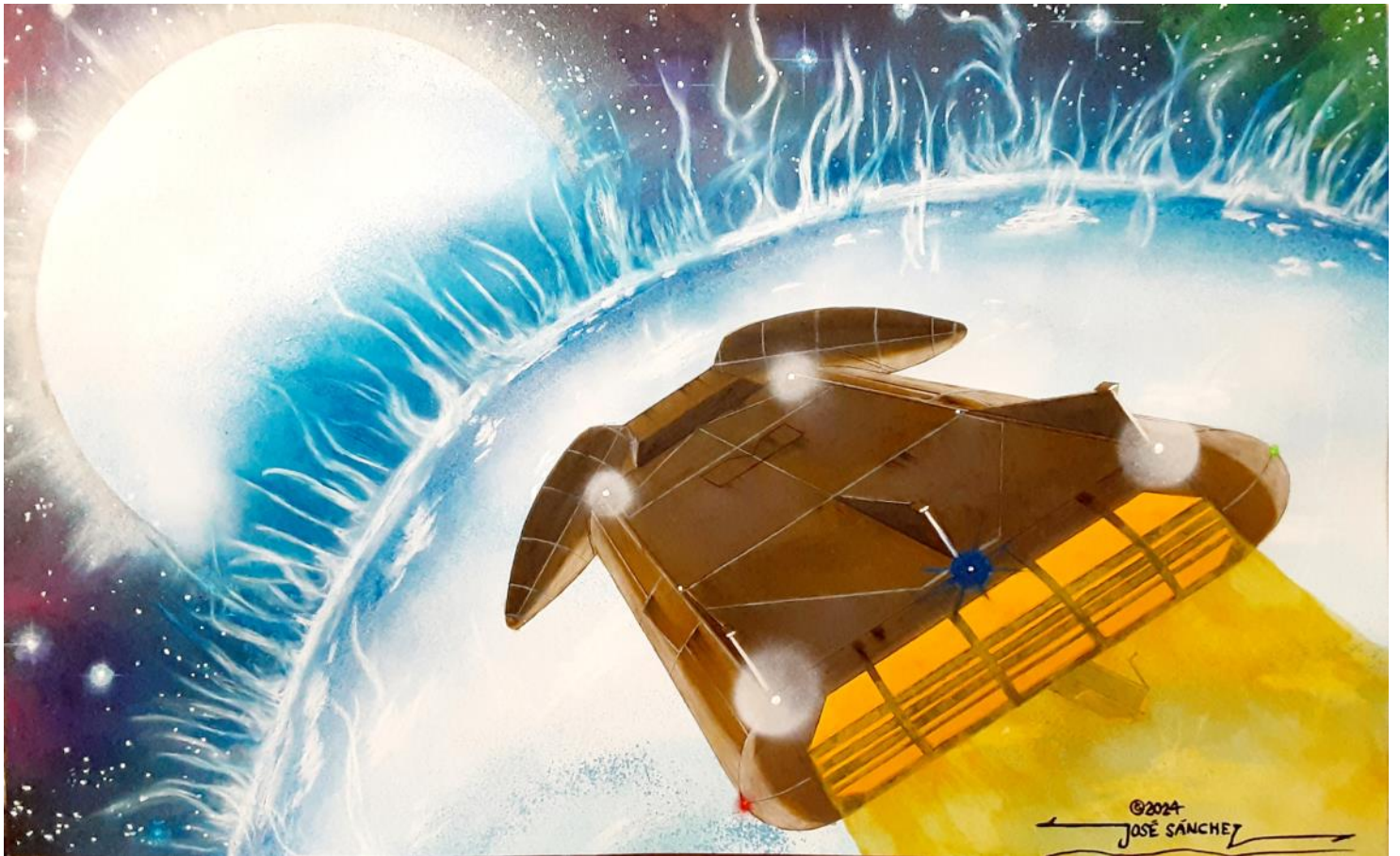


# Tightbeam 356

May 2024



Flying over White Suns

by José Sanchez

# Tightbeam 356

May 2024

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

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Anime Reviews are courtesy Jessi Silver and her site [www.s1e1.com](http://www.s1e1.com). Ms. Silver writes of her site "S1E1 is primarily an outlet for views and reviews on Japanese animated media, and occasionally video games and other entertainment." Cedar Sanderson's reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site [www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/](http://www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/) and its culinary extension. Jason P. Hunt's reviews appear on [SciFi4Me.Com](http://SciFi4Me.Com) Jim McCoy is now found at [Jimboss-ffreviews.substack.com](http://Jimboss-ffreviews.substack.com)

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# Table of Contents

## Art

Front Cover ... Flying over White Suns by Jose Sanchez  
8 ... HaHaHa Ghosts By Artist Fish  
Back Cover Red Panda Space by Tiffanie Gray

## Letter of Comment

4 ... Lloyd Penney

## Anime

4 ... Mary and the Witch's Flower ... Review by Jessi Silver

## Cartoons

7 ... Green Lantern: The Animated Series ... Review by Jim McCoy

## Comics

9 ... Star Trek: The Next Generation: Hive ... Review by Jim McCoy

## Films

11 ... John Carter ... Review by Caroline Furlong  
13 ... Avatar: The Way of Water ... Review by Jim McCoy  
15 ... Jules ... Review by Heath Row

## Prozines

15 ... Worlds of If #177 (February 2024) ... Review by Heath Row

## Television

16 ... In Defense of Wesley Crusher by Jim McCoy

## SerCon

18 ... Roger Zelazny Bio-Bibliography by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

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## Letter of Comment

Dear George and Jon:

I have Tightbeam 355 here, and it looks like there's a few things to say within this issue, and I will give it my best shot...

My loc...with the cancellations of Discovery and now Lower Decks, I think after the near-surfeit of Trek properties, perhaps Paramount/CBS is rethinking things a little. I have read that the whole studio operation may be sold to Sony, who may have totally different ideas about Trek, especially in the wake of the sale, and the billions paid out by Sony. I fully admit, Trek-fans have been spoiled, and it looks like we may have to live through another drought in the distant future.

More information on Amazing Stories will be coming soon, and we will be starting a five-part serial by Dave Creek, called Chanda's Legacy, very soon. I am still hoping that our anthology of short fiction from last year, entitled Amazing: The Best of 2023, edited by yours truly, will appear soon.

P. Schuyler Miller is definitely a recognizable name, especially seen in older short story anthologies. Looks like there is an anthology of his own work, called The Titan. I think we need an anthology of all the researches into past authors in a book.

I wish I had more for you, but this seems to be it. So many other things to do, and not much time to do it all in, so here you are, and see you next issue!

Yours, Lloyd Penney

## Anime

### Mary and the Witch's Flower Review by Jessi Silver



It is Tib the black cat who leads Mary to the strange flower in the woods. When she discovers a little broomstick shortly afterwards, she is astonished to feel it jump in to action. Before she can gather her wits, it is whisking her over the treetops, above the clouds, and in to the grounds of Endor College, where: 'All Examinations Coached for by A Competent Staff of Fully-Qualified Witches.' – ANN

Summary: Young Mary Smith moves to the countryside to live with her great aunt Charlotte while her parents are away. Mary wants more than anything to be useful, but she's a clumsy person and often causes more problems than she solves. While lamenting her situation one day, she encounters two cats – Tib and Gib – who lead her to a forest glade where a cluster of spectacular blue





flowers are growing. Mary takes the blossoms back to her room to admire them, but soon discovers that they're more than just attractive blooms – the flowers, called “fly-by-night” by magic users, bloom but once in seven years and have the power to grant magical abilities to even the most mundane of user.

Mary stumbles into these mystic powers and finds herself a magic broom, which takes her to Endor

College, a witch school above the clouds. She's mistaken for a magical prodigy and the headmistress goes so far as to approach her about joining the honors classes, but it isn't long until her secret is discovered and the faculty of the school chases Mary down in search of the fly-by-night blossoms. Mary must then protect herself, rescue her friend Peter and his cats, and make sure that the flowers don't fall into the hands of those who would try to use them for horrifying experiments..

It's cliché at this point for one to speculate on what Japanese animation studio will turn out to be the “next Ghibli.” It's difficult to define exactly what that's supposed to mean – Ghibli's output has encompassed films aimed squarely at very young children (Ponyo or My Neighbor Totoro, for example), to more intense adventures that families can enjoy (Nausicaa, Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away), to films that I'd argue take more maturity to appreciate (Porco Rosso, Only Yesterday, Grave of the Fireflies). Does Ghibli mean “animation quality?” “Story craft?” “Character and background design?” I've seen all of these traits thrown around as potential components of the Ghibli magic that's captivated animation fans all over the world, and even somehow managed to gain credence with the incredibly insular, inscrutable, and in my opinion, sometimes downright infuriating Academy Award voters (seriously, Boss Baby over Your Name? You've got to be kidding me). Whether or not there's a definitive way to identify the Ghibli style is a question that I'll leave to others who are more invested in it. As for myself, I'm just enjoying the fact that, as animators and directors graduate from Ghibli, we're able to enjoy the new perspectives they bring to this classic film making form.

Much like Hosoda Mamoru, Hiromasa Yonebayashi worked for Studio Ghibli as an animator and director before venturing off on his own to join the newly-established Studio Ponoc. Mary and the Witch's Flower, the studio's first feature-length animation, captures a lot of the classic family-friendly charm that typifies the bulk of Ghibli's output, while providing a enough freshness to distinguish itself and its creative staff from their predecessors.

I commented on social media that one thing that charmed me about the film was that it seemed to speak to me as a little girl who always wanted to grow up to become a witch. Similar to the Harry Potter series, Mary and the Witch's Flower suggests that there might be an entire secret world out there, where magic is real and those with a talent for it might be able to distinguish themselves and make impossible things happen. It helps that film eschews the tendency to make its heroine a strong but unattainable fantasy version of feminine purity, seen in such characters as Nausicaa or Kiki. It's not that those characters are inherently terrible for women (and to be honest they're much better role-models than a lot of “strong female characters (TM)”), but they also feel like an outsider's perspective on what girlhood should be, when in reality it can be messier, more painful, and more awkward than it is often portrayed. I'm definitely not saying that Yonebayashi and friends have insider knowledge in pre-adolescent girlhood, but Mary feels

closer to the type of person someone could meet in real life. She's fundamentally kind and not overly-rebellious (which tends to be another direction writers take these kinds of characters), but she's not particularly talented, gets bored easily, and goes against orders sometimes. She also lies by omission in order to feel better about herself, which ultimately gets her into trouble but is so understandable from the perspective of someone who often feels unworthy of praise. The idea that there could be a world out there somewhere in which the differences that one dislikes about oneself are seen as beneficial can become intoxicating.

The film also makes some attempt at real-world commentary, its most discernible issue-of-choice being animal (and human!) experimentation, as an offshoot of the typical environmentalism that crops up in similar films. Whether this is entirely successful is up in the air; my attitude was something akin to "I see what you did there" but more from the perspective of being repulsed by the mild body-horror aspect than buying into what I thought the creators were trying to say.

Visually the film doesn't disappoint, and manages to combine traditional character animation, lush, vivid background art, and even some CG effects into a very appealing package. It straddles the line between traditional and modern very well, making an argument for utilizing new animation techniques even while trying to maintain a mostly hand-drawn look. After watching *Shirobako* multiple times, it's interesting the kind of things I tend to notice when watching animation. In this case it was the animal movement- one of the film's climactic moments involves a herd of animals escaping from captivity, and the horde of different creatures moving across the landscape feels very natural, chaotic, and whimsical as well. The depiction of the English countryside that serves as the setting for the more mundane parts of the story recalls some of the background art from *The Secret World of Arietty*; the lushness of the plant life and the misty hillsides are almost a character all their own.

One aspect of the film that I really liked was the revelation that Mary's aunt Charlotte played an important part in the story when she was a youngster, and that Mary as a descendant of that family line is in prime position to draw things to a close. Even when young women have central roles in a narrative, it's often the case that they're the only female in a sea of men. In this case there are important connections between Mary and Charlotte, as well as the Endor headmistress. Additionally, Mary comes to the rescue of Peter, her male companion, multiple times throughout the film, which was a refreshing surprise.

The one thing that detracts from this story, and I suspect that others may agree with me, is that the whole package feels a bit rote. Stripping away the visual trappings and the spunky main character reveals a story that's competently formulaic but not otherwise special in any way. It's a fairly typical "heroine's journey" in which a young girl is forced to look inside herself and make personal improvements, all in the guise of going on a grand adventure that, once completed, brings her back again to her mundane normal life. That said, it's the type of movie that I wouldn't feel uncomfortable watching with a child and which demonstrates an example of how to be heroic and fight for something ethical. It's certainly more tolerable than your typical CG talking animal movie, and it doesn't talk down to its intended audience.

The more creators there are making great movies, the better, and having graduated from Studio Ghibli I think Yonebayashi has a bright future ahead of him bringing to screen the type of anime films that have wide appeal. *Mary and the Witch's Flower* is an above-average interpre-

tation of a Western-style fairy tale that centralizes a somewhat-atypical female heroine and brings to life a magical world that might make some viewers long for the opportunity to attend a witch school. Check it out at a local film festival, or grab the disc when it's released in May.

Pros: Mary is a spunky heroine with some realistic pre-teen flaws. The female relationships provide a good through-line to the film. The artistry is excellent.

Cons: The story is pretty average and can feel like a re-hash of old concepts.

Grade: B

## Cartoons

### Green Lantern: The Animated Series Review by Jim McCoy



So listen, your humble host, Jimbo, writer of Awesome reviews (in his own mind at least) is, and has been for closing in on forty years now, a Green Lantern mark. See, when I was a wee little Jimbo, much younger and thinner although not as good looking because, let's face it, I get better looking every day, one of my neighbors came over with a box of comics that his nephew was throwing out because he was too old, or too cool or some crap for them. I don't buy that, but thanks, guy! Because I had never read a comic before that. It's too bad I lost that box of comics along the way too, because it had some good stuff in it, most notably a Transformers #1 and a GI JOE #3, albeit both in well-loved condition. Also in that box, though, were a few Green Lantern Corps comics. I didn't learn about the much loved Green Lanterns of Sector 2814 until later, when I became old enough to ride my bike to The Antique Paper Shop in Hazel Park, Michigan. It's gone now, but they used to sell grab bags of back issues for a buck and I'd pick through them until I found one that had a Green Lantern comic visible from the outside. Sometimes I even got two.

I saw the Green Lantern movie. It was very pretty. The special effects crew did a damn good job. The writers tried to stuff two complete story arcs into one two hour movie when you'd have been lucky to do justice to either one in that much time. That didn't really work, but it was cool. I got a dirty look sitting in the audience and reciting the Green Lantern Oath during the movie, but hey, get over yourself kid. I've been reading this stuff since before you were born.

Anyway...

I was unaware of The Animated Series when it came out, probably because I was married and going to grad school at them time. I decided to take a look at it recently though, because I found it on streaming. And you know what? I loved it.

Okay, first off the disclaimer: Starting off with a fight with the Red Lanterns was a bit weird to

me. I mean, I get the whole In Media Res thing, but I don't know if that was the way I'd have done things. Then again, they did a good job with it. We end up segueing into the War of the Light ala the Blackest Night crossover event (without, it has to be admitted, many of the crossovers) and they followed things fairly closely. They didn't get all the way through it, they didn't really even get into the Black Lanterns, but it was fun.

The animation was a little cheesy, but that's okay. It's a cartoon. It worked. And the constructs were cool. The best thing about a Green Lantern (other than the part where they can travel through space with no ship, and speak every language) is being able to build awesome stuff out of light just because you want to. Seriously. How freaking cool would that be?

And yes, they do all of the cool stuff with the ring and make all the things and go all the places...

And Larfleeze is still a turd. That's good though. It made me feel grounded when he was a stink-pot. I get the fact that he's an Orange Lantern and that greed is their thing, but hey, he still sucks and I hate him. That's okay though because he doesn't really exist. Or sumfin'!

Speaking of older characters:

Hail, hail, the gang's all here!

Kilowog is everywhere in The Animated Series and you're a poozer. Sinestro makes an appearance, although as a member of the Green Lantern Corps and not the Sinestro Corps which makes no sense for where they are in the timeline, since the Sinestro Corps War had already ended, but hey it was fun to see him. We got Ch'p, Tomar Re, Carol Ferris, Guy Gardner and more. I was really happy to see Ch'p because he's my favorite. It's too bad what happened to him in the comic, but that's the life of a Green Lantern I guess. Guy is still his annoying, cocky self. They got that character perfectly when they wrote and acted him.

Seeing Hal Jordan arguing with the Guardians was good for the soul as well. It's a part of his character that gets lost sometimes, but it's been part of the comics on and off for years and it needed to be there. I'm still trying to figure out why Parallax was there, as it was the wrong time for that as well.

And that, my friends, is my biggest beef with comic book movies, and TV shows. Stop trying to cram in everything all at once! Let things play out, especially in a series. And, let's face it, Parallax killed Hal Jordan in the comics, there's no reason to show that in the first season of a TV show anyway.

All in all though, it was a good binge. I had just finished The Sopranos and I was looking for something fun. I found it here and I'll probably binge it again at some point in the future.

I read somewhere that the reason the show failed was because of poor toy sales, and I blame all of you for that. It wasn't my fault. I was still married when this came out and I got my ex-wife



HaHaHa Ghosts  
By Artist Fish



to buy a bunch of the stuff for Christmas. I had it set up all over my computer desk. It didn't really match. Most everything else was done in knights and mythological creatures, but no system is perfect and fandoms don't always go together. That's totally not my fault. At all.

And anyway, I needed a bigger basement for my Battletech stuff and my GI JOE stuff, too. Unfortunately, I've lost it all since. But that's neither here nor there.

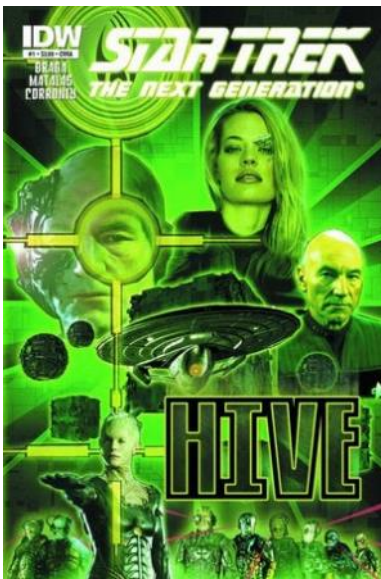
Whatever.

Just go watch the show.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Power Rings

## Comics

### Star Trek: The Next Generation: Hive Story by Brannon Braga Art by Joe Corroney Review by Jim McCoy



So, I found this while I was looking for things to link with my Wesley Crusher post and I figured I'd check Star Trek: The Next Generation: Hive out. I'm glad I did, too, because it was a lot of fun. I mean, I've loved ST:TNG since "Encounter at Farpoint" (Yeah, I know the first couple of seasons were slow. Ten year old me was so excited to see Trek episodes that he and his father hadn't seen that he didn't give a rip.) and it looked like something I might be interested in, too.

And I mean it was totally original too, because Trek had never done anything with time tra...

Errrrr...

There was this new species called the Bor....

Uhh...

Okay, so the story was new but the plot elements were familiar. I'm okay with that though. It's like there's a reason that they use this stuff. It must work or sumfin'.

I mean, who hasn't watched "The Best of Both Worlds" and loved it? If you're a Trek fan, I mean. My daughters don't like Trek (Not my fault. I tried) so they probably haven't seen it, but like, non-Trekkies (Trekkers if you prefer, I guess. I grew up using the older term.) wouldn't even know what I was talking about. And, of course, everybody's favorite Trek movie is ST4: The Voyage Home and that's all about time travel and whales and "nuclear wessels" and the Dark Ages, and...

Look, it's been a minute, okay? Let's just say that with Trek you can pretty much throw in time travel and either the Borg or Klingons and it's all good. And Hive was good. The story is all about Picard, and Data and Seven and how they have to save the galaxy from being overrun by the Borg. And yes, there is some time travel involved because Locutus/Picard has to travel back in time to prevent himself from doing something that ruined the whole freaking timeline. Somebody take his cookie away.

The story is engaging and moves well. It probably comes closer to the TNG movies than the series, but that's true of a lot of the new stuff. It's an action story and it works. I read the whole thing in about ten minutes using a Kindle app on a cell phone. No, that's not my favorite way to read a comic book/graphic novel but I've got KU so I did it that way to save eight bucks. Although, honestly, if you use the clicky feature that they've created for comics, it does work pretty well. The app automatically pops a window describing how to use it if you're not familiar.

The artwork is magnificent. The Borg are wonderfully rendered. We can recognize the familiar faces that we should be able to recognize. But more importantly, there are big space battles and they look really cool. Yeah, I know I'm supposed to use big technical terms and talk about sight-lines and whatever, but I'm an SF/F geek, not an art geek. You'll have to get your technical lessons from someone else. Seriously. I can barely remember which end of the pen goes on the paper. What I do know is what looks good from a layman's perspective and Hive is beautiful.

I could just page through this thing and look at the pictures and be happy. That's weird for me, because I'm more of a story guy, but I really did enjoy the art. It was well drawn but it felt familiar. I could look at the pictures of Locutus/Picard (depending on the point in the story) and hear the words spoken in Sir Patrick Stewart's voice, not just because I was a fan but because it looked so much like him and that's kind of a thing for me.

See, when I was a wee little Jimbo and was first getting into comics, I got confused sometimes reading comics with the same characters but different artists. I get that different artists have a different take and that's one of the things I love about comics. It's a lot easier to recognize a variation on a look at forty-six than it was at six, too. The fact remains that we need to know who we're looking at and Corroney gives us characters that have his take on them but are alike enough in appearance to the actors to make things feel comfortable. And look, I'm not here to debate who drew the definitive Silver Surfer, I'm just saying that familiarity is a good thing, especially when you're dealing with some of Trek's most beloved characters.

And speaking of Trek's most beloved characters...

The plot of Hive makes an immense amount of sense when viewed through the lens of what one would expect of the characters involved. Some harsh actions are taken but they make sense in context of the people we're dealing with. Say what you want about Picard, he never shied away from doing what he had to when it came right down to it. He'd hem. He'd haw. Then he'd do exactly what he was hesitating about. It more or less works that way here. He does what he has to do because he has to do it.

I've always had a fascination with the Seven character as well and she really shines here. Her actions show an empathy and a humanity, mixed with a bit of Borg and their obsession with perfection. Hive gives her a really well written arc, a mission that only she can accomplish and a believable reaction to the way things go. I really liked the fact that Braga seems to have con-

sidered her dual nature and done right by her.

There really aren't a lot of appearances by other members of the various shows. I'm okay with that. They wouldn't have added much to the story anyway. I remember reading something by Leonard Nimoy talking about how he didn't do *Star Trek: Generations* because his character would have served no purpose. Braga was smart in following a similar principle and not throwing characters in just to say he did.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Vulcan Artifacts

## Films

### John Carter

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>



Mars like you have never seen it before!

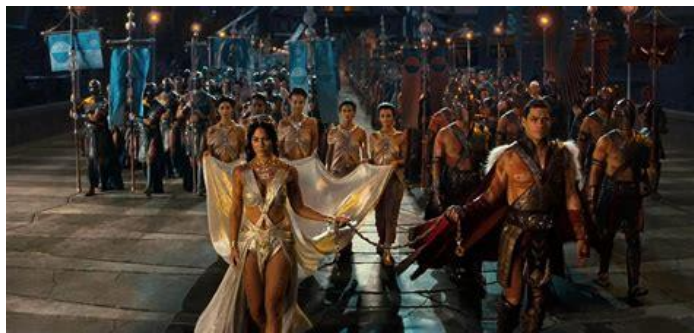
John Carter came out the same year as Marvel's *The Avengers*, which walked away with more praise from critics and audiences. While I love *The Avengers* dearly, the fact that John Carter was allowed to falter and fail at the box office by Disney remains a crying shame. This film is a modern classic.

Everything in the film is directed toward making John Carter a timeless sci-fi/fantasy movie. Andrew Stanton – creator of *Finding Nemo* and *WALL-E* – outdid himself in bringing Edgar Rice Burroughs' story to life. Although there are some concessions made for a modern audience, those hardly dent the effort put into making this homage to space opera storytelling.

Having re-watched John Carter, I was struck again by how lavishly it was filmed. We do not see this level of craftsmanship in films anymore, since movies are more about spectacle than establishing an otherworldly setting. Stanton's love for Burroughs' books shows in every scene in the movie. The vistas, the CGI, the practical effects, the acting all combine to put the viewer directly on Barsoom. Not Mars; as the voiceover introducing the story says, that is the airless red planet we know. The red planet in the movie is another world entirely.

Good films are able to transport viewers to their locations and make them feel like the place is real. John Carter achieves that effect by taking everything about the nature of the story seriously even when it uses or seems to be making fun of the titular character. For instance, the sequence where Carter learns to walk and leap across Barsoom is hilarious, but it also takes the concepts offered in Burroughs' books at face value. It does not mock Carter for learning what he can do, only points out that the process of discovery is quite amusing from an outside perspective.

Although the Barsoomians' native telepathy is not a factor in the movie, the film leaves their



cultures intact. Barsoom is a world in steep decline, its oceans having vanished long ago while its remaining rivers are drying up. This makes sustaining a sizable population difficult – hence the Tharks’ practice of infanticide and Princess Dejah Thoris’ desperate search for a limitless energy source to rejuvenate her homeworld.

The make-up and costumes only help to enhance the feeling that Carter is on another world at the same time they remind viewers that the hero and heroine come from completely different cultures. John Carter’s manners, his concern for Dejah and suggestion that she stay behind him “when things get dangerous,” along with his compassion are things taken for granted in the West even today. Yes, they are mocked regularly now, but such derision could not exist in a society that did not at least remember these proprieties.

Additionally, John Carter does not make fun of the titular hero’s “old-fashioned” manners or his masculinity. While it takes pains to show that Dejah Thoris can fight, she never belittles the Earthman for making an effort to protect her, or for rescuing her. She teases him, but it is clearly just that: banter, something meant to show she appreciates his concern for her. A far cry from *The Force Awakens*’ infamous scenes where Rey shouts: “Stop holding my hand!”

On that point, John Carter never avoids the fact that his hero abides by his culture, despite adapting to at least some of Barsoom’s customs. Although he uses or abides by the Martians’ traditions when necessary, particularly toward the end of the film, for the most part he behaves like a Christian gentleman from the American southeast. He offers a salute to Tars Tarkas – who adopts the practice himself later on – and rescues the “dog” Woola when the beast is being abused in the middle of a party. When he proposes to Dejah Thoris toward the end of the film, he does so in the traditional Christian manner, not the Barsoomian way.

Some viewers may find that a bit weird. Carter is currently living amongst aliens – some of whom are human enough in appearance, certainly – who have a different culture than his. Shouldn’t he be behaving according to their culture, not his own? Disney’s *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* did this with Milo Thatch and Kida. Why doesn’t John Carter?

Carter refrains from this complete assimilation to Martian culture because it is precisely this difference between John and the natives of Barsoom that allows them to achieve victory over Zodanga, as well as thwart the Thern. The hero’s American way of thinking coupled with his Christian upbringing makes John Carter a foe to be reckoned with, and no one who opposes him – be they Thark, Red Martian, or Thern – can compete with him because of his grounding in and determination to act according to his native civilization. It is a refreshing reminder of American exceptionalism and the power of Christian culture.

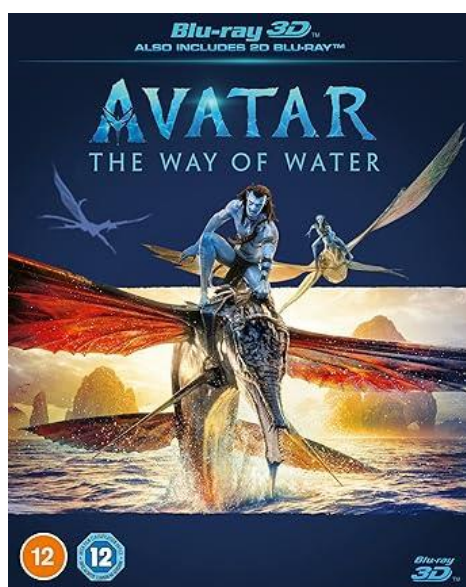
John Carter is an overlooked sci-fi gem that brings the wonder, beauty, and depth of Edgar Rice Burroughs’ work to the silver screen. It is not a perfect adaptation, but it is a loving one, and those are far too few these days to be dismissed. Andrew Stanton reportedly adored the books after reading them in his youth, and his admiration for the novels shines through in this



film. Once again, it must be stated that it is a shame that the sequels will never be filmed and produced.

In a world that has forgotten both Christian culture and American exceptionalism, John Carter is a worthy addition to any sci-fi fan's film collection. This jewel is too good to lose, especially since it serves as an able reminder of what American filmmaking can be when the people in charge love their craft and the story they are presenting to audiences. So if you need something entertaining to watch or are looking for the right gift for a friend or family member, choose this movie. It will certainly be a conversation starter!

## Avatar: The Way of Water Review by Jim McCoy



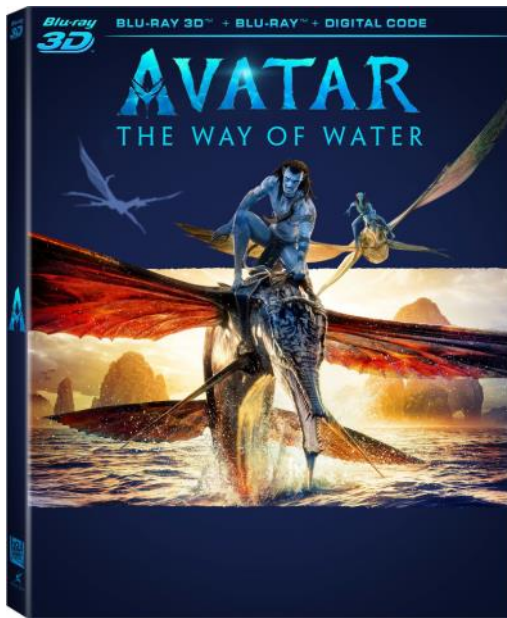
Well, it's not as bad as the first one. I had a serious dislike of the first Avatar film, and not just because I watched it with my ex-wife. Part of it, put bluntly, was political. The movie was a commentary on colonialism. It, being written with a liberal bent, failed to point out that literally every successful species in the history of the Planet Earth (think ant mounds, beehives, and fields filled with wild flowers) is a colonizing species. It was full of stereotypes commonly bandied about by liberals: The oppressed minority, the warmongering military officer, the Noble Savage...

I could go on. It honestly didn't offend me. I mean, stereotypes come from somewhere, and just about any place you can find a stereotype you can find a member of the group that is being stereotyped that acts that way. Stereotypes, at their core are an easy way of communicating. I get it. I mean, even if I use the term "lazy" you don't have to. The thing is, in the first film, they pretty much substituted stereotypes for a story. Avatar: The Way of Water contains all of the same stereotypes (even bringing back a dead man to keep up the pretense) but at least it has a bit of a story to it as well. I mean, there's even an actual character arc and everything.

One thing I will never take away from either one of these movies is their special effects. Both were beautiful. The reef was stunning. The aquatic life was amazing. The special effects team put some serious work into Avatar: The Way of Water. I seriously hope that the special effects team pulls down the Oscar this year. I haven't seen anything else that came close. Seriously, if this thing had been any more beautiful I'd have proposed to it.

The actors did a decent job with a so-so script as well. Avatar beat the political drum for the whole movie and Avatar: The Way of Water does the same. It's all there, up to and including making the human race look racist because it wants to do what's necessary to survive. I guess I get the point of view that the ends don't justify the means, but I disagree in this case. It's weird how some people like to fantasize about their own extinction. Well, get to it, goofball. As for me and my house, we will see to our own survival while you're dying off because you don't want to offend anyone. Don't worry though. I recognize your right to not participate.





The politics of the Na'vi make sense, too. Sometimes a change is necessary at the top. Sometimes, it's not easy to manage a peaceful transition of power if the old guy is around. Exile, following a mock execution, is a smart way to clear out problems before they start. I liked his part. I got this part. I may just bogart it for my own work someday. Seriously, it's not necessary in every society but it works for the Na'vi. It also gives the movie the push it needs to really get started.

And, let's face it, the new guy comes to town is an effective story (ask my buddy Tom what the two types of stories are) for two reasons: One, because it provides the basis for a narrative. Two, because the audience can discover things about the society he has visited/joined and the audience gets taken along with them. It's a trope, but

the reason it's a trope is because it works. The writers actually used the tool very effectively here.

It's also possible to use that same tool to create tension when the new guy (in this case, new family) doesn't really know how to fit in right and are either persecuted or screw up. Sometimes it's both. In Avatar: The Way of Water it's definitely both. It works though, and the story actually moves here. I feel bad for the kid in this movie. He's a dork and gets picked on a lot. That works back to the politics, because it makes his father look bad...

Yeah, somebody passed their class at script writing school. They might've even gotten a B.

Of course, the antagonists were a bunch of humans cum Na'vi with military training and bad attitudes. They kind of sound like a villainous version of American GIs in World War II propaganda films. Think the troops in the Starship Troopers movie, only more stereotypical and with less personality. Seriously, the lack of command responsibility for the troops is deplorable, and I'm not even Hillary Clinton. The fact remains that they do, indeed, serve a purpose in the story. And that's about as good as anything in this flick.

I'm still trying to figure out why these movies make as much money as they do. Someone has to be a fan, right? I mean, I've watched them both, the first on DVD and the second on streaming but I didn't really love them. I've talked to a whole freaking bunch of people who saw the first one and didn't like it. I haven't spoken to anyone who has seen the new one. I haven't even seen anyone post about seeing it on social media and that's really weird. People love posting about things they enjoy. They get downright wicked and gleeful when posting about things that they hate. The silence around Avatar: The Way of Water has been deafening, at least in my little corner of the nerdiverse. So who, pray tell, is watching this movie?

In short, I wasn't mad about wasting two hours of my life the way I was when I saw the first one. I've definitely seen better movies, but I haven't seen worse. I am hereby sentencing myself to watch at least one Godfather movie on my next day off as a form of penance though. Or maybe it's redemption? I feel like I've earned it at least.

Bottom Line: 3.5 out of 5 Scratched Chests

## Jules

### Review by Heath Row

The STF Amateur



This 2023 sf comedy-drama is a wonderfully slow and gentle movie that couches science fictional elements in a lowkey movie that meditates on aging, mental acuity, and friendship. Starring Ben Kingsley, Jane Curtin, and Harriet Sansom Harris, with whom I was less familiar, it's a quiet approach to first contact that reminded me slightly of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, as well as Cocoon.

Kingsley portrays an older man whose memory is starting to fail. He attends city council meetings regularly to express concerns about the town's motto, the need for a pedestrian signal at a particularly challenging intersection, and—eventually—an alien spacecraft that crashed in his flowerbeds.

That leads to several intertwining storylines: his daughter's increasing concern about his mental wellbeing as he ages, his encounter with an alien lifeform, and his developing friendship with the alien, as well as a couple of other women in town. Harris is delightful as the more optimistic and active artist, and Curtin portrays a delightfully bitter woman whose suspicion and skepticism softens over time. Her realization that her elderly, largely immobile cat isn't her only friend is heartwarming.

The three team up to keep their new otherworldly friend a secret—and to help the alien repair its spacecraft to return home. That involves cats in an inexplicable but fantastic manner. In the end, the movie is really about the value of developing new friendships as one ages, and the importance of family. The ending could have swung toward that of Cocoon but did not. Highly recommended.

## Prozines

### Worlds of If #177 (February 2024)

#### Review by Heath Row

The STF Amateur

Given the discussion of Worlds of If in the above fanzines inspired by my short history of the magazine (<https://tinyurl.com/If-history>) in The Stf Amateur, it's past high time I review the relaunch issue of the historic prozine. One of the editors sent me an advanced reading copy of the new issue in late February, and I read it immediately that evening. Now that I've obtained a print copy, I can revisit that experience physically. I recommend Worlds of If wholeheartedly.

The reintroduction of Worlds of If offers a good mix of reprints—Robert Silverberg, Renan

Bernardo, Zdraka Evtimova, Tara Campbell (though retitled), David Brin, and Charles Platt—as well as new, original work—Ai Jiang, Pedro Iniguez, and others—even if reprints aren't credited as such. It might behoove the editors to focus more on newer work, though I can understand the appeal of reprints for a free relaunch issue. If reprints continue to a lesser extent, I think they should be identified as such, including previous publication credits. The straight line to history is strong. It's part of the relaunch's appeal.

The black-and-white artwork by Paulo Sayeg and Bruce Pennington was absolutely wonderful. The other artwork in the issue was more incidental than illustrative—largely unrelated to the piece in which they appeared—and a few pieces made me wonder whether they were created using generative AI.

Regardless of whether material was reprinted, the story selection is tremendously solid and offered a compelling focus on biological sf, which I appreciated. The assortment stopped shy of body horror, but I enjoyed the concentration on healthcare, medicine, evolution, and similar topics. I also enjoyed how AI was addressed. It's an au courant topic and rich ground for storytelling. The advertising aspect of Bernardo's "Premium Resurrection Pack—\$99" was delightful. My favorite stories otherwise included Silverberg's "The Pain Peddlers," Campbell's "I Hope I Call You Back," Brin's brilliant "Chrysalis," and A.J. Dalton's "Biochecker."

The Book Feature courtesy of Leslie Kean confused me, however. Is it a sponsored review or a description? It's not an excerpt, and it felt awkward given the "courtesy" credit. A review would have been credited differently—and been wholly appropriate—and a sponsored review feels strange. I'd discourage sponsored content. An excerpt might have felt more natural—and might offer more value to readers in terms of promotion.

Finally, the nonfiction pieces, though welcome, were mixed. Science Editor Dr. Daniel Pomarede's cosmography article was excellent, while Kwame Cavil's personal essay on the relationship between sf and sports—while well written—didn't go as far as it might have to draw parallels between the fandoms. I did like that Cavil addressed the topic, however. My expectation is that many sf readers don't see sports in similar light, although they're both fandoms.

Overall, an extremely impressive first issue for a long-awaited relaunch. Kudos to all involved, and I cannot wait to see subsequent issues. Available for free via <https://tinyurl.com/Worlds-of-If-177> or for \$9.99 in print via <https://tinyurl.com/World-of-If-177-print>. Visit the magazine's Web site at <https://worldsofifmagazine.com>.

## Television

### In Defense of Wesley Crusher

By Jim McCoy

I can hear it now: SHUT UP JIMBO!!!!

I even get the reason for it, but hear me out here, because I'm not just a raving lunatic.

Stop laughing. I said "just".



Listen up, folks: There was a damn good reason for the Wesley character. I mean that. And this one character may have as much to do with why we still have Trek as Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Picard, whoever.

Great, now you really think I've lost it.

I want you to take a deep breath and think about it though.

C'mon. In, out, in, out...

Let's start out with a bit of Trek history from The Original Series. The first season of TOS did not feature Pavel Chekov. Why? I'm not sure why they felt that he was unnecessary the first season, but I know why they added him for the second:

They needed someone to draw in the younger crowd. Davy Jones had drawn in quite a following from the younger crowd, and they needed someone to be that guy for Star Trek. Eventually the series got cancelled so I'm not sure how that worked or what the effect on ratings was, but I know that they thought it would work at the time.

And remember, Gene Roddenberry worked on both series, at least at first. Wesley was there because Gene had learned his lesson. He needed to pull in the younger viewers. Wesley was the answer to that problem.

I'm talking from a place of experience here, because Wil Wheaton is roughly four and a half years older than me. As an adult that doesn't seem like much, but as a not quite eleven year old when ST:TNG debuted, it was a big deal. And, as weird as it sounds, I kind of considered him to be like an older brother. I mean that seriously.

You remember how it was when you were young, right? Older people got to do all the cool stuff. They could drive. They could stay out late. They didn't have to clean their room if they didn't want to. Being older was awesome. Wesley (and I didn't even know what the actor's name was at the time) was older than me. He got to fly around space in a starship. He got to do all kinds of cool science experiments. He got to wear a Starfleet uniform and hang out with Captain Picard. He was the cool one, the one with all of the experiences. He even got to have his first girlfriend before I did. Remember the time he used his science project in the mock battle between the USS Enterprise and the USS Hathaway in "Peak Performance"? Who wouldn't want to be that guy? I mean, if you were younger than him.

I couldn't have been the only one. There is an entire generation of Star Trek fans around my age. We needed someone to look up to. People talk a lot about representation nowadays. Wesley was the representative for the younger people. And that's not to say that we couldn't look up to the older people too. Who didn't want to have the brains of a Picard or the tactical acumen, and way with women, that Riker had? I can't be the only dude who thought that having Troi's Empathy (or Luw... Lw... Loo... her mother's telepathy) would be useful in trying to figure out girls and maybe get myself a date. The fact remains that Wesley was the kid. He was one of us.

And I know a lot of people who were past that age when they first saw ST:TNG find Wesley to be annoying. Guess what? A lot of adults thought I was annoying at that age, too. For that matter, a lot of my freaking classmates thought I was annoying because I was that weirdo who watched Star Trek with his dad. That just made me identify with the guy more.

And I'm sure we all remember ST:TNG episode "The First Duty." It's the one where Wesley is in Starfleet academy and one of his fellow cadets dies training as a member of Nova Squadron. That episode aired in the fall of 1992, just after I started my sophomore year of high school. I wanted to be a college student and he was one. And, let's face it, Starfleet cadets got to work in space. No way was I ever going to be able to get into a college where I could do that. And yeah, he lied. So did Ben Sisko. And yeah, he didn't go by the book. I'm not sure Kirk ever even read the damn thing. So I was, and am, still a fan.

I get the angst. I was never much of a fan of Jake Sisko or Naomi Wildman for exactly the same reason people don't like young Mr. Crusher. The thing is that I don't hate on the characters. It's weird saying that I didn't like Jake too, given the fact that he turned out to be a writer just like I want to be and that his dad was the best captain in all of Trek. (And yes, the correct answer to "Kirk or Picard?" is always "Sisko".) He was just at that perfect age for me to find him annoying. Just a little younger, a little less mature. Seriously, if Wesley Crusher was the cool older brother that got to do all of the things, then Jake was the younger brother who always tagged along, whether you wanted him to or not. And we'll leave Alexander out of the discussion. He was never the best written character and didn't show up very much.

So leave Wesley alone. He may not be your cup of tea, but he was a hero to a lot of us growing up. Go hate on someone else. I'm sure there's someone who deserves it, like maybe Karl Marx or his ideological descendant, Adolph Hitler. But Wesley Crusher is a national treasure to those of us who loved him and even if you don't get that, I'm sure that Wil Wheaton does.

## SerCon

### Roger Zelazny Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

N3F Historian

Roger Joseph Zelazny (1937 – 1995) was an American writer of science fiction (SF) and fantasy, best known for his series, *The Chronicles of Amber*. He won many awards during his writing career.

#### Early Life and Education

Zelazny was born in Euclid, Ohio, the only child of Polish immigrant Joseph Frank Zelazny and his Irish-American wife, Josephine Flora Sweet. In high school, Zelazny was the editor of the school newspaper and belonged to the school's Creative Writing Club.

He graduated from Western Reserve University with a B. A. degree in English in 1959; and



then attended Columbia University, graduating with an M. A. degree in 1962.

### Personal Life

Zelazny was married twice, first to Sharon Steberl in 1964 (divorced, no children), and then to Judith Alene Callahan in 1966. Prior to these marriages, he was engaged to folk singer Hedy West in the early 1960s.

He and Judith had two sons, Devin and Trent, and a daughter, Shannon. At the time of his death, Roger and Judith were separated; and he was living with fellow author Jane Lindskold. Two books begun by Zelazny were completed by Lindskold after Zelazny's death: *Donnerjack* (1997) and *Lord Demon* (1999).



### Publications

Zelazny's most memorable series of books were his Chronicles of Amber stories. Ten Amber novels were published from 1970 to 1991. Portions of the first novel, *Nine Princes in Amber*, had previously been published in the SF fanzine *Kallikanzaros* (No. 1, June, 1967; and No. 3, December, 1967). The novels *Sign of the Unicorn*, *The Hand of Oberon*, and *The Courts of Chaos* first appeared in abridged, serialized versions in the prozine, *Galaxy Science Fiction*. *The Guns of Avalon* and five later "Merlin Cycle" Amber novels were not serialized.

Other popular Zelazny series were his *Changeling Saga*, *Dilvish*, *Francis Sandow*, and *Millennial Contest* books, the last series written with Robert Sheckley.

Among Zelazny's most popular standalone novels were *This Immortal*, *The Dream Master*, *Lord of Light*, *Damnation Alley*, and *Jack of Shadows*.

Zelazny collaborated with several other popular SF authors of the day, including Sheckley, Philip K. Dick, Fred Saberhagen, and Charles T. Thomas. After Zelazny's death, Alfred Bester completed his novel *Psychoshop*.

Zelazny also wrote five volumes of poetry, and edited several anthologies.

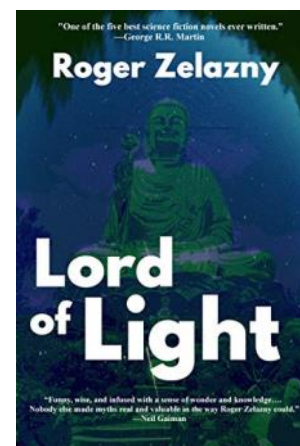
The *Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny* were published in six volumes by NESFA Press in 2009.

### Pseudonym

He sometimes used the pseudonym of Harrison Denmark.

### Awards/Honors/Recognitions

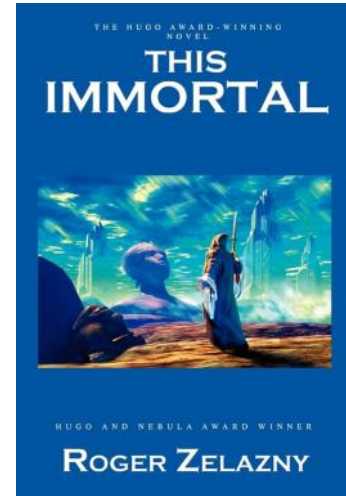
He won the Nebula Award three times (out of 14 nominations) and the Hugo Award six times (also out of 14 nominations), including two Hugos for novels.



He also won Alkor, Balrog, Locus, Lazar Komarcic, Prix Apollo, and Seim Taisho Awards during his career. He was GoH at the World SF Convention in 1974 (DisCon II), and served as the SFWA Secretary/Treasurer in 1967-1968. The fanzine, *Alternities* #6, published in the Summer of 1981, was a special Roger Zelazny Issue.

### Critical Comments

Zelazny's blend of SF, fantasy, and myth earned him a prominent position among writers of genre fiction. He was one of the first exponents of the “new wave” SF that arose during the mid-1960s, a literary movement that produced stories emphasizing the social and behavioral sciences (anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.) over the so-called “hard” sciences (astronomy, physics, chemistry, etc.).



Critics have stated that Zelazny often incorporated myths and folklore in his plots to present visions of the future.

### Death

Zelazny died in Santa Fe on June 16, 1995, of kidney failure associated with cancer. At the time of his death, he had been a twenty-year resident of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

#### Tributes

Following Zelazny's death, a tribute anthology, *Lord of the Fantastic*, was released in 1998. This book featured stories inspired by Zelazny, and personal recollections by contributors such as Robert Silverberg, Fred Saberhagen, Walter Jon Williams, Jennifer Roberson, Gregory Benford, and others.

In 2017, another tribute anthology titled *Shadows & Reflections: A Roger Zelazny Tribute Anthology* was published. This book was co-edited by Zelazny's son Trent, included an afterword by his daughter Shannon, a story by his partner and sometime co-author Jane Lindskold, and “featured a rarely seen story by Zelazny himself.”

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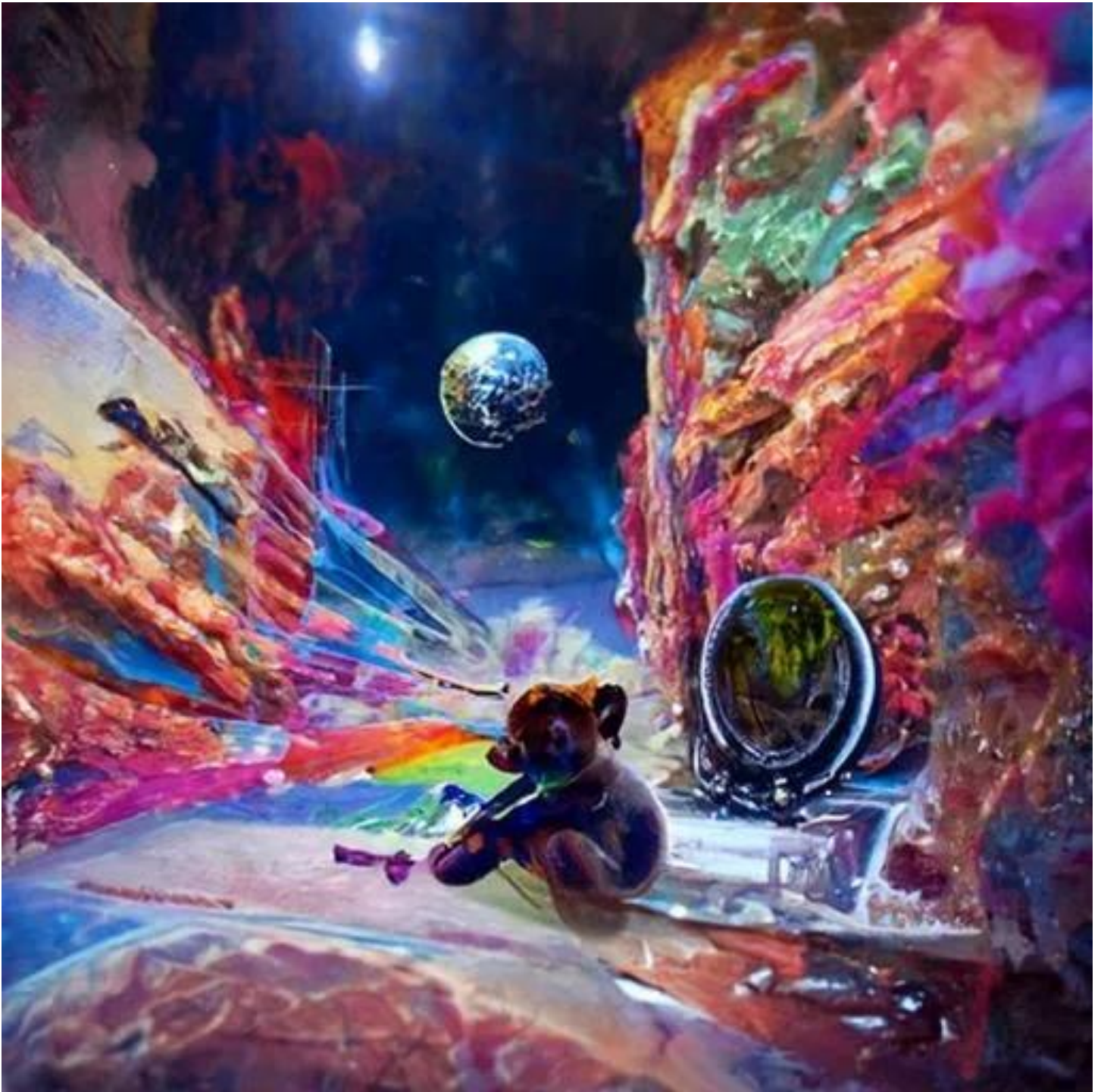
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Red Panda Space  
by Tiffanie Gray