

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

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FREE BOOKS

Promise to write a review of a book for Amazon, GoodReads, or wherever, hopefully with a copy coming here, and these authors will send you the ebook that you request for your reviewing efforts. List of authors and books — request one book at a time, please — is on the next page.

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The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

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The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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Not In Our Stars
The Captive’s Rank
The Universal Prey
The Praesidium of Archive
The Empire’s Legacy
Voyage of the Planetslayer
Revolt and Rebirth

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with Demons

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Web of Futures
The Iron Gates of Life
Deserts of Vast Eternity
The Last Age
The Shadowy Road
When Angels Fall
The Computer Ferrets
The Sea Dragon
The Thug Acrostic
What You See
Painterror
Adrift on a Foreign Sea
The Silver Crusade
Each Shining Hour
Gravelight
The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

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

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

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

Simultaneous Times
<https://spacecowboybooks.com/free-content/>

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Editorial

Yes, issue ii for August, because the July issue was a bit late.

We have a new service for Neffers who are authors. Trade free copies of your books for reviews. See previous page.

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A Cowboy in Modernopoli by Tim the Idahoan

Review by Pat Patterson

<https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com/>

A grillion years ago, when pterodactyls ruled the skies (1973, to be exact), I was a new Christian believer. I was ALSO a massive bookworm, specializing in gobbling down science fiction.

Those two things may not have caused conflict for others, but they did for me. I KNEW that some of the things I had read were NOT going to help me develop my Christian walk, and for me, it was a matter of life and death.

So, I sought to satisfy my double thirst in the fiction section of the (tiny) Christian book store, located about 100 miles away from where I was stationed. There was NOT a great selection. However, I did find a copy of John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress."

Take "Pilgrim's Progress;" add 345 years; and you get "A Cowboy in Modernopoli." I'm not certain how many allegories are being written these days, but this is one. Whereas Bunyan's work was an allegory of the perils and rewards of the Christian walk, The Mighty Tim (h/t to Monty Python) has chosen to focus on a single peril: that of idolatry.

As he points out in his prefatory material, our current civilization is not much given to erecting pillars on mountains, or forming a golden calf. (Or are they?) Instead of looking for suspicious construction as a manifestation of modern idolatry, The Mighty Tim has selected certain causes which appear to have to power to seduce the individual beyond interest, to obsession, and perhaps even into worship.

I think he is on to something.

This is a light, easy read, and it's very almost always very clear just what person, place, or principle he was discussing/skewering. It never took me more than a few seconds, even if I did have to say the words he was using out loud, in order to identify the real-life counterpart.

I'll not cross the line into Spoiler-opolis in this review, by specifying the things The Mighty Tim has offered as possible objects of idolatry. Please, read for yourself; and, should you find something that pinches a bit, consider whether you might have crossed the line yourself. I really don't think that this work will offend anyone NOT in that category.

Interestingly, The Mighty Tim goes to great length to identify the difference between involvement and worship, and while commendable (and altogether in line with the gentle spirit he has shown me), I think that was a waste of time. The non-idolater will recognize the issues, and find the humor contained in the exposition, while the idolater is just going to lose their mind. I may be wrong about that; and, in any event, I do appreciate the extra effort The Mighty Tim took to avoid breaking off the bruised reeds.

Peace be on your household.

A Prayer for the Crown-Shy by Becky Chambers

Review by Tom Feller

This is a sequel to A Psalm for the Wild-Built, which won the Hugo in the novella category last year, but it does not so much end as stop. At least one more work in her "Monk and Robot" series is coming,

which is set in a “green” utopia called Panga and feature Sibling Dex, the monk, and Mosschap, the robot. This novella is very episodic, and each chapter is its own short story. As implied by the author’s sometimes clumsy use of “they” as the pronoun for Dex, they are gay, and in one of the chapters, they meet an attractive man. The two of them are taking a roundabout trip to Panga’s only city, and one of the chapters consists of a visit to Dex’s family farm. Mosschap gets the most attention, because it is the first robot to visit human civilization in three hundred years. Along the way, they have conversations about society, history, ecology, family relations, death, and philosophy, and the prose is beautifully written in the style of a philosophical dialogue.

I learned a few new words. “Crown Shyness” refers to the way some trees have evolved so that their branches do not overlap with other trees. As a former homeowner who made the mistake of planting trees too close together, I can say I have never observed that myself. Reviewing the reviews of this story, I found the term “Solarpunk”, which apparently refers to a sub-genre of science fiction stories set in low tech worlds but with sufficient scientific knowledge to make things like solar panels and wind turbines. In this story, Dex and Mosschap makes use of communication satellites that were placed in orbit during what they called “The Factory Age”, but their civilization dismantled the industrial base required to replace or repair those satellites if they should ever malfunction.

Athenaem, Inc. Book 1: Door Number Three, by Dan Kemp

Review by Pat Patterson
<https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com/>

WARNING!

Don’t waste ANY time looking for the first two books in this series; they don’t exist. The ‘Door Number Three’ in the title references ‘The Price is Right’ game show, in which contestants can pick from one of three doors. Door Number Three is a bit like The Gripping Hand, in that there are two choices which are pretty nasty, and then a third choice, which is better for the narrator and his comrades.

The Professor is a former US military special ops person, now working for much more more money in a civilian agency which is also involved in special ops. Because they are civilians, they can get involved in things the government needs to remain distant from, and so they have come to rely on government contracts and funding to operate. The government links aren’t exclusive, though, and thus the private sector also provides them with some work.

Taking the name Athenaem Inc, with some associated links and influences elsewhere, the agency is governed by a small group of aging spooks, goons, happy guys, and whatever else seemed good at the time. As we enter the story, recent and impending death, plus a desire for a less active role, has resulted in The Professor getting drafted into heading the organization.

A word about The Professor: he is solidly ensconced in middle age, but years spent doing physically damaging activities have left him with a body that is somewhat-almost-maybe near-crippled. Mentally, though, he’s still got what it takes; more importantly, he has some (unspecified, I believe) moral compass that is the real reason that the old guard is comfortable in hiring him. Perhaps most valuable is his

ability to recognize that he REQUIRES help in some areas, both physical and intellectual.

Nearly first in line among the required help appears in a flash of glitter bombs (not literally!) TA DA! As a financial genius who has been stealing LOTS of money from cartels. She's about to get killed, or arrested, when The Professor appears in her bedroom holding a gun. Of course, she takes door number three (SWIDT?), and goes to work for the Professor at Athenaem as their accountant.

Quick plot summation: steal lots of money from very bad people, then meet bad people who are kind of good, who can help you turn lots of money into something useful (and hidden). Will it work? Read the book to find out!

The author is, I believe, a person who truly appreciates guns and gear. I know NOTHING about gear, but I do appreciate assorted firearms, and I found all of the passages in which they are discussed to be quite pleasant. By that, I mean that there are NONE of those goofy errors found all too often when it becomes bitterly clear that the author doesn't know the difference between a Dan Wesson revolver and a Dan Wesson 1911, or even the fact that Dan Wesson exists. I believe this type of writing is referred to as 'gun porn,' and Mr. Kemp has my heartfelt thanks for getting it right.

I have no means of assessing whether he gets the rest of the gear/equipment/transport/customs items right, EXCEPT that his writing style consistently deals with THOSE issues in the same way he discusses assembling a complete Ithaca 1911 from loose parts. So, I'm going to say he's got it right.

I hope you don't find those things boring. The ONLY things I found boring were the mind-numbing political debates he has with assorted semi-governmental drones in the latter part of the book. HOWEVER: I THINK those debates were really intended to prove just how stupid/incompetent/goofy the drones were, and they end badly for his opponents.

Minor quibble: a person as damaged as The Professor is NOT going to easily engage in bedroom gymnastics. Fortunately for geezers (I'm one), mostly the bedroom door is closed on those scenes, anyway.

Minor (maybe) quibble: my Kindle says this book has 476 pages. I would have PREFERRED this to be more than one volume, and give me a better story of what happened in Dallas, and other background mentioned tangentially. Maybe that's going to happen, as Door One and Door Two?

Athenaem, Inc. Book 1: Door Number Three by Dan Kemp Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

An irreverent romp that makes good use of the author's extensive knowledge of military history and pop-culture trivia, all with a healthy dose of escapism.

The Professor works for Athenaem, a private intelligence and espionage organization that walks the fuzzy line between legitimate government contractor and black-market enterprise.

When his boss dies unexpectedly and he is unceremoniously promoted to CEO, the Professor is thrown into the deep end of the company's operations. Then an incredibly risky once-in-a-lifetime opportunity lands in his lap. Why wouldn't he jump on it?

But in doing so, he falls down a rabbit hole pitting him and his colleagues against some of the most

powerful and dangerous people in the world.

The story

The senior operator known as “The Professor” seems content with his position at the top-secret private intelligence corporation Athenaeum, Inc. when he shortly finds himself in charge of the entire operation. With the help of a newly extracted accountant on the wrong side of the Mexican drug cartels, he plans to get up to speed on all of the company’s operations and finances when a golden opportunity appears: possibly a billion dollars in cash in cartel money right under the noses of the feds. The Professor is not one to pass up an opportunity like that, so he consults his hotshot team of consultants versed in everything from heavy weapons to organized crime, puts together a plan, and executes. But to paraphrase Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, no plan survives first contact with the enemy.

Door Number Three is a combination political-military thriller / heist, and most of the book involves planning the heist. Kemp sets up The Professor’s plan in exact detail, describing the full capabilities of Athenaeum’s armory and its personnel. But that in no way means there are no surprises - while the company’s employees are top notch, they also tend to be wild cards, and The Professor has to adapt to the many curveballs they throw his way.

One thing to note: this is the first in a series. It is a complete story, but the ending is there to set things up for the sequels.

The characters

While his protagonist shares the codename and role of that of Netflix’s “Money Heist,” Kemp’s main character obscures his nerdiness in a sea of snark and an avalanche of pop culture references and military and historical esoterica. I’ll admit that a lot of the references went over my head, but I recognized the slim majority.

The Professor’s two main sidekicks are also (eventually) his girlfriends. The organization’s newest accountant, codename Cash, is a walking sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen, and she’s taken a liking to low-cut shirts, short skirts, knee-high boots, and her superior, whom she likes to call “Sir.”

Angel is already in a relationship with The Professor, and is into bad boys, guns, and corrupting other young women to her boyfriend’s everlasting discomfort. By the end of the heist, they join forces to globetrot around the world doing their damndest to secure the spoils.

The supporting cast include the rest of Athenaeum’s personnel, all with their own quirks and unique skillsets. As much research as Kemp put into the workings of the weapons, equipment, and organizations of the world, the characters of Door Number Three are pure escapist fantasy. They have chemistry together, and they are great for a romp across the world, but as Angel might say, just relax and don’t think too hard about it.

The world

The world of Athenaeum is dominated by shadowy organizations and governments making off-the-books deals on the black and gray market in pursuit of power and profit. But I can assure you there are some differences from our own world, too!

As odd as it might sound for an international thriller such as this, most of the novel takes place in Nash-

ville, Tennessee. Don't let that fool you, though. The forces at play span the globe, including some of the most dangerous around the world. Athenaeum has to contend with adversaries on all sides of the law from Juarez to Washington. Kemp puts a lot of effort putting meat on the bones of The Professor's own organization, from their history to their armory to their operational capabilities and contacts.

The politics

The Professor's Fed rival accuses him of being a white nationalist, which he chalks up to voting for Trump twice. One of the villains describes a plot between international corporations and globalist governments to run the world that could have been written by Tucker Carlson. Despite the fact that this plot underlies the main conflict in the story, the Professor is too busy surviving and trying turn a profit to dwell on ideology, and since he is the narrator, we don't get much more than a glimpse of the political message.

Content warning

The Professor's boss is said to have committed suicide by fentanyl.

The Professor, Cash, and Angel are in a bisexual/polyamorous sexual relationship with each other, which is referenced often, and they engage in a good deal of dirty talk throughout the novel. There is some on-scene depictions of nudity and mild fetish gear, but no graphic descriptions.

There is plenty of violence, but no graphic descriptions of blood and gore. Profanity is ubiquitous.

Who is it for?

If you don't mind a little wish fulfillment and are looking for a military-thriller with Clancy's grasp on geopolitics and hardware and Tarantino's affinity for obscure pop culture, Door Number Three is for you.

Why read it?

Read Door Number Three for an irreverent romp that makes good use of the author's extensive knowledge of military history and pop-culture trivia, all with a healthy dose of escapism.

The Atlanta Incursion by Matthew W. Quinn

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

James Daly thought he was safe at college after defeating small-town cultists and their otherworldly master. He was wrong. Although the Thing in the Woods is dead, there's more to this world than just one monster.

Back in 2017, Mathew Quinn wrote The Thing in the Woods (reviewed here), which featured a pre-college boy in a small town coming face to face with a monster. In the aftermath of that story, he was threatened/bribed into silence by the Men in Black and sent to Georgia State University with his best friend Eli Schwartz. Unfortunately for them – and his girlfriend, fellow survivor Amber Webb – James starts having nightmares that lead him, eventually, to uncover an alien presence in the city, an alien

presence that has also kidnapped a reluctant gang member and drawn the attention of the Men in Black, leading to outright war in the streets between humans and aliens ...

Quinn captured the feel of all four characters very well. James is recovering, slowly, from his experiences in the previous book; the others grow and develop as people as the story moves along. They touch on resentments – personal and racial – then struggle to overcome them as they find themselves confronting a nakedly sadistic alien race. There’s a very strong sense that all of them will grow and develop, as human differences face in the face of alien threats. The romance between James and Amber is nicely done, with moments of intimacy that don’t get too explicit. There’s also some wry commentary on matters such as porn – and its effect on people – and growing up in areas that don’t offer much, if any, support for people who want to better themselves. This was touched upon in the first book, but the theme grows stronger here.

On the bigger scale, it’s not clear what – if anything – the aliens are actually doing. They appear to be committing sadistic acts for the sheer hell of it. (I had the feeling they were interdimensional intruders rather than extraterrestrials, but apparently not.) It suggests they’re very interested in fighting a covert war, which suits the MIBs too, but it can’t be long until their presence explodes into the open. That said, it’s nice to see a government agency that is smart enough to recruit people who’ve already seen the aliens rather than threatening them into silence. There are some neat Men in Black references too.

It’s a relatively short story, more of a novella than a novel. But it’s a nice read and a good continuation that manages to be different while maintaining the feel of the first book.

Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence by R.F. Kuang Review by Tom Feller

Silver has long been associated with magic. Using silver bullets allowed the Lone Ranger to shoot so accurately that he never killed anyone, for instance. In some vampire stories, they can only be killed by silver weapons or bullets. In this historical fantasy/alternate history, the magic system is based on words and silver. Silver bars are inscribed with two words, each in a different language but related in some way to become a source of magic, the particular use determined by the particular words.

The novel begins in 1828 when Oxford professor Richard Lovell brings a young Chinese boy home with him from Canton after the boy’s family is wiped out by cholera and renames him Robin Swift. Already knowing English, the boy is tutored in Latin, Greek, and Mandarin (Cantonese is his native language) in preparation for matriculating at Oxford’s Royal Institute of Translation, aka Babel, because it is housed in an eight-story tower (without elevators!). Its primary function, Robin eventually learns, is the advancement of the British Empire through magic. At Oxford, he joins a “cohort” consisting of himself, Ramy, a young man from Calcutta, Letty, the daughter of an English admiral, and Victoire, a Haitian girl whose family relocated to France after the Haitian revolution. Except for Letty, they have to deal with racism on a daily basis, and even Letty has to deal with misogyny. Robin has a chance encounter with a young man who looks like him and learns that he is his half-brother Griffin

who introduces him to the Hermes Society, a secret organization opposed to the British Empire. It is a very compelling read, especially when the main characters decide to oppose the Opium Wars, and, in the tradition of Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, uses footnotes to give it some verisimilitude. It won the Nebula Award for best novel.

Blue Saint by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So, yeah...

The emotional bond between someone who absolutely loves to read and one of their favorite characters is a weird one, especially when the reader starts the series when it first comes out and has to wait for each successive book. Cracking open the new book is like having an old friend swing by for a coffee. Like, you don't necessarily get as much time as you want with them but it's still nice to find out how they've been and what they've been up to.

"Go ahead and put your feet up on the table, Favorite Character and tell me about your adventures. How have you been feeling? How has your love life been? Kids doing okay? What losses have you suffered? What victories have you scored? What are you up to now?"

I'm not saying it's normal or a sign of sanity, I'm just saying that it happens. We smile with them. We cry with them. We laugh with them. We're happy when they're with us and we're sad when they're gone. Seriously, re-reading an old book can be like flipping through a family photo album.

Which is why it can hit us so hard when they die.

And, well, I don't do spoilers, but Declan Finn's Blue Saint is the last book in a series about a saint and there is no such thing as a living saint. Therefore saying that St. Tommy survived is pretty much like spoiling a movie about the American Revolution by screaming "The Americans win!" And seriously, I'm not going to conduct this review as a requiem of the life of Thomas Nolan (who, admittedly, was a better man than I'll ever be) but I feel the need to take this time to express my sense of loss and compliment both Tommy Nolan and Declan Finn on their accomplishment: Three deaths in all of the fiction I have read have brought me to tears; Sturm Brightblade, Fred Weasley and Tommy Nolan. Yes, I'm a Potterhead. Sue me.

Also like Sturm Brightblade, Tommy at least got the sendoff he deserved. Fred got hosed. That makes up for a lot. No one likes to see their favorite character die and ignominious death (Grayson Carlyle anyone?) and here he didn't have to. I've not seen a finer death for a character anywhere and that's saying something.

But hold on, now. There is a WHOLE LOT more to Blue Saint than the death of one character. There is love. There is loss. There's a lot going on here. There is a scene that reminded me of my only failings(?) not because of something awesome Tommy did but because of a human moment where he questioned himself. Maybe the best thing about Detective Nolan is that he has never been the arrogant, holier than

thou type. He lives, he breathes and he questions himself, just like the rest of us.

A lot of relationships in the series are highlighted here in new ways and that works for me as well. Seriously, think about it. If you had to go into a dangerous situation, who would you want at your back? Who would you want watching your family while you were gone? Are they the same person? What if they couldn't be? Blue Saint provides some perspective on those types of questions. It also, in a way, sheds a little light on the relationships of the people around us in ways that we wouldn't necessarily consider. I find this odd for what is primarily a first-person perspective book, but it's true. Actually, looking back on it, that's true of the whole Saint Tommy, NYPD series and your goofy reviewer is just now picking up on it.

SIGH

No system is perfect I guess. I'll work on it.

The one negative (ish) thing I will say is that Blue Saint is in no way a standalone novel. This is Finn's masterwork, the result of a full dozen books worth of interweaving plotlines and relationships. Blue Saint is a serious achievement in finally bringing everything back together and tying it up with a bow on the package. I'm not saying he can't top it (as a matter of fact, I'm daring him to) but it's going to take some serious work. And a new reader coming in out of the cold is not going to understand the backstory. You need to understand the backstory to get the Blue Saint story. Read the first eleven books. I did. I'm glad I did. I plan to do it again someday. And that makes me happy because, unlike the real people I've lost, St. Tommy is still there to hang out with the same way I always have.

Of course, one of the areas that Finn has always excelled in is writing action. Seriously, Finn's asskickery kicks ass and he's outdone himself once again. I love the way these fights are choreographed. Things go boom spectacularly. The use of mini guns was awesome. The way the team in the books has adapted things like holy water and incense to fight the minions of Satan has been amazing. And, of course, Nolan's personal arsenal comes into full play in the biggest fight in the series yet. The settings for the last couple are pretty epic, too.

Due to the weird nature of the app I used to read the story (FB Reader) I almost missed the fact that there was more story after Tommy passed. It really would have sucked to have missed what came after, too, because there is a lot of good stuff there. To misquote Kid Rock: "There ain't no story like a Blue Saint story because the Blue Saint story don't stop." (Yes, English. Don't tell me, tell Kid Rock.)

I'm not going to give up the end of the story, but I will say this: The mark of a terrific author, or any type of artist for that matter, is their ability to get an emotional reaction from their audience, whoever that may happen to be. Finn took me from crying to laughing in the last few pages of his book. There aren't many authors who could do that. Go buy the book. Then read the book. Then tell me how right I was because I AM right this time. And someone make the damn movie already.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Sappy Reviewers and my next years Dragon Award Nomination

Darkover Landfall by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

Though the seventh Darkover novel published, Darkover Landfall is the first book in terms of chronology. As such, it offers readers characters' first contact with the population of the alien planet, as well as their first exposure to the planet itself. Regardless of how much of Bradley's work or Darkover you've read, it's a wonderful story.

The book largely concentrates on the characters' efforts to survive on a relatively hospitable planet after a crash landing. On the planet Darkover, or Cottman IV, the visiting humans encounter biting worms, psychoactive pollen, and two different species: small furred hominids that make their homes in platforms around trees and a white elf-like people who are quite beautiful and can withstand extreme cold.

Much of the story focuses on overcoming two crises. In one, the psychoactive pollen leads to a sort of mass psychosis that either leads to violence or group sex. The latter leads to a number of unwelcome, unwanted, or otherwise problematic pairings the characters need to reconcile. And the former sometimes occurs as a result of the latter. One character in particular is especially ashamed of his behavior while under the pollen's influence. The other challenge stems from disagreements between two factions among the crew. One would like to concentrate the group's efforts on repairing the spacecraft in order to leave the planet, continuing to its planned destination. The other wants to turn its attention and energy on colonization even if they haven't reached the intended site for colonization. That some members of that faction are also members of a low-technology commune or similar group adds an additional layer of interest and intrigue.

Themes and topics that arise in the book include appropriate technology, gender relations, the application of learned skills and expertise, authority, human sexuality, and the role of religion. It's a good introduction to the series, even if the first in chronology wasn't the first published.

Javelin Rain by Myke Cole

Review by Russ Lockwood

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

This is the sequel to Gemini Cell, which I did not read, as Javelin Rain was a discount bin pickup. Bear with me here... Apparently, our hero Jim was turned into the undead -- a fast, strong, heightened senses undead -- who escaped the Institute. Most of this book consists of him escaping with his living wife and son through a national forest.

Meanwhile, the Institute releases the mindless undead "Golds" which kill everyone in a small-town population 1,500 plus some camping Boy Scouts for good measure. Golds, like Jim, are souls inserted into dead people to make them rise again. Jim managed to keep his wits about him. Golds are murderous demons, but good at tracking Jim. Collateral damage, you understand.

An Institute sorcerer tries to insert a 'djinn' into a living person with fatal consequences. But oh so close. Collateral damage, you understand. Of course, a Senator is involved, but nothing will stop Jim from destroying the Institute so his son can live free.

Obviously, there's a third book involved because nothing has been solved. The prose is fine, if 'talky' and overly descriptive. To me, the plot takes too long to unfold. I guess I'm too impatient and a wee bit bored.

If you're interested in zombie fiction, this might prove interesting. Otherwise, forget it.

The Mountain in the Sea by Ray Nayler Review by Tom Feller

Communicating with an alien species is an old idea in science fiction, at least as old as Stanley Weinbaum's 1934 story "A Martian Odyssey". One of the story lines in this novel reminded me a lot of Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" (adapted as the film *Arrival*), only with octopi rather than aliens from space. This novel is set an indeterminate time in the future, when the United States is referred to as "the old American states" and Germany is a great power.

Dr. Ha Nguyen is an orphaned Vietnamese marine biologist specializing in octopi when she is engaged by a large multi-national corporation called DIANIMA to investigate a species of octopus that is displaying signs of intelligence. They live on Con Dao, an island in an archipelago off the coast of Vietnam, and because of this DIANIMA has purchased the island and relocated all the inhabitants. The head of DIANIMA is Dr. Arnkatia Minervudottir-Chan, a native of Iceland whose greatest achievement was the creation of an android who passes all the Turing tests that anyone can devise. Its name is Evrim, and it has been exiled to Con Dao because most of the world's governments have passed laws outlawing it and its kind. They are joined by Altantsetseg, a tall Mongolian woman who is a war veteran and runs security.

There are two other story lines concerning Rustem, a gifted Russian hacker based in Istanbul who is hired to crack a neural network, and Eiko, a young Okinawan computer programmer who travelled to the Ho Chi Minh Autonomous Trade Zone (presumably old Saigon) to apply for a job with DIANIMA, but is kidnapped instead. He is forced to work as a slave on an automated fishing trawler. The story lines finally come together toward the end of the novel, although the point-of-view characters never actually meet.

The action is minimal, and much of the book consists of dialogues between the characters. Fortunately, the ideas they discuss are fascinating, although some readers might find them boring. I have to admit that it is didactic at times, but well worth the effort.

Postcards from Foolz: Book 4 of the Postcard series.

Review by Pat Patterson

<https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com/>

This review is going to be a challenge to write, because the stories are limited to 50 words each. It's difficult enough for me to review anthologies, for reasons detailed elsewhere, but THIS is going to really test my flexibility.

The way I understand it, Texas authors Jonna Hayden, Cedar Sanderson, and "C. V. Walter" (it's a pen name for K_____ B_____, but I don't know if I'm supposed to say that) started handing out art samples at cons, with the expectation that recipients write a postcard-sized story (meaning, 50 words or less) to match the artwork. Somewhere in all this tomfoolery, they were bestowed with super-hero status (rather, their status was recognized), and they became Three Moms of the Apocalypse.

This seed for this volume was sown at FoolzCon, which presented the challenge/opportunity of distribution to folks who only had a virtual presence. The other cons were MarsCon, Louisiana's World Steampunk Exposition, and FantaSci, and if writing this review doesn't kill off the desire, I'll go back for the first three.

Since I just discovered the series (yes, I will go back for the first three), I'm likely getting some of the details wrong.

In my opinion, the art samples given out are deliciously beautiful. As a VERY special feature, in addition to displaying the artwork for the inspired stories, five extra pictures were included, with space to write your own 50-word story.

It's Raconteur Press, so EXPECT radical creativity, and check often for nose-bleeds. Here are the stories:

A Matter of Some Urgency, by Jack Wylder. If you CAN'T keep up with your stuff, then either leave it at home, permanently attach it to your body, or just die in the field.

In Memoriam, by Richard Hailey. I used a laser pointer to provoke my mom's poodle into running head-first into the wall, when he couldn't stop in time.

Peace of Meat, by Diana Walser. Only the bravest rulers can resist the cries of the mob demanding military action.

Fool's Paradise, by Bethany Petersen. Never try to make a deal with supernatural beings.

Morning Moth Mayhem, by Trey Thurber. I rode my manly motorcycle to the pawn shop to buy a laptop. They sold it to me in a Hello Kitty bag. I was all the way home before I realized why people in cars were laughing at me.

Wight Squirrel, by Jessie Barrett. It's not a stupid idea, if it works. Wear protective gear, anyway.

Geoffrey's Lament, by Wally Waltner. Very few things are sadder than a former child star trying to hang on in Hollywood.

Lusty Fool, by Crystal Gayle. There's definitely an added attraction when a hunk puts on a uniform.

Mine, by Bex May. When the story is The Lady AND The Tiger, no low-born courtier boyfriend is necessary.

A Note to the Spider That Dressed Me this Morning, by C. V. Walter. No, I LIKE the dress, I really do! It's just that I can't scratch my itches with it on.

She Taught Me to Dance, by John D. Martin. No one dared to cut in, because true love was in the air.

The Tenor, by Z. M. Renick. An incredible future opened, with offers for voice actor work piling up at the mailbox.

The Wizard You are Trying to Reach is Currently Unavailable, by Sara Martinez. All of my friends told stories about sneaking their father's car out in the middle of the night. But the first time I tried it...

Cedar v. Ford, by Samuel A. Miller. Big companies have clout, but small companies can turn on a dime; you can't teach an elephant to tap-dance.

Enlightenment, by Lee R. Anderson, Jr. You really should have just gotten off my lawn when I told you to.

Thrift Store, by Michael A. Hooten. It's really good that trucks are so easy to rent these days.

Magic Beans, by Stephen White. All kidding aside, there are definite side effects when you prop up pole beans with a '34 Tula Mosin Nagant, with all matching serial numbers.

One Last Ride, by Petra Lynd. It wasn't a betrayal of his promise to love, honor and cherish her; it was a fulfillment.

She Doesn't Love You, by Wayne Whisnand. Every cop in the world hates a domestic disturbance call more than a bank robbery in progress.

Siege Perilous, by Ben Hunsinger. It's your job to capture or kill; but sometimes, the fugitive does your job for you.

For Want of a Sky, by Nancy Frye. If you can't see potential just over the distant horizon, this job is not for you.

Wrong Order, by Kortnee Bryant. When the Fonz showed up, everything was suddenly all right.

I hope I have managed to communicate the flavor, without spoilers. If you think I missed, kindly let me know. And also, PLEASE understand that I LOVE reading both short stories and these super-shorties; it's just that reviewing them is a challenge.

Peace be on your household.

Ruby Finley vs. The Interstellar Invasion by K. Tempest Bradford Review by Tom Feller

The title character is a precocious eleven-year-old African American girl who loves to study bugs. At the beginning of the story, she is working on a science project involving bees that her European American science teacher does not like. When she discovers a bug that she has never seen before, she cap-

tures it in a Mason jar and takes pictures. Unable to find it in any of her reference books, she posts the pictures on her secret Twitter account. (Her parents have forbidden her from using social media.)

However, the bug escapes just as three black SUVs arrive carrying “Men in Black”, although in the story they are referred to as “G-Men”. After questioning Ruby, they spread out in the neighborhood looking for the bug. Meanwhile, her Twitter account has been suspended without her permission and her iPad, with which she used to take the pictures, has been reset by an unknown hacker, erasing the pictures and everything else on it. Her parents are upset about her disobedience regarding social media, so they suspend her television privileges for one week, her access to her xCube game module, which she uses to chat with her friends, for two weeks, and unsupervised access to computers of all kinds for a month. The only technology they will allow her is a land-line telephone to call her friends, which for her is a fate worse than death.

During her punishment period, the neighborhood suffers a series of unexplained break-ins. Nothing valuable is stolen, just metal. Ruby notices that one of her neighbors, a reclusive old woman with two nasty dogs whom the locals refer to as Witchypoo, has disappeared. When Ruby and her friends discover that the playground for an abandoned nearby school has been stripped of its metal as well as the chains on its doors, they decide to investigate Scooby Doo style. What they find is that a bug-like alien has a workshop there. This is quite a delightful read, a combination of Invaders from Mars and E.T. It won the Andre Norton Award given out with the Nebulas.

Running From the Gods by D.T. Read

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So, listen: There are two types of geeks in the world: Pedantic Science Fantasy haters and super cool Star Wars fans. I know which camp I fall into. I, therefore, was really excited when I picked up my copy of D.T. Read's Running from the Gods. Seriously, look at that cover and there had to be some fantasy in the work based on the title. Not only was I in no way disappointed, Running from the Gods exceeded my expectations. Seriously, I had a good time with this one. There's a bit of Space Opera here too. It's like a giant smorgasbord of Speculative Fiction Awesomeness.

Our main character, Ku, comes from an abusive background. He lost his father as a youngster and hasn't been fully trained as a chanter, which reads as kind of a priest cum physician with a dash of summoner added...

Yeah. I kind of got the feeling that there is a lot more potential than what we get to see in the first book. That's okay though, because it's clearly labeled as first in a series and it's best for an author not to show us everything in the first installment. I find myself already wondering where and how he's going to get his chanter training given the fact that he's a member of a military that's currently at war with a foreign power and apparently losing. I'm guessing he's got a lot on his plate with just that.

Running from the Gods is very much a Hero's Journey kind of book. More than that, it feels like the whole Seventh Shaman series is going to be a Hero's Journey. I like that. People have been telling sto-

ries in his vein for literal millennia because it's a good format. It's entertaining, it's easy to follow and the familiarity provides comfort to counter the anxiety when the main character runs into problem after problem. I'm starting to detect a bit of The Chosen One trope as well, but I'm not sure. Ku himself doesn't know what the future holds for him although, because of a ceremony shortly after he was born, the rest of his tribe seems to. Ku is worried that he might be a powerful force for evil. I'm not sold on that, but how would I know? Read hasn't seen fit to tell us and I gave up trying to predict this type of thing a long time ago. I mean, I write fiction and I'm a pantsner. If I was the author here, there's at least a fifty percent chance that I wouldn't know.

Most of *Running from the Gods* takes place at pilot training. Ku is a bush pilot who joins the military while still underage and snags himself a pilot's slot in training. Whether he manages to complete his training and earn his wings is anyone's guess though, as he is immune to neither failure nor demerits.

There is a hint of politics here as well, and I look forward to seeing more in coming volumes. Things are just kind of setting up right now, but that's good. As an Honor Harrington fan, I've seen how this kind of thing can grow and it's just starting to set up nicely. I can't wait to see where Read can take it from here. What's clear is that he's thought this out and that there is more coming. I'm sure he'll let us all know soon enough.

The relationships in *Running from the Gods* can be a bit complicated at times, and that's a good thing as well. I don't know much about D.T. Read as a person, but I'm willing to bet he's spent some time in some kind of military training, because he gets the way things work. The trainers aren't always nice, but they can't be. Ku's fellow recruits aren't always his best buddies either, and that sucks because they kind of need to be. The way Ku relates to his family is sometimes complicated as well, and well...

Never mind, that would be spoiling.

There is a lot of action here. I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly things went south for Ku, in what way and what the outcome was. Once I found out that *Running from the Gods* took place mostly in a training environment, I figured there wouldn't be much life and death action. I was wrong. Things start out in a life and death crisis in the first few pages, followed by another one and then on and on...

Yeah, there is a lot of action to help move the plot along and keep people interested. It's well done, tightly paced and fun. Some of it is based on external threats, some on internal. What I don't see is anything that gets wasted. When Read wrote *Running from the Gods*, he very clearly had an idea of what he was trying to portray and how to use the events of his novel to accomplish that. I wouldn't mind sitting down with Read at some point and having a conversation with him. I'm guessing I could learn a thing or two and I'm working on a somewhat similar-ish story.

I don't want to go too far down this road, but I feel like *Running from the Gods* did a really good job at two very closely related, but oddly opposite things: It gave us enough of a story to satisfy, but left a whole bunch of loose ends for the next however many books to tie up. I like that about it. I finished reading the book and wanted to download the next one. I couldn't because it's not out yet, but that's hardly my fault.

At the end of the day, and the book, Ku is a young guy with a promising future ahead of him. Read has been nice enough to invite all of us along for the ride, and I plan on fanboi'ing this entire series (yep,

totes a word. I just made it up.) It's got a solid first book going for it and room for growth like you would not believe. Running From the Gods is the literary equivalent to a professional athlete who has just completed an awesome rookie season but still has plenty of upside.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Merits

The Space Merchants by Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. Review by Russ Lockwood

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

This novel starts as an uneven satire of the advertising industry of the future, complete with interconnected influences, corporate rivalries, and executive perks. The main character, Mitchell Courtenay, works his way up to the top of agency Fowler Schoken, dodging assassination attempts, until he's kidnapped and sent to a labor cooperative. Then, the novel turns into an adventure as he works his way out of this jam.

It's a bit schizophrenic as a whole, but generally entertaining as he once again climbs the corporate ladder.

Enjoyed it.

Spear by Nicola Griffith Review by Tom Feller

I don't know how many Arthurian stories I've read or TV shows or movies I've seen. Consequently, I was pleased to read one that takes the legends in a different direction. The story was originally intended for an anthology of LGBTQ retellings of the Arthurian legends, but once Griffith started writing, she could not stop, and the story ended up being too long for the anthology. Set in the 6th Century after the Roman withdrawal from Britain and during the Angle-Saxon invasions, she chooses to follow Mary Stewart's example (Stewart was the author of one of my favorite versions of the Arthurian legends) and use the Welsh names of the main characters: Artos (Arthur), Peretur (Parsifal), Cei (Kay), Llanza (Lancelot), Myrddyn (Merlin), Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere) and Bedwyr (Bedivere). Nimue is the only character given their standard name, and in this version, she is also the Lady of the Lake.

What I liked the most about this story was combining the Arthurian legends with the Irish legends of the Tuath De, a group of Gods who quarrel and steal from each other, especially the Four Treasures, the cauldron, the sword, the stone, and the spear. I found the LGBTQ elements the least interesting.

The story starts slowly. An unnamed girl and her mother Elen are living in the wilderness. Although the mother teaches the girl how to read, the girl becomes quite a tomboy. Then she observes a group of knights fighting bandits and decides she wants to become a knight herself. Outfitted with scraps of armor and weapons she has found and given the name Peretur by her mother, she sets out for Caer Leon (Camelot) in disguise as a man. She has a series of adventures along the way, but when she arrives Arthur refuses to make her one of his companions (there is no round table in this version of the legend) because he senses something wrong about her, even if he doesn't realize that she is really a woman.

However, there is an emergency that sends her on a mission back to her home in which she finally meets her father. The author's writing style is excellent and the story engrossing.

Time Travelers Strictly Cash by Spider Robinson Review by Russ Lockwood

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

Another quartet of Callahan's Crosstime Saloon stories plus seven other short stories. The stories were originally printed in various magazines from 1975 to 1981.

Some of the puns within the stories are quite good. Some I had to think about to get. Some sailed past me. Most were OK, although the characters in the story enjoyed them far more than I did as a reader.

All stories get a little non-fiction explanation about the events behind them, which is sometimes more interesting than the story. I'm going to steal the explanation (p44) of the difference between a book critic and a book reviewer for some future On My Mind column. Ties go to the author.

Enjoyed it.

Time Was and Times Change by Nora Roberts Review by Tom Feller

The author is one romance novelist even someone like me who does not normally read romances has heard of, because I believe I have read a few of the mysteries she writes under the name J. D. Robb. In these two novels combined into one large paperback, she combines romance with science fiction and is quite successful at it. In the first novel, Caleb Hornblower is a 23rd Century space pilot who owns his own cargo ship to haul freight between Earth and Mars. On a return trip to Earth, he has an accident like the one in the original Star Trek first season episode "Tomorrow is Yesterday". Like the Enterprise, he is thrown into the 20th Century, but instead of merely becoming an unexplained UFO sighting, he crash lands in the mountains of Oregon near the cabin of the family of Liberty Stone. She is the only family member currently in residence, writing her doctoral dissertation in cultural anthropology after five years of field work. She sees the crash, assumes it is an airplane, and drives her Land Rover in its direction. She finds Caleb, who is injured, and brings him to her cabin where she nurses him back to health. He inadvertently reveals to her that he is a reluctant time traveler and persuades her to help him repair his ship. They fall in love, of course. After repairing the ship, which I found a little too easy, he decides to stay in the 20th Century and programs the ship computer to fly it back to the 23rd Century.

In Times Change, Caleb's astrophysicist brother Jacob, aka J.T., uses the data collected by Caleb's ship to build his own space/time machine and travels to the 20th Century with the intention of bringing Caleb home. The method reminded me of the Star Trek second season episode "Assignment: Earth". However, he miscalculates the date. He hoped to arrive one day after Caleb dispatched his ship, but instead gets there several months later. Caleb and Liberty, he learns, are on their honeymoon in Bora Bora. However, Liberty's sister Sunshine is using the cabin while she is between jobs. Their initial meeting is a rather interesting variation of "meeting cute". He arrives while she is out shopping for

groceries and enters the unlocked cabin. She assumes he is an intruder and tries to use her martial arts training to subdue him before calling the police. However, he is also an accomplished martial artist and gets the better of her. After each one figures out who the other is, they make a truce, although Jacob does not reveal that he is a time traveler. Neither had Caleb, so Liberty's family assumed that he was estranged from his family since they did not attend the wedding. Sunshine and Jacob agree that he can stay in the cabin, in a separate bedroom, of course, until Caleb and Liberty return. They become lovers eventually, but Jacob keeps his time traveler status a secret until Liberty and Caleb return. Although I would have preferred more science fiction and less romance, this is quite well written, and there is also quite a bit of humor in the tradition of the Back to the Future movies. The Hornblower novels by C.S. Forester are never mentioned, but there is a science fiction connection there because they were one of Gene Roddenberry's inspirations for Star Trek.

Twisted Tropes by Various Miscreants

Review by Pat Patterson

<https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com/>

Why does the Buffalo wear a Red Hat?

To keep the sun out of his eyes.

Sigh. I really don't know who to blame this on; there are SO many candidates. I'm gonna have to go with "It's Texas, of course," even though I don't know for certain that all of this collection of hippies, renegades, rednecks, bikers, pilots, gingers, and associates of African special-ops chaplains are all currently dwelling there. My second guess would have to be North Carolina, and I'm just basing that on my mostly legal experiences in Asheville and Chapel Hill.

Anyway, while perhaps not ALL of them ever proudly wore the 'Sad Puppy' badge, this work CLEARLY demonstrates that they are now, and likely forever more, be regarded as 'sick puppies.'

What did I expect? Right up front, we read that the only goal was to take a trope (movies, books, whatever) and twist it into something new. Achievement: UNLOCKED! Sigh. I confess I really love the way these people write....

If I can actually identify the (untwisted, original) trope, I will. I promise NOTHING; not coherence, competence, nor consistency.

Caliborne's Curse, by Monalisa Foster. Presumed trope: New Orleans has vampires. Bless her sweet heart, Mallory Claiborne needed inexpensive housing, and took what she could get. Bad choice; it's a house, at least, but it's old, dilapidated, and packed with extreme amounts of clutter. That might be fixable, if her landlord was reasonable. Or even human.

Late Night Drive, by Ethan Whisnand. Presumed trope: A monster is waiting for you, along the dark, deserted highway. (If this was ONLY a horror story, it could have ended as soon as we learn that Jane is working retail in a hardware store; although perhaps only those who have been there and done that (or something closely similar) would understand. NICELY done, Ethan!)

Plaza of Pain, by Tom Rogneby. Presumed trope: Resourceful hero is himself the weapon; the guns/knives/whatever are just tools. Also, there are ten million puns, references, and McGuffins included. That last statement might not be accurate.

The Luck Breaker, by Rhiain O'Connell. Presumed trope: Something something the Fae something something. Sorry, I just don't know this branch of literature well enough to identify it, but, like Potter Stewart and pornography, I know it when I see it. Powerful princess, humans, plots deeper than we can imagine...

The Chosen One, by Cedar Sanderson. Presumed trope: In times of great danger and chaos, the Chosen One will return to set all in order. If you happen to run across anything written by Cedar Sanderson, RUN! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE! Unless, that is, you wish to fall in love with the works of one of the finest wordsmiths, story tellers, and balloon manipulators of all time.

Dog Saves Man, by Christopher Markman. Presumed trope: In the deep woods lives a hermit, with a dark and terrible secret; also, the Government was behind it the whole time; and Man's Best Friend is his dog. Hey, Christopher: Melanie was right. Glad you followed through; you did her proud.

Demons and Dishes, by Dorothy Grant. Presumed trope: "Some things, you should never say their name after dark." Okay, I confess to cheating; that's the first sentence in the story. It's PERFECT though (and I like that). Also, the Dark Side has cookies. GREAT cookies!

Nick Slade-Private Eye, by JL Curtis. Presumed trope(s): Hard-boiled Detective, The Newsboy (or Shoeshine Boy) Knows Everything, and It Always Goes Down on Monday. Jim, STOP mentioning old cars, because it induces Vehicular Lust; I almost bought a Studebaker pickup truck off eBay, after reading that the private eye drives a Ford Deluxe.

Let us now stand by for the next activity by this band of loonies, or other loonies in a different band.

Peace be on your household.

Prose Bono

Getting the "Said's" Right
A.C. Cargill

<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/2022/06/21/types-of-editing-for-your-work-of-fiction/>

A challenge for fiction writers when dealing with conversations is something I call the "said's." All those "he said" and "she said" after every line of dialogue can be tiresome for both writers and readers, slowing down the reading flow. They're also a bit of a pain to type.

Why and Why Not Use:

While "Said's" (and their alternatives, a few of which are listed below) are needed for clarity in some instances, they can get in the way of dialogue pacing. An exchange between two characters that's supposed to be rapid-fire will instead be more horse-and-buggy speed.

Example 1 (before editing):

The young man backed away slightly and said, “I’m better than you. I care about these creatures. You just want profit.”

Jim said, “So do the people who made that T-shirt you’re wearing and the Jeep that you drive and the cell phone in your pocket and all the other things you enjoy. They all want profit. It tells them they are doing something worthwhile, and then they can do more and even better things.”

“Well,” said the young man, “those companies might want profit, but they’re making useful things.”

“That’s your standard?” asked Jim. “Profit on making something useful is okay? And my agricultural endeavors that feed people and provide jobs are not useful? And how did you become the judge of what is useful? Why aren’t you driving an electric car instead of that gas-guzzling Jeep? Or better yet, why aren’t you riding a bicycle? Or walking everywhere? Why aren’t you wearing clothing made of leaves woven together? Your hair looks like it was cut with an electric razor by a barber. Why not just singe it off with a hot coal?”

“Coal pollutes!” said the young man.

Jim sighed and said, “You certainly have all the rhetoric memorized well. I need to get to work now. Leave and never come on my land again or ...”

“Or what? Are you threatening me?” asked the young man as he stuck out his chin in a manner that reminded Jim of a stubborn and ignorant child.

“Or I’ll have you arrested,” said Jim and then walked back into the kitchen and sat down at the table to eat his breakfast, not looking back.

Example 2 (after editing):

The young man backed away slightly. “I’m better than you. I care about these creatures. You just want profit.”

“So do the people who made that T-shirt you’re wearing and the Jeep that you drive and the cell phone in your pocket and all the other things you enjoy. They all want profit. It tells them they are doing something worthwhile, and then they can do more and even better things.”

“Well, those companies might want profit, but they’re making useful things.”

“That’s your standard? Profit on making something useful is okay? And my agricultural endeavors that feed people and provide jobs are not useful? And how did you become the judge of what is useful? Why aren’t you driving an electric car instead of that gas-guzzling Jeep? Or better yet, why aren’t you riding a bicycle? Or walking everywhere? Why aren’t you wearing clothing made of leaves woven together? Your hair looks like it was cut with an electric razor by a barber. Why not just singe it off with a hot coal?”

“Coal pollutes!”

Jim sighed. “You certainly have all the rhetoric memorized well. I need to get to work now. Leave and never come on my land again or ...”

“Or what? Are you threatening me?” The young man stuck out his chin in a manner that reminded Jim of a stubborn and ignorant child.

“Or I’ll have you arrested.” Jim turned, walked back into the kitchen, and sat down at the table to eat his breakfast, not looking back.

Taking out extraneous “saids” makes the dialogue read more quickly in this rapid-fire exchange of philosophy between my novel’s hero Jim O’Connell and a young man from an environmental organization.

However, when you have more than two characters participating in the conversation, “saids” are essential.

Example:

“Quite a few folks here already,” observed Henry.

“Yes,” said Rose. “He seemed to have a lot of friends.”

“There’s friends, and then there’s friends,” mused Henry as he got out of the SUV and held the door for her.

“Oh, Henry, there you go being philosophical. What does that mean?” asked Katherine, getting out the other side and walked around to them.

A third person commenting here made the “saids” (or an alternative) necessary.

Some Alternatives for “Said”

Here are some words I have used extensively instead of “said”:

Stated

Averred

Observed

Avowed

Mused

Cried

Yelled

Growled

Cooed

Explained

Insisted

Required

Stipulated

Claimed

Ordered

Commanded

Of course, if your character is asking a question, you'll want to indicate this if it's in a spot of dialogue where "saids" need to be included:

Asked

Demanded

Replied

Answered

Responded

Your thesaurus (printed or online version) will list many more. Picking the right one can not only mix things up a bit and make them more interesting for your reader but can help convey mood and character of the speaker.

A Note on Word Order

Some authors put "said" or its equivalent after the speaker's name or pronoun.

Example:

"I'm a volunteer fireman," said Chuck hurriedly, "and I'm headed out to help put out the fire."

Others reverse that when using the speaker's name.

Example:

"I'm a volunteer fireman," Chuck said hurriedly, "and I'm headed out to help put out the fire."

Which you choose seems arbitrary as long as you are consistent throughout your novel or short story and your meaning is clear to the reader.

Bottom Line

Err on the side of clarity. If it will be clear to the reader who is saying what, omit the "said." Otherwise, include it. And a long conversations of simple back and forth will be more clear if now and then you mention which character is saying what.

Hope you found this helpful and have been inspired to start and/or continue writing! Examples are from Hammil Valley Rising, book one of my WIPs.

Thanks for reading.

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

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

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

Nope.

So.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cast and Character
By Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I'd asked in the spiky book club server what topics they'd like to see me touch on in posts, and the first response was to ask about fleshing out supporting characters. Which is a good point. No one wants to wander into a book and see a bunch of cardboard cutouts propping up the joint.

The quick and easy answer to filling out a supporting cast is to remember that each of them is a person (whether human, cat-dragon hybrid, or silicone-based lifeform) with motivations and reactions. They will act, or react, based on what is being done in the story. You have to give them logical motions or the reader is going to wonder if they are just part of the scenery – hence the reviews complaining about wooden supports. Why logical? Well, real life is full of mysteries and conundrums, and while sometimes you might be able to figure out the underlying rationale of the people around you, mostly you won't. In fiction, though, you should give some reassuring clarity to the readers.

The counterpoint to giving them motivation is that it needs to be a weaker, less fully-defined motive than your main character. If it's stronger, you begin to invert your main character into a supporting character. The more formed they are the more likely they are to take on a life of their own and start taking over, in my experience. This is easier in a short story, where you don't want a large cast of characters, and in a series, where you can promise that character a spin-off all their own, if they will queue patiently over there while you give your MC the conflict plot arc of their lives, dropping them off into a resolved state before you come back to the impatiently toe-tapping side characters to give them a thrill as well.

One side benefit of fully formed characters is that your book will fill out, too. From the bare bones of the plot, you suddenly have a population in it, running around doing things. Those things might be trip-

ping up the protagonist while he's trying to get to his end goal and resolution. They might also be helping him get where he's going, especially if he's taking on a task too large for one person to handle all his own self.

To fill out a character, you don't have to go into minute detail of physical description. In fact, you really should refrain from that. For a side character, a thumbnail sketch is sufficient. However, by giving the reader some idea of the people surrounding the MC, you are also limning that character in reflected light. We are who we hang out with, in fiction as in life. Showing motivation through reactions described in action in the story will give a support, or a contrast, to the main character. If he's buddied up with a group of thugs, you don't expect him to be pure as the driven snow. More like where the dogs have been walked. If the MC is surrounded by a group of elite fighting warriors who treat him with respect (in their own way, which may look like abusive teasing) then you don't expect him to be a yellow-bellied coward dealt the white feather.

Here's a good place to use the primary questions: who, what, why, how, and where. Who is the character, and I don't mean who she says she is, but the deep underlying motives that drive her. What is she doing in the story? Why is she doing that? How will she accomplish her goals – not the MC's, but the supporting character's – as the story progresses, and yes, that might be her going along with her friend to help her friend the MC win through. Where did she come from and where is she going in the scope of the story, or beyond in a series where she has the opportunity to audition for her own leading role in a later book.

When it comes to supporting characters, the further out from the central characters they get, the more they can be simply Ionic, Doric... oh, fine, you know what I mean! They can just hold up the place, rather than needing to have things like arms and legs, much less clearly defined personalities. However, it's not difficult to ask the character a few questions, when they have a speaking role, and then as the author you can put a little of that on the page, and voila! They will spring to life. If you're like me, then you'll spend more time beating them off with a stick to keep them in their place in the story!

Small Stories

By Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Last week I asked the Book Club with Spikes (on Discord) for some help coming up with topics I could write about here. I've been sitting in a dry well of creativity and inspiration for some time, looking up at the light falling into the vertical tunnel, and knowing it's not getting any closer. I'm going to have to climb up there and get it myself. Just... very hard to move on it when I'm spending all of my energy in other places.

I was given about a dozen suggestions, and if you have any topics to suggest, please leave them in the comments. Some of the suggestions will take some time to research properly, but there was one I felt comfortable writing about today.

“On ‘small’ stories? Characters don't save the world, just grow somehow through everyday life.”

This isn't necessarily slice-of-life, although I can argue that there is a place for stories like that, which

don't necessarily have a plot, so much as a comfortable stroll with a friend down a warm path shaded by green leaves, stopping to admire mushrooms and smell flowers. There are days when a book about nothing much at all would be just about my speed.

Small stories, which I have written about before, since my Tanager's Fledglings was a small story, don't have big dramatic stakes for the protagonists. I think my favorite examples of this are some of DE Stevenson's light novels. Her books, for me, are like tucking a warm shawl around me, picking up a cup of cocoa, and burrowing into a nest of pillows. There is conflict in them, sure, they have full plots (the woman was a master of the small story, which is why she's still popular decades after the books came out), but the reader isn't twisted up with anxiety. You know things will turn out in the end, even if they don't turn out the way the main character thought they should happen.

So what is a small story? It might be a story about a man and a woman who have just married and are still learning about one another as they grow into the fullness of their relationship. It might be about housebreaking a puppy on a spaceship while avoiding greedy bureaucrats and pirates to keep that ship from being taken away. Or it could be a mother teaching her children how to grow into mature adults, while trying to keep herself from losing her sense of humor and proportion in the meantime.

Core elements include a theme of growth, sure, but there's no great tragedies here. Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Midsummer's Night* would both be small stories. However, a small story need not be a comedy, even if it does contain humorous elements.

Nor does the small story have to be unimportant. Stories that model healthy maturity and learning are important, as we know readers absorb fiction and use it in their own lives. A dragon, bereft of his hoard through the machinations of some knight, must learn to budget. A cabin boy on a (space)ship learns the value of hard work and good coffee. A girl whose mother was kidnapped by faeries learns how to cook good food, so her father has the strength to go rescue his wife. That last is a story nestled inside a story, and it's about emphasis. If you emphasize the girl working at becoming an able housekeeper and help, the shell of tragedy rests lightly around it, with a climax of her being fit to nurse her mother back to health at the end of the story, ending with a cozy family joyful in one another's presence 'round the fireplace.

One thing this topic got me wondering about, as we head further and further into an economic downturn, is what stories were popular during the Great Depression. Not what the literati think ought to be the stories of the era (likely depressing, natch) but the actual ones that people consumed for models of hope and happiness while they survived on less and less. I think we need more tales like that, about now.

While I'm here and have your attention, there's a small story I wrote that came out in *Tales from the Occupation* last week. *North Way*, which is set in the Fae Wars universe, is a family story. For other stories that are bound together by one small furry purry package, you'll want to check out *Moggies in Space* (I don't have a story in it, but that's my cover design!).

So what are your favorite small stories? What small story would you like to write, and how would you start it? And please, if you have topic suggestions, I'd like to hear them. It's going to be a few weeks at least before I'm back out of the hole.

A small story needn't be about physically small things, but it could be!

An Observation
By Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

As a writer, we need to watch everything around us, because you never know when it's going to come in handy. Last weekend I went out and picked grapes with Dorothy Grant, which was targeted research for her WIP, but I listened to her tell me about the grapes and filed that information away. Then we had a conversation with a fellow who wants to become a writer, and I got to share some of the information I've learned here and there over the years. Last night, we had neighbors over for dinner (side note that I love living in a small town, in a house where we've made new friends we can do this with) and I wound up having a passionate conversation with two of them about fantasy and science fiction. Towards the end of it, the neighbor we call Dave the Falconer turned to me and said, 'anytime you want to write about falconry and get it right, come talk to me.' He thrust out a long arm over the table, and patted his forearm. 'You don't get the birds to fly right at you, they don't do that, and you don't have them land on your arm. I want them to come here,' he patted his fist, 'where I can grab their jesses and control them, and they have flying room out away from my body.'

I don't currently have plans to write a falconer into a story, but if I do it, I will definitely take Dave up on his offer, and it's already cool to watch him training the birds in his backyard (next to ours) or have him bring over a Cooper's Hawk chick for socialization pats from us.

You never know what you're going to learn, or from whom you might learn it. The other couple at dinner that night have lived across the back alley from our house long enough to have known the previous owner (who had built our house with her late husband back in 1950) so I got to walk through the house with the neighbor lady and talk about the changes we've made, picking up a little history at the same time. She hadn't known about the hidden windows and was astonished when I described what we'd found as we renovated.

I'm headed out here shortly for a work day with the naturalist group. The main goal of the day is to pick up trash from the side of the road (we sponsor a section of highway near the state park). Knowing us as I do, we will all be making interesting observations, from birds to the clouds, to the nature of the trash we'll be hauling off. At least, I know I'll be doing the latter. Trash can tell you a lot about a person. When it's on the side of the road, mostly that they are not a nice person with good habits, but as a writer, I never know what I'll see that I can use in a story somewhere, sometime.

But now, I need to fill the camelbak and get my hat and gear ready. It's going to be relatively cool today, topping out about 95 after a week of well over 100-degree days, but I will need lots of water and electrolytes to make sure I'm not completely wiped after a few hours of work out there. This is the other way observation is useful... I have learned that here in Texas you need to drink more than you think you need, or you will suffer for it, if in no other way than muscle cramps and fatigue. Dehydration is a serious issue.

This should be an interesting day. And if you keep your eyes and ears open, they are all interesting days!

Flights of Whimsy
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

First order of business... There's a postcard challenge open while two Moms of the Apocalypse are off having fun at Imaginarium in Louisville, KY. I'm the stay-at-home mom, a role I've worn for most of my adult life. So! email for a prompt image, and then write a 50-word story, format per instructions, and submit it. It's a great little exercise in whimsy and it could wind up being published, you never know.

It's a little odd, that whole Mom thing. Last Sunday was my baby's 18th birthday. He wandered around for half the day muttering 'I'm an adult! I'm an adult!' and I didn't disabuse him of the notion. He's still living at home, at least until he's completed his welding degree. He works a little, only pays one bill, and I'm the one buying groceries. But yes, he's an adult... and I'm very proud of the directions he's heading in, even while I pick up his dirty socks from the most improbable places.

Last night he called me as he was headed home from work "get your camera and meet me at the car." I grabbed the camera, waited for him to come in, expecting he had an interesting bug, and he dragged me off to the lake to see a cool flock of birds, instead. He may be an adult, but he's still willing to indulge in my whimsies.

In the Discord art channel, there was discussion of the relative heights of fae and their riding animals. Which was a delightful flight of fancy!

There's a famous quote I often return to, about this.

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

? C.S. Lewis

I'm approaching a Certain Age. My children are mostly grown and gone, with one anxious to be out and doing big things as soon as he can possibly manage. And then, I shall indulge in more flights of whimsy. At least, I hope there will be more room in the empty nest for me to do the things I'd like to do. Right now, I barely have time for the things I must do. It makes progress on writing slow. At least the art is happening, even if most of it looks like this...

Cover art is a language of its own, and I'm getting to the point where I seem to comprehend it. I've got my hands full of work doing graphics at least through August! and more literally, my hands full of Toast. I don't remember what I was going to say here. I'm off to play with the kitten who is demanding all my attention and both hands.

Hold My Beer
by Becky Jones
<http://ornerydragon.com/>

A while back I read Scott Adams' book *How to Fail At Everything And Still Win Big*. It's a discussion of how he went from lowly engineer in a cubicle at PG&E to creator of one of the most popular and successful comics (Dilbert). In the book he talks a lot about having a system, rather than goals. He argues that a structure or system for your life will be better in the long run than some big goal sitting out there on the "someday" horizon. In other words, have a system for your days, weeks, months. So, get up. At least put on workout clothes because that will feel like you're going to work out and you will be more inclined to do so. If you put the goal of working out every day on your calendar, you're putting unnecessary stress on yourself. Instead, just get up and put on the work out clothes. That's the system.

He explains it much better than I am. I've sort of absorbed most of it and haven't reread the book... maybe I should do that. My point to all this is, having just read a post at Mad Genius Club by Sarah Hoyt, I realized I've strayed from my system. I need to get back in that rhythm or system. I need to create some structure for my days. I need to bloody well finish book 2! And, I need to start on a couple of other things. So, I need to get back to a system. One of the things that Adams mentions is that having a system is how you reach your goals. If I have a system where I write every day at 10am I am far more likely to finish things up than I am if I simply say, today I need to write. Or whatever.

One of the things I mentioned in a comment on the Mad Genius post was that while writing my dissertation, I followed the system of 15 minutes a day. If I wrote for even just 15 minutes, at least I'd done something. At the same time, if I limited myself to 15 minutes a day, I often found that I worked for far longer and made greater progress. The Pomodoro Method is similar. Set timer for 25 minutes. At the end of that time, stand up, do something else for a couple of minutes, then another 25 minute stint. Do four of the 25-minute shifts and then take at least an hour break. I've also incorporated the idea of changing locations (this was a hella lot easier before lockdowns when I could head over to the local coffee shop and sit there for a couple hours), and changing topics. I used to tell my students to try this technique when they became overwhelmed with assignments. Several of them reported back that it worked very well for them. I would probably do well to follow my own advice.

So, back to striving. I'm striving to make a career out of this writing thing. Yes, that's a goal. But, I'm thinking of it in terms of a system to reach a desired outcome. The system is to write every day. Write regardless of motivation, muses, inspiration, etc. To paraphrase Larry Correia, put butt in seat and fingers on keyboard.

I've taken Sarah's post on a personal level while she was talking about humankind in general...as in humans are designed to strive and we do poorly when reasons to strive are removed. Striving got people on the Mayflower, into covered wagons, up to Alaska, to the moon, wherever there was a seemingly impossible hurdle humans headed for it. I liked the reddit thread from a few years ago that said humans were space orcs, and a "hold my beer" species. When told we can't do this, or get there, or build that (yes, dammit we did build that), our genetic, built-in response is "hold my beer."

I actually agree with Dean Vernon Wormer, "Fat, drunk, and stupid is no way to go through life, son."*

Find something to strive for. Okay. Let's do this.

Hold my beer.