

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

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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.

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch  
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future  
The Brittle Riders  
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

The Concordat of Archive Books: “Starships and Empires.”  
Become the Hunted  
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

The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy  
with Demons

Warsprite  
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>

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

Simultaneous Times

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

Free ebook – featuring stories by: Cora Buhlert, Kim Martin, Brent A. Harris, Renan Bernardo, RedBlue-BlackSilver, Robin Rose Graves, Douglas A. Blanc, Michael Butterworth & J. Jeff Jones – with illustrations by: Austin Hart, Dante Luiz, Chynna DeSimone, Douglas A. Blanc, & Zara Kand

# Editorial

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Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Bob Jennings

Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

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

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# Fiction

**Alyx: An AI's Guide to Love and Murder by Brent A. Harris**

**Review by Jean-Paul Garnier**

<https://spacecowboybooks.com>

It was difficult to put this one down and I burned through it in a few days. As a fan of Harris's short fiction, this novel he proves to me, yet again, that he is a masterful author. A house with a built in AI starts to become sentient and through a series of logical interpretations begins to wreak havoc on a teenage girl and her neglectful mother that have just moved in. The characters are rich and full, believable and alive – one has no difficulty empathizing with all of them, including the sentient AI. The relationships between all of the characters are also believable and suck the reader in, mixed with a perfect blend of action and unpredictability. While set in the near future, one gets the sense that the occurrences in this book could be real challenges faced as we let AI into our lives without discrimination. The story has elements of horror, romance, and great storytelling in general. A science fiction masterpiece that readers of all genres will love.

**Cascor by Matthew Hughes**

**Reviewed by Robert Runté**

<http://SFeditor.ca>

Matthew Hughes is one of Canada's top five SF&F writers, a master of both novels and short stories. He has had over 40 stories published in the venerable Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine alone, for example, and I dare say the Hughes name on the cover has helped sell many copies of the magazine. The past few years, Hughes has been making an effort to collect all his various series into omnibus volumes featuring this or that character or universe.

The new Cascor collection features ten stories, mostly reprinted from F&SF Magazine, but the three longest are original to this volume and well worth the price of admission on their own. Nine of the stories feature Cascor, a hard-boiled detective in a future so distant that the Earth has reverted to magic; the tenth entry provides the childhood backstory of one of Cascor's elderly associates.

Cascor's world of cantankerous sorcerers, corrupt officials, and devious criminals combines the best elements of a Dying Earth fantasy with Hughes' ability to come up with intriguing mysteries. (Hughes has also written award-winning mystery as Matt Hughes.) Think of your favourite detective, but having to work around invisibility and forgetting spells, or using magic to track the bad guys, or being hired by a magic mirror. The internal logic of Hughes universe is completely consistent and the more you read, the more of the intricacies of that world are revealed. No Tolkienesque elves, orcs, or Hobbits here, just grimoires, guilds, and narcissists.

What elevates Hughes' stories beyond other fantasy writers--besides his dark humour, convincing world-building, and clever mysteries--is his riotous word play. Hughes is the master of neologisms, instantly conveying the nature of a person, place, or object in this other universe by grouping phonemes together that are fun to say and that somehow carry the correct emotional connotations. It is a kind of genius that we haven't seen since Dr. Seuss. Or Hughes will twist an English word to a new meaning in his universe: 'discriminator' for private detective, for example. Or he will play with diction by using perfectly good English words, except that the reader is unlikely to have ever encountered them before:

nuncupative, arrondissement, sutler, and postprandial (to choose four random examples). Together, these elements contribute mightily to the sense that one is immersed in another culture, another time, that the language has evolved to the same degree as we have diverged from Shakespearian English. This does not mean, I hasten to add, that Cascor is tough slogging—on the contrary, Hughes' style is light and breezy, if sometimes wryly sinister. Every story is a delight to read, a refreshing romp through the Earth's last eon, a nice escape from watching our current world burn to the ground.

This latest collection of short stories is likely to be Hughes' last, as his focus shifts to his more serious historical novels. Although I am an even greater fan of his literary fiction—such as the outstanding *What the Wind Brings* (reviewed in ORB Mar, 2021)—I do hope the occasional fantasy story still intrudes on these more serious projects from time to time, because there's nothing else quite like them.

## Deathbringer by Blake Carpenter Review by George Phillis

One always hesitates before reviewing the first volume of a series, because later books may take a while to appear. In this tale we find swords, horses, and steam locomotives, lovingly described farmsteads, and cruel violence. The sword of the title is magical, powerful enough to raise from the dead its rightful owner (well, there is a minor catch.) Characters are sharply drawn, argumentative, carrying with them an array of conflicting desires and plans. The heroine, Inga Alenir, is the rightful bearer of the sword Deathbringer. Close to the start of the book, on her wedding day, she and large numbers of relatives are killed. The sword is then stolen. On recovering, she discovers that she is in a chase to recover the sword with, for her, a short literal drop-dead time limit on recovery.

Carpenter gives us beautiful descriptions of a place that does not quite resemble our past. Fabrics, colors, coins, all are painted, but not overpainted, with his authorial brush. In a few pages, there is already a great deal of action and emotional tension.

## Debt of Honor by Christopher G. Nuttall Review By Russ Lockwood

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

I kept thinking I read this book before, which is odd because I know I hadn't. Yet something nagged at me. It still does, although it's just out of reach. Monarchy-based government with devious aristocracy controlling massive corporations. Feuding aristocratic brothers and sisters. Religious fanatic enemy that revels in extermination and illiteracy. Pirates picking on a little backwater planet amidst the chaos (actually, this aspect is more like Jack Campbell's Genesis series). Yep. Somewhere in my dim memory lies the books with the same set up and resolution.

The prose is clever enough, including a few lines here and there as a homage to other sci-fi books and movies, to propel the plot. Within the feeling of *deja vu*, the characters offer enough nuances and take advantage of some political maneuvers to keep it interesting. The twist at the end was different and advances you into the sequel.

Enjoyed it.

## Debt of Loyalty by Christopher G. Nuttall

Review By Russ Lockwood

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

The sequel to Debt of Honor follows the sci-fi civil war between the King in exile and the oligarchy of the aristocrats.

The novel contains considerable if-then conference room discussions and if-then political discussions inside the head of the main protagonists, so it tends to feel padded and drag a bit. The odd part is that despite the over-analysis of the various situations and counters, nobody ever thinks of surprise enemy moves and counter-moves that pop up in the pages, which make the conference-room blather all the more vacuous.

The battles are relatively matter-of-fact, in large part because the two main protagonists are 'admirals' whose sole command presence consists of saying "Fire!" and "Run away!"

The missiles and ECM drones race off, point defenses intercept missiles, and the flag bridge gets reports of explosions and detonations. It's all logical from an admirals-eye view, but a bit antiseptic.

Still, ties go to the author. Enjoyed it.

## Debt of War by Christopher G. Nuttall

Review By Russ Lockwood

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

The third and final book of the sci-fi trilogy brings the war between King and Commonwealth to a conclusion. Like the second novel, this one is also short on action and long on conferences, zoom calls, and internalized mental hand-wringing. I get the feeling that it was padded out to meet page count and that's not a good feeling.

The main characters fade from interest and that's not a good feeling, either. Sadly, the most interesting fellow is the Royal fanatic who space-nuked a city. Second place? The ambassador. At least they did something.

The trilogy started with promise, but it didn't end that way.

## Destiny of the Realms: Fate's Awakening by K.L. Jones

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Ya know, it's weird. If you had told me I was going to read a book with a character named "Bane" in it, my immediate reaction would have been to assume that he was the villain. I mean, a bane, at least to me, is a bad thing. It keeps someone from succeeding and maybe even kills them. I'm not usually a fan of banes. I have a tendency to get a bit upset at them. That much having been said, Bane is an awesome protagonist (no, that's not a typo) and I have a feeling that the name Bane is going to have some importance moving forward in the Destiny of the Realms series. I also think that K.L. Jones picked the right name for the character in his book, Fate's Awakening.

You don't look convinced. Seriously, if you don't believe me go buy the book and read it. What do you mean I need to tell you more about it?



\*SIGH\*

Why do I have to do all the work around here?

Anyway...

Bane is a hardcore dude. He's a little bit on the young side, but he's the kind of guy that a McCoy of the McCoy/Hatfield feud can get behind. Bane never gives up, and I really, honestly, truthfully mean NOT EVER. I don't know if I could do what this kid does but he does it with aplomb. I wouldn't tangle with Bane. He does lack a certain subtlety at times, but what he lacks in subtlety he makes up for in guts and forcefulness. Don't get me wrong, he has a soft side that comes out at times, and I respect that, but, well...

Let's put it this way.

Did you ever read that internet me about the big, bad bikers and their cute little dogs and the kissy noises and whatever? Yeah. I mean, Fate's Awakening has a Medieval style setting so there aren't any motorcycles but, other than that, totally Bane.

If and when you buy this one, buckle up and be ready for a rough ride. Jones has a tendency to take a hard right turn every once awhile. As soon as you think you've got it all figured out, everything changes. He does a very good job with his foreshadowing that it makes sense though. I really enjoyed that part of the book, just don't expect things to go the way you expect them to go.

I do find Fate's Awakening to be a bit Kratman-esque for those of you who enjoy his work. Young Bane receives an awful lot of training and there is some exposition about why he's learning what he's learning and why he's learning it. I liked that. I mean, we've all seen the tacky eighties movies with the thirty second training montage and no explanation. It serves a purpose but it doesn't fill the audience in on what's happening. There are some training techniques in here that I'm familiar with and some that I'm not. Having the weird stuff explained my brain malfunction less. (I mean, it's never really worked RIGHT...) Don't get me wrong, things don't devolve into a Weber style infodump, but there are times when you will be not be confused when you otherwise may have been. At least if you're paying attention.

I don't want to make it sound like all of Fate's Awakening is training. There is enough action here to keep anyone satisfied. Everything from duels to mass battles fill the pages. I found myself looking forward to the next fight and never quite being sure how it would go. I will say this much though: Fate's Awakening is not a book for those who are offended by graphic violence. That is a group that very specifically does NOT include me, I grew up on Friday the 13th and Nightmare on Elm Street, but those of you who can't take a wee bit of blood and possibly some falling internal organs are probably better off reading Sweet Valley High or something. My sister used to really like those.

The cast of characters outside of Bane is also amazing. Look for names like Toloff, Grim, Yasminia, Alicia, and others. A couple I don't want to give up. This is a book with a pretty decent sized cast and they all seem to have a place to be and a purpose to serve. People come in quickly at times, but you quickly realize why they're there. I like that.

With so much going on and so many people to get to know, this book cooks with grease. You're not going to find a minute to put it down. I got lucky (sort of) and got two solid hours to read at work because it was so slow and went through the last two hundred plus pages of Fate's Awakening before I got

stuck driving all the way across town for voucher rates. (If you missed it, voucher rates SUCK for the driver) Anyway, I went straight through this thing without pausing. I was engrossed.

The author of Fate's Awakening is a Marine and he gets military style comradery. The laughs the men in the book get are not always the most comfortable to some people, but they're FUNNY and it FITS. Jones also gets the warrior lifestyle. Too many military stories read like they were written by Worf when they should have been written by Kurn. I'm not saying Jones is Kurn but he's a hell of a lot closer than some of the authors I've read.

Before I go, I will issue one small warning: The fantastic parts of this story don't appear until late and they aren't as pronounced as some may prefer. I thought that the way they were added was not only appropriate but interesting and vital to the story. I have a feeling that things will get more fantastic as the series goes on, but I can't make any promises. Just don't go into this looking for Harry Potter. The level of magic present is probably closer to the Game of Thrones novel than it is to Willow or Eragon. I can appreciate that.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Pells

**The East Witch by Cedar Sanderson**  
**Review by Becky Jones**  
<https://ornerydragon.com>

Starting this week, I'm adding a weekly (maybe every two weeks) book review to the blog. I think I'm going to keep it on Tuesdays, but that will be determined by how other things get scheduled. The writing prompt responses for More Odds Than Ends are due (sorta) Tuesday evening, and I usually procrastinate enough that I don't get them done until then. I expect that the majority of books I review will be in the sci-fi/fantasy genre, but giving that I am a politics and history geek, there may be some of those as well. All of my reviews are in the mode of "hey, I found this fun/interesting/enthralling and you might too." So, if you agree or disagree, you can comment accordingly. Just keep it polite, thanks. We'll see how this all goes.

A bush guide in Alaska finds a wood elf in a bear trap and her day just gets stranger from there. Finding herself Underhill, in the realm of magic and faeries, Anna must draw on all her skills, strength, memories, and sheer determination to get back to her dog and her home. It turns out that helping Ivan, the wood elf, get back home, has trapped her in Underhill. Her efforts to get home and back to her dog (who's been left alone in Alaska) bring her in contact with individuals and beings she had thought were confined to children's stories, and the stories that were meant as dire warnings no less. Ivan pledges himself to Anna and vows to do what he can to help her return home. Together they set out to tackle Underhill's obstacles.

In this stand-alone book, Cedar Sanderson takes her readers back to Underhill and the world of her Pixie Noir series. Her characters are well thought-out and come to life with bright colors and human flaws (even the non-humans have human weaknesses and strengths). This is not your basic "fight the evil in the land so that all may live happily ever after" story. There are nice and not-so-nice and in-between characters (in other words, real), and there are fae politics, and complications arising from those politics. There's even a bit of romantic interest.

Anna must mind her manners while remembering the pitfalls described in the fairy tales she read as a child. How does one safely leave Baba Yaga's chicken-legged house? Anna's resourcefulness and skill



as a hunting guide in the Alaskan wilderness are also keys to her survival in the world of Underhill. That resourcefulness and determination win her allies and friends in unexpected places.

Ivan is determined to repay Anna for rescuing him and to prove to his family and clan that he is an adult and capable of handling that responsibility. He gave her his oath and he will prove that it was not an empty or frivolous promise. His adventures, as he searches for Anna, test his resolve and courage. What can one young wood elf do against the tide of fae politics?

Since politics is my bailiwick, I enjoyed seeing the story play out over a layer of politics and plotting occurring in Underhill that also affect Anna and Ivan's abilities to help each other. Anna and Ivan must use all their wits and everything at their disposal to safely negotiate the rules of Underhill and the all-too-familiar political machinations of those, human and fae, who control competing poles of power.

Sanderson has woven Siberian fairy tales together with what might be called "traditional" fairy tales into a story that makes you want to keep reading. A good book is one that makes you sad that it ended...and *The East Witch* does just that. I've read this one a few times already and I know I'll be going back again. I can also strongly recommend that if you haven't done so already, pick up the *Pixie Noir* series.

You can also read more of Sanderson's writing over at Cedar Writes where you can find more stories, snippets, and serials, alongside recipes and recommendations of what to read while you're eating some of those recipes.

**Fantasy Treehouse Art & Architecture by Cedar Sanderson**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**  
<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Talk about whimsical. Cedar Sanderson's *Fantasy Treehouse Art & Architecture* is a work of light fantasy. There are no weighty battles, no dastardly deeds or impressive heroes. No, this is a work of beauty and light, a work of art in the classic visual sense, as opposed to a work of prose where the reader must picture everything on their own. I'm not lambasting authors (Three hundred plus posts into this blog and I'd almost like to think of myself as one) I'm just saying it's a different feel.

There is a bit of a story here. Sanderson leaves the narration to a nameless person, who is paging through the work of one Mme. K. We're not told exactly what the K stands for, but that's alright. It leaves a bit of mystery and intrigue in an otherwise quite mellow work. The uncertainty, along with the art itself, draws the reader in to the story and makes us want more. The thoughts of the narrator are also committed to paper and that adds a lot. It's like having someone to discuss the book with while you're reading the book. Given the fact that this is self-consciously a tome that someone else is reading it works well. I really got a kick out of that aspect of the work.

*Fantasy Treehouse Art & Architecture* is printed in black and white. The narrator states something about the colors not translating and suggests colored pencils to fill them in to fit your imagination. (I'm paraphrasing poorly.) That does sound like it would be a lot of fun. In looking at these pictures, however, I do recommend buying and coloring the physical copy of the book. Some pictures don't translate well to coloring apps (I used to use Recolor a lot) and this does kind of have the look of a book that would have problems if you colored it electronically, unless you've got something that works better. Then again, the pictures in the book are better drawn and more highly detailed than anything that would work on a coloring app, so it's worth the trade-off.

Fantasy Treehouse Art & Architecture includes a lot of background in the drawings. I mean, you do get a look at the treehouses themselves, but in some cases you also get a look at the forest it's located in. I enjoyed this part. As someone who has looked through old pictures attached to historical events this is great. A building with no context is missing the single most important part of its existence. If you don't believe me, get hold of the Official Records of the Manhattan Project (I think that's what they were called, it's been awhile) where you get pictures of buildings featuring only the building with no real notes about what happened inside.

I was about to go on a long diatribe here, but I'll save it. Let's just say I get the security aspect. That's what my project was about.

Several of the drawings contain marginalia and the narrators thoughts about them. It was really cool. Marginalia is something that a lot of modern readers \*looks in mirror\* don't have much experience with, but it was common in older works, especially those that were hand copied before the invention of the printing press. It added an air of authenticity to the story within the book. I happen to know that Sanderson knows a bit about history and I can't help but think she did it on purpose. I approve.

Overall, Fantasy Treehouse Art & Architecture is a lot of fun. I'd recommend it to anyone with a love for fantasy who is in the mood for something more fun than intense. I'll be looking for more work from Mrs. Sanderson in the future. I love cool art and this was fun to read.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Swamp Chickens

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

Forward by Peter Watts

Review by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Herbs and Empire by Alma T. C. Boykin

Review by Pat Patterson

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

A sign of my absence from Reader Land: I'm not familiar with the first seven books in the series. A sign of astounding writing skill: in no way did that detract from my appreciation of this the 8th volume:

If there were previously uncompleted story arcs, they were not obvious to me. If there was some bit of essential information I missed, I couldn't identify it. In fact, the ONLY effect that discovering this was the most recent in an 8-volume epic is that I realized I have seven beauties yet to discover. So, good!

Saxo Birdson is an abused and neglected youth, apprenticed to Master Agri, who raises (giant) 'great-hauler' birds for use as draft animals. While performing those duties, a beast healer (Master Jeaspe) discovers Saxo has the power to influence the behavior and healing of the great birds, and insists he be trained in that gift, per the command of the Great Northern Emperor.

And: the REAL story begins!

Among the MANY things I found particularly noteworthy is this: somehow, somewhere, Saxo has developed the most EXCELLENT habit of repeating back any instructions he is given. While a valuable habit in any job, his developing life will require such attention to detail. Alas, my own dogs are too old to learn a new trick (and by dogs, one may mean 'children').

I found myself nearly giggling with delight, as I read the descriptions of the uses of assorted vegetation. These 'primitive' people are steeped, through and through, with the disciplines of SCIENCE! Describe, explain, predict, control; that's at the heart of every use of herbs found in the book. It's transformed the use of medicinal properties of growing things from the mutterings of hedge witches, to a formal body of knowledge, which can be transmitted to future practitioners.

A small note on language: some of the names for things may be totally made up; I really couldn't say. Others are merely archaic forms, no longer in use in Woodstock, GA, Cultural Center of the Universe, in Anno Domini 2023. However, I sheepishly confess that I had forgotten that 'kine' refers to cows; I was thinking it meant 'pigs.' It took a reference to horns for me to snap back to reality. Pigs are SWINE, not KINE. Duh, me.

While it is true that this world contains significant magical elements, that is definitely NOT what drives the bus. That job goes to the role of duty, and in particular, to the degree of duty owed to authority. The story is very clear that sometimes a duty to one conflicts to a duty to the other; the society essentially requires that such conflicts exist. How is one to know what takes precedence? (That answer is found in the text as well. )

This was a delightful introduction to what appears to be a sophisticated exercise in world-building. Every step along the way is consistent with things we know, or can reasonably anticipate. None of the characters are single-function villains or heroes; I could say more on this, but I won't.

My grateful thanks to the author!

## Hunters and Hijinks by Nick Steverson and Melissa Olthoff

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Once upon a time, there were four tiny cogs in a big machine. That's not bad in itself; big machines really NEED tiny cogs to operate. In this case, however, the cogs were really not DESIGNED to be cogs.

They were members of the Jongee race, and if you think of humanoid hyenas, as I did, you'll come as close as possible to getting the picture in mind. To get closer still, read a bit about customary behavior of Earth hyenas. They like to hang out in small packs, and they are pretty good at killing things. So: answer phones? Do paperwork? Be a part of a huge conglomerate? Nope, none of that is a match.

Eddie is the big, dumb klutz, who manages to break mop handles while trying to clean the floors. He's joined by the most senior Jongee, Harold, who is likely to drift into a daydream at any point. Reggie, a customer service tech (complaint manager) has a bit of a mysterious past, but clearly, the danger everyone fears is coffee-guzzling Maddy, the lone female Jongee.

Their friendship is solidified when they discover they won't be able to take their long-planned vacation to attend a celebration at home, and the group decides to quit. Harold insists he has a no-fail treasure map in hand, and that beats the idea of staying on their hated jobs. All it will take is everything they have saved. They pool their scant resources, and head out to the deep black. In a broken down hunk of space junk Harold thought would be a good buy, because the salesman SAID it was a good buy.

The plot thickens! Can Eddie REALLY be the incompetent goober he projects? Can Harold REALLY have no discernment whatever, even while finding the treasure map? Will Reggie and Maddy come to blows over the diminishing coffee supply? Can the witty dialogue contain any more puns and cultural references? Semi-sentient small hitch-hikers! Mall cops! Pirates! MY LITTLE PONY!

This is a delightfully pleasant romp. Yes, there is danger, from environments as well as from other sentient beings, but the authors treat these characters with happy respect. This is (allegedly) the first of a trilogy, so some obvious potentials are left unfulfilled, but much is resolved as well.

Although, perhaps not as the Jongee would prefer. Still, as long as more is coming (despite the authors' threats, I believe it will happen). We can all stand by for more. Maybe not for long.

## I Sing the Body Electric! by Ray Bradbury

Review By Russ Lockwood

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

Collection of short stories from 1948 to 1968, with the usual bell curve of interest as short story collections inevitably offer. Sadly, I found most of the stories difficult to read, as if the language was not quite fitting today.

That said, many of the stories were originally published in leading magazines, er, back in the day -- Playboy, Harper's, McCall's, and Life....and a couple science fiction magazines, too. I found Lost City of Mars to be the best of the bunch. It was also the final story, so maybe I was getting used to the language.

The Icarus Twin by Timothy Zahn  
Review by Declan Finn  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Wherein I review the latest Zahn novel... a bit early. - Declan Finn

Zahn returns to the Icarus universe to play an 8-sided game of chess

Timothy Zahn never fails to deliver a superlative work of science fiction. His Icarus series is no exception. The Icarus Plot was an intricate spy game, with several sides playing a long game as they all try to manipulate each other.

Now, this is almost simple in comparison, as Timothy Zahn has another eight-sided chess game that centers around murder.

The Icarus Twin

The Story

In a universe where transportation is subsumed by the Paath monopoly, Gregory Roarke and his partner Selena have been hired by the Icarus program to find interstellar gates that allow instantaneous transportation between any two points in the galaxy. But when a conman and thief named Easton Dent continuously searches for “Gregory Roarke” and “Icarus,” everyone wants to hunt Dent down. The con man will only make contact with Roarke.

But when a body drops near the contact point, with Roarke’s wallet near the corpse, the problems expand exponentially. The Paath are after the portal. Roarke’s old mob boss employer is after Roarke and Dent. Icarus has secrets of its own, and playing its own long game. On top of everything else is Easton Dent’s brother, Weston—an omnipresent threat that always watches Easton’s back. Worst of all: The badgemen are after Roarke for the murder of Easton Dent.

Not only does Timothy Zahn weave an intricate tale of espionage and murder, it is put together so brilliantly that you feel smart just for getting the answers ahead of him. The mystery author John Dickson Carr was once described as waving the clues in front of the reader’s face the entire time, but the story runs so fast that no one catches them. Zahn is the science fiction equivalent of that.

With The Icarus Twin, Zahn seems to be playing an 8-sided game of chess, but no matter how labyrinthine the plot seems to be, Zahn always plays fair, and explains everything with such crystal clarity that the endings are always satisfying.

Since this is Zahn, he established everything quickly and efficiently, summing up an entire novel of intricacies and backstabbing into a few lines. Zahn writes so well, I almost hate him a little.

Before the reader even gets to 10% of the way through the book, Zahn has written an intelligent, fast-paced thriller that has all the spy craft of a La Carre, and all the speed of a Mickey Spillane.

The nice thing about all of this is that, unlike some murder mysteries and spy novels, Timothy Zahn will always play fair with the reader, to the point where the reader may figure out what’s going on before our heroes.



Despite even throwaway scenes having wheels within wheels, Zahn delivers a brilliant, complicated story so well-written, you will never lose track of what's going on, or who all the players are. But the funny thing is that there are no throwaway scenes.

## The Characters

The entire novel is told from Roarke's perspective, and it is a doozy. Spy novels will talk about the wilderness of mirrors. Roarke practically lives in a Mordor of mirrors. When he comes up with an outlandish plan, he seems to have two dozen more up his cybernetic sleeve. He doesn't have a plan D, he will have a plan M. Roarke never stops playing three-dimensional espionage chess, and it's a joy to watch his mind work.

Rourke thinks things through so thoroughly, he even makes decisions about what gun he will use, depending on what message the gun sent.

Of course, the endless sayings from his father always lighten to mood (it helps that I read them in the voice of James Garner playing Maverick). I await the day that we get to meet his father, because I suspect he will steal a whole novel, just by showing up in the last five pages.

It helps that Rourke is a smartass—at one point, he identifies himself and Selene as Doctors Moriarty and Watson.

Roarke's partner Selene is interesting in that she's an alien who thinks enough like Roarke that she can communicate whole paragraphs to him in one line of dialogue.

Then there are the Dent brothers, one of whom is a genius-level conman. Like John Le Carre's antagonist Karla, Dent takes up a lot of this book, no matter how little screen time he has compared to everyone else. Even his introduction tells the reader that this is not someone to mess with.

## The World

Murder mysteries are a great way to explore a universe, because clues are only interpreted in light of cultural elements and assumptions. And here, we get a lot of exploration among the various and sundry alien races going around, whether it be the Paath or the Narchan, or even the various subcultures of each planet. Every piece of information fits into the overall problem, and leads both Rourke and the reader to the ultimate conclusion.

## Politics

None.

## Content Warning

This part is self explanatory

## Who is it for?

If you want the best of John le Carre's spycraft (with cybernetic arms), the mystery talents of John Dickson Carr, and the twisty planning of Mission Impossible or Leverage, you should be reading The Icarus Twin. Rourke looks like Han Solo meets Sherlock Holmes.

Oh, yes, and if you were ever a fan of Raffles, you will probably enjoy the Dent brothers.

Why buy it?

If you enjoy fast-paced, murder mystery sci-fi that will never talk down to you, you will love The Icarus Twin.

## In the Halls of Eternal Music by Denton Salle

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Espionage and dark magic in the hall of the Dwarves

In the beginning, The Avatar Wizard series started as a cute YA novel with a protagonist who turns into a panda. At the end of book one, it was revealed to be a world of fantasy intrigue and espionage, with metric tons of righteous destruction of evil. From there, the series has escalated into a full-scale war against the forces of The Dark, with book 4 ending in a cavalry charge that would have made Edgar Rice Burroughs or Tolkien happy.

In the Hall of Eternal Music, our hero Jeremy gets to learn how much diplomacy really can be warfare by other means.

The Story

Poor Jeremy. Despite having survived spies and assassins, and at least one all-out battle, his life never gets easier. This time, a simple mission to increase commercial traffic turns into another life or death battle.

Jeremy his girlfriend Galina and his best friend Bolgar have traveled to Bolgar's homeland, where his father rules the dwarven kingdom. But they don't even get a chance to say hello before they're being shot at with crossbows.

Agents of the dark are again rising, but this time they're inside the dwarven mountain. They've already tried to assassinate Bolgar's father, and now that Jeremy has arrived, there's a new target on the firing line. But this time, Jeremy can't punch his way out of this one. He'll literally have to go through Hell and back.

It has been interesting watching the Avatar Wizard series evolve from a magic school series to something that gives Narnia, Barsoom and Middle Earth a run for their money.

And, just for fun, Jeremy gets to fight Elric ... or at least his sword.

The Characters

While the focus is again mainly on Jeremy, the perspective widens a bit to Galina's point of view as well. While all the characters are deftly handled, with some solid character moments and humor, character takes a back seat to the world building in this one... until it takes a back seat to the action, and then everything gets wild and woolly.

## The World

This world building is more of the Alice in Wonderland school. Jeremy is thrust into another new culture, and has to be walked through it in order to find a solution to a mystery that's subsumed in the local culture. Frankly, having a mystery in your fantasy is a great way for worldbuilding.

## Politics

The only politics here is "evil exists, and it must be destroyed." That's it.

## Content Warning

Think of Lord of the Rings-level combat with swords. I think the TV ratings call it "fantasy violence." In battles with swords and axes, people lose body parts. There is no focus on gore, but this is as clinical as this sort of warfare can be.

Also, there seems to be more of a focus on Masonic nonsense in this one that I don't recall being present in previous novels—there is talk of lodges, and secret symbols, the Solomonic lines of Sheba, and other oddities that nearly jarred me out of the narrative. So if that's a problem, you've been warned.

## Who is it for?

Take the YA fantasy of Narnia, the action of a Barsoom or a Lord of the Rings, with humor just dark enough that makes you wonder just how much Jeremy and the others have seen.

## Why buy it?

It's fantasy YA that unambiguously identifies evil, and promptly bashes its head in. What's not to like?

**The Nova Quadrant by Brian W. Peterson**  
**Review by Jason P. Hunt**  
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

With Edgar Allan Poe as an early influence, he leans pretty heavily into the psychological thriller side of storytelling, but for now, Brian W. Peterson is playing in the science fiction sandbox with the first of a trilogy in The Nova Quadrant, setting up a tale of criminals trying to be good guys while a star threatens to explode.

"The Nova Quadrant is set in another part of the galaxy," Peterson says, "and in that section of the galaxy a star is about to go supernova. So all the beings who live there have fled, for the most part. The only ones who remain behind are those who are trying to assist others in leaving, or they are there to steal whatever's been left behind in haste. So our main characters are a group of bandits who come to the realization that they're not going to make it back to civilization without being incarcerated. They're just not going to be able to do it. So they decide they're going to switch sides, they're going to help law enforcement. The problem is, law enforcement doesn't trust them, and the other bandits hate them. So, as they're trying to figure out how they're going to keep their loot, and stay alive, they are wary because their enemies are everyone in the Nova Quadrant."

It's a story that's percolated in Peterson's mind for a while now, and after our first interview with him back in 2017, his cousin had told him that he needed to write a series, because that was the hot ticket of

the day. But Peterson draws the line at three. He has no plans to extend the story beyond that. “I don’t want to be one of those series that (I’m) eighteen books in and then I die.” Besides which, he says he’d get tired of the characters before then and want to kill them all off.

Story ideas generally start out as a collection of notes, which eventually make their way onto a spreadsheet before becoming an outline. “Once I get something in my head, I go over it for weeks or months, and then if it’s still around, I think ‘OK, this is a good enough story idea to write it down.’” Unlike *Children of the Sun*, which was pulled from Peterson’s childhood wish that aliens would come back to Earth to retrieve him from his parents, *The Nova Quadrant* started out as “a bunch of notes” that collected and gathered into a pile that was large enough to advance the project further in the creative process.

“I have notes about the characters, notes about the planets. I can’t believe how much I have there. My prior book (*Paper Doll*) was a true story, so I had hundreds of letters between family members, and I had lots of documents and such, and I thought that was a task. And it was. It was probably the biggest writing task I’ll ever undertake. But for fiction, I’m not used to this.”

Peterson is currently at work on the second book, and he has the beginnings of the outline done for book three, so he has a pretty clear idea where he’s going with the story. “I made sure that I thought this through because I don’t want to kill off a character in book one that I really wish I had in book two or three. So, yeah, I took a lot of time before I started writing.” And while the prep time is “the most boring” part of writing a novel or screenplay, it’s also the time where Peterson’s brain is more focused on the creative aspects of the story rather than the mechanics of telling it to others.

And as with all creative endeavors, the challenge is always to make sure the stories don’t seem like copycats of anything else. “I still think in *Star Trek* terms, and I still think in *Star Trek* terminology. So I work hard to avoid that.” With this new trilogy, Peterson decided to outlaw droids, because “You make a few droids – if you put them in your story, if you think about what a droid can and can’t do, they can take over the story if you’re trying to make this realistic.” Artificial intelligence is already a concern in today’s world, not just limited to dystopian settings in the future. He calls to mind an episode of *The Twilight Zone* (“The Lonely”) wherein an artificial woman is delivered to a convict living alone on an asteroid. “I remember thirty, forty years ago saying to people ‘There’s going to be a day when we’re going to see a video of a president of the United States doing something that isn’t real. It’s going to look real.’ And my gosh, did I underestimate...”

So no significant artificial intelligence in *The Nova Quadrant*, and it’s not the typical dystopian future setting, either, mainly because it’s not on Earth, which gives Peterson a lot of latitude in what kind of story he can tell. “I don’t like Earth-bound dystopia. To me, it’s always the same. Some dude survives, he’s out trying to keep what other humans are left, trying to save them, and the monsters come out at night. I just think they’re all the same to me. This was an opportunity to write a dystopian novel that is set in a completely different world and handle it in a completely different way.” Add to that a ticking time bomb in the impending supernova, a lot of trust issues all the way around, and it sounds like a recipe for a pretty tense novel.

It’s also violent. “My books are pretty clean, but this is the most gratuitous violence you’ll see,” Peterson says, extrapolating just how unlawful a true dystopia would be here on Earth, where civilized society would break down into tribal conflicts, oppressive regimes, and the like. “This book’s a little more violent than anything that I will ever write again, probably.” But in the midst of it all, there’s a group of people trying to help others escape danger. People have their various agendas, but in the end they all have the same goal of surviving the destruction of the solar system.

The violence and themes of the story elevate *The Nova Quadrant* above the YA feel of his previous science fiction work, *Children of the Sun*. In that story, two best friends learn that their each from another world, and they were on opposite sides of a civil war. It's a story of friendship, loyalty, and treachery, and with the main characters in high school, the book aims at an audience that's slightly younger. "Children of the Sun was the result of my childhood, imagining spaceships would come pick me up, thank my parents for raising me, and take me back home. Just a kid thing."

And even though Peterson describes the beginnings of the new trilogy as "goofy crap that goes through my mind" it's definitely not a kid thing. He says *The Nova Quadrant* is for a broader, older general audience.

That same broad audience may be interested in Peterson's other project currently in the works: a Star Trek fan film called *The Lost Starship*. Filmed back in February, the short is currently in post-production with the visual effects work underway. And where he worked to avoid similarities to Trek in his original books, with this he can go full redshirt and lean into being both a fan and an experienced writer.

And he's not the only one of the crew with experience. "When you think 'fan film' you think poor acting. It's a bunch of guys getting together, having fun, and then they're going to sit around and watch it and make fun of each other. Well, this is some pretty good acting. There are a number of people in it who have acting experience, and the quality is excellent because of the equipment and the sets are basically replications of the original series, so it looks good. It has that feel of the original series." The film was shot at Neutral Zone Studios in Kingsland, Georgia, and should be available this Fall. "Fan films are just a great way to keep Star Trek going, and there are people who love Star Trek making these, and that's what really adds to it, is that love of Star Trek."

Peterson also enjoyed the thrill of hearing his lines coming from the actors on set. "On my audio books, both *Paper Doll*, my family story, and *The Nova Quadrant* are on audio, and when I hear the voice actor reading what I wrote, that's a cool feeling right there, and that's just reading the book. But when someone's acting out my lines, it's hard to describe. It's a high. I love it. It's a really cool feeling."

**Paladin's Sword by Fiona Gray**  
**Review by Becky Jones**  
<https://ornerydragon.com>

The weekly book reviews continue! This week I'm reviewing Fiona Grey's debut book, *Paladin's Sword*, the first in the Professor Porter series. We are introduced to Dr. June Porter, newly minted PhD in folklore and military history, on her way to her first full-time position at Paladin University in New Hampshire. In addition to her new PhD, June is also in possession of magic which, unlike the PhD, she would like to put behind her. But the universe is a fickle thing, and it has other plans for her.

Here's the blurb:

Dr. June Porter is headed for New Hampshire as a professor, brand-new PhD in hand. The last thing she wants in her new life is more magic, so of course that's exactly what she finds. Magic, and a mysterious Irishman with emerald eyes. But there's little time for dalliance when historical artifacts begin taking a life of their own and threaten the campus. Can June reclaim her magic, protect her students – and keep her job?

We meet June as she is struggling with the multiple complexities of moving across country, the moun

tains of paperwork needed to begin a new job, and a cute new neighbor. On top of that she's got a, shall we say, less than supportive dean, with a vicious administrative assistant.

June is an introvert who nevertheless loves talking about her research whenever possible and struggles to keep her magic hidden. One person who is as interested as she is in her research is her new neighbor Peter Ridire, IT specialist and diplomat, and it turns out he's sitting in on one of her classes. He seems to want to help her which is useful as June needs all the allies she can get. The dean has dumped responsibility for an upcoming conference in her lap and expects her to fail, thus providing him with an excuse to fire her.

Her pesky magic not only refuses to go away but turns out to be quite useful when the artifacts for part of the conference take on a life of their own... and a very threatening life at that. Reclaiming and reconciling herself with her magic is one thing June must do.

Grey's description of the labyrinth facing new faculty hires is spot on. To do x you need an ID. Where do I get an ID? Over there. You need proof of employment to get the ID that says you're faculty. Where do I get that? Where is my office located relative to any classrooms? How does this even qualify as an office? And, once you figure all that out, there's the first day of classes. No matter how well-prepared one feels, it is never enough. Grey does an excellent job capturing the feeling of walking into a classroom, in a new university, for the first time, gazing over a sea of faces and praying you don't screw up too badly. On top of that, there's always that one student...

The action in *Paladin's Sword* is fast paced, but not overwhelmingly so and there are plenty of twists. The characters are well thought out and fully realized. The intermingling of university politics, the confusion of the new hire, and the chaos of an on-campus conference are true to form and provide a multi-faceted background for the main action. This book is the first of a planned series and I am looking forward to the next installment. In the meantime, I've been reading some short vignettes on Grey's blog, and she's also just released *Glitter* a short story with Peter and June.

Grey gives a great insider's view of life in academia (okay, so I've never had to deal with malevolent armor, but the rest is accurate) and the machinations and interactions of students, faculty, and staff topped off with magic. If you want to read more of Fiona Grey's work, I recommend heading over to her blog where you can find more adventures with June and Peter.

**Son of Grendel by Matthew W. Quinn**

**Review by Chris Nuttall**

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

When I reviewed *Battle for the Wastelands*, I commented that the problems facing Grendel – the toughest warlord on the block, the big bad of the novel – were very much akin to the problems facing Henry II, as he built a cluster of separate kingdoms and duchies into a coherent state. On paper, Henry should have had everything he needed to ensure the long-term success of his empire; in practice, it didn't last because of a series of civil wars. The most dangerous of those, perhaps, was the struggle between Henry II and his son, Henry the Young King. This was not an uncommon pattern amongst the nobility of that era. Sons would grow into manhood, start chafing under their father's continued rule and start making plans to take power by force.

*Son of Grendel*, set roughly a year before *Battle for the Wastelands*, is a novella that follows two people. On one hand, we have Falki Grendelsson, eldest son of Grendel, whose father is determined that he learn how to fight and how to rule before Grendel himself dies, leaving his kingdom to his son. On



the other, we have Robert Dalton, leading a desperate resistance against the encroaching enemy ... unaware that Falki has orders to earn his spurs by hunting the resistance down.

The novella showcases the growth of a young man into a reasonably decent commanding officer, although one we would regard with a certain degree of horror. Falki tries to strike a balance between being a good lord and a ruthless warlord and doesn't find it easy, particularly as he has to learn to suppress his bloodlust or prompt more rebellions. He chafes under the guidance of his father and his father's trusted advisor, who has orders to help Falki through his development. There's a core of a good person there, including someone canny enough to understand the dangers of their environment, but also demons that will overshadow the remainder of the novel series.

The book also pulls no punches when it details the effects of conquest on both sides. The resistance fighters were driven off their old farms, which were then doled out to loyalists ... who proved incompetent farmers who had to hire the old farmers just to work the lands. There's no attempt to hide the sheer brutality of the warlords, or the frustrations they face when coming to grips with an elusive enemy, or the effects of their anti-rebel campaigns that create more rebels. At one point, Falki has to tell his men not to rape. It's hard to tell if anyone paid any attention.

Unlike *Battle*, the book also looks at racial dynamics of the post-disaster world. Tribalism is rife, leading to all sorts of problems. Falki is mixed-race, in our terms, which means that – despite being a legal son and heir – he has problems fitting in with both sides. It bothers him, at least in part because his rivals – his half-brothers – probably don't have that problem. They might have a ready-made power base when they grow up and start competing with him for the throne.

The book's weakness, however, is that focusing on two major characters weakens it. There isn't anything like enough room to develop both Falki and Robert, let alone show their development as characters and their eventual final clash. It might have worked better, as a story of a boy's growth into manhood, if it focused on one. However, as a short action-adventure story set in a steampunk world, it works very well.

## Space Cowboys Edited by C.V. Walter

Review by Pat Patterson

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

My heroes have always been cowboys. It was rather inevitable, because at that time, Roy Rogers and The Lone Ranger dominated the three channels available on the rabbit-ear-antenna'ed black and white television set, to be followed closely by Bat Masterson, Gunsmoke, Maverick, Bronco and Bonanza. Have you got the idea? Because I can list MANY more examples, if you like. I was THERE, you see; and, to top it off, we moved to San Antonio in time for me to start the first grade, and I got my first cowboy hat and boots, and saw the Alamo, and had a pet horned toad. So, yeah, cowboys.

Nothing lasts forever. The US got interested in rockets, and the new shows were Men in Space, Tom Corbett: Space Cadet, Twilight Zone, and Lost in Space; by the time Star Trek finally hit the screen in 1966, NOBODY wanted a pony for Christmas anymore.

And, if ANYONE had suggested that the writers were just dusting off un-used or over-used Western story lines, calling a rabbit a smeerp, and replacing the ferocious Apache with the ferocious Martian/Klingon, they would have been shunned as a spoilsport.

Even though nothing lasts forever, nothing ever changes, either. We STILL wanted cowboys! So, we

got Wild Wild West (cowboys PLUS high-tech!), which was the very first prime-time steampunk event, preceding the origination of the term by more than 20 years. I'm ignoring cartoons, which haven't been my thing since Bugs Bunny/Roadrunner, and comic books, which I abandoned shortly after Spiderman emerged. For those of us who really loved the blend, though, it was a wasteland.

(Firefly)

WHO SAID THAT? Please, PLEASE don't make me remember Firefly...

Yes, I KNOW I'm leaving out a lot of greatness. Please feel free to make up the lack in the comments!

At long last, a colony of psychos, hippies, chippies, rednecks, cops, veterans, school marms, librarians, pilots, priests, scientists and authors (oops, redundant!) decided it was time to get the job done. And they came up with this collection of SPACE COWBOY stories. I hope that one of the future volumes will be titled "Meanwhile, Back at the Asteroid..."

The stories:

Asteroid Wranglers, by JL Curtis. When we finally get a foothold in space, we are NOT going to be able to rely on lifting up essential resources out of Earth's gravity well. No need to either, since there is an entire planet's worth, already busted up, drifting out there, waiting for us. It's dangerous work, though, and The Man only cares about the bottom line.

Drover, by Evan DeShais. The man told me that he was excited by our future in space, because there are SO many resources out there that everyone will be rich, and there will be no crime, just peace. So, I sold him some crypto-currency, an extended warranty on his car, and the winning ticket to the lottery. He was happy for the opportunity! (NOTE: none of that happened; it's just my way of illustrating that where opportunity exists, cheaters, robbers, bullies and thugs will find a way.)

All Creatures Weird and Wonderful, by David Bock. I understand that it was customary in ancient times to lame the blacksmith. He was so vital to the village, they didn't want him to run away. Same could happen with medics, in a future on another planet, with bizarre forms of disease. Query: did witch doctors ever get killed if they guessed wrong?

Getting the Herd In, by Richard Cartwright. Cool, this one is in the BIBLE, sort of! There's a difference between a shepherd and a hired hand, paid to watch sheep. In this case, it's bison adapted to a semi-terraformed Mars, but that takes NOTHING away from the story.

Showdown at Palladiumtown, by Andrew Milbourne. The Texas Rangers are the oldest law enforcement agency in America. There's no reason to believe their history can only be written on Earth, is there? Sure, there are bound to be conflicts over jurisdiction, but competent professionals can usually win over well-intentioned local cops. And, if they AREN'T well-intentioned? I don't know; shoot 'em, maybe?

Gideon's Wild Ride, by Scott Slack. Roy took good care of Trigger, and the Lone Ranger took good care of Silver. The partnership between horse and rider is a precious trust, and it goes both ways.

No Home on the Range, by Rick Cutler. This isn't a story about homeless space cowboys. This is a story about how keeping to a code of honor can be complicated; it's about loyalty. And it serves as an excellent reminder that survivors MUST know their environment.

Tin Badge, Tin Dog, by Daniel G. Zeidler. A good dog has saved more than one person from harm, and from loneliness as well. They are amazingly perceptive, and the bond between a dog and his human has to be seen to be believed. Will robot dogs be able to do that? Well, I hear that some people can be both cop and combat, so maybe it's possible.

Interstellar Cattle Drive, by Cedar Sanderson. A herd of cows may look placid, but they can DEFINITELY kill you. If that happens, though, it won't be because of evil intent; it's just that the cow couldn't be troubled by realizing you were in the way. If you are appropriately prudent, though, you can expect to operate safely in the vicinity of the herd. That safety doesn't extend to situations involving humans.

W.A.R.P. in Sector 3! by Jesse Barrett. There are good reasons that ship captains are given a great deal of authority. Most of those reasons are related to potentially lethal events. It would be nice, if the threats could be limited to weather. Or even warfare! However, I suspect that threats generated from actions by crew members are those which are most likely to succeed. A captain's authority will NOT save the author of this story, however! He played "fun with the written word," inserting cultural references, and probably puns and other japes, and is destined for the carp catapult.

This volume is certified free of existential angst, and may be used to illustrate the value of an ethical system of beliefs to youth and others in need.

**Thief on King Street: Adventures of Roger V**  
**by Alan Isom, Jason McDonald and Melanie McDonald**

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

Listen, I don't ask for much in my entertainment. Just give me an epic story that takes place across two planets, is full of political intrigue, has non-stop action, religious conflict, a crazy amount of tension and a few unbelievably well thought out characters and I'm pretty much okay. See? Easy peasy! Or not, as the case may be, but that's what the McDonalds and Isom delivered. Seriously, between working sixty hours a week and trying to recover from stomach surgery it took me WAY TOO LONG to read this book but that's my weakness talking and not their stories. Thief on King Street was an experience to treasure.

And great, here come the Fun Police to arrest me for enjoying myself. They've been after me for years. You've got no proof this time! It's an electronic copy! I can delete it while you're pounding up the driveway with the Murderous Miniature Dachshund Marauders! You'll never take me alive, Fun Police. Who am I kidding? Those guys drink decaffeinated coffee. There is NO WAY they'll have the energy to make it up the driveway, even with their hot dogs.

The earlier works of this writing trio have featured the "sister planets" - Gaia, the land of magic where technology is thought of as being weird and Terra - land of technology where magic is rare and feared by most of those who actually believe it exists. Some might be tempted to call this the "Real World" and, for the most part, it is. This set up should seem familiar to readers of the Cayn Trilogy as I'm sure you all are because I reviewed them previously and I know you all read what I tell you to, right?

Or sumfin'...

Thief on King Street is both awesome and kind of strange in how it subverts a trope: This isn't Earth

lings venturing in a strange land, it's people from a strange land adventuring on Earth. They've done it well, too. I want to make a comparison to the 1632 Universe, but even that is kind of backwards. I mean, seriously, the reaction of the characters from Gaia to a typically dressed woman in her teens is pretty funny but it also makes an absolute ton of sense if viewed with just a touch of sensitivity to someone from a society which, while it is probably more egalitarian toward women than one would initially assume, is Medieval European in nature. They don't truly grasp modern technology and that makes sense too. I can just imagine trying to dress up a medieval knight to fit in at a hospital. Think about it in context.

The authors also do a good job of including modern magical practices in their work. It seems that there is still SOME magic left in Terra - if one knows where to look for it. That makes sense given the existence of Terrans on Gaia in their earlier, uhh, Later?

I mean, this is a prequel series but that means that the books that are later in the timeline were written first, so they've already happened even though they haven't happened yet. It's a total paradox. HELP! I guess the Fun Police better bring a Time Cop as back-up.

Seriously though, if Ambrose Battenberg doesn't intrigue you as a character you don't have a pulse. In which case I'm honored, because I've always wanted a member of the undead to read my blog.

\*SIGH\*

I'm off topic again.

Listen, Ambrose has a bit of the whiny little girl in her when the story starts. She gets his with a responsibility she never wanted and wasn't prepared for. Inheriting a throne isn't for everyone, especially since she was way down the list and came into her crown by losing several members of her family. Her kingdom is beset by attackers from outside, there are those from within who don't want to see a woman running the country and honestly, she doesn't want to deal with it. The fact that she is the last of her family and there is literally no one else to take over doesn't seem to matter to her.

Honestly, she starts out reminding me a bit of that Bella chick from Twilight (for those that aren't aware, I tried to read the first book after I made a deal with a girl I know: She would read Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and I would read Twilight. I give every book a hundred and fifty pages, regardless. I got to one-forty in Twilight, prayed for God to make the next ten pages to go quickly and gave up early. I gave it to my sister and I hear my niece enjoyed it though. I hate Bella.) The thing is that Ambrose has a real character arc where she actually matures and by the end of the story she's exactly the type of woman I would want my daughters to be; Strong, proud, smart, tough, and brave. She turns into the type of leader I would follow anywhere. I love that about her.

There is a lot of a good versus evil in Thief on King Street and I can really appreciate that. Yes, I do believe that both good and evil exist in the real world. I also believe that, to paraphrase someone famous (CS Lewis maybe?) that we need good versus evil in fiction to prepare ourselves mentally to fight the battle in the real world. The McDonalds and Isom do a good job of that. Their heroes are heroes and the villains are disgustingly villainous. Fantasy is, and always has been, at its best when you have someone to root for and someone to root AGAINST. Call them Sauron. Call them the White Witch. It doesn't matter. Just give me someone I don't want around to boo and I'm good.

I'm really excited to see where this series goes next. I mean, it's the first in the series and it's not written by George R.R. Martin so we'll see the sequel sometime soon-ish I'm sure. I'll be there when it hits. You should be there, too.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Poisoned Arrows

**Through the Storm by John Ringo and Lydia Sherrer**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Ender's game has some competition.

Some years ago, when the augmented reality game Pokemon Go first came out, I mostly heard about it from its biggest fan: John Ringo. Like every good author, Ringo took something from his life, and weaponized it for a novel. And, it being a John Ringo novel, that requires weaponizing it on multiple levels, including as a real weapon. In the case of *Into the Real*, written with Lydia Sherrer, they took Pokemon Go and turned it into Ender's Game.

Because in Pokemon Go, the augmented reality monsters can't kill you.

The story

In 2040, Lynn Raven barely got through the local TransDimensional Hunter championship, but she made it. The next step is the Nationals ... assuming her team can survive that long. Five months after the championship, Lynn has certain problems. Her team leader is a schmuck. Her rising popularity has her all but in hiding from the paparazzi (now called Stream Vultures). Her high school mean girl rival has targeted her with a level of pathology that one usually only sees in serial killers.

Lynn can't even decide what's worse—her rising popularity, or the next boss battle in TransDimensional Hunter ... which seems to be threatening her small town.

*Through the Storm* is interesting on multiple levels, both for Lynn's personal challenges as a gamer and a team player, and for expanding on the overall threat she faces. Sure, it was bad enough that Lynn had to go ... outside and deal with ... ugh ... people. But now the game seems to be fighting back in ways that a mere game shouldn't be able to. It's putting her friends in hospital.

TransDimensional Hunter is easy. Fighting the storm of reality? That's hard. To conquer this threat, she not only has to fight in the real, she has to use it to her advantage. Otherwise, everyone is going to die.

I enjoyed *Through the Storm*. It was a logical continuation of *Into the Real*, and follows through on everything book one promised. Granted, much of *Through the Storm* is character driven over plot. The entire book rests on the character of Lynn Raven as she learns to deal with life, overcoming her own insecurities and foibles, and finding the balance she needs to overcome the threats in game and in real life.

But it was fun watching Lynn enter the realm of pro-gaming. It's a coming of age story at the deep end of the pool, swimming with sharks.

I had one quibble with the book, and that was the emergence of what looked like a standard YA love triangle. Someone is making the moves on Lynn Raven, she has no idea what to do with it, while at the

same time, one of her teammates is giving her the eye. But there is nothing standard about the execution of this troupe. If you think that it's going the way of all YA love triangles, no, it's not.

## The characters

Through the Storm gives us more of a perspective on the situation Lynn and her teammates find herself in. If you had your suspicions going through Into the Real, this book will confirm what's going on, and give hints as to how it all started (in South Dakota, apparently). We spend more time with Lynn's handlers in video game technical support (who are SpecOps assigned to the game), as well as Mister Krator, the game designer himself, and his own machinations to save the world.

Once again, Lynn Raven is an unusually likeable teenager. The daughter of a widowed single mother, Lynn has long ago monetized her video game exploits, generating a steady income via microtransactions. She is smart, capable, and even her foibles are relatable. And like the last book, it is also fun watching Lynn's personal character develop.

We still have Hugo, the AI that comes with TransDimensional Hunter game... basically Jarvis from the MCU.

Even the human antagonists have developed ... only they have developed in ways that are more disturbing than entertaining. But they do make for villains you want to see fed to a virtual monster ... though if they get any worse, feeding them to a real monster will suffice.

## The world

Through the Storm utilizes the Pokemon monster evolution to express the development of the threat against Lynn and her party. While much of Into the Real focused on world-building (as it was book 1), we see repercussions all over book two. In fact, chunks of the game rules have been rewritten because of Lynn's occasionally breaking the game.

The last book focused a lot on just how things work—the game IA, details on weapon classes and armor sets, and how microtransactions now work, as well as tactical support. This one leans heavier on character, and the world-building involved leans heavily on the overall story, with elements that even the characters have yet to figure out.

## The politics

No. If you want, you can find some politics in here. But no.

## Content warning

None, really. There isn't even a language warning.

If you're worried about "video game violence" ... then I deeply worry about you, since there is no correlation between video games and violence. Since over a third of American households own a game console (not counting PCs) if video games meant violence, we'd be hip deep in blood.

## Who is it for?

If you liked Ender's Game, or even video games, you're going to enjoy the TransDimensional Hunter series. It puts new spins on the YA genre and the tropes within.



Why read it?

Ringo and Sherrer have created a modern day Ender's Game using the technology of Pokemon Go. The characters are vivid and interesting, and the action is strong enough to carry you along.

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.

## Critical Analysis

Encouraging The "Reluctant Reader"  
by Jim McCoy

Jim McCoy's Blog is [JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com](http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com)

<rant> Batten down the hatches folks. This is a blog post that has been brewing for forty years now, and no that's not a typo or an exaggeration. I have dealt with the American educational system since the fall of nineteen eighty-two. It's not going to be pretty. It's not going to be polite. I can almost guarantee a huge amount of butthurt from ninety-plus percent of the educators in this country if they read this post.

Guess what?

I don't give a rat's ass. The field upon which I grow my fucks is barren and I shan't be buying any to give you. Seriously, this is the type of thing that should have been said years ago by young men and parents' groups alike. Why young men? Because "reluctant readers" is a coded phrase used by educators. It means boys. There is a real challenge getting boys and young men to pick up a book. This then leads to men that won't read because they never have. Teachers in this country blame Attention Deficit Disorder. They blame television. They blame video games. The list of things that teachers in this country blame for the fact that boys won't read is long and doubtless all of those things contribute to the problem. But none of these things, individually or as a group, are the primary cause of the fact that boys will not read unless forced.

The primary source of the problem, the main reason that these kids won't lift up a book, the cause of low reading comprehension scores in reading, and the problems in math and science that are propagated by problems created when a non-proficient reader can't comprehend the words written in their textbooks are caused primarily by the teachers in this country. A child cannot learn chemistry if they don't

read well enough to understand their chemistry book. Try doing math homework if you can't puzzle out the examples in the math text. The selfsame people that will tell you how hard they work to teach their kids to love to read are flat-out doing it wrong. Most of that is institutional, and some of it is quite frankly gender related.

Yeah, I said it.

First, let's start with institutional:

English Literature was the most feared class at Hazel Park High School when I was a student there. Why? Because the teacher (who shall remain nameless for her own protection) gave the same speech at the beginning of every class:

"This book is now your life. If you play a sport, quit the sport. This book is now your sport. If you have a boyfriend or girlfriend, break up with them. This book is now your boyfriend or girlfriend. If you have a job, quit your job. This book is now your job."

She was, of course, referring to the textbook for the class. I'm sure, in her mind, she was trying to be fair and warn students of the work required in her class. Everyone I knew that took her class talked about how much work it was. From that point of view, it was probably fair. But, my friends, I ask you this:

How much excitement did you just get about reading that book? How badly do you want to pick that book up and learn everything in it, having just heard that speech? What reason did she have to believe that her students would actually be encouraged by what they had just heard?

Anyone?

Bueller?

So you agree with me.

Listen, I was a smart kid who loved reading and probably could have pulled down a really good grade in that class. When my turn came, however, I already knew the speech. I took Mythology instead and spent a semester with Zeus and Osiris instead of Shakespeare and Lord Byron. No way was I dealing with that crap. I had her for the American Lit my sophomore year (English Lit was for juniors at HPHS) and she tried to recruit me. I turned her down flat. I had no interest in that.

And I'm the guy who got his bachelors degree while working full time and taking care of his oldest kid while going to school, albeit at a later age.

And listen, I get the idea that it is absolutely necessary to have assigned readings, just like it's necessary to assign math problems and science experiments. I just don't see how force feeding a student to the extent above benefited them. Although, to be fair, this aspect of the problem isn't just about "problem readers" because the girls all hated it, too. Still, willingly and knowingly forcing that kind of an attitude on a teenager is a problem. But, let's face it, most students didn't like reading before that point anyway, especially the "problem readers." Why? Because the stuff they teach in school is boring, pointless and in no way encourages young males to want to consume it.

I'm gonna be beaten up by a herd of literature teachers for this, but here it is:

"Important literature" should only be taught during the high school years or later, and then only to students in college prep courses or actual colleges. This isn't because of some elitist push on my part. It's partially because the advanced students are the only ones likely to benefit from the lessons taught by deciphering those books. But also, it's because the system kills the interest of young men when it forces him to break down the feelings evoked by a book like Romeo and Juliet. The frustration evoked by trying to decode the language in Shakespeare's stories is just as bad for a lot of dudes. (And for the love of GOD please translate Shakespeare's work for use in high schools. If we can translate Don Quixote, which was written in Spanish, to English, we can translate Shakespeare into modern English. The stories are still relevant. The form of English they were written in is not. The original language can be preserved and passed on for future generations and taught to students studying literature and history in colleges where it will be relevant.)

If you want students to get better at reading, they need to practice. The only way to practice reading is by reading. Realistically speaking if, as a society, we want young men to have an interest in reading we have to give them things to read that they will find interesting. A lot of what is taught in American schools straight up sucks. It's boring. The students in your class who are bored and are asking "When am I ever going to use this in life?" are right.

But here's the thing: What they could use in life is skill in reading. What a young man is not getting is skill in reading when he buys the Cliff's Notes version of The Scarlet Letter because he couldn't care less about some chick who nailed the wrong dude and had to wear a red A on her chest. And no, that's not his fault because of lack of empathy. It's the teachers fault for trying to ram boring bullshit down his throat.

Here's something very few teachers want to hear, but all of them need to accept: It's not the student's job to learn to love reading the crap you shovel in front of them. It's the teachers job to put interesting books and stories in front of the student to encourage their interest. If, as a primary or secondary school teacher, you are out there forcing things on your students because of their literary importance **YOU ARE ENCOURAGING ILLITERACY. YOU ARE CRIPPLING YOUR STUDENTS ABILITY TO LEARN ALL OTHER SUBJECTS. YOUR INTENT IN DOING SO IS IRRELEVANT.**

Let me make myself even more clear here: I am the owner of this blog. This is the three hundred and sixtieth post here. I started this blog because of my love of reading. I have continued it because of my love of both reading and writing. With the exception of two years of my education (and I'll get back to this in a minute) if I had been introduced to reading, and only read the crap I was fed in school, there is at least a seventy-five percent chance that I would be functionally illiterate at this point in my life.

Yes, I mean that literally.

The system and the teachers that perpetuate it are the primary cause of the lack of reading skills in this country. They work hard. Most of them aren't happy about what's going on. But working harder using the wrong techniques isn't going to make things better. </rant>

And yes, I do understand that girls need to love reading, too. The facts are, however, that girls do much better on tests of reading ability than boys do, and it's not because of intelligence. It's because of interest.

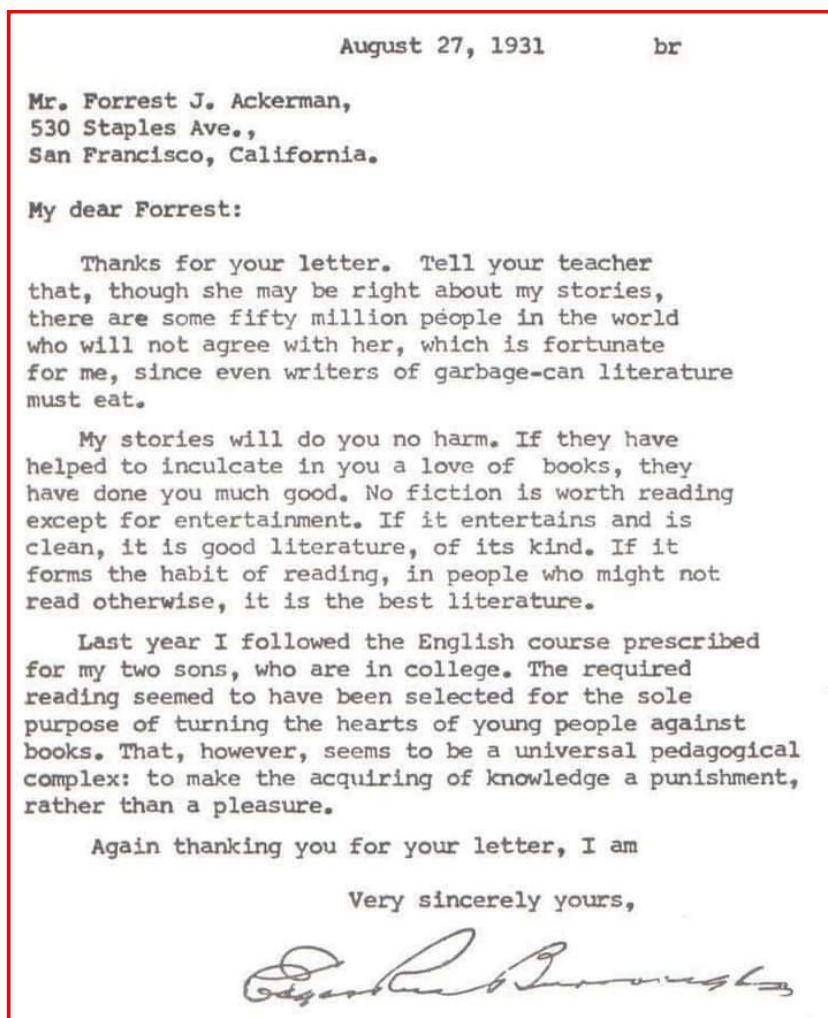
"So," you're asking, "What's the solution, Jimbo? Do you have one or are you just talking to hear your head rattle?"

Yes, I have a solution. And please ignore the rattling coming from my head. It's one that will work wonders for the United States and pretty much any other country where kids think for themselves. I'm not saying it will work for every student, but it will work for a lot more than the current system does. I like to call it the Emlet System, because I point blank stole it from Mrs. Yvonne Emlet, whom it was my pleasure to study under for both my fourth and sixth grade years. She was an amazing teacher, as many of my former classmates have attested. I don't know if she'd call it a system, or even if she even intended it to be one, but it felt like one to me and (this is the most important part) it worked. And seriously, someone needs to give this woman an award. I can line up students of hers that will echo that sentiment if it helps. I've heard more than one declare Mrs. Emlet to be "the best teacher I ever had."

And by the way, I go to church and a small group there with her now and I'm supposed to call her Yvonne. I usually do, but in her official capacity she'll always be Mrs. Emlet to me.

Anyway...

Mrs. Emlet had this thing where she would assign stuff that was fun to read. Some of it was actually "literature" I suppose. We read Tom Sawyer, but it wasn't until years later that I even realized that he was an "important author" who wrote "classics." I just wanted to be the guy who tricked his buddy into painting the fence so he could go fishing. I read *Where the Red Fern Grows* in her class. Johnny Tremaine, *The Battle Off Midway Island*, *Across Five Aprils*, and a couple of other books whose titles I



can't remember were things that I consumed and loved. I've re-read most of them since and I need to find out the title of at least one of the books I can't remember because I want to re-read it. Several of the books she assigned were things that I later bought for my daughters. That didn't always work as well. Girls tend to like things that boys don't. There really are differences between the genders. Lesson learned and applied here.

I'll be honest here. I'm not necessarily sure how well *Old Yeller* would appeal to a young man in 2023. The system will still work though. It just needs some tweaking. It probably depends on region as well. I loved *Where the Red Fern Grows* because it had a lot of hunting and fishing in it and I grew up fishing and hiking. I couldn't hunt until later because of age restrictions, but it was something I had an interest in anyway, probably even more than the other stuff because I wanted to hunt and couldn't. In some communities that might still appeal. In others, maybe not.

Supporting Testimony from a Famous Writer

So what will work?

Comic books at lower grades will work great. Everything from graphic novels like Diary of a Wimpy Kid to Marvel or DC and their superheroes. There are also novels published by both Marvel and DC. Somewhere out there, someone is rolling their eyes and making testosterone jokes, but the testosterone is the point. Boys like exciting stuff. Superheroes are big right now and their primary consumers are male.

Detective novels are good. The Hardy Boys immediately come to mind, and I'm thinking that Nancy Drew might just feed the excitement requirement for boys and get that female demographic interested because Nancy is a girl.

And yes, boys will read books with a female main character if it's a well written adventure. The keys are excitement and a fast paced plot with some action.

If there is a teacher out there stuck on "The Classics" I recommend authors like Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain. I already mentioned Tom Sawyer. Huck Finn was another good book. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court was as fun as it was humorous. I read Treasure Island and Kidnapped before I found I was supposed to. Redwall is popular among kids, too. Non-fiction works, but only if it's written for the age group and is something of interest to your students.

I guess maybe I wasn't "smart as paint" the way I thought I was.

And, well, harnessing other interests can help get kids interested in reading. Like...

(Buckle up kids. It's going to get ugly)

The novels on this list are all video game tie-ins. I've read a couple Halo novels and the old Everquest novel series, as well as a World of Warcraft novel or two. They're good books. They should be pretty easy reads starting at about eighth grade for most kids (I could have read them earlier than that, but I could read before I started school, so I'm probably an outlier here.)

The Young Adult genre didn't exist until J.K. Rowling forced it into existence with Harry Potter, so I didn't get a chance to read any of that until later, but there are plenty of good books written specifically for tweens and kids in their early teens that didn't exist when I was that age.

Most of the books reviewed on this blog would work for a high school student. Anything with sexual themes would be marked, but there's something I want to mention here as well:

I get the logistical problems with what I'm suggesting. There's only so much money in the book budget, and there are only so many copies available via interlibrary loan or whatever your state's version of MelCat is.

If you teach students who tend to have cell phones, there is at least a partial solution:

Things that are out of copyright are usually available on Project Gutenberg for free. I just checked and Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson are both available, legally, as free ebooks that the kids can read on the phones that they already own.

Alternatively, if your district issues computers (my daughters go to a school that checks out Chrome



Books to their students) they can read the same books on their computers that they could on their phones.

Baen Books also has a Free Library full of ebooks containing works of derring-do and they publish top-notch Science Fiction and Fantasy. Granted, this is meant more as a marketing tool than a charitable donation, but the books are the books.

I find myself wondering if publishers make charitable donations for this kind of thing, but I have no knowledge either way. It can't hurt to ask. The worst case scenario is the publisher saying no and nothing changing.

The bottom line is that where there's a will there's a way and nothing is going to improve until there are changes made in the system. To all the educators out there: Please think about what you just read. You are the people that can implement changes that will save your students and this country. If you're saddled with district curriculum requirements, then put together a coalition and show up at school board meetings loaded for bear. If you care as much about your students as you say you do, it will be worth your time.

If you made it this far and you have suggestions for good books for boys and young men, please take the time to drop the titles/authors/buy links in the comments.

## Prose Bono

Fitting Holidays in Fiction  
by A.C. Cargill  
<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/>

On Winter Solstice, the thought of fitting holidays into fiction comes to mind. If you're writing a story about a particular holiday, the whole issue is fairly straightforward. But what if you're writing a romance that happens to take place during, well, this time of year, for example? Suddenly, Christmas becomes a part of that story and maybe New Year's Eve and Day, too. It can totally change your story, adding in elements that are part of those holidays, such as the issue of dealing with family or having no family to deal with and feeling all alone. Those elements make some writers hesitate to include any holidays in their work.

Another factor is your fiction genre. Horror at Halloween is one thing. I'm not sure about horror at Independence Day or Mother's Day, but then, a good writer can probably work it all out. Horror at Valentine's Day is a no-brainer, though. As for science fiction, there could be holidays, but different ones. Grgolh Day, for example, where the founding of the planet Grgolh ("Home" in the language of the original inhabitants) could be one – a time of massive celebration around the planet and the perfect time for a planned murder or two.

The main goal is to make the holiday work for you, not the other way around. Your readers will certainly expect certain things from that holiday, but you have plenty of ways to add your own touches. A great example is the movie Die Hard, which many people forget takes place at Christmas. Bruce Willis and Alan Rickman certainly don't share any holiday cheer between them. Your characters needn't either. As usual, you, the writer, are in control. Have fun with it!



For ten years I wrote articles about tea, researching information far and wide and putting it together into an organized fashion for readers of the two company blogs I ran as well as my own site. Part of those efforts was this fun little read called the 12 Days of Christmas (with a tea slant). <https://accargillauthor.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/12-days-of-christmasb-1.pdf> Enjoy!

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

Please check out my WIPs. And thanks for reading.

**Raising the Stakes**  
**by Cedar Sanderson**  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

This week I've come back to the topics suggested in Book Club with Spikes, to follow on from the small stories post a couple of weeks back. I have a great list, and people keep adding topic ideas, thank you! I didn't jot down who suggested which topic, sorry guys.

There are likely as many ways to escalate the tension in a story as there are stories. I never want to say 'this is the way, and only this is the way' because the delightful thing about human imagination is that it's limitless. That being said, there are ways that will work better than others.

Sometimes, this is because raising the stakes has been overdone. I think we're all familiar with the trope of a family killed, leaving only one survivor for vengeance.... and even that, I'm not going to say you shouldn't do. I've done it, with my story about Soleh (collected in Crow Moon) who survived the slaughter of her extended family, was taken into slavery, married, and only when her own children died did the flame of revenge leap up in her heart. That's where the story starts. I think it's going to depend on how and where you approach the story and the character. I took a woman who had been broken as a child, regained strength into adulthood, and at the peak of her physical abilities, then and only then snapped her mind into the possibility of avenging what had been done.

The small stories I talked about in the other post are often plights that can be overcome, and if the problem doesn't work out, the ripples ebb away in life, and eventually calm returns. When you raise the stakes in a story, you amplify those ripples into waves, and if you want the level of drama, all the way into a tsunami. Plots can be roller coasters, all ups-and-downs, and a tsunami plot would be: normal day at the beach, why is the ocean running away from me?, and then terror and destruction. Personally, I'd wind up that plot with the main characters finding themselves again, safe if not sound. That's just me, I prefer a happy or at least the potential-to-be-happy ending both in my reading and writing.

Some of this depends on your character. A brittle character is probably not the best choice with a plot escalation that involves them having made a terrible mistake that makes everything worse. This is a great place to have character growth happen, but make sure the character is still redeemable to the readers. If the readers can't forgive, they will either abandon the story, or leave with a bad taste in their mouth that can have them avoiding your work ever after. Even if the character struggles to forgive themselves, give the readers reason to trust that the character can come back from this error in their ways.

The mirror of this would be to have a character learn that they thought they had made a mistake with tragic consequences, only to discover that they had not in fact screwed up. This is an interesting way to raise the stakes in a plot. Avoid bitterness and resentment being too much on stage, however, because

the reader doesn't engage well with a self-pitying character. I started reading a story the other day and put it down again because the character's outlook on life was so bleak and cynical I just didn't care what became of her.

Which is in the author's best interest to start the story in a way that engages the readers with the characters, so the reader is caring about what happens to them, and is invested in seeing them succeed as the water is sucked back out and while the characters are confused, the reader is flipping pages with bated breath waiting to see how they cope when their world falls in on them. Even starting a story in media res can still have this moment of connection between the reader and the fiction. Hook in the reader, and then you can start raising the stakes. If you start at the ultimate height of peril, there's nowhere to go but down.

As a pantsier, I don't always know where I'm going with the plot when I start writing. This can make planning escalation of stakes a bit challenging. Still, I think it's quite possible if you look at the logical next steps. If a character is in danger, what could make it worse? Lost in the woods, and it starts to rain (side note: cold rain is worse than dry snow. Trust my multiple-hypothermic-events self on this one...)? Adrift in space and the beacon is picked up... by aliens! Charging into battle and thrown off his horse? There are ways to make things worse, always. Before you commit to one, though, spend some time thinking about what the path forward will look like. Multiple crises, piling up, before resolution? Or have you already written so many catastrophes in that the character seems to be a chaos magnet, and it's time to explain to the poor reader what is going on? Will raising this stake, in this way, leave a way out for the character which won't break him, or the plot?

This can, by the way, be done even with small stories. A friend is dealing with this in her life right now. One of her dogs brought her a tiny, bedraggled kitten. Which is, by itself, a stake! The kitten now must be taught to drink milk from a bottle – a raised stake. What will happen next? This tiny bit of fuzz has a pitbull guardian, I have a feeling life will hold adventures.

What are good stories with raising stakes that you enjoy reading?

~Finis~

















































































































