

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

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# Editorial

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# Fiction

Captain Empirical by Sam (aka Shirley) Nicholson

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Despite the cover, this novel following Captain Schuster covers his various maritime commands on Earth. The spaceship is only the first chapter and the last chapters, when he's shepherding ore modules that went awry. In between, this is a marvelous character study of a rough and tumble merchant ship captain who is the company's troubleshooter because he knows the sea, the ships, and the sailors and is a fast study to unravel the cons and salvage the dangerous situations. He's like the James Bond of the merchant marine, without the gadgets, but with a knack for bashing the right heads to solve the problem. He even has an adoring company secretary.

Enjoyed it.

The Crossing by Kevin Ikenberry

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

AmRev woulda been a lot cooler with M-16s!!!

In the spirit of Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South*, Kevin Ikenberry decides to slap a little bit of time travel onto a big historical American war, introducing firepower that's about 200 years ahead of its time. Unlike *The Guns of the South*, *The Crossing* is tight and concise and takes place in the wider sandbox of Eric Flint's *Assiti Shards* universe.

## The Story

If you're unfamiliar with *Assiti Shards*, here's the necessary bit: there are these random jolts of energy that fly across the cosmos from some alien civilization and crash into Earth. When they hit, pieces of land become temporally displaced, moving backward in time by centuries. The late Eric Flint started this universe with his novel *1632*, which expanded into a massive series with numerous collaborators.

*The Crossing* is a *Shards* story featuring a squad of Army cadets in 2008 who suddenly find themselves catapulted backward to December 21st, 1776, in the northeastern United States. They immediately drop into a colonial farm under attack by Hessians, so it's pretty easy to pick sides. They win the fight but one of the Hessians makes off with an M-16, and even though the cadets only had dummy rounds (they were on a training exercise when they got Sharded), it still represents a massive technological leap. If they don't get the gun back, it'll find its way into British hands and change the course of industrial history.

That's just one problem. Once they figure out the date, they realize George Washington's post-Christmas Delaware River attack is less than a week out, and they want to help. In fact, they might have to. This idea has a few speed bumps though, not least of which is that one of the cadets is a woman, and two of them are black. 18th Century America might have had Deborah Sampson and Crispus Attucks, but they were extreme exceptions.

## The Characters

My absolute kryptonite when I read military fiction is that I become “name-blind” when reading about different soldiers who carry the same rank. This became a big problem for me with *The Crossing* because they’re all cadets. The two who stood out to me, though, were Mason and Booker, the black cadets who had to explain to the Continental Army why they were equal to their fellow soldiers in the future.

In the hands of a lesser author, this story element would have been handled poorly, but Ikenberry did a good job with it and didn’t soapbox about anachronistic race relations. The future soldiers explained their time to the army of the past, and once they all had a read on the situation—and they realized their shared goal of establishing America—they carried on with the story.

Even so, the soldiers weren’t cookie-cutter copies of each other. They quarreled and disagreed and had conflicting visions for how to proceed. There were also a few chapters written from George Washington’s perspective, and they felt authentic without feeling forced. Ikenberry handled his characters well here.

## The World

The brief glimpses of 2008 USA are easily recognizable, while the 1776 portion of the novel was easy to understand. Some historical fiction spends a ton of time explaining the setting, but Ikenberry kept a light hand here. There were only a few exposition scenes that stood out—again, the author keeps the story moving.

## The Politics

None.

## Content

R-rating for language (lotta F-bombs, it’s the Army) and an attempted rape (a Hessian is trying to force himself on a colonist when the cadets arrive in 1776, and they save her.)

## Who’s it for?

Fans of historical fiction and military fiction. Other than the time-travel mechanism, sci-fi doesn’t play a huge role.

## Why buy it?

*The Crossing* makes for a great Independence Day read, and in addition to being an entertaining narrative, the characters highlight facts about the Delaware Crossing that don’t get as much attention in history classes. This gives it value beyond a fun mil-fic story.

Dark Web by Declan Finn  
Review by Jim McCoy  
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Holy Dichotomy, Batman! (Pun totally intended.) Dark Web is an awesome book, which shows one Lieutenant Nolan being torn in two directions. One is doing what he was born to do. Tommy fights evil like the champion that he is. But here again, he finds himself confronted with something he can't fight, and it's getting worse. I feel for the guy.

And it's weird because they always tell you not to meet your idols. The inference is that they won't live up to what you want them to be. Mr. Nolan finally comes up against a threat he has no defense against, and it makes me like him more. There's nothing more humbling than watching someone go through something you can't help them with while wishing that you could. Tommy takes a metaphorical (and I think an actual) punch to the gut and it hurts.

I want to talk about this for a bit because it hit me pretty hard. Some authors do things better than others, right? Lots of people can write a book about friends and friendship but very few can do it like J.K. Rowling. Lots of authors write about battles in space but if anyone can do it better than David Weber I don't know who it is. Tom Kratman is the only human being on the planet who can write a training manual and make it entertaining. Declan Finn has always been the best writer I've read when it comes to combining spiritual matters with fun and action. I mean, who else can write a gun battle with a main character who prays the whole time and make it make sense? Finn is the only one I've seen.

What I never expected from a guy like Finn was for him to make me cry my own tears. I'm not that guy. Maybe as a kid I was, but I've been through some things since then. I got through a divorce without crying about losing my ex-wife. But Finn had me crying. I'm not going to tell you what happens, but once you figure it out for yourself, hold on. The part that really had me crying isn't quite here yet.

This is a big thing for me, because writing is art and art is all about evoking an emotional response. Sure, that might be excitement and aggression and with the Saint Tommy, NYPD Series it usually is. Tommy fights some really tough opponents and it's fun to watch him take them down a peg. That's why I like these books.

But I don't usually like things that make me cry. Crying comes from sadness and sadness sucks. I haven't shed tears of joy since...

Uhh...

I got a little choked up at my wedding I guess, but even then, I didn't actually cry. There were no tears at either of my daughters' births...

It's just not me.

It is, therefore, a rare author that can make me cry and have me still enjoy their book. Finn managed to pull it off. Not to be that guy about it, but I didn't think he had it in him. His books are usually rollicking good fun, not the type of thing that would make me get all mushy. So kudos to one of my favorite authors for pulling off something I didn't believe possible.

And the thing is, this is NOT a tear-jerker. There is enough action in Dark Web to make a Rambo movie blush. It's almost non-stop. Finn brings out every monster he can think of. He leaves his hero weak-



ened to face them in places. He pretty much (but not quite) drops a nuke from orbit. He brings back both old friends and old foes. Dark Web is the book where all of the things happen and nothing ever stops. Even when Tommy thinks things are boring, the rest of the crew would disagree.

Dark Web is the best St. Tommy, NYPD book yet and it's almost the last one as well. There's so much in here that I don't think I did it justice. Suffice it to say that I plan on re-reading this one soon. I went through Dark Web in one fell swoop on my day off because I couldn't stop reading it. I was so hooked on this one that I didn't want to do anything but rip through it as fast as I could. As a matter of fact, this one was so good, I think I will give Finn a bonus one ten-millionth of a point to make up for the one I took away earlier.

Bottom Line: 5.0000001 out of 5 Shed Tears

And that's all three if you're keeping score at home. I'm a bit apprehensive about the next one. Blue Saint is the final book in the series and, if you know anything about the Catholic religion, you know there's no such thing as a living saint. We'll see how true that is on October Eleventh. I doubt Finn will make me cry two books straight though.

**The Day of Creation by J.G. Ballard**  
**Review by Jean-Paul Garnier**  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Ballard is by far one of my favorite authors, and while this book was my least favorite of his novels that I have read so far, it was still an amazing and challenging book. While many of his novels focus on the deterioration of urban environments this one takes place in the deserts of Africa during a disastrous irrigation project. Thematically this book felt like a hybrid between Heart of Darkness and Lolita, so it probably goes without saying that it was a dark story. Most of the Ballard novels that I have read have been on the dark side but feel as though they expose some deeper, reluctant truths about humanity. Ballard is the master of cognitive dissonance, and this book is no exception – he often has me rooting for things that I find appalling, without being sure how he got me there. I find that no matter what he is writing about his prose style is eloquent and shocking, unusually succinct, and often times cold. Day of Creation reads like a fever while still making sense, allowing the reader to experience the mental collapse of the characters. This feverishness is a difficult thing to accomplish and brings to mind some other great novels such as Ana Kavan's Ice and Katherine Dunn's Attic. I recommend reading this one but if you haven't read Ballard yet I probably wouldn't start with this here. If you're new to Ballard do yourself a favor and pick up Concrete Island.

**The Dead Mountaineer's Inn by the Strugatsky Brothers**  
**Review by Jean-Paul Garnier**  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

Generally, I love the Strugatsky brothers and had only been aware of their science fiction writing. I have not read many mysteries so when I found this book by authors I love, I figured I'd give it a try. Most of the story was entertaining and somewhat absurd. The tale is about a group of people, supposedly all on vacation up in the snowy mountains, who are blocked in by an avalanche. A murder ensues and then things get continually stranger. An inspector who happens to be staying at the inn takes on the case and tries to piece together the events through a series of weird interviews with the other patrons. For ninety percent of the book, it is a mystery then is wrapped up quickly with a bizarre science fiction explanation of events. My problem with the book is that it ended rather abruptly, and all the loose ends

were tied up in a hurry with preposterous explanations. The ending led me to believe that perhaps this book is a parody of mystery fiction, but I am not well versed enough in the genre to fully get the joke. A fun story, but if you haven't read the Strugatsky brothers yet, I would start with *Roadside Picnic*.

**Deathbringer by Blake Carpenter**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

There is no one more dangerous than someone who wants to be left alone – except someone who has come back from the dead!

Inga Ivanova couldn't be happier. She is about to marry her childhood sweetheart, Pyotr, and take up her rightful place on the collective farm as a wife and mother. Not even her own mother pulling her aside moments before the wedding begins to show her a magnificent sword and tell her a secret can ruin her big day.

Not until the First Daughter of Clan Avard rides up with her soldiers and, confirming Inga's likeness to that of a noblewoman, orders her troops to kill everyone on the farm. Starting with Inga's mother, Pyotr, and Inga herself.

## The Story

One would think being murdered on one's wedding day would be the worst thing to happen. But when Inga, sole remaining heir to the noble Alenir line rather than the common Ivanova family she believed to be her heritage, is revived by her family's ancestral sword, she finds coming back worse than dying. Still wearing her wedding dress, Inga must crawl out from beneath a pile of bodies – the remains of the farmers she has known all her life. Her mother and husband-to-be are among the slain, and Inga can barely find the strength to stand up as she watches her world burn.

Stumbling to another collective farm, Inga is psychically contacted by her ancestral family sword. Known as Deathbringer, this Spellsword was thought lost when Inga's great-grandmother, Katarina, died trying to start her own empire. Instead, along with Katarina's daughter – Inga's grandmother – the blade went into hiding.

Now Yenda Avard the Younger, First Daughter and heir to the Avard line, has that precious sword. Yenda has been fascinated for a long time with the Spellwords. Despite being in line to wield the Spellsword Frostbite, she wants more. She wants another blade. She wants Deathbringer.

So long as an heir to the Alenir line draws breath, however, Deathbringer will remain out of Yenda's control. Living without a heartbeat, Inga must reclaim her ancestral heritage before the week is out. Otherwise, she will die and Yenda the Younger will gain her family's Spellword. As soon as she has that, she will make Katarina Alenir's attempt to take over the world look like child's play. Yet how can a farm girl who is more dead than alive reach the capital of Clan Avard's holdings when every soldier under Yenda's command is looking for her?

Maybe she should ask the man who murdered her for help.

## The Characters

Inga's determination to claim revenge would be boring or downright horrible if it wasn't balanced by



her compassion and better nature. She suppresses none of her normal personality during the story and hunts Yenda the Younger down for more than simple revenge. Part of her wants to protect others from suffering as she has, making her a more interesting and altogether fun heroine to travel with as the book progresses.

Kale Isrodel is a man trapped in a bad situation with no way out. A decent fellow, he has no stomach for murder but finds himself unable to avoid killing at least one woman on Yenda's order. When that woman comes back from the dead, however, he tacitly decides it is a second chance. A chance to do something good and to make up in some minor way for the atrocity he helped to perpetrate.

Yenda the Younger is a piece of work. A manipulative and spoiled brat, she wants power for its own sake and will do anything to get it, from rape to murder to wholesale slaughter. The only stipulation is that she cannot get her own hands dirty doing such deeds; it would be unseemly for a woman of her standing to actually murder someone. Her cold-hearted perfection makes her even more detestable and monstrous, meaning she is a truly great villainess.

## The World

Imagine a fantastical Russia where magic is real and all families are matriarchies, with descent traced from mother to daughter. Then add in powerful swords and rumors of one blade that could end the world, and you have some idea of the world of Deathbringer. With trains and dirigibles alongside horses and wagons, Deathbringer's world has the feel of Tsarist Russia in the latter half of the 19th century or just at the beginning of the 20th. Perfect for a tale of bloody deeds the local nobles try to hush up or ignore, where one young woman's determination to bring her family's murderers to justice might cause more than a slight upset to the status quo.

## Politics

There are no politics that are not part of the story in this book. Deathbringer is mercifully free of present-day issues, focusing entirely on telling a compelling tale rather than on making any kind of political point.

## Content Warning

There is lots of death, and a chapter that describes the morning-after realization of female-on-male rape, as well as the mention that the character endured rape on numerous occasions. Foul language, most but not all of which is made up, is also present. Some gore naturally gets mentioned as well. This book would rate on the higher end of a PG-13 scale for these reasons, but any mature teenager will not be put off by these items.

## Who is it for?

Those who like tales of revenge with protagonists who do not lose their humanity or become permanently obsessed by it will enjoy this book. Anyone who wants to see other cultures portrayed in new settings and new ways will find it entertaining as well. The novel should appeal to fantasy fans everywhere but particularly those interested in Slavic and Russian milieus, as the story has the air of Anastasia about it. Those who want a new twist on familiar tropes should find this story quite engaging.

## Why buy it?

It is a new twist on an old trope, with a setting one does not often see. Bonus points, no politics. Why not purchase it and give it a read?

**Demons are Forever by Declan Finn**  
**Review by George Phillis**

Declan Finn continues to give us supernatural fiction with heavy religious overtones. This is actually the second book of a four-book (at least at the moment) series, on which I had not read the first book, but the book is sufficiently well done that you can simply drop into it and follow what is going on. Not only are the two lead characters clearly presented, but the lesser characters appear to be solid, not simple walk-ons.

As an opener, the writing is considerably better than in Finn's Saint Tommy, and the writing there was quite good. There is considerable amount of well-chosen descriptive prose, intermingled with well described hand-to-hand combat scenes and chaste romance. I would contrast with Saint Tommy, in which there was a great deal of combat and somewhat less of everything else.

The romance has some minor difficulties. The heroine of the piece is a vampire. However, when she became a vampire she chose the side of good, not the side of evil, so she is a dutiful Roman Catholic who attends mass on a regular basis and partakes of the Eucharist, the Blood of Christ. The hero, so far as it is revealed in this book, is an extremely dangerous but otherwise normal mortal. The hero and heroine are each other's love interest, a matter that they are unwilling to admit to each other.

Finn applies the fundamental rule that in real combat some number of people die, including people who are introduced as attractive characters and carried along for part of the book. Of course, some people are harder to kill than others, including the heroine, but also including the chief villain. Unlike some other magical tales, the heroes have heard that there these neat modern weapons that are at least somewhat combat-effective against supernatural creatures.

We also have politics, both mundane world and supernatural world. If there are enough vampires, there is a vampiric government. If there is a human government, there are supernatural creatures looking to subvert it.

If you are into supernatural fiction, well-written, with substantial combat elements and a romance, you might well enjoy the series. Recommended.

**Destiny by Declan Finn**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**  
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

While I am one hundred percent certain that Tommy Nolan does not, under any circumstances, cave in to wrath, it seems that Declan Finn most certainly does. In this case, Finn got frustrated after the Italian government trying to force him and his wife to pay an exorbitant fine while simultaneously having their travel plans cancelled because of an honest mistake. The Nolan family goes through basically the same thing and then...

It gets ugly.

Listen, I'm a history nerd with the degree to prove it. I've even got a couple of graduate credits in

American History. I've always loved the history of both Ancient Rome and the Christian Church as well, but I never pursued those as a degree because I don't have the language skills. Seriously.

And what Finn does to some of the coolest historical architecture in Rome was kinda...

Well...

Were you a wrestling fan in the Nineties? Did you see the Undertaker/Mick Foley Hell in a Cell match? The one where Taker choked and slammed Foley through the top of the cell into the thumbtacks? Do you remember running your fingers through your own hair, your eyes huge and your feet kicking? Do you remember the simultaneous feeling of "OH MY GOD THAT WAS SO COOL!!!!" mixed with "OH MY GOD THIS SUCKS!!!" with just a wee bit of "DID THAT REALLY JUST HAPPEN?!" Do you remember that feeling?

Yeah, I experienced that a few times with Destiny. Seriously, Hollywood needs to stop rebooting crap and make this into a movie.

Err...

Just as long as I don't have to be the one to pay for the special effects.

So it's only fair to say that the action scenes were amazing. Saint Tommy with all his charisms and quite a few allies up against the best that Hell has to send after him. It's amazing and believable. Tommy takes a beating a few times. When he's up against what he gets thrown at him, that makes sense. He even has to be reminded to take care of himself at times.

And that's one of the things I like about Tommy Nolan. He's strong physically, strong at heart, and strong spiritually but we're reminded that his very strength is also a great weakness. He tries to take too much on himself and not accept help. I wish this didn't make as much sense to me as it does, but at the end of the day it's horrifyingly realistic.

Also, the physical effects of aging are pretty accurately portrayed as well. It seems that our St. Tommy isn't as young as he used to be. I get that. I'm forty-five and sometimes my recovery takes a while longer. Since St. Tommy is forty-five in Destiny as well, it makes sense that he would suffer some of the same probl...

Hey wait!

Finn just said I was getting too old for something! You're busted, buddy. That's a one-ten millionth of a point deduction for...

uhh...

Sumfin'

Pretty sure it was sumfin'.

The rest of the family is on vacation with Tommy. This doesn't start out as a business trip. It's weird because I never thought I'd say this about a St. Tommy NYPD book, but there is a certain Scooby Doo element here. Not the stupid humor thing, because that would never work in a St. Tommy novel. But it

does have kind of an air of "Look guys, we're on vacation! This is gonna be SOO fun!" that then turns into "Uh, oh." Seriously, this thing needs two "Zoiks" and a "Jinkies" before the action really gets going. Well, either that, or maybe I'm just a nerd.

Okay, not really. What it really needed was for my dispatcher to shut up and stop sending me off to make money while I was trying to read. Seriously, don't become a cab driver. But if you ever do, don't start a good book on the first. Just don't do it. That's the busiest time of month and it can be hard to do your job when your body is in Michigan but your mind is in another country fighting demons. I would definitely recommend reading *Destiny*, but I would also try to find an open spot in my schedule if I were you. It's going to take up quite a bit of your time after all, because you're not going to want to put it down.

Bottom Line: 4.9999999 out of 5 Missed Fares

**The First Book of Swords, by Fred Saberhagen**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
**Telegraphs & Tar Pits #70**

Similar to Terry Brooks's *The Elfstones of Shannara* and Niel Hancock's *Circle of Light #1: Greyfax & Grimwald*, this excellent first outing in Saberhagen's fantasy series alludes to a higher-technology time that came before. "[I]n some cases, they even had access to certain surviving technology of the Old World," he writes. In her wonderfully contextual afterword, Sandra Miesel indicates that Saberhagen's earlier trilogy *The Empire of the East* (later published in one volume) "takes place in a post-catastrophe North America whose culture is vaguely medieval. Wizardry dominates this demon-ridden age while the rare bits of technology surviving from the Old World are objects of superstitious awe." Though intriguing, that doesn't really come into play in this volume.

Despite such potential, this first book is largely a fantasy in which the gods—or beings presumed to be gods—meddle in the doings of men, unbalancing political tensions and military positions of power... just for kicks. In the prologue, one of those figures forges 12 swords, some of which come into play over the course of this book. Finding and wielding one of the swords gives its possessor certain powers, and various leaders strive to collect multiple swords to secure their positions of power.

Our protagonist, however, is a 13-year-old boy who absconds with his father's sword after an accidental slaying. He falls in with a traveling dragon slayer, who wields one of the other swords, and undergoes a series of adventures as he tries to survive; learn the secrets of his sword, *Town saver*; and make his way in the world. People try to steal his sword, he loses it, he finds another sword, and he finds friendship as the world around him surges and sways in response to the meddling of the gods.

All in all, *The First Book of Swords* is an enjoyable fantasy. It offers traditional, familiar tropes—youth as hero, discovered magical power, and multiple big baddies vying to gain power—and is very well written, neither cursory nor overwritten. I shall seek out the subsequent books.

Miesel's afterword, "Sword-Play," shall inspire me to seek out other writing by Saberhagen, as well. In the afterword, she considers the author's "technical expertise and mythic instinct" in books such as *The Veils of Azarloc*, the berserker series, Saberhagen's *Dracula* series, *The Empire of the East*, and the subsequent *Book of Swords*. After a brief digression on game-oriented sf—an avid chess-player, Saberhagen often focuses on the topic of games in his fiction—Miesel explores the meaning of the number 12, the meaning of swords in myth and fantasy literature, and the various swords in the *Book of Swords*. Already, I can see the value and enjoyment in reading a novel about the adventures and misad-

ventures of each sword, each possessing its own personality and power. Dan Wells's 2016 Tor.com piece "Power with Consequences: Fred Saberhagen's Swords Series" offers additional context.

Well done, Mr. Saberhagen, from your scabbards to our bookshelves. Apparently, there's a 2002 movie titled *The Book of Swords*. Unlike *The Shannara Chronicles* 2016 television miniseries, it has nothing to do with its namesake book. Instead, the film is a martial arts flick about a police officer in Chicago.

Grimm's War, books 1-3, by Jeffrey H. Haskell  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

"Firefly" meets the U.S. Navy, in SPAAAAACE!

As well as Haskell did with his *Full Metal Superhero* series, he really hit his stride when he committed to military space opera in the *Grimm's War* novels. 900 years in the future, mankind has spread across the galaxy, and boy is it a mixed bag. The novels focus on Jacob T. Grimm, a naval officer on a redemption quest with an outdated ship and a ragtag crew. I chanced an Audible credit on the 3-in-1 box set and was not disappointed.

Against All Odds (Book 1)

With Grimm Resolve (Book 2)

One Decisive Victory (Book 3)

The Story

Right out of the gate, we get a glimpse of young naval officer Jacob T. Grimm on the deck of a warship in space, circa 2900 AD. In the middle of a conflict, he orders his ship to fire on what he perceives to be an enemy vessel, only to find to his horror that it was full of families and children.

Extenuating circumstances keep him from being completely expelled from the Navy, but his name is now Mudd. Nobody is harder on him about it than himself. When he's relegated to a rundown vessel at the edge of civilized space, he's determined to whip his crew into shape and salvage what he can of his legacy, not due to his pride, but out of duty.

What follows across the first book and into the next two is a progression of escalating tasks that put Grimm and his crew up against space pirates, slavers, separatists, and more. While the first two were fine, they were also a little bit "safe" as far as serials go—here's a bad guy, here's what he wants, here's why he's dangerous, go stop him. The books were enjoyable but the only thing "fresh" about them was the worldbuilding.

Then the third book comes along, and Haskell pulls a *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*, where just as Grimm is starting to repair his reputation, he's asked by high command to feign an insurrection and take his ship deep into enemy space on a rage mission against an existential threat. Politics prevent the Navy from attacking when they absolutely should. However, Grimm is uniquely positioned to do so, both in the eyes of the military and the public, so the question then becomes: will it work?

With all of the military fic I've been reading lately, this series was refreshing in its pacing; the prose was smooth and straightforward, while still demonstrating that it had heart, and wasn't just rushed off.

It helps that Grimm is an earnest character that I felt sorry for and wanted to see him service his raging guilt for his error. Haskell struck the right balance between portraying Grimm as both resolved and sorrowful.

## The Characters

As happens often in military fiction, many of the names run together, but the character types come through strong all the same. Grimm is a disgraced officer looking for redemption. On his new assignment, the 40-year-old Interceptor, he's got a lot of lazy crewmen with bad habits, and the occasional low-ranking officer who sticks to the book and isn't sure what to think of the new captain.

I've never been in the military, but I've worked in plenty of "ensemble" jobs where it's easy to identify these personalities. The slacker. The wise cracker. The kiss-ass. The corporate climber. They all bounced off of Grimm in different ways, and he in turn influenced them to live up to their commission as service members.

I especially appreciated that Grimm was a man of faith; it plays a role in how he handles trials, without being so in-your-face as to reclassify the series under Christian fiction. He's a little bit Captain Picard and a little bit Captain America, before either of those men had cemented their reputations.

## The World

900 years is a lot to cover, and Haskell doesn't bother hitting you with all the details before he gets underway. Much like planet Earth, different pockets of the skies are dominated by different ethnic or social groups, and when they get rowdy enough to draw the Navy's attention, we get to see a new corner of the cosmos.

Did I mention I've never been in the military? I've also never been a physicist, but I felt like I could understand the mechanics of these spaceships and their battles in the black. "Gravities" (and multiples thereof) determine how fast a ship moves, and hard projectile weapons come in varying gauges. It all feels very realistic, or at least, very well thought-out.

## Politics

## Content Warning

High PG-13 on the language. Haskell does like to do the "What the f—" [explosion] thing, so you don't get the fully caffeinated version of the big word. Some combat violence, and soft descriptions of war crimes.

## Who is it for?

If you enjoyed Taylor Anderson's Destroyermen novels about a WW2-era destroyer that travels to a parallel world and gets caught up in a tribal war, you'll dig the naval element of Grimm's War. But the story itself is relatable to anyone who misses Firefly and dreams about expanding humanity out into the black.

## Why buy it

Jacob T. Grimm is a God-fearing man who made a terrible mistake and has committed his life to fixing



it. Aside from the cool setting and the epic space combat, it's the rare pious heroism that makes this series a good investment of time for the reader.

**Into Deepest Space by Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle**

**Review by Roy Lockwood**

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

This discount bin novel reads like it should have been left in the bin. A human and three allied aliens in an allied alien ship get captured and pulled by a giant alien Yela spaceship to a place outside the galaxy. Along this trip, they must confront several 'deepest space' challenges as their ship is slowly deprived of energy, life support, and so on. Sounds great but reads poorly. The astronomy portion of the book offers a ring of authenticity, albeit circa early 1970s, as author Sir Fred Hoyle is an astronomer of note. Why there is interstellar travel, and no human colonies remains a mystery, as does the use of hydrogen to counter the effects of a solar lithium bomb that frees humanity, or at least the four main characters, from the confines of Earth. The main characters? Everything about them must be in a prequel because they are certainly not developed beyond cardboard cutouts here. And how did they get back to the galaxy, much less to Earth? After painstakingly describing every astronomical phenomenon, the use of a black hole seems more handwavium than anything else. Maybe Sir Fred had to hit a deadline. This could have been so much more.

**Lightbringer by Declan Finn**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Okay, so this time we're back on our side of the Atlantic and there are no more priceless historical artifacts around to mercilessly slaughter. That's a good thing. I like my violence with a side of not destroying the ruins of an ancient society. I mean, it's not like Ancient Rome wasn't a cesspit, but modern New York is not only a cesspit, it's one whose loony ideas I have to deal with on a regular basis.

And once again, as much as Finn says he hates his hometown you can tell how much he loves his hometown by how well he writes it and Lightbringer is no different. Anne Rice may have had a bigger love affair with New Orleans than Finn has with New York, but it's a close-run race. The city itself oozes off the pages. All of New York's features and all its foibles can be found here. It really feels like Finn hates the local politics but loves the city for what it is when he's not dealing with politicians. I have an urban fantasy work in progress and a lot of the reason I put it in the Detroit area is so that I could do Detroit as well as Finn does New York.

I really like Lightbringer because Tommy Nolan finally faces something he can't take head on. I mean that sincerely. I love the fact that Saint Tommy is, well, a saint, but really if you pulled the prayer and the emphasis on piety and good works as a spiritual concept out of the books, what you'd have left is a superhero. Don't misunderstand me. I love superheroes. I just think that Thomas Nolan has a little more to him than Captain America or Superman. I mean, spiritually powered lightsabers are awesome, but...

I mean...

You can't solve every problem by stabbing it, or blowing it up, sprinkling it with holy salt or..

You get the picture.

And, as a man of faith who has been through some things, I can tell you truly that while God does an-

swer prayer, it's not always with the answer you want.

This time around the man who can bilocate, levitate, call on angels for backup and outshoot pretty much anything he faces goes up against something that none of that will work on. In a sense, a very real one, you could say that he's facing his worst fear. And it makes him seem much more human than he was before.

Sometimes with heroes, and it doesn't matter whether we're talking Bruce Wayne or Chris Kyle, Hal Jordan or Saint Peter, it's easy to forget that these are human beings. You get so used to thinking about what they've done that you forget who they are. There are times during *Lightbringer* when we're reminded that one Thomas Nolan is a man, just like the rest of us. I've always found Finn's characterizations to be realistic but after reading this one, I feel closer to St. Tommy.

And it makes sense, because two of Nolan's kids are adults now, and they are hardcore. It does the heart good to see the babies all grown up following in their father's footsteps, still seeing the old man on a regular basis, hanging out and doing some of the heavy lifting. The way they show their support for their daddy the best way they know how. And the youngest, not yet grown, is showing signs (I think) of being something special herself someday.

But don't let me get too sentimental on you. I guess I'm just getting soft in my old age. There is plenty of over-the-top action to keep you entertained. Things go boom. Things go pow. Things go bop, bang, zing. There's a collision or two. Some special friends show up when needed. A hole appears that wasn't there before. And, well...

Listen, this isn't a spoiler. It's in the title. But the book lives up to its title. Either you get that, or you don't. If you do you already knew what was going to happen. If you don't you have no clue what I'm talking about. I just know that I was prepared to get really upset if I didn't see something occur and it did. If you don't know what, go read the book. If you still don't get it, leave a comment and I'll try to explain it to you. Then again, if you don't get it, maybe *Lightbringer* isn't the only book you need to read.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Soul Rings

**Men and Machines Edited by Robert Silverberg**

**Review by Russ Lockwood**

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

With all this talk about artificial intelligence roiling society, I found a discount bin book that reprinted 10 short stories covering the same subject. These stories, originally printed from 1941 to 1964 in various magazines, consider how we humans will adapt, or not, to AI-controlled robots. Most of the short stories cover the robots taking over. With *Folded Hands* by Jack Williamson (1947) builds on the robots keeping humans "safe." *The Twonky* by Lewis Padgett (1942) gets my nod as runner-up for best story.

Enjoyed it.

Nightland Racer by Fenton Wood  
Review by Chris DiNote  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Most if not all the major mainstream imprints would have no idea what to do with this book, let alone have the guts to publish it.

Nightland Racer is a 2021 novel by indie writer Fenton Wood, author of the five-part Yankee Republic: A Mythic Radio Adventure series, and his most recent work, Hacking Galileo. Nightland Racer is the first of his books I've read, and it's a doozy that makes me look forward to reading more of his work. What I admire most about the current indie, Pulp Rev and Iron Age scenes is the authors' fearlessness. I think most if not all the major mainstream imprints would have no idea what to do with this book, let alone have the guts to publish it.

Nightland Racer is an astounding "big idea" book. At first it deceives you into thinking that it's just a straightforward alternate universe 1980s sci-fi-horror action movie homage, the low budget-direct to VHS-on the bottom shelf-at your local non-chain video rental store kind. On TV at 3:00 a.m. if you have basic cable.

However, the book is much more than that. Nightland Racer draws on themes of mythical America, the Cold War, ancient mythology and folklore, hard science, theoretical physics, and the Power of Engineering. It's an exploration of a terrifying potential future, eldritch horror, and deep time.

Its most important and namesake inspiration is British author William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*, originally published in 1912. It is considered one of the most important works of weird fiction, and foundational to the Dying Earth genre. While reading *The Night Land* adds context to Wood's book, it's not a requirement. Wood's book is also not related to the collection of *Night Land* tribute fiction found here, and the highly regarded stories by John C. Wright.

In his introduction Wood tells us that his work is not a sequel to *The Night Land*, but a "reimagining." Now I know that word tends to flash a well-deserved giant red DANGER warning these days, but rest assured Wood did it right, and *Nightland Racer* stands on its own.

## The Story

Reynard "The Fox" Douglas is, or was, the world's greatest outlaw race car driver, so good that NASCAR became little more than a boring hobby. He got himself in trouble with the law, and in the process lost his career, his wealth, his family, his whole life, and becoming a washed up drunk for his trouble. To say he has a problem with the U.S. government is an understatement.

Then one day, the President himself shows up on Douglas' doorstep, to draft him for a world-saving mission. Douglas is the only man capable of piloting the ENLAV-AM, the Experimental Nuclear Land Vehicle, Antarctic Model. The ENLAV is the world's ultimate supercar, capable of reaching supersonic speeds in a straight run.

The government needs him to drive the ENLAV headlong into the ominous "Zone." The Zone, a misty other dimensional realm of shadowy monsters invading the real world, is slowly growing outward from the site of the 1945 Trinity atomic bomb tests. The Zone already encompasses hundreds of square miles and will someday engulf the entire world. Douglas's task is to detonate a nuclear weapon at its heart and destroy the singularity believed to be its source. All previous attempts to explore and destroy the Zone have ended in failure and death.

During his mission, Douglas learns that the singularity is merely a manifestation of a sentient black hole, intent on devouring Earth. Encountering the singularity, Douglas finds himself transported ten million years into Earth's future. He encounters the strange and horrific life of the Nightland and its final civilizations, as he embarks on a race to find an ancient superweapon, the one thing that might defeat the sentient black hole and restore the world.

Now, for the writing itself.

Nightland Racer uses a limited third person narrator when the action centers on Douglas's point of view. Wood does occasionally shift the narrator to omniscient, but only when Douglas or another character's knowledge or observations reveal insights that alter their frame of reference. This occurs during the story's final quarter, when Douglas has access to a far more cosmic level of perception.

The prose is straightforward and fits adventure fiction. Wood consciously avoids aping late Victorian and Edwardian flowery prose common to the original era of weird fiction. He also avoids Hodgson's often criticized faux-eighteenth century style used in *The Night Land*.

Wood shifts often between breakneck action, scientific exposition, and travelogue to hell, all culminating in a space-bound psychedelic hard-science climax. The payoff is tremendous, and most, but not all, questions are answered.

On the negative side, the book does lend itself to periods of odd or slow pacing, and occasional data dumps. I needed multiple read throughs of some to wrap my head around the concepts. I have two degrees in history, and a third in over-baked international relations theory, and as much as I love science, a lot of this went way over my head.

There are four parts to the narrative: First, a 1980s action film setup and training montage (cue *Rocky IV* and the *Karate Kid* soundtracks). Then, a high-speed action sci-fi-horror journey into hell (the Zone.) Wood notes in his introduction that Jon Mollison's *Barbarian Emperor* inspired the Zone, although I don't think a comparison to *The Mist* or some of John Carpenter's work is out of bounds either. The third is the journey through the Nightland itself, a *Roadside Café of Dying Earth* horror. The fourth is an ultimate battle in space via Antarctica that puts *2001*, Disney's *The Black Hole*, and the whole V'Ger bit of *Star Trek: The (non) Motion Picture* to shame. Science stretches out to incredulity, and a slew of homages to very classic pulp science fiction and science fantasy come full circle. I think there's an homage to Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky* in there too, but I might be reading too much into it.

The denouement takes place somewhere and somewhen else, and to say more would spoil it. However, it is satisfying, even sweet, in sort of a Studio Gainax kind of way (thankfully, not like the original *Evangelion* or *Space Runaway Ideon*). If Wood isn't referencing a little bit of *Dark Star* and even *Red Dwarf* here, I'd be shocked.

## The Characters

The story has few named characters beyond the protagonist and hero, Reynard Douglas, and two companions who accompany him in specific phases of the story.

In his introduction, Wood tells us that Douglas is based on "the real-life biography of Junior Johnson, and other bootleggers turned racecar drivers." I'm not a NASCAR guy, I'm more Ford v Ferrari when it comes to racing, but Wood writes a compelling flawed hero from these sources.

Douglas's companions are there to contrast him, move the story along, and to highlight his regeneration

from bitter wash-up to hero.

His first companion is a fighter pilot straight from central casting who serves as Douglas' ENLAV co-pilot. Lt Zack Strasser (great 1980s action hero name) is the only candidate to make it through the grueling selection process and come remotely close to matching Douglas's skill. Strasser pushes Douglas to wake up to the fact that he can't do this alone. Strasser makes the heroic sacrifice needed to transition the story from the Zone to the Nightland.

Tao is Douglas's companion in the Nightland itself, and Douglas' guide. Tao is one of the most unusual, horrifying, fascinating, and noble cybernetic beings I've ever seen in print. He's a man of strong character, both savage and civilized at the same time. He hails from a culture long after Douglas's twentieth century, while there was still a sun, long before the sunless Nightland. Tao plays Qeequeg to Douglas' Ishmael, or Enkidu to Douglas's Gilgamesh if you prefer.

Tao is introduced by rescuing Douglas from Nightland Racer's version of the Last Redoubt, which in Wood's universe is not the brave yet doomed final home of the evolved human race found in the original story, but home to something evil.

He's also the source of most of the scientific expositions in the novel. However, Tao's knowledge, the result of his cybernetic modifications, is crucial to understanding this world, its inhabitants, and civilizations, how it happened, and what happens to it and the entire cosmos.

Tao becomes Douglas's devoted friend. He commits to the quest to defeat the evil sentient black sun dooming the Earth, the Solar System, and all of existence.

Other characters are rarely named. They are archetypes referred to by their titles such as "The President" or "The General." They exist as foils for Douglas and represent larger and impersonal forces such as Government or Science Gone Wrong. Other characters represent the Nightland's dying civilizations.

Some of the eldritch horrors are manifestations of Platonic Solids or embodied abstract concepts.

Now things get weird.

First up is the King Who Was A Thousand. While long dead by the era of the Nightland, the shadow of this world ruling hero and tyrant looms over the entire Solar System. Douglas and Tao's efforts to uncover his secrets drive much of the plot. There is something of the "Emprah protects" to him, although his sourcing in actual mythology is stronger and more satisfying.

The Nighthorse. I'm just going to leave him for the reader to ponder.

Yaldabaoth. The evil sentient black hole. To not give away the game, I'll leave you with a C. S. Lewis quote from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: "...that is not what a star is but only what it is made of." I'll also give you this clue; the name Yaldabaoth and what it represents hails from Gnosticism.

## The World

Wood builds his world through exposition, Tao's descriptions, and Douglas's experience of the environment.

In the first part of the book, Douglas and his government handlers discuss the Soviets, and the descrip-

tions of 1980s artifacts fix the story in time, place, and mood. The General and others lay out the threat of the Zone, as well as their limited understanding of what lies within it.

The ENLAV is described in loving detail, and engineering nerds will love it. If you're not predisposed to science and engineering, or to the psychology behind human high-performance training, or to military team building, you will not enjoy this part as much.

Now, in the second part of the book, the journey through the Zone, Wood shows a lot more than he tells, as Douglas and Strasser go on their terrifying Cannonball Run. The danger is both psychological and very concrete at the same time.

Wood applies this technique in the third section, set in the far future Nightland. By keeping Douglas and his companions inside the relative safety of the ENLAV, traveling at enormous speed through an environment inimical to unblemished natural life, this makes the glimpses of monstrous threats powerful and effective. They linger.

The beings of the Nightland don't just attack physically, they slowly eat away at the sanity and souls of Douglas and Tao. Wood builds on the claustrophobia, the evil black sun's hatred of life, the loneliness of being the last of their kind, and the fear of mission failure. This makes the excursions outside the ENLAV far more terrifying.

If anything, it's when the book stops and lingers for a while, whether contemplating a lost civilization or something so alien and evil that reality itself non-metaphorically pulls away from it, that the book pays tribute to the source material.

However, the third part of the book also makes heavy use of exposition. Tao is a walking encyclopedia of the Nightland (thanks to his cybernetic brain implants). You will either find Tao's exposition fascinating and intellectually challenging, or you will get bored and annoyed by the "tour guide" aspect.

Wood tries, and mostly succeeds, in balancing hard science with mythology and the dark vision found in Hodgson's book, and in the works of other authors Wood cites as influences, including John C. Wright, Gene Wolfe, and Jack Vance.

If he had left out the hard science, we would have a pure fantasy story, still powerful, but much shallower. Science blends with metaphysics and mysticism. It's not "just" magic, or "technology so advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic."

This becomes even more relevant in the book's climax and decisive battle in space. It works with time itself in a satisfying way that Doctor WHO attempts but typically falls short. Tao is critically important here, because unless you are a theoretical physicist, you're going to have a rough time enjoying this segment beyond the surface level action and amazing imagery of the most powerful forces known in the universe. However, this allows Douglas, and through him, the reader, to see, understand, and finally, take part in the final showdown between good and evil, life and death, creation, and destruction.

## The Politics

Wood isn't shy about politics, for both world building and plot construction.

Hero Reynard Douglas is no fan of the federal government and holds to a classically liberal worldview with libertarian tendencies.



Wood's presentation of U.S. military and federal officials in the first phase of the story casts them as doomed "top men" failing to stop a slow but sure world-ending disaster, one unleashed by their own arrogance. The story makes no bones about the physical and moral dangers science can unleash, especially when "could" trumps "should," to paraphrase a popular movie based on another popular book. Douglas encounters many twisted examples of this flavor of "the ends justify the means" morality along his journey.

The author draws a direct thread from contemporary 21st-century politics to the dying civilizations of the Nightland. This includes commentary on evil peculiar to women, and evil peculiar to men, but posits that the worse evil occurs when both hold each other in contempt.

Wood also directly addresses the eventual fate of the United States, albeit in an approach this reviewer found a bit heavy handed but grounded in very genuine issues.

## Content Warning

There are intense descriptions of body horror and torture. I agree with the recommendation of "age 12 and up," with parental discretion advised. There is also mild use of profanity, but nothing above PG-13.

The "abhuman" monsters and other horrors of the Nightland are terrifying in appearance, their alienness, and their sheer danger and power. However, like the original Night Land, and many of the other influences Wood cites in his introduction, much of the horror is by implication. He makes excellent use of what's left unsaid. In that, the sense of existential and spiritual dread takes hold. In other words, the exact reaction H.P. Lovecraft proposed good supernatural literary horror should cause in the reader.

## Who is it for?

This book is for, well, me. "Fenton Wood" is a nom de plume, but I suspect he's Gen X or close to it. He hits too many of the right notes, at the right time, that someone like me finds the book tailor made.

I was born in the late '70s, a kid in the '80s, and a teenager in the '90s. What red-blooded American boy of that age doesn't secretly want to drive the Most Awesome Hot Wheels Car Ever to save the world on a mission given by the President, only to find themselves thrust 10,000,000 years into the future, find a best buddy who could easily be a Masters of the Universe character, face reality-defying mutants and monsters, survive a deadly hellscape of eternal night, search for a literal Man in the Moon, all the while with a freaking evil sentient black hole trying to destroy the whole universe. Just typing that all out made me want to start singing "The Night Begins to Shine" with my eight-year-old daughter.

## Why Buy It?

1. Its mind blowing. I'm going to read it again. I know I missed things on the first go.
2. It's well-executed overall. There are fair criticisms, including a pace that occasionally lags, expositional data dumps, and a heavy-handed approach to Current Year politics. However, none of these stopped me from finishing the book or hurt my enjoyment of it. Wood's superficial knowledge of the U.S. military irked me more, but he's also not writing Mil Sci-Fi or contemporary military thrillers, and I'm one of those veteran types who will absolutely find something wrong with even the best fictional depictions of the armed forces.

3. It pays due respect to its forbearers. Wood takes Hodgson's setting and uses it as a springboard for his own ideas, and to pay tribute to the worthies he acknowledges. It may get you to read some old books and learn what the cultural vandals stole from you.

I agree with John C. Wright that this criticism is often unfair and that critics usually miss the point. Thankfully, we are not alone in this. We contend that Hodgson attempted to evoke sacred scripture in *The Night Land*. I also agree with the hypothesis that *The Night Land* was the earliest written of WHH's novels, although the final one published. This puts the book and the rest of his entire fictional output in context. He didn't "build up" to the themes and ideas in *The Night Land*, he started there, and the rest of his work flowed from and back toward it.

In an email conversation between Mr. Wright and I, John stressed that the use of a biblical style is necessary to discuss the "four last things" of death, judgement, heaven, and hell. I haven't read the plain English "A Story Retold" adaptation of *The Night Land*, but I fear modernizing the language may obscure the deeper aspects of the story, even if it's easier to read. To that point, WHH also released an abridged version of the 200,000-word novel, called *The Dream of X* which may serve as a better introduction to the story.

**Nunslinger: The Complete Series, by Stark Holborn**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
**Telegraphs & Tar Pits #69**

Originally issued as a series of 12 16-chapter ebooks, this resulting collected novel isn't science-fictional or fantastic in the supernatural sense, but it is hard-driving, serialized genre fiction that owes a debt to other similar western adventures, serials and series books. It's a persistently breathless approach to storytelling that maintains its cliffhanger pace relatively well for the duration.

Practically every chapter pulls you to the next, and the books pull the reader to the subsequent books, to the extent that I can hardly imagine reading these as serialized ebooks rather than all in one go. It's an intense reading experience and slightly more rewarding than I remember Stephen King's six-part serial *The Green Mile*.

The idea is simple: A nun with guns, the six-gun sister. Its execution was excellent, offering challenging antagonists, a wonderful setting, and gallant compatriots. Were it not for the more recent streaming series *Mrs. Davis*, I'd expect a TV show!

**Perseus Corbett and the Forbidden Valley by David Breitenbeck**  
**Review by Caroline Furlong**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A childhood dream. A torn manuscript. Terrors and wonders that lie hidden in the Amazon....

As a boy, Perseus Corbett was sent from London to Sangral House in the English countryside for his health. There he was apprenticed to his uncle, a gardener on the estate, whereafter he met the young Elizabeth Alban, daughter of Baron Darrow. While the two became fast friends and spent their summers together in happiness, Elizabeth's mother was disturbed at how attached her daughter had become to the gardener's nephew.

Lady Darrow decided that her daughter should come on family a trip to American, convincing Perseus' father to call the lad back home to London. But she did not prevent the two youths from spending one

last day together. During that day, Elizabeth seizes the opportunity to give Perseus a gift, and the two share their first kiss....

## The Story

Having been forced to part from Elizabeth, Perseus has dreamt of only one thing: Finding or earning enough wealth to marry her. This desire leads him to travel the world, fight in the War to End All Wars, and adventure Indiana Jones-style around the globe, following every hint of treasure or lost riches that he can find. One such escapade ends with him earning Martin Halritter, valet to a now deceased Austrian count, as his traveling companion.

The two find themselves in Istanbul, in need of funds and with no new destination in mind. Where can they go to try and make Perseus' fortune now that Russia, which has just witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution, is closed to them?

The answer arrives when he and Martin rush to a dying old man's aid. Too late to save his life, Corbett is surprised when the old man pushes a tattered manuscript into his hands. Muttering about hidden treasure in the Amazon, the man gives up the ghost before Perseus can learn more. Reading the manuscript later offers no further clues, as it cuts off halfway through. He and Martin must wonder whether the treasure – and the monster said to guard it – mentioned in the book is real or not.

When a man holds Corbett at gunpoint on the boat headed to England, however, all thoughts that the book may be a fake are dispelled. No one threatens someone with death for an item that is worthless, which means the diary is legitimate. All that needs to be done now is to find funding to go to the Amazon. Luckily there happens to be a gala at the Natural History Museum – perfect for coaxing one or more of the professors and perhaps some rich patrons to put up the liquid capital needed to purchase supplies and hire a crew help to “study the rare wildlife” in a tributary of the Amazon River.

While at the gala, Perseus discovers Martin set him up: One of the rich patrons is Elizabeth. Having avoided England and the news therefrom for years, lest he find her married to someone else, Perseus is stunned by her adult beauty but succeeds in winning the unwed Elizabeth's financial support for the expedition. She also helps to convince one of the professors to have the museum fund the trip. There is only one little snag in this otherwise flawless evening – she wants to join the expedition.

In desperate need of the money, Perseus cannot tell Elizabeth that he isn't going to the Amazon on a scientific expedition but a treasure hunt. All attempts short of the truth to convince her not to join fail, and he ends up knowing the love of his life will be accompanying him on a journey filled with danger from more than one source. Someone still wants that diary and is ready to kill for it, and then there are the warnings about a mysterious creature that protects the treasure. A beast – or a god? – out of myth and legend that may be more real than anyone wants to believe....

## The Characters

Perseus Corbett is every inch the gentleman he does not consider or realize himself to be. An adventurer full of courage and personal integrity, while Perseus is not above lying, he remains an honest and very likeable character. Unafraid to act when the situation calls for it and a capable leader, he is an excellent homage to the pulp heroes of old, struggling against titanic odds to win the girl and the treasure.

Baroness Elizabeth Darrow is a lady of class and character able to disarm the witless at the same time she is quite likely to need a little rescuing herself. Yet even when captured and held at gunpoint she

proves to have mettle, doing whatever she can to help Perseus during the adventure. Full of spirit and fire, she recalls the best of the pulp heroines at the same time she is her own unique person and a worthy protagonist for a fun adventure.

Martin Halritter is solid as a rock and has the patience of a saint. He needs all of it to handle not only what the Amazon throws at the expedition, but Perseus' lack of self-confidence in his ability to win Elizabeth's hand. A stouthearted companion and the near-equal of his master in a fight, Martin recalls all that is best about the stoic righthand man archetype and the ferociously loyal manservant without being stiff – or the least bit predictable.

## The World

Put Indiana Jones in King Kong, then add in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World and stir thoroughly. Throw in a dash of H.P. Lovecraft and a smidgeon of Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, and you have the world of Perseus Corbett and the Forbidden Valley. It is the real world and the real past but with all the twists and surprises which pulp era writers included in their adventures, meaning there is a pleasant – or unpleasant, for the heroes at least! – surprise around every corner.

## Politics

There are no politics in the story that have anything to do with present-day matters.

## Content Warning

None. The book is very clean and readable by anyone of any age group.

## Who is it for?

Boys looking for a clear-cut action story they cannot find anywhere else, with the hero fighting monsters – human and otherwise – for the hand of the girl he loves. Fans of pulp era stories, Indiana Jones, King Kong, and The Lost World will absolutely LOVE this red-blooded action story as well, since it hits all the right notes that these tales did. Anyone trying to find a novel that will have one biting one's nails in suspense before cheering the heroes or booing the villains will also enjoy this tale. Hollywood would learn a lot from studying – and adapting – this book, so if that is not recommendation enough for it, I do not know what is!

## Why buy it?

This is pure fun reading. Perseus Corbett and the Forbidden Valley is pretty much guaranteed to hit all the high notes for those looking for a good adventure. How can anyone turn down the chance to have fun these days?

**The Pride of Chanur, by C.J. Cherryh**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
**Telegraphs & Tar Pits #69**

I read The Pride of Chanur in a mass market paperback omnibus edition titled The Chanur Saga (DAW, 2000). Rather than review the collection as a whole, I plan to address each of the three novels individually. An excerpt of the first novel in Cherryh's five-book series was originally published as a short story, "The Pride of Chanur," in the October-November 1981 issue of Science Fiction Digest. The novel

as such focuses on the interactions of several alien races that convene at Meetpoint, a cosmopolitan space station: the mysterious, inscrutable Knnn; the dark and foreboding, thieving Kif; the formally bureaucratic Mahendo'sat; and the feline Hani. Most of the narrative concentrates on the adventures of a representative of one Hani family, the Chanur.

The *Pride of Chanur's* approach to portraying alien races is different than that of C.S. Friedman's *This Alien Shore*. Instead of concentrating on alien natures generally, incorporating them as backdrop or in the aggregate, Cherryh offers insight on each of the races involved in the story. For the most part, that involves detail of physiology, culture, and communication, and much of the plot relies on successful—or unsuccessful—communication.

Things kick off when some kind of humanoid cargo escapes from a Kif ship at Meetpoint, seeking shelter and protection from Pyanfar Chanur and her crew. The escapee turns out to be sapient, a spacefaring representative of humanity accosted by the Kif. This is humanity's first contact with Compact Space, a loose trade-based peace among the other aliens. Over the course of the novel, Chanur Holding stands up for humanity's place within the Compact—not as property—while dealing with other familial, political, and social challenges.

Of the alien races, Cherryh fleshes out the race of the Chanur the most in the novel. She explores their physiology and culture, focusing on fashion and ornament, the meaning of facial expressions (including their ear posture), and social hierarchy within and among the holdings. The Chanur seem to be a matriarchal society of sorts, with women taking to space while men tend to homes and gardens on their home world Anuurn. Pride and honor come into play.

It's a rich concept, well executed—and strong enough to merit further exploration. I'll certainly continue reading the omnibus.

*Sands of Dune*, by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson  
Review by Heath Row  
Telegraphs & Tar Pits #69

This collection offers four short stories, three of which were previously published in Shawn Speakman's anthology *Unfettered III*, Bryan Thomas Schmidt's anthology *Infinite Stars*, and Speakman's *Unbound II*. In the introduction, the authors discuss their intent to focus such stories on smaller ideas—and sometimes smaller characters—to fill in some of the gaps within Frank Herbert's *Dune* universe.

The first story, "The Edge of a Chrysknife," takes place 39 and 56 years before *Dune*, sharing some of the backstory of Shadout Mapes, the rebellious housekeeper whose life had been marked by Harkonnen rule. The story is a wonderful portrayal of Fremen resistance against the Harkonnen and helps flesh out a character who proves important early in the series.

"Blood of the Sardaukar" focuses on a Sardaukar Colonel Bashar who's resolute that Duke Leto die without undue suffering. The story details that Sardaukar's connection to House Atreides and what transpired in the past to account for his avoidance of cruelty on behalf of the Emperor. It also sheds some light on the training and preparation of the Sardaukar forces, which is formidable.

Gurney Halleck is the focal point of "The Waters of Kanly," a story drawn from his "lost years" during which the troubadour and warrior is working as a smuggler while Paul Atreides establishes his home among the Fremen. The smugglers undertake guerrilla attacks against the Harkonnens, and Halleck's desire for revenge occasionally proves problematic.

And “Imperial Court” is set 97 years after the Battle of Corrin and the end of the thinking machines, nine years after the formation of the Spacing Guild. The piece addresses the feud between House Atreides and House Harkonnen as an assassination attempt upends a governmental appointment.

I enjoy Frank Herbert’s Dune series thoroughly, having read up through Heretics of Dune and rereading Dune during the pandemic. But I’ve never explored any of Brian Herbert’s work or read any Dune-related short stories. This collection will be appreciated by fans of the series and might serve as an excellent entry point to some of the various characters, houses, and ideas present in the novels. I found the short story form particularly well suited for the series.

Servant to the Wolf by Sue Wentz  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Pride goeth before a fall – even for a slave.

The year is 106 A.D. Marcus is a slave – an extremely fortunate one. He has good looks, a quick mind, and an owner who treats him well. Some slaves would kill to be pampered as he is.

Marcus does not know just how good he has it. Not until one wrong move ends with his “perfection” damaged and his sale to a barbarian. Only then does Marcus come to see that he might have overstepped his place.

For nothing is so dangerous as arrogance, particularly when that pride belongs to a slave.

## The Story

The tale opens with Marcus running an errand for his owner, the patrician Gnaeus Oppius Flavius. It starts to rain, so he ducks into a local smithy and finds it run by a big barbarian from outside the city of Rome. Assuming the other man to be a slave as well, Marcus discovers to his chagrin that the blacksmith owns the shop in which he has taken shelter.

Still, the freedman is not a Roman. The beard he wears gives him away as a non-native and the two talk. Marcus worries what his master will say about the delay but, after confirming that his young friend won’t be beaten for being late, the blacksmith suggests he remain inside until the rain stops. Better to be scolded for being late than to be chastised for bringing in wet scrolls, right?

Marcus agrees and goes home once the rain stops. Flavius, his master, decides to visit the blacksmith to show his gratitude and is most upset that the smith refuses to offer him proper homage. His grumbling about the barbarian secures Marcus in his own prejudices against the man; after all, he may be a slave, but at least he is a civilized slave. Unlike this uncouth barbarian who works with his hands in the heat all day.

That night, though, Marcus makes a grave mistake. He recites some poetry for the other slaves, impressing one of the grooms. The young man goes to Marcus’ room to ask him for lessons and Marcus, offended to have the stink of horse manure in his chamber, insults the other lad.

Losing his temper, the slave throws an oil lamp at Marcus, which ruins his “perfect” good looks. Flavius won’t tolerate ugly things in his house and so has the wounded and feverish slave taken to the market to be sold. Certain at first that he will be sent to the Coliseum, Marcus instead finds himself bought by the very blacksmith he looked down upon: Caledonius Lupus.



Being a blacksmith's slave is a far cry from the indulgent life which Marcus led previously. He soon finds that there is more to hard labor than he initially thought, and that barbarians can be just as refined in their own ways as the Romans. But what happens when Lupus' own biases surface as the specter of revenge appears before the blacksmith's eyes?

## The Characters

Marcus' arrogance drips from the first few chapters' pages and only diminishes as time passes. Yet even so, part of a reader's interest in him is that he is, at heart, a good man. While pride has hidden Marcus' better qualities, it has not destroyed them. It just takes a while for him to clean his inner house of this menace so that readers and Marcus himself can see what he is truly made of and capable of accomplishing.

Lupus is a gruff, distant man at first. But his compassion, integrity, and understanding mark him as an exceptional man. Determined to be better than the Romans who enslaved him for the early part of his life, Lupus takes pride in the knowledge that he is not as bigoted as those who abused him. None of which means he goes easy on Marcus, who does occasionally need a good swift kick to learn his lessons, but it does mean that he is neither a cruel man nor an abusive master.

## The World

The world is a well-researched presentation of second century Rome. It is not the modern world – the modern world might as well be on another planet when compared with this one. No mention is made of Christianity but, since both Lupus and Marcus are still pagans and their drama does not touch on wider matters, that is hardly a detriment. The novel is not concerned with history per se but the people who made it – people, in short, like Marcus and Caledonius Lupus.

## Politics

No politics are present in the narrative at all.

## Content Warning

There is some mention of torture, beatings, and at one point Marcus flatly refuses to describe what happened to him. Beyond this, there is nothing objectionable in the book at all.

## Who is it for?

This is a boys' adventure novel for sure and it will be appreciated by middle graders or advanced elementary readers for certain. Older readers interested in Ancient Rome or looking for a quiet journey that has low stakes for the world but imperative risks for the protagonists will find this novel gives them precisely what they want. Beyond that, readers looking for a good story about men who become brothers despite their disparate stations and differing views will love *Servant to the Wolf*. It is a novel for all ages and all times and should have wide appeal based on that fact alone.

## Why buy it?

It's a good novel. What other reason can there be?

Skyfarer: The Drifting Lands Book One by Joseph Brassey  
Review by Russ Lockwood

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

This discount bin fantasy novel offers flaming swords, magic, demons, firearms, and ships that fly using magic navigation and some sort of crystal technology -- jet or anti-grav (not sure what metadrive is, but you don't need magic to zoom around). It's a bit of a mish-mash of a setting. Why non-magic people use swords and spears instead of firearms is beyond me. Maybe it's like the high Middle Ages with early handguns. To be fair, firearms made a surprise (to me) appearance and then disappeared from the plot.

Anyway, young novice magician Aimee joins her mentor on one such skycraft for adventure and ends up in the middle of a war. Azrael, a black armor-clad Darth Vader character with magically infused armor and a fair knowledge of magic, is after a large magic diamond that is hidden on a fairly large island. He even kneels on a circular platform to converse with his master, Roland. Told you he was Vaderish. The characters are quite well formed and the good versus evil aspects proffer exquisite motivations for the resulting action. It's a well-written book with a sketchy world setting but a diamond hook.

Enjoyed it.

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 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 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 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 characters.

**The System Apocalypse Series by Tao Wong**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

It seems like every time I read a LitRPG book, I think about how I should read more LitRPG. I love it, but I guess it came to be too late in my life to be a default like Space Opera and Epic Fantasy. Every once in a while, though, something will gain my notice and I'll feel the need to check it out. That's precisely what happened with Tao Wong's series *The System Apocalypse*. I think I picked the first book, *Life in the North*, up because it was in my Facebook feed, and it caught my eye. I had never heard of Mr. Wong so I was a bit cautious at first, but *The System Apocalypse* grabbed my attention from page one.

*The System Apocalypse* starts with our hero, one John Lee, on vacation in Canada's Yukon Territory. It's cold, he's camping and a little blue box appears in his vision. From there the whole world changes literally (well, fictionally literally) instantly, not just for him but also for the rest of the human race and anything else that lives on planet Earth. Animals and plants begin to mutate, people start dying in job lot quantities (think nuclear war levels of casualties only there are no actual nukes launched. Then it gets worse.) and no one and nowhere is safe. And yes, I've played Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games in the past, but in *The System Apocalypse*, there are no respawns.

The series goes through a few different arcs, starting out with straight-up survival. First John must survive long enough to find another human being, then he takes part in helping others to survive. It's not as easy as it should be, either. Even with help, he loses people and, on many occasions, almost loses him-

self. John is a ball of rage and he doesn't always use common sense but even when he does the wrong thing it's usually for the right reasons.

The cast of characters he gathers around himself is long and distinguished. Most are human. A few are aliens. They are, for the most part, all honorable beings who want to do what is best for themselves and for others. It's well thought out though, and they all seem to have their own motivations, even if it's only leveling.

If you're familiar with roleplaying games, whether online in games like World of Warcraft, Everquest, Eve Online or City of Heroes, on old-school platforms ala Wizardry and Shining in the Darkness, or tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons, Heroes Unlimited, or Shadowrun, then you know how important leveling is. The higher a character's level, the more powerful they are. The more powerful they are, the better they can protect themselves against increasing threats. The more fighting they do, the higher their level gets. Well, for Combat Classers. The System also has classes in areas like crafting (artisans), growing (farmers), politics (duh) and even the media (one of my favorite side characters is a reporter named Harry). Everyone needs to level, but it is both easiest and most important for Combat Classers.

Also part of leveling, and one of the reasons it's easier to make/grow that new product or defeat that new monster, is gaining new abilities or spells or feats or...

Every game calls them something different and, in a lot of cases, there are different labels applied to different things in the same game. It can be a wee bit confusing until you get the hang of the game. The System is no different. There are a ton of abilities, skills, spells, affinities and probably some other things that I forgot about. The System is actually pretty crunchy if you grok the term. If not, it just means there are a lot of rules and usually a lot of math. It can be confusing to our heroes and definitely to the reader, at least at first. Just have patience and remember your first time playing your favorite roleplaying game. We were all confused and something Wong does well is have his characters share what they're learning with the rest of us.

Probably the most unusual thing about The System and its leveling progression is the tier system. Most people start out with a basic class. That might be Farmer, or Construction Worker, but it might also be Soldier or Hunter or some other combat class. Fifty levels in a basic class opens up an advanced class. A Soldier might become a Sergeant. Fifty levels of an Advance Class opens up a Master Class. A Sergeant might become an Officer. Fifty levels of Master Class opens up a Heroic Class. An Officer might become a General. Fifty levels of a Heroic Class opens up a Legendary Class. That General might become an Emperor. It doesn't get any higher than Legendary, but few ever make it there.

Opening up new tiers is exciting as it leads to massive increases in abilities. One Advanced Classer could mow down an entire mob of low level Basic Classers fairly easily. A Heroic Classer might be able to take your planet over singlehandedly. Legendary Classers, especially if they're Combat Classers, probably run empires or command a bajillion troops and are not just deadly themselves, but make all of their followers even more effective. This is an amazingly well built system and I just hope I did a good enough job explaining it.

Speaking of leveling and Class Tiers, there is a moment in the series that almost made me quit reading it. I'm not going to go into details but trust me when I say you'll know it when you see it. Wong promises to write what's missing in the Afterword and, while I believe we're still waiting, I trust him. But it did leave me seriously frustrated at the time. At the end of the day, I'm glad I kept reading because it is a truly awesome series, but I was more than a little bit shaken.

Once John learns how The System works at the most basic level and figures out how to survive and even thrive in the face of what his planet has turned into, we get into another arc. In this one, John and lots of others try to unite the Earth and elect a planetary ruler. It's not easy and the fact that there are aliens (John calls them "Galactics") all over the place just makes it harder. Then we get to watch John and Earth figure out their places in the universe.

The final arc is probably my favorite, and not just because that's where all the fighting is. I love it because it is the struggle to find out what The System is and where it came from. Why does it exist? Is there a point to it or is it just there? I'll be honest, there is a lot of technical stuff here, but it all makes sense across a twelve-book series in ways I can't begin to duplicate in a single review.

The ending itself is satisfying in a way that I hadn't seen coming, even if it didn't give me quite everything I wanted. It works for the series and wraps things up in a way that leaves no loose ends.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Spirit Companions.

**Telepaths Don't Need Safe Words, by Cecilia Tan**  
**Review by Heath Row**  
**Telegraphs & Tar Pits #70**

To recognize the 18th anniversary of Tan's 1991 collection issued as a chapbook in 1992, Cirlet published this "Age of Majority" ebook edition. While I've been aware of Tan's erotic sf writing for a long time through the mundane zine press (I used to review erotica for Brenda Loew's magazine EIDOS—Everyone Is Doing Outrageous Sex), this is perhaps the first time I've read a Cirlet work to completion.

While it might not entirely be my cup of tea, I thoroughly enjoyed the sipping and recognize the three stories included here for what they are, well-written speculative fiction incorporating topics and themes of interest to people who might be drawn to the BDSM community. This is sexy sf, and it's redolent with a particular kind of sex—and love.

Tan's introduction recounts the initial publication of the chapbook and Cirlet's evolution over time. The title story was first published on the alt.sex.bondage Usenet newsgroup before a self-published edition was printed for distribution at Lunacon—where I first met John Hertz—and then multiple commercial printings.

The story and chapbook inspired the launch of Cirlet Press, which, at its peak, published 10-12 erotic sf titles a year before print distribution went bust. Now, with the popularity of ebooks and subgenres such as paranormal romance, Cirlet's promise has largely been validated and Tan has embarked on a new career as a romance author. These three stories are where it all began, evolving from Usenet to chapbooks to a publishing imprint.

"Telepaths Don't Need Safe Words" focuses on a couple attending a party at the Hall overlooking the Galdarin River. The partygoers, seemingly wealthy royalty or people in positions of power, are masked, and BDSM imagery abounds: leashes, whips, power dynamics, swinging, slave relations, "scenes," and rape. The sex scenes are explicit, but the overarching themes are those of the importance of consent, and of the devotion and dedication of a loving couple.

As Tan wrote in the introduction, "[W]riting an 'established relationship' instead of an 'encounter story' was radical and different..." The story serves as a great introduction to quality writing of this type—even if the sf elements are few, perhaps relegated to the presence of telepathy and the fantastic



setting and other characters, which suggest the long-term dissolution of immortality.

“Cat Scratch Fever” is slightly more clearly fantastic. A lordly hunter with a Keep—perhaps on another planet—captures a female feline humanoid whom he wins over in ways that remind me of the Cure song “The Lovecats.”

In the end, it’s revealed that the lord Calidare might not have captured his new lover as much as she has claimed him. “I had no doubt I would return to the Keep with her,” Tan writes. “But I wondered, now, whether she was still mine, or if the tables had been turned.” This might be my favorite story in the collection.

Finally, “Heart’s Desire” takes place at another slightly futuristic party. Partygoers tease a bound subject, utilizing a cat o’ nine tails. The text refers to reestablishing the rules of a scenario, and the story focuses on a wager of sorts to claim the affections and company of the bound subject, focusing on the limits of one’s desire. Where is the line between play and reality? Perhaps we do need safe words.

Intrigued readers can learn more about Circler Press, including its 2018 anthology *Superlative Speculative Erotica: The Best of Circler Press 2012-2017*, at <https://www.circler.com>

**The Wizard's Stone by Herman P. Hunter**  
**Review by Trevor Denning**  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

### A Fantasy Tale that Stands Tall on the Shoulders of The Hobbit

Since his epic fantasy tome fell into our hands, the shadow of J.R.R. Tolkien has loomed large over the genre. The Lord of the Rings defines it. Such is the case with *The Wizard’s Stone*, and comparisons are inevitable. Fortunately, the story of young Odo, who knows little of the world beyond his pastoral community, has an aura of its own.

Like *The Lord of the Rings*, it’s the story of an unassuming innocent surrendering a treasure rather than finding one. But unlike that journey, the treasure itself isn’t inherently evil and he’s in no danger of it corrupting him. The lands he must travel are simply dangerous and Odo has lived a sheltered life. Consequently, Odo’s story is more inward than outward as he comes to a greater understanding of himself, and it’s that key difference which makes his story more than a ripoff.

For this review I listened to the audiobook. Some stories are best experienced read aloud, and such is the case here.

### The Story

Odo is an orphan who was taken in by the wizard Remfrey. Though he was allowed to study books of magic and lore, he remains humble and holds his master in awe. Mostly he just does chores around the farm, fearful of what exists “out there.” As we later learn, his fears are justified. War is a recent memory, civilized society crumbled (what of it ever existed), and everyone is responsible for his own welfare. Thanks to Odo’s dark skin, people are unsure of him. Without a family’s love and support, he’s unsure of himself.

When Remfrey tasks him with delivering a magic stone to a faraway king, Odo is terrified, knowing he’ll be facing the hardships of the cruel outside world. And the mercenary Captain Inoch, who is hired

as his protector, isn't exactly reassuring. Remfrey is willing to pay a fortune to the Captain and his not-so-merry band of cutthroats to see Odo to his destination, but Inoch doesn't have to be nice about it. Not that the situation permits it.

Along the way Odo has to rely on his limited knowledge of magic, his wits, and most of all, the Captain and his crew. They aren't much better or kinder than Inoch, either. His travels take him to many grimy places, with no Rivendell respites, and he ends up doing things that trouble his conscience. The spark of goodness he carries in his heart may be as (or more) important as the stone.

## The Characters

Odo isn't Frodo, and we don't see him relishing in country comforts. Life has never treated him kindly, so he never expects kindness. He's timid and uncertain of everyone, even Remfrey, whose influence is his guiding light. All along his journey he finds himself wondering what the old wizard would do in difficult situations, of which there are many.

Captain Inoch is a harsh mentor, fitting for a cruel world. In the places he takes Odo it's kill first and ask questions later, and he's a survivor in a country filled with death. The rest of his crew is about the same. Everyone is distinct and has a backstory that gradually develops as Odo gets to know them. These are characters with ambitions beyond earning some gold, and regrets deeper than a stack of dead bodies.

## The World

As you would expect, everything is in the mold of medieval fantasy, with farms, fishing villages, and kings. Naturally, fantasy means elfin beings, monsters, and magic, though the monsters mostly remain in the shadows and the magic system itself isn't explained in any great detail. Mostly, we see that this is a harsh world, still recovering from the ravages of war.

## The Politics

None

## Content Warning

Nothing as frightening as *Weathertop*, nor grimy as *Game of Thrones*.

## Who is it for?

Your local bookstore might throw this on the YA shelf and call it a day. But as someone said, all stories are for adults, and some can also be enjoyed by children. Anyone looking to scratch that LOTR itch with something more than a pastiche will appreciate what Hunter does here.

## Why read it?

There are some stories told with such loving care that you can feel it in every word and carefully crafted detail. These are works that the artist had to create and took time developing the skill to share with the world. *The Wizard's Stone* is one of those stories. This alone doesn't make it worth reading, though it certainly helps. When the fantasy story landscape is littered with nihilistic doorstoppers featuring Mary-Sues, it's refreshing to find something simple and familiar, that's not simplistic.

Worlds Long Lost, edited by Sean CW Korsgaard  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Ancient alien relics can hold magnificent secrets – or mind-destroying horrors....

Space, the Final Frontier – or so we have been told. It is a frontier to us, but what of those races or species which probed the stars first? What about those bizarre lines caves that look like structures, or the temples obviously made by rational beings in the far reaches of space?

Then there are the questions left here on Earth. The Egyptian pyramids – why did they build them? What about those odd monoliths that appear and then vanish? Or the old whispers of gods long forgotten or utterly lost?

Not every question can be answered satisfactorily. And in some cases, curiosity kills more than the cat!

## The Story

The tales in *Worlds Long Lost* range from the macabre milieus first explored by H.P. Lovecraft to the tantalizing other worlds of Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, with some homages to later works in between. Join M.A. Rothman and D.J. Butler in their tale *The Rise of the Administrator*. A hive-mind intelligence that evolved beyond space and time, this creature learned to ply the paths of space before entering the multiverse itself. But when threats to that infinite multiverse arise, the self-named Administrator is faced with a dilemma of how to avoid similar issues in the future.

Les Johnson takes a more laidback approach to interplanetary archaeology in *Mere Passersby*, where the crew of the USSS Alligator makes the jump out of Earth's solar system. Recently entangled in a war with the alien Kurofune, the crew is on edge and does not take kindly to a warning being triggered by the navigator for being two units of space off-course. But when they learn why they ended up slightly off-course, things become very interesting – and extremely mysterious.

*The Sleepers of Tartarus*, by David J. West, follows a man with nothing left to lose as he tries to make history. Having lost his wife and son before being diagnosed with bone cancer, Cormac's options were retirement or to become a shuttle pilot for an archaeological dig in Antarctica. Going to space on what amounts to a suicide mission to travel to an iron asteroid named Cruithne seemed like the better option. Just as he is about to land on the asteroid, though, his ship's systems die. Cormac seems to be headed for a collision course with Cruithne but finds himself caught in its magnetic field and circling it instead. The spinning gets so bad he eventually loses consciousness, only to wake in time to find that Cruithne is headed back to Earth – and his ship is attached to it!

When he lands, Cormac finds himself in a primitive world of giants, slaves, gods, and monsters. Up to his neck in mysteries and with no way home, he must figure out what can be done to stop the giants before they take what is not theirs to hold.

Griffin Barber's *Retrospective* rounds out the collection with a tale of a commando in a firefight for his life. His team under assault, Boatwright encounters a strange artifact. When the rest of his unit is killed by the enemy, he touches it, and something strange occurs. Something for which there is no satisfactory scientific explanation....

Worlds Long Lost aren't always safe. Some questions are better left unanswered, while others will never be answered. Yet the rewards for the discoveries that are made will be beyond priceless – or more horrible than anything mankind can imagine.

## The Characters

While the characters vary in each narrative, the heroes tend not to be of the same mold. There are soldiers who get caught up in mysteries beyond their comprehension, and then there are amateur archaeologists who know more than the experts but cannot say it because the experts will stridently shout them down. Other expert archaeologists feature in their own tales as well, and the less open-minded they are, the more likely they are to receive a harsh comeuppance.

Seeing some of these protagonists receive their just reward is satisfying but for others, a certain amount of pity must be felt. After all, not everyone deserves to be the meal for a Lovecraftian monster – and if they do, that might be a touch extreme even for them.

## The World

Every world is sketched out neatly for the type of tale it is telling. The horror tales have enough atmosphere to butter toast, while the adventurous escapades reverberate with pulse-pounding action. Several stories delve into the whys and wherefores of archaeology and science, making them a little slower than others but still fun to read, not to mention rather relaxing. Nothing like a little scientific debate to give one time to think about matters normally not considered, after all!

## Politics

None whatsoever.

## Content Warning

Roughly half of the tales in Worlds Long Lost are horror, so expect lots of body horror, psychological terror, and bad language. Some of the non-horror entries have cursing and swearing as well. Mature teens and adults will not be put off by this but for readers with different sensibilities, this might be a bit much.

## Who is it for?

Those who love horror and horror homages of various kinds will definitely find many of the stories here scratch that particular itch. From nods to *The Thing* to reverent hat tips to H.P. Lovecraft, Worlds Long Lost will more than deliver. Anyone who wants a good adventure romp such as that found in Robert E. Howard and E.R. Burroughs' stories will find a story or two to fit their desires, and those who just want to see the heroes run into something they cannot explain will be satisfied as well. It is a good collection for those who want something to curl up with in the afternoon – or to keep them up at night. ??

## Why buy it?

Worlds Long Lost delivers on its promise to take you out of this world. These days, who doesn't want to get off Earth, at least for a little while? It can't hurt to take a reading vacation now, can it?

Wraithbound by Tim Akers  
Review by Graham Bradley  
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Won't lie to you, dear reader: about 20% of the way through this book I was getting chest pains, because Tim Akers wrote a story that was quite similar to one I have been working on. Things like "I really hope [X] doesn't happen now..." or "Crap, did he just use [Y] for the worldbuilding?" crossed my mind. I almost wished in the end that it wouldn't be good.

Fortunately, it walks its own path, and I enjoyed the road that it took to get there. This is new-era epic fantasy doing good things in the genre.

## The Story

Wraithbound is a family story wearing the fake nose and mustache of a quest fantasy. Our focal character is a young boy called Rae, but unlike a certain big-property space wizard with a similar name, he actually struggles and has to think. He lives with his parents and sister on the outskirts of the "Ordered World," where they lament the loss of their once-comfortable lives. Worse, the Ordered World is generally safe from Chaos (big spiritual forces at work, folks) but homesteads on the border are a bit more dangerous.

But Rae was old enough to remember when his family still lived well, and he's been cooking up a plan to get back. With a little bit of coin, some blackmail, and a fair amount of cunning, he's able to give himself magical superpowers like his father.

Somewhere along the way, a mistake was made, and his new powers are actually kind of a huge hazard. I can't explain what happens next without spoiling big, impactful developments. Just know that Rae and his sister Lalette have to spend the rest of the book trying to put things as right as they can.

And it's something of a slow burn the whole way. Tim Akers doesn't drag you along through purple concrete prose, but the book isn't in any rush to get to its conclusion either. I felt like he struck a good balance between the worldbuilding and the pace; it's not *Son of the Black Sword*-fast, nor *Wheel of Time* slow. We experience most of it through the eyes of Rae, so let's talk about...

## The Characters

It's an overdone trope in sci-fi/fantasy to give us an orphaned Chosen One as the main character, and Akers avoids that. Instead, we get an intact family with a capable father, a mother with a strong presence, an earnest son, and a fiery daughter. I liked just how much the family worked together and looked out for each other, even as they struggled and disagreed on things (much like a real family, hmmm...)

I do think Lalette was a little much at times (even though I have a loud and fiery daughter with attitude to spare) but she played a good foil to Rae, and kept him on his toes on their journey. Rae feels like Harry Potter with a little more depth and ambition from the get-go, and that's a good thing.

## The World

It might take the reader a minute to get used to the elements of this world, with words like "justiciar" that look familiar but have unclear meanings. The magic is familiar though: there's a hereditary quality, and from there you need to know what type you potentially hold, and then bind a magical spirit of that

type (elemental spirits, water, fire, etc) to your own soul.

The spiritbinding can be really dangerous though, and you've got to know what you're doing or else it can go off the rails in a bad way. You get a good look at that in the book, so I won't say too much. Rae's father used wind spirits to fly and do things with air, and Rae wants to do the same. It all feels very "playable" and that helps with the immersion factor.

Also, can we keep getting more fantasy worlds with firearms? I really dig this trend. There is no law under heaven requiring all fantasy novels to be stuck at a 10th-century tech level.

Politics

None.

Content Warning

PG-13 in terms of action and language.

Who is it for?

This book is for people who want Larry Correia's action in a Brandon Sanderson world, with a fair amount of the fat trimmed off the roast. If you like epic fantasy that moves (but not too fast) give this a look.

Why buy it

This is a story about a good kid trying to do a good thing, but he makes a mistake and winds up in over his head. Familiar enough to be comfortable, yet new enough to surprise you. WRAITHBOUND is the forward for the epic fantasy genre which finds itself buried under thousand-page epics far too often.

68 Cantos by William Weiss  
Review by Jean-Paul Garnier  
<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

An abstract and feverish tale of worldly disintegration. This book is a nonlinear narrative that takes us through post-apocalyptic wastelands and teases us with whether the war has just finished or is about to begin. If read as a novel it can feel a bit meandering but when viewed as poetry one feels, and is dragged through, what is occurring in this hellish and deteriorating world. Fans of the cut-up technique will appreciate this book. The characters are generalized, I.E. Control, Everyman, Mutants etc. – and stand for ideas rather than typical people doing things in an invented world. With moments of vivid poetry and startling imagery this book will appeal to fans strange and non-traditional stories.



# Literary Criticism

You Live in a Fairytale  
L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright

You know the one, where a boy or a girl wanders into a strange land, unable to find home again. It is a story of darkness that crushes the spirit and of hope in the midst of the darkness.

That fairytale. The one where you are the hero.

People tell us that reading fantasy is escapism. But do you ever feel more alive, more real, than when you are reading? When we are reading a really good story, don't we feel as if it allows us to burn with bliss and suffer the sorrow of others? To come out of ourselves and be more than we would have been?

If your heart burns for brighter things, if you are one who yearns to venture Beyond the Fields We Know, this is for you.

## Prose Bono

Minor Thoughts on Advances  
Chris Nuttall  
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

There's been some chatter in various writers' groups and suchlike about this article: Book Authors Are Getting Real About How Much They Are Paid. Most of what I can say about it, in response, has been said by Larry Correia and John Scalzi, but I think there are a few minor points that bear mentioning.

One – an advance is called an advance because that's precisely what it is. It's an advance on monies the publisher believes the book will earn. If you're just starting out, with no social profile at all, you'll get a very low advance; if you have a well-deserved reputation as a money-maker and/or you have lots of fans, you'll get much bigger advances.

Two – once an advance is paid, you rarely see anything more until the book recoups the publisher's investment. If, for example, it costs roughly £20K to publish a book, you won't see a penny more until it earns over 20K.

Three – it can get very sticky indeed if the book fails to earn back its advance. If your book does not earn itself out ... well, best-case, the beancounters will probably refuse to greenlight publishing another book of yours. Worst-case, they'll demand the money back and/or refuse to release the rights so you can self-publish the book. And the other publishers will take note too. Put crudely, a big advance can easily become an anvil around your neck.

Four – the big publishers can afford to take certain risks with advances that look big to the human eye

but aren't that big relative to their budgets. Small publishers cannot afford to take the risk, to the point they only offer small advances or none. Even a mid-size publisher can run into trouble if they invest heavily in a flop. Baen Books – depending on which version you believe – invested heavily in 1945 by Bill Fortschen and Newt Gingrich during the height of Gingrich's popularity. The book came out at a very bad moment, the company took a massive financial hit and came very close to complete collapse.

Five – because of the previous four factors, most advances are very low. The big figures mentioned by the article are the exception, not the rule.

Six – it's very easy to start comparing apples to oranges. A book that fits into a niche market (MIL-SF) may not make the jump into a genre market (SF), let alone go mainstream. The advances for niche books are generally lower because the publishers believe, rightly or wrongly, that the pool of potential customers is smaller. A book written by a famous name – a politician or sports star or whatever – will be seen as appealing to the name's fans and thus garner a bigger advance. (Note that such a personage will have more clout when it comes to demanding a bigger advance.)

Seven – and this is the controversial part – pushing authors based on anything apart from writing skill is always hazardous. The vast majority of readers don't care about the author; they don't care about sex or skin colour or religion or habits or anything, beyond writing skill. It's very easy for a big publisher to assume a book that appeals to them will appeal to everyone, which is frankly untrue.

Is there actually a disparity between advances paid to white authors and everyone else? I don't know, because it is very hard to compare two authors without eliminating all the other factors. Did someone, for example, sell so well the first time around that the publisher hyped the next advance? Or were sales lower than predicted and the publisher didn't feel like taking a chance again? For all the white authors mentioned in the article as getting huge advances, how many white authors – and POC authors – got smaller or no advances?

What do you think?

Idle Thoughts on Motives  
Chris Nuttall  
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

We've been so busy trying to work out if [the murderer] is into boys or girls that we haven't stopped to wonder if that's his actual motive.

-Wee Hughie (roughly paraphased)

The basic idea of The Witch of Turlingham Academy books is that Sophie, a Witch, is BFF (yes, these are kids books) with Katy, a Witch Hunter. The first book follows the two girls becoming friends, almost despite themselves; the successive books follow them trying to conceal their friendship from their families, then convince their families to accept their friendships. Book Four makes things more complicated when a new Witch comes to school and her parents raise concerns about Katy. Sophie's mother (muggle, but married to a Witch) points out, rather frostily, that Katy has every right to an education too. The new Witch's parents aren't too impressed and it's fairly clear that, if they hadn't needed to have their daughter at the school, they would have taken her elsewhere.

Are they being discriminatory?

Katy has the same problem as a bunch of other sharp-edged characters (like Hermione Granger). If you're predisposed to like her, as her BFF obviously is, she's a wonderful person. If not ... she's rather less wonderful. And, as much as it pains me to admit it, there are good reasons for the new girl's parents to view Katy with a degree of wariness. For example:

-Katy is a Witch Hunter from a family of Witch Hunters with a very bad (and very well deserved) reputation.

-Katy (and her brother) genuinely did come to school to track down and depower a witch, a process that would have been directly or indirectly fatal.

-Katy only changed her mind when she discovered the Witch in question was her BFF.

-Katy's brother and parents continued to pose a threat until they were forced to choose between saving their daughter and continuing the war. For this, they have been cast out from the Witch Hunters.

Now, if you know Katy (as Sophia and her mother do), you might feel that there's no reason to fear. Katy has more than proved herself a true and loyal friend. But if you don't know Katy, you might think otherwise. Your daughter is at stake. Would you take the risk of allowing her to share space with a Witch Hunter?

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Midway through Prince Caspian, as this writer reminds us, Nikabrik the Dwarf proposes summoning the White Witch to aid the Narnians in their fight against the Telmarines. Anyone who's read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Magician's Nephew* knows just how bad an idea this is. The White Witch is a monster who destroyed her entire world out of spite, introduced evil into Narnia and – eventually – plunged the land into endless winter until her death. It's easy for the reader to understand that Nikabrik's idea is pure madness.

Nikabrik hasn't read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He never saw the endless winter. To him, the White Witch is a creature out of legend. A threat, perhaps, but one the Narnians survived.

And the situation is desperate. The Narnians are losing. The Telmarines will exterminate the talking beasts (and everyone else) if they win. Surrender is impossible. There's little hope of conventional victory, let alone escape; there's no reason to believe help is on the way. Defeat means the end of everything.

All of a sudden, summoning the White Witch doesn't seem such a bad idea.

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Viewers of *Battlestar Galactica* recoiled in horror when Gaius Baltar was elected President of the Twelve Colonies (or what was left of them) at the end of Season Two. They knew, even if the characters didn't, that Baltar was indirectly responsible for the fall of the colonies, the effective genocide of mankind, the death of the fleet's legitimate commanding officer and the electronic signature that eventually doomed the settlement on New Caprica. (To be fair, unlike his original series counterpart, Baltar never meant to do any of it (with the possible exception of assassinating Admiral Cain)). To viewers, electing Baltar seemed an utterly unbelievable mistake.

Is it?

Baltar ran against Laura Roslin. Again, if you are inclined to like Roslin, you'll probably think well of her. But if you're not so inclined, a more disturbing picture begins to arise.

Roslin did not become President through running for election. She became President through the death of everyone higher up the line of succession. She was unwilling to admit this and hold new elections in season one until she had her hypocrisy pointed out to her (by Lee) and selected Baltar as her VP. She then induced an officer to go against the chain of command, triggered a near-civil war within the fleet which risked splitting it at a crucial moment, plotted to assassinate the fleet's legitimate commanding officer, tried to rig the election and quite a few other dubious choices. She's also a religious fanatic who bent the knee to other religious fanatics and, perhaps worst of all, a person with a knack for making promises and breaking them at the drop of a hat.

Now, you can argue that some of this was justified. Admiral Cain really was a lunatic who had to be removed. The split in the fleet led to the discovery of the way to Earth. But many of her other decisions were not. And not all of this was known to the average citizen of the fleet.

Baltar would not look bad, from the average citizen's point of view. He's a legitimate war hero. He's a man of science, not a religious nut. He doesn't have a record of making bad and/or dubious decisions, as far as the average citizen knows. And Roslin picked him as her VP, which suggests she – at least – was happy to run the risk of Baltar being her successor. In short, he might not seem such a bad choice.

But Baltar isn't the only issue. The colonials have a choice between settling New Caprica and continuing on a desperate quest to find Earth. The fleet leadership believes that settling on New Caprica is asking for disaster, rightly so. But consider it from the point of view of the average citizen. You're trapped on a fleet that is under constant attack. Supplies are constantly on the brink of running out. You're living under martial law. You're either sitting around doing nothing, defending the fleet, or working in dangerously unsafe conditions to keep the fleet going (and, all the time, resenting the officers on Galactica and Colonial One, who don't find it so bad because they have private cabins and such-like.) Moving to New Caprica suddenly seems like a very good idea, all the more so as the planet is practically impossible to find (no one knows the detonation will eventually lead the bad guys to the colony).

Sure, there are risks inherent in settling on New Caprica. But there are also risks in not settling on New Caprica.

All of a sudden, the idea of electing Baltar – the man who pledged to set up a colony on New Caprica – doesn't seem quite so insane.

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Now, you can reasonably argue that the people in all three examples above were dangerously ignorant, at the very least. This would be true. They don't know things they need to know to make a proper judgement, they don't know that Katy is a good friend, that the White Witch is a terrible menace and that it's only a matter of time before New Caprica is discovered and occupied. But, based on what they actually know (and their past experiences), they're making good decisions.

The problem facing the good guys, in all three examples, is a certain reluctance to admit the other side

has a point, let alone try to deconstruct it. It's very easy to refuse to recognise that the other side has legitimate arguments, as – in this day and age – merely considering their arguments seriously runs the risk of being accused of agreeing with those arguments. It's also possible that the weight of those arguments is so strong that they simply cannot be deflected, even if they're wrong. The colonials of Battlestar Galactica are in such dire circumstances that even clear proof of Baltar's failings would not change the simple fact that settling New Caprica looks like a very good idea.

And yet, deconstructing the other side's arguments is the only way to progress.

People have feelings. They have needs and fears and a certain degree of self-interest. If you dismiss those feelings as foolish or wrong or whatever, even if they are objectively so, you'll harden their hearts against you. They will reach a state where throwing the baby out with the bathwater seems a very good idea. However, if you recognise that they consider their arguments to be legitimate and engage with them, you may convince them to recognise that your feelings are also legitimate. For example:

Sophia's mother could have stood up for Katy and pointed out that there's no reason to think that either Katy or her family pose any threat to the new Witch. She could even have offered to ensure the girls slept in different dorms, limiting the contact between them as much as possible.

Prince Caspian could have pointed out that the war is not completely lost. They can make preparations to summon the White Witch but refrain from actually doing so until they are on the brink of total destruction. Caspian would have looked more reasonable and, as help was already on the way (IIRC, in the next room), there'd be no need to take the risk.

Roslin could have proposed a compromise. The fleet would lurk in interstellar space while slowly and steadily developing New Caprica. The planet would be turned into a source of food, with the long-term intention of eventually settling the world completely. In the meantime, one of the battlestars could have continued the search for Earth. When the bad guys turned up and invaded New Caprica, Roslin would have looked very far-sighted indeed.

I don't pretend that listening to the other side would solve all of our problems. But refusing to accept that they have legitimate points – or think they do – will only make our problems worse.

**A Most Practical Heroine**  
**Cedar Sanderson**  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I'm back to writing Chloe, the main character of my Groundskeeper world. In the first story, I introduced her slowly to the weirdness of her new job and living situation. In the second, she's fully embroiled in the hidden world, but the thing is...

I grew up with horses. Mom adopted mustangs, Dad learned how to break them from an old-school bronc buster and former bull rider. Later, Mom adopted the Jefferson Method of gentling the horses using their instincts and innate nature. Some horses became reliable for riding. Other horses never did, and one memorable mare Dad will swear to this day was doped to her eyeballs when they picked her up from the BLM, because they were able to handle her no problem, right up to putting a saddle blanket on her. They turned her into the stall for the night, and next morning came to check on her and she did her level best to kill them, and they were never able to so much as touch her again. Her son, who we also

adopted, was my official ‘first’ horse. Mom wouldn’t let me name him Snakedancer, so he became Shadowdancer. Because a horse will spook, startling sideways (or up, down, or maneuvers you’d swear a beast of that solidity should not be able to perform) at things obvious and not. The rare horse is what’s called bomb-proof. This is a horse you can take anywhere, do anything with, and they will just shrug and endure it. Usually, this is the result of long training starting from the moment they are born (with the cooperation of their dam, because some of it’s genetic I think), but some horses are just like that, phlegmatically taking their world as it comes.

Chloe is bomb-proof. She’s relatively young, as I based her in many ways on my youngest daughter who is 21 this year. And yes, the Jr. Mad Scientist knows about her, and even helped with developing the world. She is still a little bemused about my writing, but she was pleased with the results, I think. That’s the thing, having a stoic as a child, you worry that they aren’t telling you everything. Chloe, as the product of my own imagination, isn’t my daughter. And Chloe really does just roll with the world, however strange it gets. My worlds aren’t fully developed when I start writing. That happens as the tales unfold, usually. In the third story, currently headed towards novella length, I’m contemplating Chloe’s family. We hear about them, but so far haven’t met them. And yet, they formed her into this brave young woman who doesn’t flinch from what her job entails. It should be interesting to see where future stories take me, and her.

One of the things I’ve realized is that I enjoy reading, and writing, practical characters. Not just the heroine, of course, but this post is about young Chloe. I like to see what happens when they take logical steps in a crisis, or when things start to get risky, instead of plunging recklessly into situations that have no way out. There are times when taking risks is merited. And there are times when calling for help is the absolute right thing to do. For context in the snippet, Chloe has been given the afternoon off, before starting training in special defenses the next day. She’s just started to unwind when...

She was looking for a mug in the cupboard when she heard the knock at her door. Chloe took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, then went to answer the door.

“Hello?” She opened the door and looked around, confused. There was no one on the small landing, and she didn’t hear anyone on the stairs. She started to close the door and saw the small box lying on her mat.

Her mat didn’t read ‘welcome.’ Her father had gotten it for her when she’d moved into the apartment, and it read ‘Probably Not a Trap Door’ on the rough fiber surface. The box was aligned perfectly over the word ‘Trap.’

Chloe took a quick step back, then pulled out her cell phone and took a photo before she closed the door, with the box safely on the other side. Then she dialed the top number in her favorites.

Mr. Cruor answered, as he always did, before the second ring. “Bellevue.”

“Sir, there’s a box on my mat.” Chloe took a deep breath, stilling the shaking she didn’t realize had started. “Someone rang the bell, but there was no-one there when I answered the door, and there’s a box...”

“Stay where you are,” he said. “Do not touch the box.”

Chloe said “yes,” before she realized she was talking to a dead line. She stood there staring at the wall



for a moment before she shook her head and returned to make her abandoned tea. The water was more green-tea temperature than she wanted by then, so she turned the kettle back on, and prepared her mug with a tea ball of the loose stuff. This afternoon called for something stronger. As the kettle started bubbling, she got another mug out of the cupboard for Mr. Cruor, should he want something. Her phone rang as she was pouring water into her own mug.

“Hello?” Chloe answered the unknown number hesitantly, then relaxed as her boss’s familiar voice sounded in her ear.

“Could you please open your door? Don’t come out, just open it.”

She did as told, and was facing Mr. Cruor, who was holding a sleek cell phone to his ear, a jarring incongruity. He hung up as soon as she opened the door. Chloe tucked her own phone into her pocket.

“Interesting placement,” He pointed down at the box. “I have to think it was intentional.”

“Someone has a terrible sense of humor.” Chloe glared down at it.

“There is no address. Hm.” He reached in his blazer pocket and pulled out a baggie of white powder. As Chloe watched, he pulled out a large pinch and scattered it over the box and her welcome mat. “Baking soda. Leaves less mess than flour, and the chemical reactivity... ah.”

Chloe stared at the box. It didn’t look like anything had happened to her. “Sir?”

“Step back, please. I’d prefer you close your door, but as you need to know how to do this, leave it open, putting most of your body behind it.”

Chloe swung her door partly closed, feeling the weight of the steel in her hand. She’d never really thought about it’s construction until now. Mr. Cruor carefully hiked his pant legs and settled into a crouch, peering at the box. After a moment, he reached out and delicately lifted it up, raising it until he could look at the bottom of the box without tipping it over. Then, he stood, holding it in both hands.

“I am going to take this, carefully, into the driveway. Please accompany me.”

Chloe followed him down the stairs, and out on the pavement until they were away from all the buildings. He set the box down on the ground, then looked at her.

“Have you perhaps got a bamboo pole, for trellising?”

Confused, Chloe blinked. It took her a moment to recall if she did, after the apparent non-sequitur. “Um. Yes, I do.”

“Perfect. The longest you have, if you would?”

She trotted off towards the utility shed and returned a few moments later with a ten foot pole.

“Ten feet is the longest I have,” She was panting just a little from her hurry.

“So. I shall now touch the box with a ten-foot pole.” His lips quirked.

## When Inspiration Hits

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Inspiration can hit anytime, anywhere, and it usually comes at some of the most inopportune moments. These include when you're lying back trying to sleep, when you're fixing breakfast or dinner or lunch, when you're brushing your teeth or washing your hair or taking a shower, when you are driving to work or the store or the doctor's office, and a multitude of other times. In most of these instances you are unable to do much about it except to jot down a few notes that you hope will make sense when you read them later. In a few of these occasions, you can't even do that.

The worst time, though, for such an inspiration to hit is when you are smack dab in the middle of your latest Work in Progress (work in progress) – a novel, poem, or story on which you have been working for some time. If you are nearing the end, that inspirational interruption can be even more annoying. What to do? Option One: Stop writing that Work in Progress and start working on developing that inspiration. Option Two: Make detailed notes and hope you can pick it up later when you have finished that first project.

When a recent inspiration hit me, I chose Option One. In a week I had 27,000+ words done toward a goal of 75,000 for what is basically a light-hearted Christmas romance story. It seemed to come flowing out. Then, the writing came to a screeching halt as I seemed to need some better direction for how to get to my goal (in these stories, the guy and gal always have to end up together). A day spent reviewing what I had written got me back on track, and the next day was spent doing some rewriting and editing to get rid of various inconsistencies and repetitiveness. Now, I am at 32,000+ words and humming along toward my goal again.

My posts about this on my Writing Group and other writing groups on MeWe elicited some interesting responses:

“That’s outstanding! Hat’s off to you and your hubby. I am editing the fourth book in my series and doing a side project for NaNoWriMo. Both are going nice and steady. Good things! ... Sometimes you have to do some planning. I plan all the time. Sometimes I plan too much. But I can’t just wing it forever either. I have to have direction.” — Parker McCoy (two comments posted separately but joined together here)

“Never stop writing. Bursts are rare for me, so I run with it.” — Scott Slotterbeck

“I keep another writing project going in addition to my main Work in Progress so I have somewhere to go when inspiration fades. It keeps me writing and sometimes I problem-solve in one that transfers to the other.” — Paul Piatt

“I do the same thing. It’s helped me stay productive during those slow moments in the other Work in Progress.” — Ruth Nordin (replying to Paul’s comment above)

“I have a MS 70,000 word strong and started a new one for NaNoWriMo, now almost 17,000. I totally get this! ... I waffled on starting something else. Write often, write well, write on!” — Kaci Rigney

The big question for me, and for you if you have similarly gotten veered onto a side project by a thunderbolt idea that seized your brain, is “Can I return to my Work in Progress and pick up where I left

off?”

My brain never left that first Work in Progress. Memories of what I have written on it so far as well as new ideas keep rattling around inside even as I work out the pathway to my heroine and hero getting together at the end without too much interference from the sub-characters, including old boyfriends, a female housemate who has overstayed her welcome, a mother who thinks she is being helpful, and a best friend trying to steal the hero away for herself.

Bottom Line

Don't be afraid to pursue that new inspiration while keeping your Work in Progress fresh in mind. Lots of writers seem to do it.

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

Please check out my Work in Progress. And thanks for reading.