging speculative fiction: real people who find themselves in weird situations.

This collection covers 14 stories that illustrate the depth and breadth of McBride's speculative writing, from "Totem", her very first story (published by the legendary editor Judith Merrill in the first Tesseract anthology back in 1989), to two stories published just last year. A third of this volume is reserved, however, for previously unpublished work (including a 70+ page novella) which add a metric ton of value for even those already familiar with McBride's canon. The rest first appeared in such venerable venues as Tesseracts, Asimov's, On Spec, and Realms of Fantasy, and newer Canadian venues like House of Zolo and Polar Borealis.

The tone ranges from the dark horror of "Hello, Jane, Goodbye"—brain surgery gone terrifyingly sideways—to the cozy mystery of "The Faraway Club", in which the ghosts of murdered teens set out to catch the serial killer responsible for their deaths. (The villains might have got away with it, too, if not for those meddling ghosts!)

The title story, "The Fragrance of Orchids" originally appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine in 1994, won an Aurora Award for short fiction, was reprinted in Tor's Northern Suns anthology and Van Belkom's Prize-Winning SF&F. It stands up surprisingly well after 30 years, a rich tapestry of conflicting motivations, tiny but revealing moments that mesh to become both story and an almost philosophical analysis of loneliness—with the 'alienated outsider' as both metaphor and literal alien. The story deserves every accolade received and reading it again here was every bit as moving as the first three times, and left me marvelling once again at McBride's mastery of nuance.

Listing the premise of each story, however, would be counterproductive, for two reasons. First: spoilers. With the possible exception of "Softlinks" (an AI story, now thirty years old), the common link here is unpredictability. McBride's brain just works differently, wanders places others could not, or would not, so following where she leads—discovering the premise—is half of what makes these stories so absorbing.

Second, McBride then uses that unique setting or idea to reflect back to the reader the universality of human experience: loneliness and grief, ambition and greed, art and compassion. One feels rather than read her stories. Her stories are almost never about the plot or action or the 'story' part of the story. The experience is often unsettling, disconcerting, but ultimately life affirming. There is always an underlying optimism in everything McBride writes. Things may be bad—may be about to get a lot worse—but still, life goes on. And occasionally, there is an underlying wry humour that goes some distance towards acceptance of the need to confront the dark.

Another thing I appreciate about this particular collection is that McBride and Brain Lag kept the author's introduction to each story brief and spoilers-free, while still managing to convey the general thrust and the impetus for each story. Here, for example, is the intro to "Hello, Jane, Goodbye":

"That most excellent Canadian editor of horror, Don Hutchinson, very delicately indicated to me that my work, while lovely in its own way, just wasn't scary enough to be included in his new anthology series, Northern Frights. Despite his good looks and suave demeanour, I felt rather insulted. I cracked my knuckles and confronted my fears."

"Hello, Jane, Goodbye" did indeed make it into Northern Frights and is every bit as disturbing as her introduction implies. Although I urge you to still read the story, one cannot claim the reader wasn't warned.

Lest I leave the wrong impression, it is not all, or even mostly, dark fiction. The collection nicely balances McBride's deeper work with delightful lighter pieces.

Finally, there is the "Forward" by Peter Watts, arguably Canada's top writer of dark fiction. As expected, Watts provides a concise and insightful analysis of McBride's writing, while managing to avoid too many spoilers. Unexpectedly, Watts also succinctly identifies, almost in passing, the fundamental failings of jump-scare horror or formulaic CanLit as written by most others. Watts nails exactly why McBride's work transcends one's expectations of either of those genres to create work that resonates with authentic emotion and generates meaningful reflection.

### Ghastly Glass by Joyce and Jim Lavene Review by Heath Row in Telegraphs and Tar Pits

Having recently read the first novel in the Renaissance Faire Mystery series (T&T #65), I've now also finished reading its sequel, Ghastly Glass. Similar to its predecessor, the mystery is neither science fictional nor fantastic, and there's not even a whiff of the supernatural—but while we're still in Renaissance faire season, it's fandom adjacent. (The Original Renaissance Pleasure Faire closed last weekend, and the Koroneburg Renaissance Festival ([https:// renfestcorona.com](https://renfestcorona.com)) runs in Eastvale through June 25. Besides, because the novel is set around Halloween, there's plenty of shivers, skullduggery, and spooks to scratch the near-supernatural fantastic itch.

Jessie Morton, our protagonist, continues her research of Renaissance crafts, interning with a crotchety glassblower whose nephew has set his unwelcome sights on her and his uncle's businesses. A Renaissance Village employee cast as the Grim Reaper—Death—for the Halloween season dies, and threatening graffiti—"Death shall find thee"—begins to appear throughout the village. Additionally, another employee goes missing, prompting his sister to begin a manhunt of sorts.

The relationship between the glassblower and the first novel's basket maker is on the rocks. The influence of the amorous nephew proves disconcerting. Morton has a run in with the king of the pirates. The queen of the pirates returns unexpectedly. And the cast and staff of the village combine efforts to uncover any and all culprits in order to restore relative peace and calm to the village—which is threatened with closure because of the ill doings. Throughout, Morton and village bailiff Chase Manhattan's relationship waxes and wanes due to the threat to the village and other general flirtations.

It's a fun read, though not as good or compelling as the first novel. I'll read the subsequent books in the series—I have three more—before sending them to my mom and sister to read—they both love mysteries and read actively, and it might help them visualize my participation in the local Ren faire. The pa-

perback ends with another edition of “Ye Village Crier,” a village newsletter of sorts, as well as another recipe: cinnamon couscous.

In *Ashes Born* by Nathan Lowell

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Once upon a time there was an author named Nathan Lowell. He wrote Space Opera but it wasn't your typical Space Opera with flashy lasers and big time blowuptuations. No, very little explodes in a Nathan Lowell novel. The crazy thing is, Nathan Lowell's Space Opera is still some of the best I've ever read. I never thought I'd say that, but it's true.

When last we saw our hero, Ishmael Wang, he had rocketed through the ranks of the Merchant Marine, going from a quarter share apprentice to captaining his own ship. It was a rough ride in parts but rewarding for him as well as the reader. This time around it's a little different.

This time, Captain Wang owns his ship. This time, he has a murdered lover to avenge... if he can find the guy who killed her. And while he is searching, he's got some money to make (and a ship that can be repossessed if he doesn't) and some things to learn along the way. There's a whole side of the galaxy that he hasn't seen yet. A series of places where he can make a ton of cash. Places called the Toe-Holds that aren't regulated by the larger government of Confederated Planets.

I love the concept of the Toe-Holds. Local governance and greater freedom have always been my thing. Less regulation equals more money and more possibilities. I've often stated that government sucks at everything it does and, while that's not totally true, I'm right more often than I'm wrong. My attitude has one hole in it though, and Lowell hits it head-on: Sometimes unregulated things break. That can be a very bad thing when you're on a space station and something critical breaks. Lowell doesn't shy away from the problems with lack of regulation though, and anyone who can remember the Challenger or Columbia explosions knows that the government's record on regulating spacecraft isn't exactly spotless either.

I also like the way Lowell handles some of the crew members. Ishmael was always in a hurry to learn the new material, take the next exam and get the next promotion. Some of his crew members aren't like that. This is a good thing. We've all worked with someone who wanted to rise to the top, but not everyone is like that. Some people balk at the idea of extra responsibility, even if it means extra pay. To not desire more than one has is a legitimate right and it's one that I'm glad to see Lowell championing. Don't get me wrong. I'm not here to hold anyone back. I'm just saying that it's not right to force someone to move forward if they don't want to.

I really need to re-read this and apply a lot of what's here to my own work (yes, I know I have nothing published. I'll get there.) because there is a lot of time spent on things that usually get lost in the novels with flashier setting and big space fights. I mean, at some point we all know that the crew needs to breathe, but how often do we get to see someone working with oxygen purification gear? I love Honor Harrington. I have since the lady at the bookstore led me back to the appropriate shelf by hand and put *On Basilisk Station* in my hand, but how often do we get to see what happens in the galley? I mean, her steward is one of the finest in the fleet and has a service-wide reputation for serving the finest coffee around, but do we really know how he does it? (Shut up, Tom, he might use a different method than you do.) It is seriously the little things that make this series.

I've got to mention Pip, the captain's best friend and a guy Ishmael went to officer school with. Pip is a laid-back dude, but he's got some serious brain power. A lot of the money that goes to keeping the ship and, indeed, the idea for buying it, came from Pip. He's got a big brain and a good head, even if he can be a bit pie in the sky sometimes. Add Pip to the list of characters I would like to hang out and have a drink with. My understanding of interstellar economics isn't as sharp as his, but I still feel like I could have a good time discussing his theories.

You'd think that with the lack of battles and all the little details covered that these books would drag, but they don't. There is always something going on and, if it's not the run of the mill, it's still a good time. Seeing how Wang helps his crew learn their jobs and increase their earnings is a good time. He has a way about him that makes his crew better.

And maybe that's what I like most about Ishmael Wang. He's a guy I'd love to work for. He knows his stuff, communicates well and isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Some of his crew express surprise that their captain started out as a lowly rating and did some of the scut work, but that shows how much they have to learn about their captain. That, in and of itself, is a good thing because there is always a mystique about a successful captain, and part of that is the mystery.

Ishmael's search for the murderer is kind of the point of this story and it's kind of not. It's always there, but sometimes it's just his struggle to succeed that comes to the fore. It's so easy to get caught up in the day to day and the changes in setting between Toe-Holds (and they do vary a lot) and forget that there is a dead woman out there who needs avenging and, I know this sounds weird, I like that. A Seeker's Tale from the Golden Age of the Solar Clipper isn't Mel Gibson screaming, "GIMME BACK MY SON!" It was never intended to be. It's a story about a man doing his best to succeed in life while helping others to succeed as well. That's why I love it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Cases of Frozen Food

**The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin**

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

A 'Federation' envoy, Genly Ai, drops in on a king to offer planetary membership in the 88-planet interstellar group, but the king not only declines, he tosses out the advisor who supported the plan. So begins the sojourn of envoy and advisor, apart and together, as they head to the kingdom next door with the same offer...and back again. Machiavellian intrigue, desperate escapes, and a sense of hopelessness engulfs our heroes in this reflection of a splintering society. No laser battles, spaceship wars, or other techy twists mar the commentary.

While on occasion tough to slog through, Le Guin nonetheless ultimately delivers a positive outcome for a fractured civilization. Written in 1969, it is nonetheless worthy of 2021.

Enjoyed it.

**Lucky Starr: The Oceans of Venus by Isaac Asimov.**

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Written in 1954 under the pseudonym of Paul French, this adventure finds our hero, David 'Lucky' Starr, in a 1978 reprint. Back in the 1950s, science had yet to discover many features of Venus as per the reprint date of 1978, and much more since then, as this review is in 2021. You have to take the year

into account with the setting. The book also reflects a simpler 'Golly Gee' sense of culture, where a Council of Science agent such as Starr provided clean-cut authority. No troubled hero here or problems with his steadfast Martian sidekick Bigman, whose worst epithet is "Sands of Mars!"

Gee whillikers! When you read "SoM!", you know they're in a fix! Sorry, couldn't resist. This is the third book of six in the series and hero and sidekick investigate a fellow agent's alleged fraud in the undersea city of Aphrodite. Yes, Venus has a sea with a huge amount of seaweed (or plankton or pond scum -- your choice) populated by V-frogs. These frogs are everywhere and serve as soothing pets -- sort of like tribbles in Star Trek about a decade later. You just know that Kermit the Frog's Venusian fracas of frogs will make the trouble with tribbles seem like a garden party.

If the 20-something Starr is too smart and perfect, well, such was the age of sci-fi heroes back then, but even he makes miscalculations. Short, sweet, and moves right along.

Enjoyed it.

**Mask of the Vampire by Stormy McDonald and Jason McDonald**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**  
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

I don't usually comment on covers because "Don't judge a book by its cover," but I really like that one.

So here we are once again with Damage, Inc. and their world-fanning adventures. It's good to be back. Seriously, Dave, Hummingbird and crew (and I'm happy to see more of Jasper this time) are up to their usual shenanigans and that makes me happy, because I'm a native Shenaniganian.

Or sumfin'

Listen, it's not even noon yet.

Hopefully this isn't too much of a spoiler, but in part of the end matter it is revealed that Damage Inc. started off as a gaming group. This makes a lot of sense to me because Mask of the Vampire and the other related novels do kind of remind me of a really good night around a gaming table with my friends throwing dice and arguing. Only the books come with the added bonus of not having to pick popcorn out of your hair afterward. (Don't ask, it's ugly.)

I don't mean to say that you can't enjoy the book if you're not a tabletop role player, because you totally can. I'm just saying that so much of Mask of the Vampire feels so familiar if you have. You'll recognize the tropes if you don't play, but it's so much better when you've lived them. Well, sort of. I mean, you don't really live the things you roleplay. Thankfully. I mean, I'm sure my players would be pretty upset at me for that time I almost TPK'ed them.

\*SIGH\*

I'm getting off topic.

Listen, just buy the book.

Mask of the Vampire is a story about friends dealing with some rough circumstances in the best manner



possible, or at least the best way they can come up with. One plan in particular sounded a little janky to me when they hatched it. I'm not going to say what it was, or how it turned out but I wasn't wrong. Still though, that adds to the reality of the work, because people don't always come up with the best plans in situations when they're under pressure. At the end of the day, they did something when they needed to do something.

Yes, life would be simpler if they could just walk to Mordor. No, really.

I'm fighting off the urge to make a Hardy Boys reference here, but I don't think it's going to work. There are a couple of different mysteries going on to go with the usual chaos and mayhem I expected in a *Damage, Inc.* novel. I detect a hint of *Lord of the Rings* here too, but only in a way. Let's just say that having a Mount Doom around might make things a wee bit simpler for our heroes.

I find myself liking our heroes more every time I read another installment in this series and this one is no exception. I find myself more drawn especially to the character of Hummingbird who, because reasons, seems to be easier to understand and relate to this time around. I feel like she's finally found her groove where maybe she hadn't before. There are still some things she needs to do and some obstacles she needs to overcome, but she's working here and she's moving forward. This could just be a personality thing on my part, but she seems to at least be making a better attempt to adapt to the world around her now.

Something I haven't commented on previously is the coolness of seeing characters for our planet in the books. The story takes place on a planet called Gaia (yes, I get the mythological reference) but a couple of the main characters are from the planet Terra (yep, that's us) and it's awesome. Every once in a while you'll catch a reference back to our world and it's fun. Plus in a weird sort of way, Dave and friends are like the Vulcan/android in a *Star Trek* series: They exist to point out and analyze the strangeness of the people around them.

The action sequences in *Mask of the Vampire* are amazing as always. Whether it's a straight up fight or something even bigger, the McDonald's deliver. I've never seen a character arc come quite so far in one fight as what happens here either, but it makes sense and was necessary. I was really impressed by that one scene and how it turned out. Something things aren't easy to do and never should be, but needs must when the devil drives.

In short, I'd read it. I mean, I already did though. Let's just say if it's worth my time, I'd say it's worth yours. Like I just did. Or sumfin'

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Hidden Treasures

Riptides by Blain L. Pardoe  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Second in the "Land & Sea" series, with mechs versus aliens

In *Splashdown*, humanity got a rude awakening when aliens surged out of the seas, where they'd been hiding for years, studying our tech and our civilizations. They know a lot about us. Now they want to kill us and take our stuff.

Time to do the right thing and blow them all to hell with superior firepower...if we have it.

## The Story

Riptides exists at the intersection of a couple of different story types: it's urban warzone survival next to military fiction. It's mecha near-futurism and international intrigue. It's a refugee teen looking for her family, and POWs trying to escape an impossible alien prison. Give Tom Clancy a box of Ex-oSquad toys and an afternoon with Michael Bay, and you start to understand what you have with Riptides.

With multiple viewpoint characters, you get a big picture of what's going on and how the events are interconnected. The subaquatic alien invaders have already conquered most of Earth, it's just the ocean part of it where we don't have as much presence. Next, they take the coastal cities, which necessarily puts pressure on the inland areas, and there are logistical nightmares that come out of this. Pardoe doesn't just tell you about them, he walks you through them with realistic characters who feel the stress and pressure and horror of it all.

Inside of all that you get little interpersonal gems as the characters deal with their own troubles, trying to balance them against the larger threats against humanity. People still have room to be individuals while sacrificing for their families, their nations, their species. It's the element that lifts the series above a simple daydream about what would happen to the world in this situation. In order to understand that better, I need to tell you about...

## The Characters

There's a big cast in this series, but I want to focus on three of them: CC is a teen girl who has the guts to go back into Los Angeles in the middle of an evacuation because she thinks her mom and siblings are there. Her part of the story reads like a World War 2 survivor memoir, like someone who lived through the occupation of Poland or the Netherlands. There's a real feeling to her terror but also her drive to keep going, because abandoning her loved ones is worse. She makes friends and enemies along the way and finds her courage in a horrible ordeal.

Then there's Reid Porter, who lived through a violent battle and got recommended for the Medal of Honor by his CO, but he feels it's a political stunt to drum up high morale for the war. The real heroes were either killed or taken prisoner by the aliens. He's powerless to stop his commanders from pushing it through, and he's so guilt-ridden by the whole thing that he eventually sneaks away to get back on the front lines.

The flipside of Reid Porter's coin is Natalia Falto, a lance corporal who got captured by the aliens and taken to an underwater prison. She and her fellow inmates give the reader a glimpse into what the aliens are doing down there, and this is where the strong horror elements of the story really come to the surface. The "Fish" aliens don't speak English. They have some modest foodstuffs that the humans can eat, so they don't die of starvation, but they're dying of everything else; the Fish keep hauling the prisoners out of their cells to experiment on them, hacking up limbs or testing poisons that kill them slowly. The prisoners are powerless to stop it or even understand why. The best they can do is guess, and wait, and be afraid.

Falto does what she can to keep the others sane, though. She knows time is running out and they will probably all die down there; still, she doesn't surrender, and while we would all like to be that resilient, Pardoe does a good job of writing her in such a way that it makes you wonder if you could do it. Unfortunately we don't find out at the end of this book, so I need to pick up the third one in order to see what happens to her. Clever little trick, that...

The World

Ours, in about fifteen years. Slightly advanced tech, slightly evolved political tensions, but all very recognizable.

The Politics

Doesn't really come through, when you're running or fighting for your life you don't really have time to make sure the guy next to you has Correct Opinions.

Content

R-rated for violence and language.

Who's it for?

Fans of Battletech or Pacific Rim, military fiction, and mecha.

Why read it?

I'm starved for good mecha novels. I've dabbled in some here or there, but nobody's doing it better than Pardoe right now. So I'll keep up with the series. You should too!

**Swim Among the People by Karl Gallagher**

**Review by Declan Finn**

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In a world after Big Brother has been chased off, what happens when he comes back?

With his Fall of the Censor series, Karl Gallagher seems intent on covering every possible aspect of science fiction, as well as straight up warfare. The Censor is a multi-planetary 1984. In books two and three he covered new angles of space combat. His last book, Karl had the fine art of spycraft.

In this book, Karl breaks out the manual on guerilla warfare.

Story

In book three, the planet of Fiera had been liberated from the Censor's tyrannical grasp with the help of The Concord — the star system on the other side of the hyperspace bubble. Everything was going fine on Fiera, even a new government had been established.

Unfortunately, the Censor is back, and they want to send a message: Freedom just isn't done here. They're out to retake the planet. And when the Concord forces are driven off, Marcus Landry is left behind with his Fieran wife Wynny.

But unlike the Censor, the Concord does not destroy books when the author dies. So Marcus has a surfeit of books on insurgencies.

I like a lot of various and sundry tricks Karl used throughout this one. From an opening that's right out of On Basilisk Station to how the point of view shifts are handled, the plot is effectively conveyed

without bloated plots or unwieldy casts.

And I do enjoy Karl's writing. His style uses an efficiency of words that other authors should learn from. There are some authors that would have made this novel into three volumes. At one point, Marcus Landry is called to be a Devil's Advocate (long story) and "Marcus wondered if the Devil could appeal for ineffective counsel."

Also, do not f\*\*\* with the engineers.

I will grant that there is one massive problem in this book, but that's mostly because the needs of the plot dictated it. Despite the dozen different fleet and ship battles Karl has written in this series alone, the first battle in this book is over and done with in a matter of pages. One thing goes wrong in a battle plan, and Fiera is left to fend for itself by its Concord allies. However, it's understandable. The battle to retake Fiera wraps up at 18% of the way into the novel: the book description is entirely about the Censor taking Fiera back, so an extended battle is futile—the reader knows it's going to happen. It makes sense, it just strikes a discordant note in what has been, to date, a solid series.

Then there's the cartoon stegosaurus, and the process for getting a library card. Both of which are funny as hell. And there's weaponized accounting in a way I would have expected from Larry Correia.

By the end, this book is perfectly set up for a sequel without feeling like sequel bait.

## The Characters

I do enjoy the character developments here. It's all done so nice and neat and efficient.

Marcus Landry is one of our big point of view characters, the better to convey a planetary-wide insurrection in manageable bites. He's gone from "I just load cargo onto a freighter" to combat trainer, fleet commander, cultural translator, and now he's William Wallace.

Wynny Landry has gone from being a simple private investigator (mostly by necessity) to being a spy hunter... and sometimes resistance leader, mostly when Marcus isn't in the office.

Then there are two different infiltration experts. One is a marine. The other is ... amusing.

Damn it, sometimes, I hate needing to avoid spoilers.

## The World

The culture clashes here are so well thought out it's hard to encapsulate it all. Forget the clashes between enemies, the culture differences between friends and allies can make things overly complex. In this book, it becomes a major turning point in the plot when Marcus finds unlikely allies with whom to hide with. It even touches on elements of the rules of warfare ("You attacked a hospital? We have treaties prohibiting attacks on Hospitals!" "Did I sign this treaty?").

And like characters, the worlds have growth. Before the shooting starts, it's interesting to see just how much the problems of prosperity kick in and impact Fiera on multiple levels. Even the political systems have unique cultural elements. (Granted, it is amusing when the new Fieran president is an actor. Though it becomes obvious he did his own stunts.)

Of course, our heroes are not the only well-drawn characters with fleshed out cultures. The Censor has a vivid culture. It's pure evil with some threads of idiocy, but it is consistent with all of their cultural elements. The Censorate has a learning curve, but some of the lessons come just a little too late. One plot point comes in because it fits perfectly in keeping with the Censorate culture—and has ripples throughout the book. The Censorate culture of bureaucracy even interferes in picking people out for random executions... seriously.

The Concord cultures are ... seriously on point. I can't go into it, it's a spoiler.

All of these cultures feel like they have a Tolkien-sized appendix for them, but unlike Tolkien, the cultural elements and history only come up when they feed into the plot.

## Politics

This one doesn't have a political bent.

## Content Warning

There is warfare. There is even mass murder. But nothing is presented in a gruesome or graphic way. I didn't even note a language issue.

## Who is it for?

It feels like a mashup of David Weber and Timothy Zahn: military science fiction with smart characters who will think through their problems.

## Why buy it

It's a straight up, tightly written, entertaining novel with smart character

## Tearmoon Empire

Book Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Surrounded by the hate-filled gazes of her people, the selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, Mia, takes one last look at the bleeding sun before the guillotine blade falls... Only to wake back up as a twelve-year-old! With time rewound and a second chance at life dropped into her lap, she sets out to right the countless wrongs that plague the ailing Empire. Corrupt governance? Check. Border troubles? Check. Natural calamities and economic strife? Check. My, seems like a lot of work. Hard work and Mia don't mix, so she seeks out the aid of others, starting with her loyal maid, Anne, and the brilliant minister, Ludwig. Together, they strive day and night to restore the Empire. Little by little, their tireless efforts begin to change the course of history, pushing the whole of the continent toward a new future. And why did the selfish princess have a change of heart, you ask? Simple—she didn't. She's just terrified of the guillotine. Dying hurt like hell, and Mia hates pain more than work.

## -Book One Blurb

My opinion of light novels and manga has always been a little mixed. Some of them are very good – Death Note, for example – while others, I suspect, don't translate very well. I enjoy Ascendance of a Bookworm, but there's something about the style that makes it hard to read and I can't put my finger on

it. They also shift between formats. The Ascendance of a Bookworm light novels work very well, but the manga comics aren't so detailed; Death Note works much better as a manga than an animated or live-action show. I stumbled into the Tearmoon Empire books more or less by accident and found myself hooked. They may be based in a fictional world, but they are definitely of interest to alternate history fans.

The basic concept of the series is that Princess Mia, a rough expy for Marie Antoinette, is dethroned by a revolution (following a major famine) held in prison for several years and then meets her end under the guillotine. And then she wakes up as she was in her early teens with an opportunity to do it all again. She remembers the final moments so clearly that she is willing to do anything, anything at all, to avoid being executed again.

This is a difficult task, because the problems facing the empire are vast and, in the original timeline, Mia's personality flaws made them worse. She was – and still is, to a degree – ignorant, lazy, greedy and selfish. She did come out of her shell a little, in her last few years, but it was far too late to do more than struggle before the end. The crop failures and famines led to disease, deprivation and eventual revolution (led by someone who Mia bullied harshly at school). Mia knows this to be true, but can she stop it?

She doesn't know, but she's determined to try. This time around, she makes allies both at home – including Ludwig, this world's counterpart of Jacques Necker – and at the school, which is more of a meeting place for aristocrats and a handful of commoners. She's afraid of some of the students who will turn on her, in the first timeline, but somehow she finds herself making new friends and allies. She does this so well, partly by accident, that she earns the title of Great Sage of the Empire. Her insights into people – spurred by the first timeline – give her a reputation for perceptiveness that is simply not true.

Indeed, most of the humour of the books comes from the discrepancy between Mia's true thoughts and how her friends and allies (and even some of her enemies) perceive her. Mia reaches a pedestal too high for any of her closest allies to lose faith in her, even when she is clearly driven by selfishness. They are, in a sense, gas-lighting themselves. (Although, to be fair, it is a very practical kind of selfishness; she's aware of just how easy it is to make enemies and goes out of her way to try to avoid it.) It also leads to some amusing moments when her romantic letters to her crush are intercepted and read – the spies assume the fluff is a secret code, rather than sappy exchanges between two youngsters in love. The narrator is the only person who is aware of this discrepancy and regularly highlights it.

These books are not too deep, to be honest, but they do make a lot of good points. The kingdom is in serious danger of a famine, at least in part because the aristocracy look down on farmers and refuse to assign more than the bare minimum of land to growing crops. The public health system is non-existent – Mia shames the aristocracy into funding an orphanage and hospice for the poor – and education is terrible. She works hard to try to fix the problems, while ducking other problems; somehow, she blunders through the world and does things, in a manner that reminds me of Darth Jar-Jar, that have astonishingly positive results. And in this case it is luck.

The romance is fluffy and, at least at first, rather silly. OTL's Mia was in love with a prince who disliked her, because of her entitled personality. The second time around, she falls for a young prince who is a much better match, but the relationship is often cringe-worthy because most real-life teen romance is cringe-worthy. It gets a little annoying at times.

The side characters are also fleshed out, with hints of what they were like in the original timeline contrasted with the new. Some characters see dreams of themselves as they were and find them disturbing, even wrong. There are also suggestions the future timeline is constantly changing, with each of her improvements leading to different timelines ... some more worrying than the rest.

The series does have a weakness, and that is the introduction of an ancient conspiracy to tear down the empire and civilisation itself. I understand the temptation to blame everything on evildoers, but it is a mistake. A great many problems are caused by incompetence, short-sightedness and a simple failure to ensure good leadership. Blaming one's woes on shadowy figures merely deflects one from solving the real problem. The empire brought most of its problems on itself, as did the real-life France of Louis and Marie Antoinette. There was no one else to blame.

A somewhat lesser weakness is that there is no real tension. Mia has a knack, in this timeline, for winning people over and making her enemies into friends. There's no real sense she's ever in any major danger, even when she thrusts herself into situations that should threaten her.

Overall, though, the series is very good, if you like light-hearted books which don't take themselves too seriously. (The manga comics are less good, because you don't see innermost thoughts and suchlike.) If you want to try, you can find them on Amazon or direct from J-Club.

**This Alien Shore by C.S. Friedman**  
**Review by Heath Row in Faculae & Filigree**

This is the first book I've read by the author, and advice to not judge a book by its cover aside, the cover artwork by Michael Whelan is glorious—and ably communicates one of the novel's themes.

By turns a story about escape and safety, self-discovery, and the value of diversity, *This Alien Shore* focuses on the adventures of a young woman protagonist named Jamisia as she flees from corporate raiders invading Shido Habitat. Jamisia makes her way to the Up-and-Out, another space station or habitat of sorts and has to figure out who she is, who her friends are, and why the raiders are after her.

While most of what struck me about the novel centered on its handling and portrayal of the broad diversity of alien races—and what life might be like when they all convene—aspects of the book also reminded me of the cyberpunk writing of William Gibson, specifically the short story “Johnny Mnemonic.”

There's a lot going on in Jamisia's head, much more than she realizes or is always able to handle. Friedman's representation of the Outspace Guild resonated with Frank Herbert's portrayal of Guild aviators, which I appreciated and enjoyed. Those concepts collide as Jamisia unravels the mystery of her personality and mental capacity, and why a corporate interest would be interested in acquiring her—perhaps to squirrel her away unwillingly.

Not ostensibly offered as the first in a series, the novel was followed by another Outworlds book in 2020, *This Virtual Night*. The more recent edition of *This Alien Shore* mirrors the cover design of the newer title, losing the wonderful Whelan artwork, which is a shame. See if you can find the mass market paperback edition.

# Literary Criticism

Howard Andrew Jones: New Edge Barbarian King  
Interview by Michael Gallagher  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The Sword and Sorcery genre's greatest exponent talks bringing his Hanuvar universe to longform, preserving the pulp ethos, and the importance of the 'New Edge' manifesto 15 years later.

Howard Andrew Jones is a man on a mission. His exploits and contributions to not only the fantasy genre but the whole of literary fiction can hardly be overstated; savior of the works of Harold Lamb, editor of *Tales from the Magician's Skull* and *Black Gate* magazines, and author of nearly a dozen novels, along with a plethora of short fiction.

In 2008, Jones published what would eventually become known as the "New Edge" manifesto in two parts. It was a sorely needed crystallization that codified the modern ethos of Sword and Sorcery at a time when the scene's relevancy was flagging.

This year, Jones will publish the first two titles of his recently inked five-book deal with Baen, *Lord of a Shattered Land* and *The City of Marble and Blood*. His Hanuvar universe, stories set in a world which has only been seen in his short fiction, are finally being brought to a fully realized series of novels. He talked with Upstream about Hanuvar's long quest ahead and the future of Sword and Sorcery.

Q: Congratulations on the new series! While you've been very involved in what it means for something to be called Sword and Sorcery, Hanuvar, your Hannibal-inspired protagonist breaks the mold in a few ways. Can you tell us what's unique about your hero and the world he's in?

Thanks for that, and your wonderful introduction. To be clear, it's Hannibal of Carthage who's always fascinated me, not the imaginary mass murdering cannibal guy.

Like most sword-and-sorcery characters, Hanuvar's not on the hero's journey that Hollywood seems stuck on. You know -- a young, untried guy who's forced to leave the ordinary world, learns about his powers from a wise man, comes into his own, and stops the bad guys while winning true love. That's not Hanuvar. He's seasoned and experienced and while you get to know his backstory, there's no slow origin to wait through before things get interesting. You start with him at the height of his abilities.

He's no brash youngster, he's middle-aged. He's not out to prove anything and he doesn't need to find himself. He knows who he is. And he's not interested in self-advancement or riches, which is probably the most significant difference between him and the typical sword-and-sorcery lead, because rather than being in it for himself, he's essentially selfless. For him, the only thing that matters are his people. He's the last surviving general of the city of Volanus, which was destroyed by the Dervan Empire. His people fought block by block, house by house, until most fell with their swords in hand. Only a thousand or so survived to be led away in chains.

That may sound like the setup for a tale of vengeance, but bleak as that back story is, revenge isn't what Hanuvar's about, either. No matter where his people have been taken, from the empire's festering capital to its most remote outpost, he means to find them. Every last one of them. And he will set them free.



He doesn't expect to survive the process, but he intends to free as many as possible before he finally falls.

I suppose I should also say that Hanuvar's world has an ancient Mediterranean sword-and-sandal vibe. That's not that different from the bronze-age feel of a lot of traditional sword-and-sorcery, but is less common in heroic fantasy now than it used to be. Think Spartacus and Gladiator.

Lord of a Shattered Land on Amazon

Q: There's already a sizeable library of short fiction involving this setting and hero. Was it a challenge to adapt your usual faster-paced stories to a longer story arc? How did you approach this project from a plotting standpoint?

The last thing I wanted was to abandon the fast-paced feel of a great sword-and-sorcery story. So I didn't. From the very beginning I envisioned this character's adventures as a set of episodes that would build one upon the other. There would be an overall arc, there would be returning characters and ongoing threats, but each tale – now chapter -- has to stand alone.

This objective has sometimes been tricky to pull off but I've also had an awful lot of fun with it. Writing this way means I've been able to avoid the slow starts endemic to a lot of modern fantasy and just get right to the parts that are fun to write and read. As a result of this approach, each book is a little like a modern TV series made up of individual episodes. The chapters can be enjoyed separately, but they are almost certainly more rewarding if consumed in order. And like those TV series, each season (or book, in this case) ends with a climactic conclusion that resolves the immediate problems, although some challenges linger on for the next season/book.

Additionally, each book builds upon the one before, creating a larger connected sequence. Book two is more tightly integrated than book one, but that's by design. Book one, *Lord of a Shattered Land*, gets you familiar with Hanuvar, his world, and his challenges, before additional complications and details get added to the mix in book two, *The City of Marble and Blood*.

*The City of Marble and Blood* on Amazon

Q: Some feel that increasing dissatisfaction with modern entertainment, with its incessant remakes and ham-fisted messaging, has led to the phenomenon of the "Iron Age" zeitgeist. Many writers and artists, especially among independent fiction, feel we're on the cusp of a burgeoning Pulp Renaissance, and many are looking back to the old masters like Howard, Rice-Burroughs and Lovecraft among others. What are your thoughts on the movement, and do you agree that there could be a groundswell of fantastic storytelling on the horizon?

I sure hope there's a groundswell of great fiction on its way. I've been looking forward to seeing it for probably a quarter century now. Maybe longer. Around the turn of the millennium, it seemed like sword-and-sorcery was almost completely dead apart from the small press, and its presence even there was pretty anemic. It was easier to find parodies of sword-and-sorcery than the real thing. In those days it was snarky irony that kept cropping up in adventure tales – and that can be amusing in small doses in skilled hands, admittedly -- but it had grown tired. It was as though some writers were embarrassed to be writing sword-and-sorcery and therefore wanted to make sure readers knew that the writers understood the genre was beneath them. Fah.

When it comes to that newer problem, ham-fisted messaging, I hear you. Don't get me wrong – I have opinions and feelings about things, and I know they end up in my fiction even when I don't mean them to. But story has to come first. If you're just beating your point home on an anvil then you'll drown out the worth of anything important you're trying to say, and the odds are that your characters will feel about as real as cardboard cutouts with speakers to broadcast your message. Probably that kind of fiction makes the writer and its intended consumers feel pleased with their righteousness, but beyond that narrow audience the story has no staying power because it doesn't provide much entertainment.

I grew up on reruns of the original Star Trek, and it often seems to me that a lot of modern message fiction writers don't get the difference between the approach of a good Trek episode and a bad Trek episode. Consider "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield," from the third and weakest season, where the crew runs into an alien species that is half black and half white, but fifty percent of the population has those features on the opposite sides from the other. Each "race" is filled with hate for the other. The episode does a nice job of starkly rendering racism as absurd, but it's also fifty-five minutes of the same point being made over and over, and over, with a complete lack of subtlety. Whereas "The Doomsday Machine" is the story of the Enterprise's haunted sister-ship, its tragic and obsessive commander, and a terrible weapon that has to be stopped before hundreds of millions of people are slain. It's a masterpiece of tension, suspense, and plotting, with great character moments, and it also touches upon the danger of creating weapons so powerful that we may not be able to stop them from destroying us. Both racism and weapons of mass destruction are worthy topics for discussion, but one tale puts message first and the other puts story and character first. "The Doomsday Machine" routinely makes "best of original Trek" lists and the other never does.

"Never apologize because you like sword-and-sorcery or let yourself be made to feel ashamed because it isn't message forward."

But back to your main point, I'm seeing more signs than ever that there may be a pendulum swinging back the other way. Until recently it's been the small press where sword-and-sorcery and heroic fiction have taken strength, and it's a strength that seems to have been gathering momentum because more and more outlets are cropping up every year. This suggests a thirst for the form. (I regret that the modern media landscape is so fragmented, because it seems like some of these writers and movements are doing similar things and are sadly unaware of one another!) We're seeing more and more fantasy fiction on big and little screens and that's a good sign. And then I see that Baen, a major publisher, is enthusiastic not just about my work but about a growing library of writers interested in writing tales of fantasy adventure where heroes are front and center. All of this fills me with hope.

Q: As the editor of several fantasy literary magazines, who are some of your favorite new authors out there and why? Who's carrying the Sword and Sorcery banner highest so to speak, who might be flying under the radar?

I answer this question with some trepidation as I fear that any answer I give will unintentionally slight one of the very fine authors who I've had the privilege to know or work with. I've met a lot of them over the years, both through appearing in some of those small press pubs – in the trenches of the fight to keep sword-and-sorcery alive – and through publishing them.

The most obvious suspect is James Enge, whose Vancian/Zelaznian adventures of Morlock are one of the best remembered things about Black Gate and led to a six book deal from Pyr some years back. He's recently cracked some of the major modern science fiction and fantasy markets without compromising his vision in the slightest, and his Morlock work was once nominated for a World Fantasy award, the only true sword-and-sorcery fiction I'm aware of to have come close to a major industry award since Michael Shea won the World Fantasy Award for Niff the Lean. Then you have Scott

Oden, who's been writing some cracking good heroic/historical fantasy with a true Howardian vibe for at least a decade for major publishers and somehow keeps getting overlooked in favor of the next big fat fantasy series.

“The past was a different country, and it can be hard to explain to young people, or people unused to reading older literature, that different times had different attitudes.”

Already this discussion grows long, and I haven't gotten to Chris Willrich, creator of the long running Gaunt and Bone tales, or John C. Hocking, writer of the Tales of the Archivist, and Benhus, and, like Oden, author of some of the best Conan pastiche. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention John Fultz, who has a wonderful updated Clark Ashton Smith/Tanith Lee vibe, and C.L. Werner, best known for a whole slew of great Warhammer fiction but perfectly capable of great original stuff as well, or Nathan Long, about whom I could say exactly the same thing (and who writes officially authorized Lankhmar stories for The Magician's Skull), or William King, the Warhammer writer who created Gotrek and Felix and who's written a whole slew of Kormak novels. Then there's Milton Davis, creator of MVmedia, home to Changa's Safari and other great sword-and-soul fiction, and Violette Malan, creator of Dhulyn and Parno.

These are just some of the people I know who've been around a while. There are all kinds of promising newcomers, or not-quite-as-newcomers, and an entire school of British sword-and-sorcery writers whom I've only recently become aware of. If you really want to see sword-and-sorcery prosper, I hope you'll check out great venues like Tales From the Magician's Skull, where Joseph Goodman and I publish the finest new sword-and-sorcery tales we can lay hands on. You should also look to other fiction venues, like Whetstone, and Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, and Weirdbook, and Grimdark, and New Edge Magazine, and Cirsova, and Savage Realms, and probably a bunch of others I've momentarily forgotten about, not to mention great small press outfits like DMR and Rogue Blades Entertainment. I can't claim to love every tale from every one of these outfits, nor do I share every opinion in every editorial or post from these other places, but when it comes to fiction these are some of the most exciting places to find what's new and fresh in sword-and-sorcery.

And of course I hope you'll check out Baen! For the last few years I've been pretty enmeshed in short fiction because of all my work for The Skull, and so had completely missed some of the heroic fantasy coming out of their stables, like the fiction of Tim Akers and Larry Correia, and upcoming work from Gregory Frost.

Q: On the topic of the future of the genre, some speculate that there may be an effort on the horizon to clean away some of the grit that defines the genre, or shoehorn anachronistic elements that mirror modern social neuroses. An attempt was made to cancel Lovecraft last year, Burroughs and Howard could very well be the next targets.

Back in 2008, you wrote, rather presciently, in Honing the New Edge Part 2 at Black Gate that: “To be new, to be fresh, we must throw off the shackles of those who have tried to remold the genre to be respectable, and we must step past those who hoped to de-fang it to apologize for the genre's faults and bad practitioners.” It seems what's old may be new again. What advice do you have for writers of fantasy who take inspiration from the same authors you do, looking to preserve the past while not succumbing to the mob pressures of the modern literary scene?

Never apologize because you like sword-and-sorcery or let yourself be made to feel ashamed because it isn't message forward. A lot of times the genre may seem to lack a message entirely, but that doesn't mean there's nothing of value in a story where characters are shown overcoming a terrible challenge

with wit and brawn. Sword-and-sorcery is part and parcel of the mythic cycles we've been sharing around the campfire since the earliest days of our species. We'd hear how our ancestors chased down the elusive stag, or fended off the clawed thing in the dark, or guided the tribe to safety through a land of enemies. In listening, we were inspired to emulate courageous action and to not stand idle when times were dark and all hope seemed lost.

While we can model off the wild inventiveness and great pacing and thrill of adventure (and horror!) from the old guard we don't need to copy some of the old-fashioned shorthand along with it, where THIS culture or ethnicity is summed up as having only these (nasty) characteristics, or where all gay people are weak and useless (I mean, come on – some of the most badass generals and warriors in history weren't exactly straight), or where almost all women exist only to be handed out as rewards.

We must not throw what's come before on the rubbish heap. We can acknowledge the differences and some of the instances that make us feel uncomfortable now yet still celebrate what's great in the older work. Just because some attitudes or expressions in a work are different from modern societal norms doesn't mean that the work in its original form isn't valuable or inspirational. Those sorts of things could be said about any literature, past, present, or future. What we should all strive to do is to get at the core of what makes things engaging and enlightening to our fellow humans.

The past was a different country, and it can be hard to explain to young people, or people unused to reading older literature, that different times had different attitudes. Some don't have the patience to hear the explanation or an interest in reading things that can make them uncomfortable, and while that's disappointing, I get that it can be hard to find joy in a work where you really don't see yourself. It's harder to talk to people when they get shrill about the matter, or when they come in ready to pre-judge, but I try to reach them and point out how anyone who wants to craft a great mass battle needs to read Robert E. Howard's "Black Colossus" or see how to describe an amazing, memorable sword fighting sequence via Fritz Leiber's "The Seven Black Priests," or I discuss the evocative worldbuilding of Leigh Brackett's fading Mars – and so on. I love this stuff, and I guess I keep hoping that if I can point the skeptical to the things that are magnificent maybe they can overcome their misgivings and find some of the same beauty that still entralls me.

If you'd like to check out Howard Andrew Jones's website, check out [www.howardandrewjones.com](http://www.howardandrewjones.com). You can also check out his page on Baen books' website [here](#).

## Prose Bono

Sequels and Other Such Difficulties by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I have a fondness, in my personal reading, for interconnected books. Not necessarily a series, but books that share characters, or are family sagas, or give a favorite secondary character a chance to step into the spotlight. I also like getting a glimpse of the 'happily ever after' and seeing that indeed, it still exists.

Sidebar that just occurred to me and isn't part of the planned post: this is what killed Star Wars for me. Having the relationship between Leia and Han be acrimonious, and their child a psychopathic killer, broke the characters and the world for me beyond any forgiveness. I'll never watch Star Wars again,

early or later films. Particularly not when I know that there are novels that were discarded by the ‘new’ canon where there was a much more wholesome and hopeful dynamic.

Back on my original thoughts... Sequels are a pain for me, as a pantsner. I’m not sure every pantsner has this issue but getting back into a story (particularly if there’s been a gap) and remembering all the details to keep the characters and settings recognizable is a bit of a pain. However, writing another story that meshes with the first? I can do that more easily. Which is probably why the story that ambushed me in the shower on Wednesday has been flowing so well over the last couple of days (I’ll finish it later today). It’s after Farmhand, and set in the same town of Bluehills, but the central character is one of the side characters in that story. One of the primary characters in the first story makes an appearance here, as well... as do other secondaries. It’s meshing very nicely.

I had to go back and re-read Farmhand in order to get all the details squared away. Since I wrote it seven years ago, and hadn’t looked at it since, that was... weird. Almost stranger was the First Reader re-reading it (since I loaded it on our shared e-library) and commenting that it was really good, he’d forgotten it and why hadn’t I written more since that one was done? Something about that amount of distance, or, to be very honest, my poor memory, made it feel like I was reading someone else’s work. Strange.

One thing, though, makes me internally giddy to write a happy continuation for a character. I think this is why I have a soft spot for romance, both in fiction and real life. These days, it’s because I’m happy with life and love. At other points in my life, it was wanting those good things for myself. Goals, ephemeral and impossible and yet... here I am. Taking all of that and translating it into fiction is fun, and makes the writing of it easy. Not that the story is all sunshine and roses. The story opens with a sombre and tragic close to a beloved life. I mean for it to end with hope and promise as the sun sets and the moon rises.

I’ve also slipped in a reference to the happy couple in the first story. The one I’m writing (working title is Dream a Little Dream, but that’s likely to change) is set about six months after the first one. Enough time for some things to have taken place, but not others. Although the end of this story might also coincide with a bit of news from that first couple. I wonder if that will take away from the resolution of the secondary characters, or just make it a bit more joyful? Will have to ponder that while I’m out on the birdwalk this morning and write it when I get back.

My intent is to continue to write inter-linked stories in this town, weaving in and out the secondary characters. Re-reading Farmhand made me realize that I’d left open several avenues for this, as it was my plan all along, and I’d like to explore those, and find what stories lie along the way. Every story won’t necessarily touch every other story. However, the world will become firmer and more defined as I go and expand. Anyway, I’m having fun writing something I like to read, and that’s the important bit right now.

Writing to Formula by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

“But Cedar! Formulaic is Bad!”

No. No it is not, it’s shorthand, more often than not, for you don’t like it. Formula is a useful tool, and one most writers are using, even if unconsciously. In fact, to break out of being a formulaic writer, you must understand the formula first, and then deliberately set about stretching it into the shape you’d like your plot to be in. Because if you dash in there all willy-nilly like the kitten having zoomies this morn-

ing, all you're going to do is break something with a resounding crash, and your readers will yell at you and banish you from the bedroom.

The trick is to be aware of the formula, and not stick so closely to the bones of it that you become boring. Let me back up a little, first. Why do I say that formula isn't bad? Because, my dear young writer, it sells so well. There's not much point in being an author who doesn't sell books. Given you are here, and reading this blog, let alone this post, tells me you want to sell books. Also, think about essays (which this is an example of), and how they are taught. It's a very definite formula, yes? There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. So, then, is the formula for a story. Sure, you are thinking of exceptions. There are always exceptions, and they stand out because they break the rules, you remember them because they break the rules in some way that was exceptional, not badly done, or you wouldn't remember them. Besides which, if everything were an exception, that would be the rule.

That's not what you meant by a formula? No, it rarely is.

Take brioche, or any bread, for example. It can be mixed up by recipe, and you'll have a serviceable loaf of whatever it is. This morning, as in the sponge is rising while I'm writing this post, I'm working up a formula for brioche, since I didn't have one in my recipe book. Brioche is a sweet, rich bread. I have done a recipe for it in the past, but the thing about recipes is that they are very limiting and also, imprecise. My existing brioche recipe is for a stuffed loaf (with cheesecake filling) and I'd like to have a formula for a standalone loaf that can be made into French Toast. In aid of this, I am weighing ingredients, keeping an eye on the percentages, and the ratio of liquid to flour (plus, using duck eggs, which will skew later recipes if I didn't go the mass route). A formula allows me to know that I want, say, 50% hydration for a loaf that will be a specific texture.

Writing, for me, is a lot like cooking. I could give you a recipe for a story: Take one hero, mix with damsel in distress, expose to villain for 30 minutes, then remove from heat and voila! Romance. Which... works. Sort of. I may be stretching the metaphor beyond its capacity there. I know for certain that the ingredients need to be in the story if you want to write a specific sort of story. A romance without two characters is a retelling of the tale of Narcissus. A science fiction story without science is... well. You get the drift.

Now, there are reader expectations and beats to hit if you are writing stories that will sell. I'm leaving aside the literary school of writing stories for the explicit purpose of breaking formula and 'just because I can' breaking characters as well. Most readers will get bored with those, or disgusted, and wander off looking for a story that makes them happy. Like a nice warm slice of brioche with raspberry jelly on it. Readers like stories that fit certain paths. I'm not going to tell you what those paths are (this post is long enough as it is), you either know them from what you like to read, or you need to read more, making notes, and then use those notes to distill into the formula you can use for your own work. Also take note of reviews, what people liked, what threw them out of the story, what they wanted more of. It's not the typos, just a hint here. In a really good story, the reader usually misses those because the pattern is strong enough to carry the reader right past them.

In short, formula is a desired result for the writer. The reader wants it, and a writer working at being professional needs to understand it, take it apart, put it back together again knowing what its mechanics are, and then use it to create their own flavors of story. A really good writer can do this and write compelling, enjoyable tales, even within the formula of their genre, that the reader will crave and come back for again and again. A writer bored with the formula writing strictly to some perceived recipe will cause readers to wrinkle their noses and exclaim 'ew, that's so formulaic!' before they go looking for their preferred formula of story. Writers who sell well are skillful, and more importantly, having fun with their formula.

When Using Passive Voice Works by A.C. Cargill  
<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/>

Yes, you can use passive voice!

I know, I know, the “experts” say otherwise. But like all rules, it’s general, meaning that you the author gets to decide when passive voice is preferable to active voice.

Passive voice is when you use a “to be” past participle, that is, something was done by something. “The chicken was chased by the woman” versus “The woman chased the chicken.”

Active voice is more concise and readable, and it sounds stronger and more vibrant, accomplishing your goal as a writer of creating a page-turner, keeping your readers engaged from first page to last.

An article I have seen on the subject says:

Use active voice instead of passive voice, unless you have a legitimate reason for using passive voice (action being more important instead of the doer).

I couldn’t agree more. When I turned on “passive voice” checking as part of the grammar checker in Word 2003, some instances showed up (thankfully, not many). Some I changed and improved things. But in a number of instances, changing to active voice would have made things quite awkward.

Example 1:

“That sweater,” said Dulcina. “I – take it away – all of these things – take them away. I’d rather go naked.” *Her face was twisted in a look of revulsion.* She stepped back from the box suddenly and turned away.

The sentence in italics is passive voice. It works here. It’s an observation by the person to whom she is speaking and is included for the benefit of the reader.

Example 2:

Colonel Eugene Pampas had been attached to the Judge Advocate General’s office of the Freelan National Guard for five years.

Keep your reader in mind. If passive voice is clear to understand and active voice would sound stilted or awkward, stick with passive voice. I tried rewriting the above, and the best I came up with was:

Five years earlier the Freelan National Guard had attached Colonel Eugene Pampas to the Judge Advocate General’s office.

But that seems quite awkward to me and unnecessary, since the original wording is clear, so I left the original in place.

Example 3:

She even had a good chance of being cured altogether as new medicines were being developed.

I had an easier time revising the above into this:

Even her chances of a cure altogether had improved as the development of new medicines progressed.

Bottom Line

Expert advice is great, but ultimately you, the author, have to make the choice.

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

~Finis~