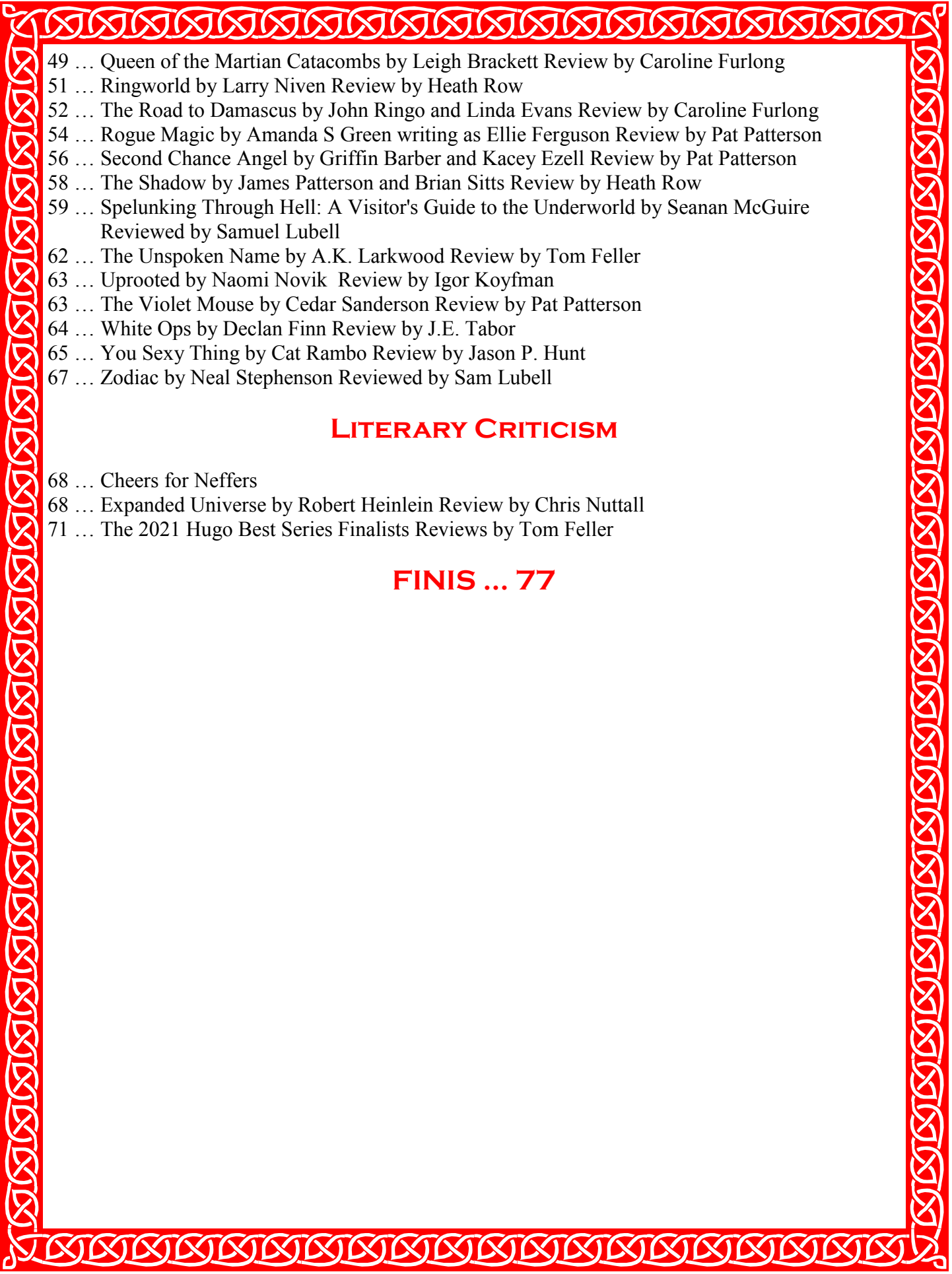


The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
April 2022

FICTION

- 2 ... A Thousand Pieces of You by Claudia Gray Review by Mindy Hunt
3 ... Academic Magic by Becky R. Jones Review by Pat Patterson
4 ... Alternate Routes by Tim Powers Review by Declan Finn
7 ... Auditors of Doom by Roy M. Griffis Review by Michael Gallagher
9 ... Barrayar by Lois McMaster Bujold Review by JE Tabor
11 ... Beyond All Weapons by L. Ron Hubbard Review by Heath Row
11 ... Brother, Frank by Michael Bunker Review by Graham Bradley
13 ... City of Sensors by A.M. Todd Reviewed by Robert Runté
14 ... Daggerspell by Katharine Kerr Reviewed by Sam Lubell
15 ... Death Cult by Declan Finn Review by Michael Gallagher
18 ... Doctor Inferno by Pam Uphoff Review by Pat Patterson
19 ... Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze by Kit Sun Cheah Review by Caroline Furlong
21 ... The Engines of God by Jack McDevitt Review by Heath Row
22 ... Fire Eyes Awakened by RJ Batla Review by Jim McCoy
23 ... Fireborne by Rosaria Munda Review by Igor Koyfman
24 ... For the Wolf (The Wilderwood) by Hannah Whitten Reviewed by Sam Lubell
25 ... Going Ballistic by Dorothy Grant Review by Pat Patterson
26 ... Gun Runner by Larry Correia and John D. Brow Review by Ginger Man
28 ... Home for the Howlidays, edited by M.L.D. Curelas Review by Robert Runté
29 ... In the Palace of Shadow and Joy by D.J. Butler Review by Graham Bradley
30 ... Isekai Skies by H. P. Holo Review by Declan Finn
32 ... The Kaiju Preservation Society by John Scalzi Review by Heath Row
33 ... Knight Rider by Glen A. Larson and Roger Hill Review by Heath Row
34 ... The Last Archon by Richard W. Watts Review by Ginger Man
36 ... Let Sleeping Gods Lie by David J. West Review by JE Tabor
37 ... Lost Planet Homicide by Larry Correia Review by Graham Bradley
38 ... Main Street, DOA by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man
40 ... Midnight at the Well of Souls by Jack L. Chalker Review by Heath Row
41 ... Monster Punk Horizon by HP Holo Review by Declan Finn
43 ... The Mummy of Monte Cristo by J. Trevor Robinson Review by Trevor Denning
44 ... Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys Review by Jim McCoy
46 ... Odd Magics: Tales for the Lost by Sarah A. Hoyt Book Review by Becky Jones
47 ... Politics Kills by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man

- 
- 49 ... Queen of the Martian Catacombs by Leigh Brackett Review by Caroline Furlong
51 ... Ringworld by Larry Niven Review by Heath Row
52 ... The Road to Damascus by John Ringo and Linda Evans Review by Caroline Furlong
54 ... Rogue Magic by Amanda S Green writing as Ellie Ferguson Review by Pat Patterson
56 ... Second Chance Angel by Griffin Barber and Kacey Ezell Review by Pat Patterson
58 ... The Shadow by James Patterson and Brian Sitts Review by Heath Row
59 ... Spelunking Through Hell: A Visitor's Guide to the Underworld by Seanan McGuire
Reviewed by Samuel Lubell
62 ... The Unspoken Name by A.K. Larkwood Review by Tom Feller
63 ... Uprooted by Naomi Novik Review by Igor Koyfman
63 ... The Violet Mouse by Cedar Sanderson Review by Pat Patterson
64 ... White Ops by Declan Finn Review by J.E. Tabor
65 ... You Sexy Thing by Cat Rambo Review by Jason P. Hunt
67 ... Zodiac by Neal Stephenson Reviewed by Sam Lubell

LITERARY CRITICISM

- 68 ... Cheers for Neffers
68 ... Expanded Universe by Robert Heinlein Review by Chris Nuttall
71 ... The 2021 Hugo Best Series Finalists Reviews by Tom Feller

FINIS ... 77

Editorial

For some reason I have on several occasions been asked why the nominations for the N3F Neffy Award for best novel and the nominations for the Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell Awards for best novel do not overlap. The answer is a simple exercise in mathematics. Consider Fandom. Besides novel fandom, we have short story fandom, poetry fandom, anime fandom, comics fandom, cosplay fandom, convention attending fandom, convention running fandom, film fandom, TV fandom, video fandom, Star Trek fandom, Star Wars fandom, Tolkein fandom, fannish history fandom, milSF fandom, Regency Revival fandom, fanzine publishing fandom, fan fiction writing fandom, collecting fandom, the Prestigious Interstellar Gourmand Society, author fandom, drinking fandom, most important of all the N3F Gourmet Bureau, etc., etc., and etc. That's a lot of fandoms. Even if each of our voting members participates in several of these, when we distribute our membership over all these fandoms the number of Neffers who are novel readers is a bit limited, perhaps several dozen members.

How many SF novels come out in a given year? A few years back I did a monthly list of new novels from one source, and found a hundred a month. This did not include the hardback, paperback, and trade paperback publishers, nor the people who published on Amazon Kindle and nowhere else, nor the sfnal romance novels. As a rough estimate, there are a couple-three thousand sfnal novels published every year.

If the book fans each read a book or two a month, and no two of them read the same book, that's perhaps 500 titles a year that our book fen read, a quarter or less of all titles. The odds are then only moderately in favor of even one member having read one of the Hugo finalists. By the time we ask if that member liked the book enough to support it being a nominee and then actually made a nomination, the odds are much against there being any overlap between our list of nominees and the nominee lists of these more modern awards.

~~~~~  
The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 and is distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. In most issues superb proofreading support was provided by Jean Lamb. Most of our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Some of them link from their reviews on the internet to Amazon. If you buy at Amazon.com via our reviewers' web pages, they get a modest financial reward. Some of us also write novels. Please buy them. Our lead reviewers are:

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>  
Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>  
Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>  
Patrick Ijima-Washburn <http://patokon.com>  
Becky Jones: <http://ornerydragon.com>  
Rob Kroese <https://upstreamreviews.com/>  
Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>  
Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>  
Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>  
Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>  
George Phillies <http://books-by-george.com>  
Jeffrey Redmond's writings also appear in the N3F zines Origins and Ionisphere  
Cedar Sanderson <http://www.CedarWrites.com>  
Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>

To join the N3F: <http://N3F.org/join>. Submit articles to the editor, George Phillies, [phillies@4liberty.net](mailto:phillies@4liberty.net) as text files, MSWORD files, or .odt files. The N3F claims no ownership on published submissions beyond the nonexclusive right to distribute the Review and its articles in all formats, including archival sites.

# Fiction

## A Thousand Pieces of You by Claudia Gray

### Review by Mindy Hunt

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

I'll start off with this, which isn't new for me. I'm glad that this was the first book of a trilogy. Without the basics of the story and how the pieces move, I think jumping into the middle of it may have been confusing.

With that said, I'll leave the suspense to the story.

A Thousand Pieces of You follows Marguerite Caine through different dimensions as she hunts down her father's killer. Her parents are brilliant physicists who have invented the Firebird, a device that can transport a person into another dimension. The man blamed for her father's death is a handsome, yet awkward grad assistant named Paul, whom the family took in as one of their own. It appears to be the perfect murder and get away; however, the murder didn't take into consideration Marguerite's stubbornness to find and, if she's able to, kill her father's killer, regardless of what dimension she has to visit. Plus, she's not alone. Helping her is her parents' other grad assistant, Theo, who is almost equally as determined to kill Paul but also keep Marguerite safe. Her journey takes them to different worlds with different technology and in different periods of that dimension's history. But one little twist of fate throws Marguerite's anger and other emotions about Paul into question. Was her reality, or dimension, right or was it terribly wrong?

Ok, first I'll admit I originally picked up this book because it was by Claudia Gray, whom I know for her work on Star Wars books. Now, I haven't read any of her Star Wars books or any of the other new Star Wars, just the ones released in my high school days. So I was curious to see what type of writer she was without given a plan from a large company who seems to have an agenda other than an organically good story.

I am happy.

Luckily, the concept of A Thousand Pieces intrigued me. Dimension jumping versus the usual time jumping; same group of characters in a different world. Don't get me wrong, the places she jumps to in the dimensions can have a time or period shift, too, but I didn't expect that based on how the jumping was explained. So when our leading lady suddenly finds herself tripping down stairs at a formal ball in turn-of-the-century Russia, I think I was as shocked as she was.... well not quite, but you get my drift. Gray's ability to write this part, and with some decent research for it, is enchanting. Honestly, she could have done more in this part of the book, and I would have been delighted. The detail she puts into certain aspects of Marguerite's experience as the grand Duchess: her lifestyle, the clothing, the Fabergé Eggs....she really creates a picture that draws you in.

Speaking of which, kudos on this: even though there's a lot of fantastical science theory in the story, the fact is Marguerite's the odd one in the physicist family (her mom, dad, older sister); she is the artist. So she sees things through an artist's mind, which helps "dumb" down the science aspect for us non-scientist readers. I also like how she will admit that she needs the layman terms even if she has an understanding of the science. It's like Gray gets that some of details need to be simplified or she'll lose her

reader. Plus, as a fellow artist and student, I found some of Marguerite's references are quite fun. I did mention suspense. I had a feeling it would be a "ok, who really done it?" story and played out different scenarios in my mind. Just like the locations of the next dimension were surprising, the explanation for the plot was too. I liked the twist, the simplicity yet complexity of it. I know that's odd but bear with me. The who is kind of a given once you get into it. The why you learn as you learn more about the Firebird and how dimensions work. However, throw on top of that a characteristic of mankind that seems to be used quite often (and often against us) and the explanation behind that why is almost a "oh duh" moment. However, the execution of how that person and using the dimensions to accomplish a goal makes you look back through the rest of the book for those "did I miss something" moments.

You had one job, Gray. And you nailed it.

Suspense, world building, a clever story with characters that are not over the top. And an ending that wants more. Which apparently Gray does give because *A Thousand Pieces of You* is the first in a trilogy. I thought I felt the story wasn't finished and had missed something (yes, I reread the last couple pages again to make sure).

This means I need to hunt down the next book because I do want to know what happens. I admit, I was more taken with this than I had expected. I would like to read another of her books. Her own made-up world with her own characters appear to work well in this book, and possibly whole series, so maybe I should try a Star Wars book of hers. I know the criticism with the newer High Republic work, so perhaps I should start with an older one of hers to see if her story telling is as good when she's confined into an already established galaxy.

But until then, I think I'll join Marguerite's search for her father's killer with book two.

## Academic Magic by Becky R. Jones Review by Pat Patterson

Zoe O'Brien, Ph.D., is a relatively new hire in the history department at Summerfield College, a smallish liberal arts institution located in metro Philadelphia. As such, she has the standard concerns of junior faculty everywhere: committee assignments; teaching freshman level survey courses; cranking out research papers; living without tenure; no romantic life; and two cats for company. All normal, until she sees a group of squirrels sitting in a circle, and one of them waves at her.

Zoe's concentration in Medieval European history gave her a strong foundation in the types of behaviors termed magical, as well as the reaction of surrounding societies. She also has a scholarly skepticism and a modern view of Life. However, her confidence already shaken by what she THINKS she saw, she is further challenged by her closest friend Mark, and his husband David, who tell her that just because the belief is medieval, that doesn't mean it's wrong.

Thus, when she discovers two squirrels waiting for her when she goes to work the next day, she braves the unknown, and speaks politely to them. They return the courtesy, and meet with her, in her office. That evening, her cats talk to her.

All of this inter-species' communication has a point: there is something that feels nasty about the main administration building, and the squirrels need her help. And so they come to a junior member of the

faculty, non-tenured, and ask her to speak to her department head, and mentor, on their behalf; a person who will certainly have a significant role to play on whether she is offered a tenured position.

Thus develops a lovely fantasy, spread over a very true-to-life depiction of a college campus, something I know about. Jones is spot-on with her descriptions of mind-numbing committee meetings and office politics. Even those who haven't spent much time in the ivory towers can find much to appreciate about this tale of an intelligent young prof, confronted by the impossible. Her conversations with her cats alone make it worth the read. Add in wicked witches, winos, wise wizards, and a whining woman-parent, and the alliteration will take you home.

## Alternate Routes by Tim Powers

### Review by Declan Finn

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

John C. Wright on par with the late Gene Wolfe. Wright basically writes straightforward science fiction and fantasy novels, only layers with philosophical implications as part of basic worldbuilding and written in a style that's more literature than airport read.

Knowing all this, I often wondered why John C Wright had never written for Baen Books, who publish a wide variety of science fiction, and who might be the best game in town for a non-indie SFF read.

Now I know, they don't need John C. Wright. They have Tim Powers. And he is amazing.

The story

Ex-Secret Service agent Sebastian Vickery is on the run from the federal government for once overhearing radio intercepts from the world of ghosts. When Ingrid Castine comes to save him from being assassinated, both of them end up on the run.

It seems that the US government has been using ghosts as intelligence assets. After all, when someone dies, it's not like they're going to be apt at counterinterrogation techniques. The man in charge is Emilio Terracotta, who may have looked into the abyss one too many times.

Unfortunately, the more Terracotta and his agency reaches out to the other side, the more the other side reaches back.

As I read through the novel, I must admit that one thing kept running through my mind: the scene from the original Ghostbusters, where the psychokinetic activity in New York City had gone from a normal Twinkie, to one approximate the size of a bus.

The Twinkie is about to hit the fan.

The pacing of this book basically makes it a thriller. As such, it's basically very straightforward. But it has a combination of elements. There are touches of horror (obviously, there are ghosts), urban fantasy (after all, we're in LA) as well as science fiction reaching out towards fantasy.

When we got to the action, there are two modes. For the fantasy action, he operates under the rules and operating procedures of fantasy—no one here is punching a ghost in the face. When it comes to the action against other humans, Powers wields a deft hand on par with Robert Ludlum, but nowhere near as

convoluted.

The characters

There are two main point of view characters, Vickery and Terracotta. Castine is also a major player, but we see little from her point of view. Despite matching certain surface characteristics, Vickery and Castine are not Mulder and Scully. During his years on the run, Vickery has learned the rules of dealing with ghosts as a “spectral-evasion driver,” and the risks of being on the freeway that have nothing to do with Los Angeles traffic. Castine has been approaching the supernatural from a more clinical setting.

In a fashion I have come to expect from authors of this skill level, Powers establishes character, physical descriptions, and a whole history for both Castine and Vickery in a quick and efficient number of pages. And the shooting begins shortly thereafter. But the character building never stops, and it’s usually carried in a whole sentence.

For example, and it’s not much of a spoiler, but Vickery refers to

“a vasectomy I got when I was twenty-three. And came to profoundly regret. He shied away from thoughts of his wife’s suicide....”

That’s a whole short story in two lines. One plus one equals an emotional gut punch.

These characters are also very real, if only at points where it is very clear that they don’t want to play hero, they have plenty of ways out of being the hero, and no one expects them to be the hero... but we can give it a try, right?

Terracotta... is a Dean Koontz villain, with less mustache twirling. He’s a creature who believes in no God but reaches out for the occult. His view of the world is deterministic and atomistic –human beings are meat machines who will do what we do because we are supposed to do it. He is all too real—literally, I think I’ve met this guy. But like all men who mess with forces they don’t understand, he gets in way over his head, and he never even realizes. He’s a creature out of *That Hideous Strength*, and if he’s not pure evil, he gives a great impression of it.

As Castine explains

“Terracotta says people can’t help what they do, any more than a rock rolling down a hill can. The rock might think it has a choice about rolling left or right, just like people think they can choose what to do, but really, it’s all just physics... In one of his books he wrote, free consciousness is pointless—what’s the use of a you, when all you can do is watch what your body does and says? Sometimes he seems surprised by what he does—though he’d say surprise is useless too.”

In typical fashion of people of Powers’ level, he also dissects this train of thought even easier than it’s originally expressed.

Seriously, I’ve seen more humanity from Bela Lugosi’s *Dracula* than out of this guy. There is a backstory for Terracotta that explains a lot of why he is this way, but it makes no excuse for him.

The world

These rules are all perfectly laid out and explained to the audience as we go along. And it is clear that

Powers has given a LOT of thought to what does and does not affect ghosts, throwing in thoughts on everything from the uncanny valley to biochemistry. All of our characters have already fallen down this rabbit hole and have basically lived there for years. Everyone knows the rules and uses them within the story as weapons. And Tim Powers is not one to talk down to his audience. He's put a lot of thought into this, and he expects you to keep up. But you will probably read this book in one or two sittings, so don't worry about forgetting any of these rules.

There are certain points where this story goes down the rabbit hole, and while we're not quite on Wonderland logic, the realm on the other side has specific rules as well. Powers manages to catch this even in the tone of the narration as the characters go from one realm into another. It's quite marvelous. It makes me think that this is what Neil Gaiman wants to be when he grows up.

Powers' rules for ghosts are akin to CS Lewis'. These ghosts are just the leftovers of the people left behind. These are not souls, and they are not people. These are echoes. But as the book explains, they may not be real people, but the ghosts think they are. Or, to take one example...

"Elliot's g-ghost thinks it's still Elliot!" And lots of crazy people think they're Jesus or somebody.

Powers also gives a great sense of otherworldliness to his work. When something comes from elsewhere, you are certain it's not from around here. It thinks, acts, and speaks like it's from Elsewhere.

And all of this is before Tim Powers weaponizes Greek mythology.

The politics

I'm sure if you want to reach for political analogy like Gumby, you could look at Terracotta's agency as akin to the NSA's spying program. But really, the most hay you can make out of this is "Don't trust government agencies," but I think that's a lesson we've all learned at this point in our lives. For regular people, there are no politics here. If there's a message, there's "Do not play with Occult sh\*\*, occult sh\*\* will not play with you."

Content warning

People die, sometimes with gun shots to the head.

Who is it for?

This is for fans of Neil Gaiman who don't mind if Gaiman ends up looking like a poser. If you enjoy John C Wright and are waiting for his next book, then you definitely need to try this.

Why read it?

Read this because this is just a fun roller coaster ride with narrative tricks you've never seen before.

Even the Twinkie.



Auditors of Doom by Roy M. Griffis  
Review by Michael Gallagher  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

The last time a Roy Griffis novel was featured on this site, I said it may have been the funniest book I'd ever read. With the release of his second entry into his Cthulhu, Amalgamated universe, he manages to avoid the dreaded sophomore slump with Auditors of Doom. Narg and Murph are back, this time in Depression-Era Texas. It's not a comfortable Ivy League college gig they're given either; the pair's host body is working as a bellhop in a hotel that's very, very haunted.

#### The story

If you haven't read our review of the series' preceding title, The Thing From HR, you can find it here; I won't rehash too much, and I absolutely suggest you read that book before starting this one. (WARNING: some spoilers for the first book follow)

That fair warning given, this story takes place a while after the events of the first book. Narg'Lah, our shoggoth protagonist, has settled comfortably into a promotion within the Human Restraint office, and has found success authoring a monograph of his experiences among the "Hairless Apes", or "Poo Flingers". His erstwhile companion on that adventure, Murph, has actually found love and settled down in That Dimension Where Madness Reigns and Toner is Scarce. Things are running smoothly (such as they can be in a Lovecraftian realm of cosmic horror and insanity), until the recently dead essence of a short, loud man appears in the processing area and starts demanding to speak to a manager.

This kind of thing is normally below Narg's pay grade now, but given his experience with the Flingers, he listens as the ghostly being gives a dire warning: something terrible is about to happen in Faninville, Texas. With Murph more interested in spending time with his noncorporeal girlfriend (read the first book), Narg is left alone to ponder the threat. The more he ruminates on it, the more he becomes convinced that a summoning is likely being planned (and an unauthorized one at that), and rather hastily decides to lone wolf it down to Earth. He finds himself in the recently deceased body of a bellhop for the Crockett Hotel.

A hotel which, wouldn't you know it, is preparing to host a big gathering of spiritualists who visit every year on the celebration of the massacre the town is known for, and strange dancing lights appear in the sky. Before long, Narg finds himself in strange territory, alone and not quite sure he can manage to get back. And this time, no one back at the office knows where he's gone.

#### The characters

Our hero pair of Narg'Lah the shoggoth and his human companion Murph make return appearances, and their chemistry is just as good. The big change in this book is their "meatsuit", the bellhop known as Cosmo. Though short of stature, it seems their vessel was a notorious philanderer of exceptional endowment. A regular "entertainer" of female staff and guests, particularly several members of the Sisters of the Spirit, part of the spiritualist group staying at the hotel. They gain an altogether new appreciation for him once discovering he'd been declared legally dead and is now walking around again, believing his being to "the other side" makes him the perfect sacrifice for the aforementioned unauthorized summoning Narg was tipped off about.

The Sisters of the Spirit are headed by the gorgeous but decidedly (insert cuckoo clock noise) Lady

Clytemnestra, who may or may not wield the secrets she learns about others in a blackmailing racket and is covered in tattoos that make her abdomen a human Ouija board. Her diminutive and wizened assistant/chauffer Franklin is lacking in both looks and charm but may be more than he seems.

But the boys aren't completely without assistance; remember me mentioning the hotel's haunted? That's because it was built on the site of a notorious massacre of Texan soldiers at the hands of the Mexican Army. Their restless souls were trapped there, most vocal and prevalent among them being Gil, their captain. Having been stuck in the same spot for a hundred years, he's intimately familiar with the comings and goings of the hotel staff. After seeing that he doesn't scare Cosmo, the two become friends, with Gil even helping the two out at various points. In life he'd bartered with the Mexicans for safe passage for his men, only to be double-crossed on orders from Santa Anna himself. He's still carrying around the guilt of their deaths, and his desire to see them "go home" at last becomes an irresistible temptation when the Sisters start making promises to him.

## The world

The world is a bit less immersive this time around, as the story almost entirely takes place within the hotel. Cosmo is given meager room and board there, so he has little reason to leave the place, aside from the occasional errand such as a factfinding mission to a local museum. As I mentioned before, it is set in Depression-era Texas, which means the Spiritualist movement is en vogue, and segregation is still very much a thing. And on that note . . .

## The politics

It's revealed late in the story that the year is 1941. Society-wide racial segregation in Texas was in full force, and Griffis does not paper over this. He does however make the smart decision to focus on the humanity of his characters rather than the injustice of the law. One great example is Harper, a black cab driver, who's always there to help Cosmo out with a ride despite it being risky for him to pick up white passengers. He's friendly and hardworking and speaks in a patois true to the time and setting, as is also true of many of the Hispanic characters in the book.

No doubt this brazen act of writing minority characters with culturally accurate dialogue would send a certain sub-sub-sub section of the reading populace into stroke-inducing paroxysms of rage; Griffis doesn't care. He knows exactly what kind of story he wants to tell, and while there's plenty of ink to spill over the policy of segregation in this country and the far-reaching consequences thereof, it's not in his book. We've got a bellhop with a large member occupied by a shoggoth and a dead surfer trying to stop a cult.

## Content warning

The climax of the first book culminated in the faculty of a college slicing their faces off with straight razors: thankfully nothing so graphic occurs in this book, although there is another scene of almost-sex and quite a number of jokes / references to Cosmo's "Divine Gift", especially early on.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Griffis' first novel (like myself) will enjoy this next installment of the Cthulhu Amalgamated series. The dynamic between Narg'Lah and Murph hasn't lost a step, and there's some satisfying character growth on both sides. Newcomers to the series who are fans of occult detective or horror comedy would find this a natural addition to their TBR pile. It's not a standalone, though; I again implore any-

one curious about this story to first treat themselves to the excellent *The Thing From HR* before picking this one up.

Why read it?

Griffis' comedic treatment of Lovecraft's mythos is, as I mentioned in my previous review, done with loving respect. Narg'Lah's erudite commentary throughout is chock full of unrelenting dry wit, especially as he incorporates more human mannerisms into his speech and writing (such as calling Murph as his "homelad"). The comedy is funny, the characters are well fleshed-out, and the adventure is a fun ride. Even the afterword hides a spine-chilling final touch. Griffis' books are a sure bet from beginning to end.

## Barrayar by Lois McMaster Bujold

Review by JE Tabor

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Falsely suspected of being a victim of enemy mind control, Cordelia Naismith fled her home planet of Beta Colony to marry a military officer of her former enemy of Barrayar and is soon pregnant with his heir. Just as she is settling into the old-fashioned ways of Barrayar society, her husband reluctantly agrees to serve as the regent of the child heir to the aging Emperor, setting off an assassination attempt and then a coup against the would-be child emperor.

Cordelia must navigate the politics of her newly adopted home planet as it descends into full-on civil war. With her son trapped in an artificial womb and threatened with death, Barrayar becomes the story of a mother's quest to save her preborn child.

The story

The story follows the events of *Shards of Honor*, which closes with Commander Cordelia Naismith leaving her home of Beta Colony to accept the proposal of Aral Vorkosigan, an officer of the Barrayaran Empire and rival to Beta Colony.

At the start of *Barrayar*, Cordelia is pregnant with Vorkosigan's son and is settling into the militaristic world's conservative culture and feudal class system. But when her husband agrees to become the regent for the dying Emperor's grandson, Cordelia and her family are caught up in the politics of the world.

Aral and Cordelia are targeted in an assassination attempt using poison gas. Although they escape with their lives, the treatment for the gas has serious side effects for her unborn child, and she is forced to place her son into an artificial womb for treatment.

When rivals attempt a coup against the young emperor-to-be, the world descends into civil war, and Cordelia is cut off from the facilities that house her pre-born son. Worse, without maintenance, the child will die within the week. Against the wishes of her husband, Cordelia organizes and leads a clandestine rescue of her endangered son.

The characters

As described in the review for *Shards of Honor*, Cordelia Naismith was born and raised on the world of

Beta Colony, a socially liberal and society that values technocratic social engineering and somehow also personal autonomy. She is the window through which the reader experiences the feudal class-based society of Barrayar. Cordelia is often open-minded about adopting the customs of her newfound home, opting to carry her son naturally rather than to have him conceived in an artificial womb, but her tolerance for some of Barrayar's Darwinist mores only go so far. She is loyal to her husband but more loyal to her child, and she will not sit back while either are threatened, and despite her Betan heritage, does not shy away from brutality.

The character of Konstantine Bothari is reintroduced in Barrayar and becomes one of the more intriguing characters in Barrayar. The mentally disturbed giant of a man is an empty shell, a tool to be wielded by those who command him. In his dog-like obedience to his superiors, he goes from torturer to bodyguard to midwife without so much as a blink of an eye. When he comes under Cordelia's command, he becomes a window into Cordelia's id as she uses him to enforce her own will.

## The world

At first glance, Barrayar resembles something of a fairytale world where Lords rule over vast swaths of idyllic countryside, but Bujold pulls the layers back throughout the book. Barrayar is steeped in eugenic practices, and children with minor birth defects are euthanized so as not to become a burden on their families. The life of a Barrayaran noble is a dangerous one, with constant intrigue and backstabbing, and it gives a sense that the violence that erupts in the early chapters of the book is always bubbling under the surface for members of the ruling class. Bujold does not ignore the implication for the peasants at the bottom of the feudal ladder, either, and they are often the victims of upper class power plays.

But Bujold shows the world from multiple angles, and hints at the logical reasons behind the alien society that Cordelia finds herself in. The Barrayarans are written as humans, not condemned as reactionary monsters, regardless of Cordelia's own biases.

## The politics

Barrayar might be the most pro-life piece of fiction I have ever read. Not only does the main conflict revolve around saving Cordelia's preborn son, the child's own grandfather urges Cordelia to abort her son as soon as it is revealed that he will become a "deformed mutant" after the poison gas assassination attempt.

Cordelia responds with the appropriate maternal rage, and much of the rest of the book is dedicated to protecting and rescuing the child from Barrayaran society. The novel's ending makes clear how wrong those particular views are.

## Content warning

There is plenty of violence to go around in Barrayar, from attacks against children to beheadings, but none of the descriptions are particularly graphic.

## Who is it for?

Barrayar is for any sci-fi fans who enjoy medieval politics and intrigue in a planetary setting. The pro-life message is an added bonus.

## Why read it?

Read Barrayar for the backstabbing political intrigue of a futuristic feudal world and for the lengths at which Cordelia will go to save her preborn son.

## Beyond All Weapons by L. Ron Hubbard

### Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

This slim collection—121 pages—is part of Galaxy Press’s Stories from the Golden Age series. The collection of 80 books and unabridged audiobooks compile more than 150 stories written by L. Ron Hubbard, with subsets focusing on air adventure, far-flung adventure, sea adventure, tales from the Orient, mystery, fantasy, science fiction, and western stories. This volume comes from the science fiction sub-series and collects three stories.

The title story, “Beyond All Weapons,” originally appeared in Super Science Stories (January 1950). “Strain” was published in the April 1942 Astounding Science Fiction, and “The Invaders” appeared in the January 1942 Astounding. In the first story, during a rebellion on Earth, several rebel ships break a blockade in order to travel past Mars to Alpha Centauri. After establishing a colony on a habitable world, they return to Earth only to find that more time had passed than expected; they did the math later.

In “Strain,” a military commander changes his plan of attack after two soldiers are captured and questioned as prisoners of war. And in “The Invaders,” a nebbishy member of the Extra-Territorial Science Corps, a technician—a troubleshooter of some note, apparently—is able to rout the attack of an increasingly formidable force despite every effort to thwart him by the very people he’s working to save.

The stories are a fun read, though the foreword and endnotes are even more fun. If one reads Kevin J. Anderson’s foreword and the brief essay “L. Ron Hubbard in the Golden Age of Pulp Fiction” at face value, Hubbard effectively invented or perfected pulp fiction and science fiction—in fact, any genre he put his hand to. “He could write on any subject, in any genre,” Anderson writes, claiming that Hubbard is the most enduring writer of the era. The end piece suggests that Hubbard’s character-driven stories ushered in the golden age of science fiction. Apparently, Robert A. Heinlein was a protege of his.

In the end, these are fun stories, but nothing earth-shatteringly important, and it’s a risk to believe Galaxy’s own press. Hyperbole aside, Hubbard is interesting, but were it not for Dianetics and Scientology, would he be important? Regardless, I hadn’t known that Hubbard scripted the serial The Secret of Treasure Island, so that might be worth checking out. And I do look forward to reading other volumes in this series, despite my misgivings. Old stories can be good stories, after all. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine Faculae & Filigree #11.)

## Brother, Frank by Michael Bunker

### Review by Graham Bradley

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

A genius—who also happens to be a madman—saves the life of a dying child by sticking his brain inside a high-tech DARPA robot that has the power to win wars singlehandedly. And then things go sideways.

Note: the print edition of this story is titled BROTHER, FRANK while the audiobook is called BROTHER, FRANKENSTEIN. The distinction is unclear to me, but they are both the same book.

I listened to the audio edition.

## The story

What kind of story can you tell when you mix DARPA, the Amish, a mad scientist, and a terminally ill autistic kid? This one, and probably several more that are nowhere near this good. Chris Alexander is the aforementioned scientist who has a loose moral code and a drive to see if he can do the impossible. Think of Hugh Laurie's Dr. House, only with an affinity for cybernetics.

Alexander usually takes time off during the year to help a local Amish community with their medical needs, and eventually befriends a young man named Frank. Frank is only about middle-school aged, and his severe autism has held back his development considerably. He's verbal and able to recognize faces, but he's also fixated on certain tics and habits that make it highly difficult for him to control himself.

His prognosis is compounded by other factors that leave him with a short clock for the remainder of his young life. That is until Alexander realizes Frank is a perfect candidate for a new project over at DARPA, fusing human nervous tissue with a robotic chassis. Human brains, mechanical bodies. The implement? Why, war, of course!

But hey, Alexander is gonna do the responsible thing. He'll just disarm the robot and make sure its urban camouflage is up to snuff, so that Frank can pass as human throughout society. Any oddities in his appearance will just be chalked up to his autism.

Here's the problem, though: Alexander didn't really have permission to use DARPA's robot. And he definitely didn't have consent from Frank's Amish parents. He wanted to see if he could do it, so he did. And now he's got a whole new batch of problems breathing down his neck.

Especially once Frank finds out that DARPA is holding his community hostage, and he gets his hands on all those weapons that Dr. Alexander removed...

## The characters

Dr. Chris Alexander is our POV character, while Frank is his patient. There's also a shady government agency, shadier than our CIA, somewhere on par with Larry Correia's "Special Task Force Unicorn," only more serious.

## The world

It's our world, on paper at least. The DARPA elements are meant to be hidden from public view. Of greater interest is the fact that Michael Bunker lives much like the Amish do and writes regularly on his website about homesteading off-the-grid. His Pennsylvania roots heavily influence his worldbuilding and this isn't the only story of his that features people living a low-tech life. That lends a degree of authenticity that brings Brother, Frank to life.

## The politics

Bunker's politics are less divided between "Red Elephant, Blue Donkey" and more between "high tech conformity, low-tech individualism." So you'll frequently see protagonists who come from strong communities full of responsible individuals, people who make things with their hands and support their

neighbors. Antagonists are usually excessive consumers or cogs in the government machine, who find human life to be comfortably disposable.

Content warning

Action violence, especially when Frank goes Full Metal Awesome against the dark state operatives. Some language, but nothing in excess of the S-bomb. No sensuality.

Who is it for?

Fans of sci-fi and military fiction, with bits of medical fic mixed in. If you've got any familiarity or love for the Amish and their tight-knit communities, you'll find a kindred spirit in Michael Bunker's characters.

Why read it?

It points to True North on my literary compass: it's just plain fun. In addition to that it reinforces why strong family-based communities are preferable to the immoral might of entrenched government alphabet agencies. Of the handful of Bunker books I've read, this is the one I'd plug to anyone regardless of their tastes.

## City of Sensors by A.M. Todd

Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://SFeditor.ca>

If you are at all into film noir or hard-boiled detectives, then *City of Sensors* may be for you. The setting may be near-future speculative fiction, but the tone is entirely that of classic B-movie angst.

The story follows Detective Frank Southwood, a data cop whose partner has been murdered while investigating a money laundering scheme. Frank is assigned his dead partner's caseload but ordered to stay away from the investigation into her murder. Frank, having no faith in the abilities of the homicide squad and knowing in his gut both cases must be linked, pursues both with a relentless disregard for protocol.

If that sounds like a movie that might have starred Humphrey Bogart you are not wrong, but our protagonist's self-rationalizing narration reminded me most strongly of *Detour*, where each bad decision leads to . . . even worse decisions. By chapter 5, the stress has made Frank's OCD worse, his loneliness collides with various femme fatales, and his gambling addiction and compulsive spending have left him broke and vulnerable at the very moment he intends to take on some of the city's most powerful figures. Bottomline: Frank is an unreliable narrator and kind of an ass, but you can't look away from this story of the rogue cop going undercover.

Frank moves through settings that alternate between glitzy casinos and seedy dinners—a gritty, dark world that oozes corruption and menace. These are the contrasting neighbourhoods of the super-rich and the criminal-poor that exist in any large urban center, but which we know only second-hand because neither are neighbourhoods in which we would feel safe.

The speculative world-building focuses on the implications of cybercurrency and data mining trends extrapolated to their logical conclusions. None of it is heavy-handed or didactic; instead competing

views and possibilities are woven through the story action.

Like the best film noir, there are little tidbits of memorable dialog, action, description that elevate the book above mere storytelling. This is an oddly insightful novel about flawed people making their way as best they can through crappy alternatives in a fundamentally distorted society. Yes, the author presents a critique of the surveillance society and too-late-stage capitalism—an updated take on 1984—but with a better understanding, perhaps, of individual psychology. Where Orwell understood how the average citizen is manipulated and controlled, Todd understands the reality that there are always going to be a least some individuals so screwed up that they inevitably spin out of one's control.

This is Todd's first novel, hot off the press, and the best novel I've read so far this year.

The City of Sensors is published by Now or Never Publishing

## Daggerspell by Katharine Kerr Reviewed by Sam Lubell

At first glance Katharine Kerr's *Daggerspell*, the first of her Deverry books, seems a typical fantasy. There is a sorcerer under a curse (well, sort of), elves (Tolkien style, not little folk), dwarfs, and sprites called wildfolk. There is also a mercenary band of silver daggers. The main character is a female warrior. However, in this case, first appearances are deceiving. The book is made original and interesting through two devices. The first is the idea of reincarnation. In his youth, wizard (actually he is called a dweomarmaster), Nevyn, makes a wrong decision and harms the lives of those around him. He swears an oath that he will never rest until they are repaid, however long it takes. 400 years later he is still at it. His friends and foes keep on being reborn, into different identities with no memories of their other selves. And Nevyn seeks the reincarnation of the woman he was to marry, to train her in the magic of the dweomar. Much of the fun of the series is in recognizing the older characters in their new guises (there's a chart in the back if this becomes too confusing.) And the author jumps from one time period to the other throughout the book, in fact throughout the entire series. Also, the "lass with a sword" is common in fantasy today, but was still unusual when this book first appeared in 1986.

The main plot of *Daggerspell* is anything but straightforwardly predictable except in one respect. In this land of clans and warleaders, a rebellion threatens to disrupt the balance of power. And since the gwerbret (sort of an underking) hates his brother who will inherit these lands where their mother dies, he allows the rebellion to proceed in the hopes his brother Rhodry will be killed. However the rebellion is being assisted by a dweomarmaster who has pronounced a prophecy that no man will strike the blow that will kill the leader (which leads to the predictable solution.) Fortunately, Rhodry has the assistance of the best living swordsman, the silver dagger named Cullynn, but also Cullynn's daughter Jill who not only is a good fighter in her own right, but also the reincarnated soul that Nevyn must train to the dweomar if he is to fulfill his vows and die. Jill is actually the book's other main character as the stress of the war begins to develop Jill's own abilities as both warrior and magic-user. And there are several other twists I haven't mentioned. And, best of all, the ending, while happy, is not the happy ending most readers would have predicted.

The other crucial difference is in the background. This is not a pretty, cleaned-up generic middle ages. The author shows the grimy details, the dirt and sweat that is the dirty underside of more conventional fantasy



"It was odd, Cullyn always thought, that while bards sang of warriors slicing each other into shreds, you generally killed a man by beating him to death with your sword." The silver daggers, the mercenary soldiers for hire whose are a running presence in the book are not presented as glamorous heroes, but as, disgraced men. fighting for coin instead of for honor. And early in the book, when two noble lords fight over the right to graze their pigs in the same woods, the honor is revealed for the petty thing it is:

"Da, I don't understand," Jill broke in. "You mean someone was killed over pig food?" "It's the honor of the thing!" Braedd slammed his tankard on the table so hard that the ale jumped out and spilled. "Never will I let a man take what's rightfully mine. The honor of my warband calls out for vengeance! We'll fight to the last man." "Pity we can't arm the swine," Cullyn said. "Everyone will fight for their own food."

This level of detail and sense of irony, turns what could have been conventional fantasy into something more. The stark realism, only makes the magic stand out more even though the dweomar, the magic, is also low key. Nevyn can scry (see people who are far away), cast illusions, create fire, and throw sparks and a few other tricks. Those trained by the elves can change into giant birds. But that's about that magic can do. Still, in this gritty realistic seeming world, even this small amount of magic can turn the balance.

"For a long time they sat in silence, the noble-born as cowed as their men. Rhodry wondered why none of them --and he included himself in this--were comforted by the knowledge that they had dweomar on their side. Finally he realized that they all felt insignificant, mere playing stones on a game board of the dweomar's choosing. For weeks Rhodry had thought of himself as the focus of the rebellion and his death as its goal. Now he'd become only a pebble, set down as one small move in a war between Aderyn and Loddlaen."

The believable background, combined with the complex plot and use of multiple time periods to add depth to the characters, produces a rich, complex novel that is like a series in a single volume. All the characters seem to ring true; the reincarnations are just similar enough so the reader can tell they are the same even while differing in temperament and intelligence.

Daggerspell rises above its roots in the typical fantasy quest/adventure novel. Fans of Mercedes Lackey who want to try something deeper and more complex will find this series a perfect entry point to more complex fantasy novels. This is the start of a long series, that unfortunately moves slower and slower as the series progresses. Still, the first four books in the series comprise a complete story and is very much worth reading. I do recommend getting the revised edition of Daggerspell and its sequel Darkspell rather than the original DelRey version.

## Death Cult by Declan Finn Review by Michael Gallagher <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

The second installment of the Saint Tommy, NYPD series, Death Cult continues the story of NYPD detective Thomas Nolan and his fight against the forces of evil.

The events of the first book have pulled back the curtain on the scope of his enemy's plot, and it's not just one murderous servant of darkness he has to worry about this time.

## The story

If you haven't read the first book in the series, *Hell Spawn*, I highly suggest you do so, or at least catch up on my review from last month. At the end of that book, Nolan and his allies (chiefly his partner Alex Packard and Dominican priest psychologist Father Freeman) had managed to break up a prison riot at Riker's that was being stirred up by the demon inhabiting the body of Richard Curran. The serial murderer and willing servant of the Dark Lord met his end courtesy of a rebar acupuncture; his employment by the Women's Health Corps meant everyone from the District Attorney's office to the press had them in their sights.

The WHC, feeling that Nolan has been a thorn in their proverbial side long enough, decides to take matters into their own hands, and goes about attempting to end Nolan's life at every possible chance they get. It begins with a middle of the night home invasion acted out by gunmen who don't scream when shot, continues with an entire morgues' worth of corpses rising up and attacking him, an attempted poisoning, and even the kidnapping of his son hoping to lure him into the lion's den: the suburb-dwelling cult of Moloch at the center of it all.

## The characters

Many of the core characters that were in the first book return, such as the aforementioned trio of Tommy, his partner Alex and Father Freeman, along with his wife Mariel and son Jeremy. I wrote more about them in my *Hell Spawn* review, so I won't repeat it here.

A few minor characters from the first book and a new character get more page time in this book, which include:

Daniel Davis DeLeo (Don't call him '3D'), is a local gang leader who conducts his business like a professional. His crew dresses sharp and likes to keep a low profile, eschewing the collateral damage of more thuggish outfits. He's also a father who has a grudging respect for Tommy and isn't crazy about the presence of abortion mills that operate as little more than money laundering operations in his turf. He's ready with the heavy artillery when Tommy needs backup and likes to surprise his opponents with a friendly grenade or two to liven things up.

Joanna LaObliger, the president of the Women's Health Corps returns, and plays the part of puppet master. No longer content to allow her powerful political connections to aid her, she enlists the help of a powerful voodoo practitioner in her mission to destroy Nolan. In the previous book, she was shown to be ruthless in her lust for wealth and status within her organization. This book further reveals that she's thrown herself fully and willfully in to worshipping the demon Moloch, who she believes is the god of money. She lives in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in New York, one where people very much value their privacy. Especially when it comes to those strange trucks that come and go at her house every week.

The shadowy and menacing Bokor Baracus, LaObliger's previously mentioned lieutenant, is without question the guilty pleasure of the book when it comes to characters. This fashionably dressed Haitian witch wields black magic to try to remove Nolan from the cult's plans. He's got an easy, pleasant smile and butter-smooth, musical voice, with an easy laugh and personality that would be charismatic if he weren't so scary. Able to control zombies, harness the strength of passed souls, and seemingly melt between shadows, he makes for a frustratingly taunting opponent for our hero detective, almost seeming to hold back just to prolong the sport.

The world

The action takes place in New York City again, but more in the suburban nooks than in urban settings. There aren't any horror show abattoirs like the Riker's riot of the first book, preferring to focus more on the horrors that lurk behind eight-foot privacy fences.

The politics

Right, so remember all that stuff I said last time?

“. . . a major turning point in the plot centers around abortion both as act and industry. Finn himself is a practicing Catholic and makes no bones about this. One should not be surprised to discover then, that the procedure the Church refers to as “an act of intrinsic evil that cannot be allowed under any circumstances,” isn't portrayed in a positive light. You've been warned.”

Now take that and turn it up to twenty. If anyone out there harboring pro-choice sensibilities was able to make it through Hell Spawn and still enjoy it, I suggest you really gird your loins here. The mask is completely ripped off of LaObliger, as she is rendered completely irredeemable, even going so far as to hurl a racial slur at one point. During the course of their investigation, Packard and Nolan visit abortion clinics so filthy and flagrantly in violation of code Nolan is forced to stop at a church between each visit to reorient himself. Women get coerced into having abortions by gang members, abortionists get caught ready to outright murder already-birthing and fully viable newborns, and corrupt staff stonewall and cover for it all.

All of it of course, is being done with the express support and full-throated admiration of City Hall. To my shock, this time Gracie Manor is occupied by some ungodly breed of political animal that is a blend of small-L libertarian and capital-bold-underlined-P progressive. Mayor Hoynes is an opportunistic empty suit who blathers platitudes while resisting any appeals to common sense or duty to the citizenry, which is actually a pretty good representation of any example of mayoral governance from the past twenty years.

Content warning

While the book is not nearly as bloody as its predecessor, as mentioned above, there is plenty of moral ugliness to be found. The tragic thing is, one can hardly accuse Finn of being sensational, as investigations such as the infamous Kermit Gosnell trial and others sadly reveal that his depictions, especially in New York City, are all too often “ripped from the headlines”. Also, watch out for an eyebrow-raising n-bomb, courtesy of our lily-white limousine liberal antagonist. You're never quite ready for it, but . . . it's there.

Who is it for?

Hell Spawn made me a bona fide Tommy Nolan fan, and this book didn't disappoint as a sequel. The stakes were higher, and the introduction of Bokor Baracus made for a great (at times, even sympathetic) nemesis for Nolan to be stacked up against. It's got a much more of an action movie feel to it, and less of the outright horror tone of the first one, and I breezed through it in two nights.

Why read it?

This thing is an easy-to-get-through, wild ride. It feels like a street fight against good and evil, and the

gloves are off. Plenty of gunfire, zombie hordes and outstanding character development ensure that I'm going to be following this up with book three: Infernal Affairs.

## Doctor Inferno by Pam Uphoff Review by Pat Patterson

I would have gotten this book, just because it's written by one of the Masters of Prolificity, Pam Uphoff. Once you start reading her work, you will never finish (at least, not as long as you are trying to do other things with your life); but what a great way to go!

However, there was another reason for picking this volume, and that is that the person on the front cover looks A LOT like me, with some few differences; my hairline hasn't receded that far back, yet. I was delighted to find that this represents a super-villain, and more so to discover that he's about three hundred years older than I. So, I have a while to work on the hairline.

Alas, William N. Furnace (Dr. Inferno) and I appear to have at least one other thing in common: we forget things. He forgets what senior activities he has signed up for; I forget to review books I've gotten. This particular item was picked up on March 11; today is May 29.

Sorry, Pam.

He's long since retired and been forgotten by the world. That's what permits him to live undisturbed in a senior facility, close enough to the bright lights of Las Vegas to permit monthly field trips. Undisturbed, despite the fact that one of his fellow residents is a former agent who had pursued him during his days of active mischief. Time has healed those wounds, however, and now they have a bond formed by the fact that they are both inactive, due to being more than three centuries old. They expect that even their advanced, and manipulated, DNA will give out eventually, though, as it has already shown signs of doing.

But don't touch that dial! A comeback awaits!

A combination of irascibility, luck, and general refusal to accept fate without fighting back puts our aged ex-villain back into action. Backed with resources accumulated by his long-active AI, Dr Inferno emerges, just in time to threaten/save the world, one more time.

Uphoff's ability to make you feel the characters she produces is enough to cause one to be just a bit suspicious. Does she actually KNOW a near-senescent super-villain? Is that why she is able to make this character come to life so thoroughly?

Alas. I fear that it's merely a case of her being able to write characters that we want to be, ourselves. Is there anyone who WOULDN'T like to rise above the wheelchair and adult diapers, and shake the world to its foundations again?

Maybe it's just because the cover image and I resemble each other, but I think not. I would have liked to read this when I was 12 years old. I was, of course, a confirmed FAN by that time. And, while the technology referenced in the story would have been far advanced for 1965, the true nature of the adventure lies in the determination of the characters to Get The Job Done. And, as long as she is writing about that, not private relationships with super-villains are necessary. I'm not ruling them out, though. She does, after all, live in Texas.

Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze by Kit Sun Cheah  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

A student with a martial arts hobby, Yamada Yuuki was finishing up a lesson with his class when the world abruptly turned inside out.

Brought to a strange dimension with other time-displaced humans, he and his class are thrust into a conflict for their very lives.

The demon that summoned them to fight for his amusement and sustenance has promised to send those who survive home – but only if they can fight through the dungeon at the heart of his world, where he himself waits to claim the brave soul who will eventually face him.

The story

New to the martial arts discipline of Kukishin-ryu, Yamada joined the class at his friend Hiroshi's insistence. Hiroshi has more natural aptitude and skill due to studying longer, but Yamada makes up for his lack in these areas with pure determination and stubbornness. This means his style is somewhat more reckless; although he wins his bout with Hiroshi at the beginning of the book, the class teacher has reason to critique Yamada for his performance.

Just as the lesson is winding down, however, both Yamada and Hiroshi hear a strange voice. Some of the other students do as well, and so does their teacher. Once class has been dismissed, reality turns inside out as the unfortunate people who heard the voice enter a realm of strange, disorienting shapes and twisting signs. Despite their best efforts, Yamada, Hiroshi, and the rest are dragged from modern Japan to another world entirely.

Once they awake in this strange location, they find they are not the only people present. Groups of men and women from East to West have been brought to this odd dimension as well, and in spite of the fact that they all speak different languages, they understand one another perfectly. Among the group is a Japanese girl wearing the attire of a miko or temple maiden. She catches Yamada's eye, but only for a moment.

The disparate abductees soon notice they all have something in common: they practice various martial arts – Eastern or Western – and they all have an interest in either the weapons or the arts of their respective culture's Medieval skills. After making that connection, they are approached by three men who fall to their knees and beg forgiveness for summoning them to this hell world. Immediately following this revelation, the demon that brought everyone here appears and thanks them “for being [his] food.”

The demon explains that their only way home is to defeat him in his dungeon. When one of the new abductees attempts to chase him off by invoking God's name, the demon demonstrates that he cannot be overcome so easily. Action as well as faith is needed to conquer this foe, something made clearer when the three men lead their new recruits to the village all the displaced humans in this realm call home.

After they have eaten, the leaders tell the newcomers to step forward to receive their skills. These paranormal abilities will help them to fight the demon and make life somewhat easier for those who live in

the village as well. Hiroshi is granted a new power none have ever seen before – kishi, or “knight.” Yamada, however, earns a different and unfavorable skill: kamikaze, or “divine wind.” Those with the kamikaze skill are brave to the point of foolhardiness, being filled with blind rage and beyond-human strength when they fight.

Unfortunately, none who gain the power of kamikaze live long. Yamada, in the minds of many, has not received a gift but a curse. The question for him may not be whether or not he can survive the dungeon. It might be whether or not he can survive his new power.

## The characters

Yamada is an everyman hero with mediocre talent thrust into a world that challenges him to survive. He is also given a power that is as much a handicap as it is a help, and a reader can feel his frustration with his limitations. Nevertheless, Yamada doesn't whine and moan about his situation. Whenever he is knocked down, he climbs to his feet and resolves to do better next time. Sheer determination can carry a man further than prowess on occasion, and what he lacks in finesse, Yamada more than makes up for with his resolve.

Hiroshi balances Yamada. Calmer, talented, and generally easy-going, he is also a practicing Christian. This is in contrast to Yamada, who does not practice Shintoism much until it becomes necessary in the war with the demon. For Hiroshi, facing the demon just makes his faith shine brighter – and it means he aids his kamikaze friend in battle as well as in training.

Sensei, the teacher of the class, is wise without playing to either Western or Eastern stereotypes. Though strict, firm, and determined he has a lighter side that manifests in his paternal interest in his students. In spite of his critiques, he cares about Yamada and wants him to succeed. He criticizes not because the lad is “doing it the wrong way” but because he wants him to learn and improve.

The other side characters in the novel, particularly the miko, are fleshed out and vibrant. Since most of the story revolves around fighting, we don't see the non-combatants often, but they do make appearances. Everyone has a purpose in the narrative; even if they are not present at all times, a reader will not forget them easily.

## The world

Picture an isekai – Japanese portal fantasy, usually to a video game world – crossed with an American Role-Playing game, with a dash of anime and Dungeons and Dragons thrown in. Then remove the stats and gaming jargon that weighs the former down, add some strong spiritual depth, and voila! You have *Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze*.

## The politics

The politics are: “Conquer the dungeon and defeat the demon.” There are no other policies to speak of, because they have no bearing on where the characters are or the battle they are fighting.

## Content warning

Since the cast is fighting a demon and his monsters in his dungeon, the deaths (and there are several) get messy. The monsters are hideous, but none of this is dwelt upon. *Kamikaze* is easily one of the most PG-13 friendly novels on the market today.

Who is it for?

Fans of anime will love this book, as will martial artists or those with an interest in the art of personal combat. Historians will enjoy it for the detail Mr. Cheah adds to his training scenes and the battles, as the warriors all use Medieval armor and weaponry. Romance readers will love Yamada learning to court a girl while horror enthusiasts will be fascinated by the various monsters the characters must overcome. Video gamers, LitRPG readers, and GameLit fans who have friends they wish to introduce to the latter two genres will find this invaluable as a book to give their companions after they have devoured it themselves.

Why read it?

It's a good book that pits the heroes against overwhelming odds and the despair that naturally entails. The characters are challenged to build up their faith at the same time they must fight for their lives. A rollicking adventure novel, *Dungeon Samurai Vol. 1: Kamikaze* has something for everyone. Why not buy it?

## The Engines of God by Jack McDevitt Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

I forget when and where I picked up this paperback, perhaps from a nearby Little Library in the neighborhood because it has a used book store price sticker on the back cover. The front cover was detaching slightly, so I repaired it using some packing tape. (DIY bookbinding for the win!) I imagine I picked it up because of the cover lines comparing it to *Rendezvous with Rama* and mentioning “artifacts of alien intelligence,” and the cover art depicting a relatively large sculpture of alien craftsmanship. (I would have preferred not having that image of one of the alien races so McDevitt’s writing was the only guide I had to imagine.) Arthur C. Clarke’s *Rendezvous with Rama* and its sequels written with Gentry Lee rank among my favorite books of all time, and I was intrigued by the potential of this novel. I was not disappointed.

The book, the first in McDevitt’s eight-book *The Academy* series, features a heroic pilot named Priscilla Hutchins, “Hutch,” as she helps a number of scientists explore and examine several alien archaeological digs on planets toward the Sagittarius Arm and galactic center, including Beta Pacifica III, Nok, Pinnacle, and Quraqua. Set at the turn of the 23rd century, life on Earth is increasingly challenging, and corporations are identifying and exploring other planets to terraform and populate with earthlings. Discovering not just alien sculptures and monuments, archaeologists also discover a temple, which contains artwork connecting the remains of two alien societies perhaps 20,000 years old—and what might be a key to their language and iconography.

Over the course of the book, Hutch and the scientists from the Academy learn more about the alien races and cultures—finding an enormous orbital satellite dish and strangely antique abandoned space station—and identify what might have caused the decline of the societies. The book ends with the suggestion that that catastrophe might eventually reach Earth, setting up the other books in the series intriguingly.

It’s a wonderful read. Hutch is a compelling heroine, and there are plenty of smart, heartfelt people trying to solve big problems using science and technology. The romantic interludes and suggested pairings are compelling. The light comedy and pranks are humorous. The corporate, political, and economic un-

derpinnings of the setting are detailed. And the alien archaeology and artifact aspects—while not directly parallel to Rama (this book's scope and aperture is slightly larger given that the aliens are somewhat humanoid)—are excellent and portrayed at scale.

Highly recommended. If the subsequent volumes are as good as this novel, an unexpected and enjoyable find, The Academy is a series and an organization worth following.

## Fire Eyes Awakened by RJ Batla Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Okay, let's write a story. We'll start out with a little steampunk. Then we'll toss in just a bit of a classic Science Fiction feel. Then, just for shits and giggles, we'll throw in a HUGE dose of comic book style superhero action. And of course, we're going to need a super villain. And maybe a conflict for our hero. Oh, and we can't forget a sexy lady or two. We could do all of that. It sounds like a good story. Or, since I'm feeling lazy, maybe I'll just let R.J. Batla do it for us. He did a good job with it too. Seriously. Fire Eyes Awakened is a romping good time.

I'll get to our main character in a minute, but first let me say that I can't believe how much Batla managed to get into this book. I mean, not only does he have everything I mentioned above, but the themes in Fire Eyes Awakened are amazeballs. There's morality. There's a Christian theme. You've got good versus evil. You've got selflessness. You see the value of thrift and hard work. You get a look at the value of charity. There is really a lot here and not a single bit of it is preached at the audience. Batla just writes it in and away you go.

Our main character, our hero, is one Jayton Baird, also known as Jay. This is a guy who worked and saved money his entire life to become Awakened and gain superpowers. You'd think a guy like that would be out for power, but he basically just wants a good paying job. He's hoping that through thrift and hard work he can overcome his poor upbringing and earn a decent living by putting his life on the line to defend the East Side (more about this in a minute) from the depredations of the evil monsters of the West Side. He's basically a really good guy who just wants what's best for himself and his parents and is willing to serve to do it. I like him.

I don't want to give too much away, but you can't get a feel for this book without knowing that he gains huge powers in like the first ten pages of the story. A lot of the book centers around Jay learning to use his powers. He also gains one power that makes him a threat to all around him. He spends the majority of the book under suspicion. All he wants to do is his duty. This kid is amazing.

The world of Fire Eyes Awakened is a dangerous place. On one side we have humanity and its allies. Superpowers are common among the non-human populace but are rare and expensive to acquire for humans. The good guys live on the East Side of the Break, a range of mountains with a huge wall across them. On the East Side are the monsters and they're pissed. They've been locked out. Granted, it's because their ancestors were tearing things up and hurting people, but they're convinced that they've been done dirty and the other side has it better. There is a war coming.

Our antagonist is named Malstrak. He has the same power that causes Jay to come under suspicion — and he embraces it. Malstrak commands the armies of the West Side and he's on his way to cause havoc, if he can make it. He has been cast out from the East Side and is not at all happy about it. At some



point, he's going to find a way to get revenge. He's got all the creatures of the West Side happy to help him do it. I seriously want to slap this guy. He's coming though.

There are several subplots and challenges contained within the pages of *Fire Eyes Awakened*. I don't do spoilers and I'm not going to try to go over them all here. The main focus though is on Jay and his training. The vast majority of the book is dedicated to his character arc. We get a really good feel for how Jay learns what his powers are and how to use them. We see Jay fight to control his dark side. We see Jay dealing with normal emotions as well. Batla did a really good job constructing this character and his travails.

That's not to say that the other characters are not well developed as well. Jay's friends and enemies are well thought out and live in the pages. We really do get a good idea of what makes the rest of the cast tick. They all go through their own arcs and we get a feel for what the good guys actually are: A family. Jay is a member of the Senturian Corps, a group that combines the responsibilities of army, law enforcement, fire department and often EMT and doctors all rolled into one group. They're responsible for just about everything regarding the safety of their people. They kind of have a military feel to them and the kind of don't. It's a weird middle ground, but it makes sense in context. Batla did a great job making the Senturian Corps his own instead of creating just another military SF organization.

My only complaint about *Fire Eyes Awakened* is that it is too short. I really wanted this book to give me an ending to a particular storyline, but it kind of ends right at the good part. I really shouldn't panic. I already have a copy of *Tempus*, the sequel so it's not like I'll never know what happens, but still, you can feel the lack at the end of this one. It's like ending *Star Wars Episode Four* just when the Rebel fleet finds the Death Star. I mean, it's like ahhhhhH!!!!!!!! I want more! I'm SO TOTALLY gonna tell my MOM!!!!

Then again, I'm not totally certain that it's as bad as I'm making it out to be. At the end of the day, if the audience wants more, then the author has done his job. I definitely can't wait to see what happens next. Except that I'm going to, because I never review the same author twice in a row. Stay tuned though. I'll get there soon.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Train Whistles

## Fireborne by Rosaria Munda Review by Igor Koyfman

This book is heartrending, and it's so beautiful I keep rereading it. It's family and friendship vs. justice and love. The characters' triumphs make you soar, but their unsolvable moral dilemmas tear you apart. One of the problems with birthright aristocracy is that when people get sick of it and want to change the regime, they have to kill every last one of the ruling class. Not simply because of personal hatred, but because of their symbolic power. Any surviving aristocrat will become a center for a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, regardless of what they themselves want..

*Fireborne* starts with exactly such a revolution, and the rebels are methodically wiping out every last member of the ruling families—down to very small children. The revolutionary leader is pragmatic, but many people are consumed by hatred, and it's really ugly. One little boy gets spared and ends up in an orphanage, where he meets a girl whose family his father had burned alive with the fire of his dragon because of their anti-government sentiments.

Yes, there are dragons. That's what gave the ruling families their power before the revolution came. A single fire-breathing dragon can completely destroy a small town, and a whole fleet of them can control an entire country.

The revolution won. The new regime is more equitable, yet they still need dragons to defend against external enemies. They hope to recruit commoner children who'll be loyal to the people, and the boy and the girl are among that number. Ten years later the dragon corps is ready to graduate and serve the regime, which is still finding its footing. Revolution is easy; governing is hard.

Fireborne is really intense. It has many very deep, well fleshed-out characters that struggle with really serious issues. The book is psychological and emotional and full of action. There is some tastefully done romance. There are some shocking plot twists and character surprises. This is the first in a trilogy but could be read as a standalone book.

## For the Wolf (The Wilderwood) by Hannah Whitten Reviewed by Sam Lubell

Anyone seeing the cover of For the Wolf with its striking image of a red cloak would assume the book is a retelling of Little Red Riding Hood. But aside from the cloak and a character named Wolf, I do not see any connection. Whitten's mythology seems original to her.

In the Kingdom of Valleyda, the Queen's First Daughter inherits the throne while the Second Daughter is a sacrifice to the Wolf of the Wilderwood, who everyone in Valleyda believes holds the Kings captive. Redarys, the second daughter, is fated to go to the Wolf even though her older sister Neve begs her to run away. Redarys refuses because she is afraid of the magic that links her to Wildwood and does not want to risk harming anyone.

Once she enters the Wildwood, she discovers much of what she always was told is wrong. The Wolf, the son of the original, actually protects everyone from the hostile magic of the Wilderwood. Even though Wilderwood is growing stronger and Wolf's ability to quiet it has weakened, he refuses Red's help for much of the book. Meanwhile, Neve, in her desperate effort to enable Red to return to the kingdom, teams up with a renegade priestess. But their efforts actually destroy one of the few things keeping the Wilderwood under control, placing Red at greater risk.

The idea of evil vegetation is rare in fantasy since it means the main villain does not have a face or characterization (although Wilderwood sometimes does create a surrogate that can talk). There are some similarities with Naomi Novik's Uprooted, which does the idea of a vegetative villain much better.

Ironically, the romantic element is the least convincing aspect of the book. Wolf seems perpetually grouchy and keeps trying to keep Red out of his efforts to fight the Wildwood. So the idea the two would fall in love seems unconvincing and exists more for plot purposes than emerging out of characterization. Red's other major relationship, that with her sister, Neve, rings more true. It is interesting how their connection so strong at the beginning of the book turns into a major problem as Neve's obsession with regaining her sister blinds her to a major threat to her kingdom.

For the Wolf is a first novel. It is not a bad book but strikes me as an average, at best, romantic fantasy. It shows some promise for the author, but much of the book is rather slow going with repetitive attacks by Wilderwood. I suggest readers read who like the idea of fighting an evil forest ead Uprooted instead.

## Going Ballistic by Dorothy Grant Review by Pat Patterson

There are old pilots, and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots.

Michelle Lauden is a hard-core pilot. She's not yet old, but if she ever WAS bold, she's gotten it out of her system. Good enough is NOT for her; she seeks perfection, in every aspect, every time. What sets her apart from some other pilots is that she also seeks perfection in her courtesy and respect for her flight crew, the mechanics, and even the ramp rats who load cargo. Perhaps her respect doesn't extend to the dispatchers, but she DOES honor the schedule, even when it's radically changed at the last second.

And THAT is the state in which we find her at the beginning of the book. She has just brought in a ballistic flight (one of a very small number of pilots with that rating) and is expecting some down-time; instead, she discovers that she has a quick turn-around flight, that comes too close to putting her over the maximum time she is permitted to fly.

A small note here: beside rules like this (and others) there are some particular aviation terms that some readers might not know. It will NOT harm your comprehension of the story; it WILL be a nice extra for those with some prior knowledge.

Since she IS a hard-core pilot, Michelle adapts, and, with the help of some unexpected but welcome Organized-Muscle-With-Brains, she proceeds to get the bird in the air...

...only to have politics interfere. She is told at first that there are terrorists in the area, but eventually discovers that some smaller governments are attempting to become independent of the ponderous Federation.

I will NOT write spoilers! Therefore, EVEN THOUGH the essential action sequences occur delightfully early in the story, I turn from narrative to themes.

Theme 1: Michelle is a female in a testosterone-laden environment. She can't ignore it; part of her ability to form and operate a crew is the way she deals with hazing, particularly of newbies. It's a nasty reality, and fragile people don't survive.

Theme 2: Michelle is a civilian pilot, in a situation that QUICKLY becomes a military operation. Because she has a skill the military MUST HAVE, she is not given the option of sitting on the sidelines. However, she is also not in the chain of command.

Theme 3: The massive Federation is at war with the smaller Empire. Michelle is not truly affiliated with either but has a Federated background. However, she can't remain unaffiliated.

Theme 4: TECHNOLOGY!!!!!! Humanity has expanded out to thousands of planets, using jump gates to get there, but that's really not a story factor. More applicable to the story is the tech Michelle has available to fly the plane; it's inserted into her body, and allows her to plug into systems, make changes, get data; all sorts of things. She has also received some upgrades to allow her to respond more quickly to emergencies. Those include a system diagnostic/communications port on her wrist, covered with synthetic skin. There are some advanced weapons mentioned, but a very interesting segment is devoted to Michelle being trained to use what seems to be a conventional projectile pistol.

THEME 5: Redliners. I'm using the term from the David Drake book but here there are two categories of burn-out. There are some former combat troops, now in a semi-civilian capacity, who appear to have misplaced the ability to play well with others. More common are the limits reached by the characters. Despite advanced medical tech, or because of it, each individual has a limit to what they can accomplish before they crash.

THEME 6: This is the central theme, worth every bit of attention given to it; it is NOT ham-handed, though. It's about human relationships; how you treat others MATTERS. Those most deeply affected by burnout seem to have fallen back on one treatment for everyone, and it's usually abusive. That works well with some people but damages the effectiveness of others.

Because the early action is critical to the story development, I backed away from it in this review. Action lovers have NOTHING to fear; from exploding spaceships to punches in the nose, there is plenty going on. And, while I'm not saying that someone points a loaded gun at their boss, someone points a loaded gun at their boss.

## Gun Runner by Larry Correia and John D. Brow Review by Ginger Man <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Gun Runner is my first exposure to the work of Larry Correia and Larry Brown. After reading it, I have two thoughts.

One, this won't be the last of his work that I read.

Two, why the hell did I wait so long?

The story

Captain Halloway may be a gun smuggler, but he's the good kind. No, really. He spends most of his time running guns to the underdogs of the galaxy, the people that the mega governments and corporations have decided shouldn't have weapons to defend themselves. One collection of underdogs was the freedom fighters of the planet Gloss. Struggling to throw off the abusive government, they had been fighting a losing battle until the Captain and the crew of the Tar Heel dropped off some mechs. Even then, it was a tough fight until Jackson Rook climbed into one.

Mechs are dangerous weapons when used properly but their full potential can only be unlocked by pilots who are capable of accepting certain cybernetic implants. Jackson Rook, though only a teen at the time, is one of the few who can accept them. Already a gifted pilot in manual mode, with the implants he became a virtual god of war.

Unfortunately, the enemy had an ace up their sleeve that would have consigned Jack to a prolonged and agonizing death had Halloway not rescued him.

Now, Jackson is part of the Tar Heel crew, helping to secure a Citadel, a top-of-the-line mech and the last item in an order that will let Halloway retire and Jack get his own ship. That order is going to the planet Swindle, a world full of nightmare creatures that makes the worst of Australia look like a petting zoo on Valium. It also happens to be the source of the fuel that makes interstellar travel possible, meaning that regardless of the dangers, people make regular excursions to the surface to mine the stuff.

However, while finalizing the deal with Warlord – one of the two men with the most direct control over Swindle – Jack and other members of the crew come across some things that make them doubt they've been supplying the good guys after all. Unable to let it rest, Jack winds up dragging the crew of the Tar Heel into the fight of their lives.

## The characters

The crew of the Tar Heel is made up of a merry band of misfits collected from all over the galaxy. The few things they have in common are troubled pasts, a high degree of skill in their field, and the trust of Captain Halloway.

Halloway is definitely a rogue with a heart of gold, fiercely loyal to his ship and his crew, with a code that drives him to help the galaxy's Davids fight their Goliaths. He is apparently willing to not look too close though and may be too willing to trust their broker Shade when it comes to who they should work with.

Shade herself is a mysterious figure. She seemingly is on an equal or even superior footing with Halloway in business matters and also has the ability to call on unknown allies to get the crew out of tight situations. She also is clearly hiding something as discovered by Jane.

Jane is the Tar Heel's spectre, a computer genius who builds adorable murder robots in her spare time. Possibly the best tech expert in the galaxy, she still has to work for it sometimes, such as when tracking down Shade's contacts or that time she saved Jack from being enslaved by the people he was trying to fight.

Jackson Rook, despite being a child soldier, getting turned on his own people and living his subsequent life as a smuggler and thief is an idealist. In order avoid his fate on Gloss, he's sworn to never do a full uplink to a mech again. He also can't stand the thought that he and the crew have been supplying a brutal dictator, someone who almost makes his former enemies seem tame.

That brutal dictator is of course Warlord. Yes, just Warlord. Given the name, it probably isn't too surprising. He is brilliant, charismatic, determined, and downright sadistic, willing to go to any lengths to maintain and expand his control over Swindle.

## The world

The world of Gun Runner is well-grounded in the realm of the possible. Other than the gates that facilitate interstellar travel, there isn't any magical technology. Otherwise, artificial gravity is provided by rotating a taurus, mechs are not useful in most situations unless piloted by someone like Jackson, various corporations and governments vie for dominance. In short, the politics are not so different from this world.

## The politics

Captain Halloway and crew are very explicitly the type who don't much like rules. In fact, if doing so will poke one of the major powers in the eye, he will be more than happy to bring weapons to nearly anyone. Gun Runner isn't an unthinking endorsement of that outlook either, as the whole story is about what can happen if you get sloppy and don't take proper care of your corner of the world.

Content warning

There are some scenes where children are brutally murdered. If you can handle that, you'll be just fine.

Who is it for?

Think of Gun Runner as Firefly with more purpose and without the space whore. If that sounds good to you, then this book will definitely appeal.

Why read it?

Correia and Brown deliver a gripping tale that will keep you on the edge of your seat, while also taking the necessary time to develop his characters and introduce them in ways that make them seem very grounded and real.

## Home for the Howlidays, edited by M.L.D. Curelas

### Review by Robert Runté

<http://www.EssentialEdits.ca>

The marketing category, “Holiday Collection”, conjures up heart-warming stories about families getting together for Christmas dinner, Hallmark romcoms featuring mistletoe, and perhaps some stories about puppies. Well, okay, this holiday collection actually has all of that. But you might not have been expecting coyotes, werewolves, hellhounds, or a variety of non-Christian winter solstice celebrations. On the other hand, A Christmas Carol is undeniably a ghost story, A Wonderful Life is about suicide and angels, and Gremlins is apparently as much a Christmas movie as Die Hard, so who is to say Christmas specials shouldn't include the occasional werewolf?

Take, for example, the opening story, “A Furtastic Gathering” by Angèle Gougeon. It's a charming depiction of every family's Christmas dinner: kids under foot, cousins crowding round, and meeting the daughter's boyfriend for the first time. That the family happens to be werewolves, and the new boyfriend a vampire, merely emphasises the universality of the experience.

Krista Ball's “The Twelve Days of Christmas” provides the romcom. A young woman tries a dating app to meet someone for the holidays, with predictable but entertaining results. This is pretty much everyone's awful dating experience, with “werewolf” standing in for whatever body image issue you once feared disqualified you from finding that special someone.

There were several stories about alternative holidays, of which my favourites were J.Y.T. Kennedy's “Apple Night” and Sarah Hersma's “Yule Moon,” both lovely examples of communities striving for peace on Earth.

My two very favorite stories of the collection both stood out for their perfect depiction of rural life. “Corn Dogs,” by the writing duo of Sarah L Johnson and Robert Bose evoked such a strong sense of place that the slide from the ordinary into ancient Slavic curses became almost imperceptible. Pitting werewolves against a John Deere combine harvester in a Taber corn field may be the definitive prairie horror story. Similarly, Rebecca Brae's “The Teeth Have It” is a completely accurate description of driving alone in a blizzard and therefore a completely logical encounter with a coyote.

Not everything in the collection works quite as well as the above. A few took longer to get to the point

than I thought necessary. If you have a clever horror concept, then a short, sharp jab is usually what's needed. Louis B. Rosenberg's flash piece, "The Curse of Christmas Present", is an excellent example of matching length to concept, an engagingly short delivery to a delightful punchline. In contrast, there were two or three stories that could have used a bit more editing to tighten the pacing and raise the tension.

And while I really enjoyed Lizz Donnelly's "Bark! The Harold Angels Sing", others may find the partly ambiguous ending annoying. (I am prepared to argue that endings that leave at least part of the story unresolved are a particularly Canadian thing, but not everyone is into Canlit.)

Overall, I recommend the collection, the good far outweighing the few stories that were kind of 'meh'. No anthology is ever a perfect match for all readers, and "Corn Dogs" alone is worth the price of admission. If you're looking for a slightly unusual Christmas gift, you could do worse than introduce friends and family to a refreshingly different take on the season.

This review previously appeared in the Ottawa Review of Books.

## In the Palace of Shadow and Joy by D.J. Butler

### Review by Graham Bradley

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

An organized crime hit mixed with flagrant insurance fraud in a fantasy/distant-future setting, with a pair of buddy-cop protagonists leading the way.

#### The story

Indrajit is a gambler with a drinking problem, or maybe the other way around. Either way he's run out of luck with both hobbies and finds himself in a tight spot. Then a shady benefactor appears and covers his tab at the local bar, then hires him to carry out a protection contract on a local celebrity singer. Turns out that Indrajit isn't the only one with a contract on said singer, and now a lot of highly motivated factions are about to car-crash into each other, while Indrajit tries to figure out what the hell is actually going on.

#### The characters

Indrajit is our protagonist, and he's paired up with a straight shooter named Fix, who is his opposite in every way: literate, handsome, and competent. They're out to protect a singer named Ilsa Without Peer, who performs at the nearby opera house, the eponymous Palace of Shadow and Joy. They're our principal three characters. The antagonist list is...pretty long.

#### The world

Similar to Earth in the fundamental ways, but all of the humanoid species appear to be mutated or descended from animal species, such as fish or camels. The political power structures will feel familiar, if varied, and concepts like organized crime, insurance fraud, and waning artistic careers play a strong role in the story. It's a high fantasy world that feels familiar in its humanity.

The politics

No parallels to real-world politics. This book is more entrepreneurial than political, really focusing on two guys who are just trying to get reliable income so they can improve their lives, but they keep hitting speed bumps.

Content warning

None! Just fantasy action and some combat scenes, but no profanity or sensuality.

Who is it for?

Fans of high fantasy or epic fantasy who wonder what life is like for the blue-collar types in back alleys when monsters and magic are commonplace.

Why read it?

It's light entertainment in a genre that tends to stare at its own navel for 1000 pages. While there are a few Scooby-Doo-esque dialogue scenes where characters take stock of what happened and try to guess why, the progression of the story is smooth and quick enough to keep the reader engaged. Genre fiction used to be like this and it can be again with more titles in this vein.

## Isekai Skies by H. P. Holo Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Isekai genre is just a Japanese term for falling from one world into another. Be it Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland, or maybe even Peter Pan (if you're the Darling kids).

In HP Holo's Monster Punk Horizon novels, it's a common occurrence. Sky portals routinely drop all sorts of creatures from all manner of worlds. Isekai Skies are literal.

Someone new is about to drop in. And he's going to have a heck of a learning curve.

Kaito is at Wyvern Con in the 31st century. He's basically IT and an expert in holographic projections and special effects.

Then the floor disappears from under his feet, and he's thrown into the world of Skull Harbor, among the rest of the monster hunters.

Unfortunately for Kaito, it's only a month since the first novel. The monster they called the Screecher has limped off into the ocean, wounded but not defeated. Unfortunately, the Screecher adopts the characteristics of whatever the Screecher consumes, and it's just eaten something that produces asexually.

If they thought that it was a problem before, they now have to deal with the Screecher, and the new army it just spawned.

Basically, the Screecher is a kaiju version of the DC villain Doomsday, and it spawns.



Overall, the story worked so very well here. The first round was more carried by nothing but plot. But this one was more balanced in terms of story, character and world-building.

It even had a great opening line: “The suns were high, the air was sultry, and the sky had exploded again.”

There were multiple traps that Holo could have fallen into, but deftly avoided. One was Kaito constantly thinking “this is all a dream” until the last minute, a trope that would have had me throwing my tablet across the room. It could have very easily been done, given the rules laid out here, but Holo got it out of the way in short order.

### The characters

I must say that the characters are better established in this one than in book one. Usually, it would be because the author would reintroduce the characters through the new arrival, Kaito. Here, it’s not the case. The newcomer doesn’t drop in for a few chapters. Both Pix the analyst and Jaz the berserker are far better established in the first chapter than they were throughout the whole of book one. That was a surprise, because I thought book 1 was both fun and technically brilliant. Holo has surpassed herself here.

Even the character descriptions are better and more vivid, describing one older cat-like creature as

“a grizzled gray thing who looked like he’d popped out to get a jug of milk, but somehow ended up in a war and just decided to keep fighting because grocery runs were boring.”

Kaito is entertaining. He’s not stupid, despite having been dropped feet first into the deep end of the Isekai pool. But that’s okay, he spent time at the 30-building convention known as Wyvern Con in Atlanta. He might survive long enough to adapt.

### The world

Holo’s trick here was interesting, because two worlds had to be built here: the world of Skull Harbor, and Kaito’s future. While his technology is trashed by the sky portal, his knowledge is still intact, even if his nanites no longer connect him to the world wide web. But not to worry, the sky portals translate everyone’s language so they can all communicate.

Although, having been to DragonCon, I understand the line

“All the neon and body odor .... suggested he’d been trapped inside a cyberpunk dystopia. Really, it was just the Saturday night masquerade at Wyvern Con.”

And the threat that technology could have been hacked made for a nice red herring for a bit and stopped before it became annoying. I especially liked “the Deep Fake Wars” in his world’s past, making it especially necessary to tell the difference between real and fake.

The additional lore brought to Skull Harbor is exactly how they treat the Isekai newcomers—usually by messing with them as a form of entertainment. But as a “pure” human, Kaito is considered extremely lucky, it says so in the holy book from the skies, the teachings of Ripig.... spelled RPG.

Yes, they thought an RPG manual was holy book.

I suspect that Holo is spending time poking fun at the tropes in other other LitRPG novels, but I could be mistaken, this is my first foray into the genre. (My wife informs me that “Rifts” may have been an influencing factor.) However, I do get the joke about Kaito having “main character hair.”

Again, Holo spends a LOT of time on monster design, attacks, habitats, and how they’re used when a hunter brings one in. Like a magic gem that makes things bigger on the inside, or saltwater versus freshwater types of monsters. Holo even goes into monster behaviors as evidence that Something Is Up.

As I said in the last book review, I haven’t seen this much in the way of ecology since I read Dune.

Oh, and the gems to make things bigger on the inside? They’re for monster trainers to carry their monsters with them. Even I caught the Pokémon reference.

Heck, Holo even makes bards useful.

The politics

None, thank God. We don’t even spend a lot of time on the local economy, which is barter, and centered around magic jewels harvested from monsters.

Though there is a slight bit of satire in here that could be read as political, with the mention of “the Beer Plague” making everyone prefer contactless greetings in the 31st century. I laughed.

Content warning

Honestly, none that I noticed. I think you could give this to children if it weren’t for all of nightmare monsters. If someone could watch Lord of the Rings without bad dreams, you’re good to go here.

Okay, if you’re an arachnophobe who couldn’t stand Shelob, you might have some problems.

Who is it for?

Anyone who just wants to jump onto an insane, wild ride with plenty of thought put into it, this is for you. If you play monster hunter games, you should definitely read it. This may work both for fans of LitRPGs, and probably also for those who hate them. Holo pokes fun at the tropes without being mean about them.

Why read it?

Because it’s just fun, well-written, and clearly thought-out fantasy.

## The Kaiju Preservation Society by John Scalzi Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

At the start of the pandemic, Scalzi had embarked on writing a “dark, heavy, complex, and broodingly ambitious” novel but was flummoxed by COVID-19 and other world events, including losing some of what he’d written. So he set the book aside, and last spring—in February and March 2021—Scalzi

turned his attention to something smaller and lighter. That something is this less than 300-page novel, which he developed within a day of setting aside the potential magnum opus that was blocking him and backing out of his previous contract. It's a fun and palate-cleansing read, not too serious, but not a throwaway. And it was just what I needed when it arrived from the Science Fiction Book Club.

The gist of the novel is this: A laid-off dotcom employee turned delivery worker gets hired by an animal rights organization that tends to kaiju—in the traditional sense—that reside in an adjacent alternate dimension. Think Pacific Rim, Cloverfield, and more traditional kaiju movies such as Godzilla; Gamera, the Giant Monster; and Mothra. The book, though brief, does a good job detailing the history of the organization and its caretaking, gives some sense of the biology (and reproductive biology) of the kaiju, connects them to nuclear energy—a nice parallel to Godzilla—and features a threat to the secrecy of the project, the kaiju themselves, and our world next door. The wall between the dimensions is thinner than one might hope in some situations.

One of the highlights of the novel is the reintroduction of the dotcom executive who fired the protagonist, their interactions, and the business leader's connection to a previous disaster involving the organization. The book is quite humorous, with friendly sparring among the caregivers, puerile jokes, and fictional band names. Scalzi is also quite conscious about incorporating a diverse cast of characters and using gender-neutral pronouns, which is occasionally distracting, but only because it's not yet that common a practice. The book doesn't get bogged down by that, however, and remains a quick and breezy read.

All in all, I'm glad Scalzi was able to recover from his health concerns and writer's block during the pandemic. Not having read any of his other books, I don't know how representative of his work this is. But it's an enjoyable read, and interesting enough in terms of ideas that I'm curious about his other writing. I'm also thankful for the included "Author's Note and Acknowledgments," which offers useful context for the book.

## **Knight Rider by Glen A. Larson and Roger Hill**

### **Review by Heath Row**

<http://N3F.org>

While recovering after a medical procedure earlier this year, I began to rewatch early episodes of the 1982 television series Knight Rider. A passing mention of artificial intelligence while discussing the Knight Industries Two Thousand vehicle and the pilot's setting in Silicon Valley made me realize that perhaps Knight Rider was... science fiction—something that had eluded my preteen self when originally watching the program. Now that we're more firmly in a time of smart cars, collision detection, and other technological developments, I thought it'd be worth learning more about the science behind the TV show.

So I read the first Knight Rider tie-in novel, credited to the series' creator and producer Larson—who also had a hand in Battlestar Galactica, Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, and The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries—but written by Hill, a former journalist from Los Angeles and author of three previous novels.

The novelization is largely a straight-forward retelling of the pilot episode, though the book does include additional detail on the science fiction elements of Knight Rider. Knight Industries had previously perfected a use of plastics. There's a reference to Burke and Hare, as well as a mention of Asimov's

Laws of Robotics. Hill also expands on Wilton Knight's political viewpoints, which are downright Randian.

And the car itself? The "most expensive car in the world" has a "finish bonded into the molecular structure of the car body itself." It's not fiberglass, but a "new substance altogether. An alloy only space technology could produce." KITT is faster, safer, and stronger than any other car. The car is virtually indestructible. "It is hydrogen-fueled and totally fuel efficient. The microprocessors that control its functions make it impossible for the vehicle to be involved in any sort of mishap or collision ... unless specifically ordered to by its pilot."

But most importantly, the car thinks. "Dr. Miles and I took pains to program KITT's machine personality for maximum interface value with the pilot-program driver... As the seat and dashboard are customized to your physical shape, so is the 'personality' of the microprocessor in conformity to your psychological profile." The car learns.

The book is an interesting expansion on the ideas behind the show. Michael Haenlein and Andreas Kaplan's "A Brief History of Artificial Intelligence" (<https://tinyurl.com/bddc8zc5>) suggests that early AI efforts date back to the 1940s and Asimov's story "Runaround." ELIZA was created in the mid-'60s, and investment waned in the 1970s and 1980s, not to reemerge seriously until the '90s and more recently.

Pretty progressive ideas for the early 1980s! (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine Faculae & Filigree #11.)

## The Last Archon by Richard W. Watts Review by Ginger Man <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

When you've been around for three thousand years you would think that you're ready for anything.

Unless your powers are fading just as the greatest threat the world has known returns.

Fortunately, Deckard has help.

The story

There is a new drug, Shard, going around the city of Atlanta. It's supercharging Primes and driving them insane, and it doesn't do any favors for the normal people that use it either. Archon and his apprentice Arclite are on the case though, trying to track down the source of the drug and shut him down for good. What they find is no mere drug cartel but a series of ancient rites that are disturbingly familiar to Archon.

Things get interesting when Arclite, known by day as Hayden, stops an assassination attempt on Marcus Wolfe, a new up and coming politician, after being alerted by the occasionally clairvoyant Vivian. Hayden is soon drawn into Wolfe's orbit, and together with Vivian soon learn that he is not what or who he seems to be.

Drug dealers, ancient evils, and crooked politicians are not all that our heroes have to contend with. Hayden has been the apprentice of Deckard Riss (Archon) for over ten years. His frustration over the lack of progress in his abilities and the fact he is still plagued with the nightmares that brought him to

Riss anyway has led to no small amount of tension between the two heroes.

## The characters

Hayden is a young and talented hot heat, constantly chaffing under Deckard's tutelage. While his angst can be grating at times, it is also difficult to blame him. He has power but accessing anything close to his full potential causes him immense amounts of pain, something that hasn't changed in the many years the pair have been working together. All the while, Deckard does what many mentors do, corrects Hayden, explaining how he could have done things better. Hayden also has several redeeming qualities, especially his bravery and sense of self-sacrifice. He constantly throws himself in harm's way to protect total strangers and even Deckard when their conflict reaches its highest point.

Deckard Riss has been alive for three thousand years, working to protect the world from the return from an entity called the Worm, an entity he stopped millennia ago. His actions may have saved the world, but they also destroyed Atlantis. Through in the fact that he realizes he's dying, and Deckard has a little bit of angst he's dealing with as well. It's his realization that his time is up that makes him a bit harder on Hayden than he perhaps would otherwise be.

Vivian, the barista who warns Hayden of the assassination attempt on Wolfe joins the pair of Primes, first as the damsel in distress who stumbles on elements of the villains' plans but later has an important part of their team. Not that she is some Mary Sue who suddenly has perfect control of her powers and never loses her cool in the face of danger. On the contrary, she clearly struggles with both control of her abilities and dealing with the trauma of having multiple Primes trying to kill her.

## The world

We get a slightly different view of the Heroes Unleashed Universe here. First, the story takes place in the real-world city of Atlanta. Second, Archon and Arclite are established and recognized heroes who are also not endorsed by the police.

Also, while it isn't quite conclusive, there are indication that the book actually takes place before the Rampage, so often referenced in the other HU books. That makes this the earliest book in the universe chronologically speaking and offers a glimpse into the world before that central event.

It also offers some interesting theories on the true origin of the Primes. It's suggested that they are all actually deriving their power from an energy field called the Axiom and that the Event that triggered their rise didn't so much create the Primes as allow them greater access to the Axiom.

We of course also learn a bit more about Atlantis, and interdimensional threats, which have only been hinted at in the other book.

## The politics

As with many superhero stories, the politics have a strong libertarian or at least anti-establishment streak in that the good guys are the ones who get things done, even if it involves working outside the system, especially when it comes to corrupt politicians, of which there are no small number.

## Content warning

A few gruesome deaths and use of magic on a level that will be unlikely to offend all but the most mental of fundamentalists.

Who is it for?

Archon and Arclite represent the most traditional of the HU heroes in that they are costumed, have obvious secret identities, avoid killing (though they aren't completely opposed to it), and have a clear mentor/sidekick relationship. So, if you were brought up on the typical Marvel and DC books, then The Last Archon would be a good step towards leaving those now moribund companies behind.

Why read it?

The Last Archon presents a good character dynamic between the three heroes, nicely balancing their different personalities and the resulting tensions. It also expands the lore and scope of Heroes Unleashed in ways that will be sure to have ramifications down the road.

## Let Sleeping Gods Lie by David J. West Review by JE Tabor <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

When Porter Rockwell's friends dig up an ancient book in Wild West California and offer to sell it for cheap, he thinks he's made a great deal.

But Porter has no clue of the horrors that this old book brings with it.

Porter, his partner Bloody Creek Mary, and his dog, Dawg, set out to track down a gang of murderous outlaws, but what they find is much stranger, including supernatural creatures, ancient ruins, and a gateway to another world.

The story

Porter Rockwell's friends have been murdered over a strange artifact: an ancient book. Porter sets out to discover why. As he digs deeper into the mystery, the stakes get higher, and he goes from tracking outlaws to shootouts to facing down monsters to entering the lair of ancient elder gods waiting to be released and bring ruin upon the Earth.

The supernatural elements of the story start at a slow burn. The initial hook brings the mystery, but the beginning of the story plays out like your standard western: white hats tracking black hats through the mountains and deserts to bring them to justice. That standard western takes a sharp left turn into the Lovecraftian in the third act, and it only gets weirder from there.

The characters

Porter Rockwell is, funnily enough, himself an outlaw, wanted for a murder he did not commit, as well as some that he did. But Porter is an outlaw with a hardcoded sense of justice, and his loyalty to his few friends is unquestionable. It is this loyalty and his own curiosity that drives Porter throughout the story.

His partner, Bloody Creek Mary, is a no-nonsense indigenous woman who accompanies him on his adventures. Though she acts as a check on Porter's more impulsive instincts, it is clear that there is a great

deal of mutual respect between the two, and they are repeatedly bailing each other out of tough situations.

The world

The story takes place in California in the Old West, and largely conforms with the tropes and history associated with it, plus some added mythological lore. Saloons, Prospectors, and Chinese immigrants are thrown in indigenous mysticism and western cryptids such as Sasquatch. The end of the story draws the reader into the realm of the Elder Gods, complete with the strange geometries and cyclopean structures drawn straight from the works of H. P. Lovecraft.

The politics

There is not much old west politics to speak of in *Let Sleeping Gods Lie*, much less modern politics. This is a romp through the realms of eldritch horror, with no partisan ideology to be found.

Content warning

While there is plenty of violence and descriptions of Lovecraftian horrors, none of it is especially graphic.

Who is it for?

Anyone who loves Westerns and Lovecraft should read *Let Sleeping Gods Lie*.

Why read it?

Read it for good old fashioned western heroes going up against the most powerful beings in the cosmos.

**Lost Planet Homicide by Larry Correia**  
**Available Exclusively via Audible**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

*Lost Planet Homicide*- Cover Reveal | Monster Hunter Nation. The last good cop has to solve a murder in a very bad little town, on top of a mountain, above an acid cloud, on a planet so far away that Earth doesn't even know about it. What drives him?

The story

Many generations ago, a colony ship left the Earth system to settle a new world, only to somehow get jumped to a distant planet that wasn't on their maps. They're incredibly far from Earth and their only hope for survival is to carve out a rough existence on a planet that may surely kill them.

After a century on this world, appropriately called Croatoan, humanity has all but surrendered to its basest tendencies, operating under what should be a functioning government but really dividing itself into classes and being controlled by criminal organizations. It's under these circumstances that the

corrupt police force must maintain the appearance of order.

## The characters

Lutero Cade is our protagonist, a police inspector with a conscience and a code. He's descended from the man that Croatoan blames for its predicament, a man who allegedly pushed the button that jumped their ship to this planet with no hope of escape. He wants to prove that he's better than the rep anyone else puts on him, and so he has a strong moral code—despite being surrounded by people who would just as soon shoot you as take a bribe.

## The world

If you've read GUN RUNNER, you've got a feel for how dangerous these planets can be, and Croatoan is no different from Lush in terms of how badly it wants to kill you. There's also a literal tier system to the colony there, with rich corporations at the highest levels of the mountain compound, and shady mafias ruling the lower levels. They grow their own meat in vats. They live in metal boxes. It's a meager existence, ruled by the two highest commandments known to a vicious society: survive, and take whatever you can.

## The politics

If “survivatarian” is a point on the political spectrum, then that's where it goes. And that would make Lutero Cade the only “DoTheRightThingTarian” on Croatoan. Other than that, there's nothing from our world crammed into this.

## Content warning

PG-13 for language and crime-related violence, with some substance abuse references.

## Who is it for?

Fans of GUN RUNNER, naturally, as well as those who like gritty cop shows and hard-boiled crime with sci-fi mixed in.

## Why read it?

If you're invested in what's to come in future GUN RUNNER stories, you'll want to read LOST PLANET HOMICIDE. That said, my one complaint is the abrupt nature of the story's ending, and the fact that it's rather incomplete. This could be a few bridge chapters in the background of a larger story, and we won't know until the next GR book comes out. All the same, it was an entertaining two hours on Audible.

**Main Street, DOA by Declan Finn**  
**Review by Ginger Man**  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

What do you do after you stopped an alien invasion, ended a civil war, deposed a dictator, helped unite most of the galaxy? You take a vacation, right? That's what you and I would do.

For Sean Ryan and his White Ops team, that doesn't really fit their style. However, when their new



boss, Calinn orders them to take some downtime, the crew finds themselves on Yisden, a planet-sized amusement park. Of course, Sean can't go anywhere without blowing something up.

## The story

The galaxy is safe from the threat of the Anima, the Renar have been spared a lengthy civil war (and had a new valley installed), and President Douglas Wills is in hiding. You would think that Sean Ryan and White Ops would be able to settle down and begin training future generations of Rangers.

That's certainly what they thought until Sean inadvertently snarks his way into an unwanted trip to an overgrown amusement park.

The team begrudgingly goes along with it, expecting the whole thing to be an exercise in controlling their more violent impulses, impulses that are tested repeatedly until they discover that the park is not what it seems. In fact, it's under the control of one William Smythe, head of security for former President Wills and he has plans for the planet and its many, many tourists.

In the meantime, Father Healy of the Holy Order of St. Patrick is putting together a team of his own, a team made of former White Ops members and others on a par with Ryan and his associates.

## The characters

While it's a big galaxy out there, Declan Finn's Main Street DOA stays mostly confined to the amusement park.

If the idea of a planet-wide park controlled by a sociopathic genius sounds nuts to you, I can assure you that you have no idea. Just imagine what could be done with genetically engineered dinosaurs, undead pirates, and superheroes programed to fight and be able to take on massive damage. All of that is just for starters.

If nothing else, Finn shows that when the situation calls for it, he is more than willing to lean into the crazy. The result is an absurd amount of mayhem and fun.

## The world

How does a team of accomplished killers relax? What's more, what if they are the kind of killer that takes glee in being the fist of justice sent to punish the wicked? They fall in love and argue with robots of course.

Following on the heels of Politics Kills, Sean and Kami begin exploring their relationship as do other members of the team, even the less normally than affectionate Renar on White Ops. If you thought they were dangerous before having significant others to care about, you're right. But give Sean Ryan a woman to love and... well, let's just say getting in his way would be a bad idea.

There are others as well. Like John, the unassuming best assassin in the galaxy who is trying to clean up a loose end with the last name of Wills.

Of course, there is a new bad guy. William Smythe is one of the remaining loyalists to President Wills, the human villain of the last two books. He's also a loyalist who wants to get paid. To make sure that happens, the brilliant psychopath has concocted a plan to use Yisden and every tourist on the planet as

hostages. He also has a nasty history with one of the additions to White Ops, a history that is going to get someone killed.

The politics

The title of the previous book is Politics Kills. One of the themes in this one is that politics is petty and vicious. Yet usually all it takes to take down the bad guys is good men and women willing to stand up to them. If you can bring an arsenal to help, it's just more fun.

Content warning

I suppose if you don't like watching Ryan and company smacking down krakens, dragons, and animatronic superheroes in the service of the good, true, and beautiful then this might not be for you.

Who is it for?

If you liked Reacher but wish the guy had more personality and stood for something other than his own interests, this is definitely your book. Or you can think of it as Flash Gordon meets Die Hard 2. Or maybe Die Hard 4, the one where John McLane beats up an F-35 and kills a helicopter with a car. It's that level of insane kick-assery.

Why read it?

Did you read the above paragraph? If that sounds good, what the hell are you waiting for?

## Midnight at the Well of Souls by Jack L. Chalker

### Review by Heath Row

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Fellow Neffer and avid Chalker fan Patsy Williams recommended I read *Midnight at the Well of Souls*, the first of five books in Chalker's *Saga of the Well of Souls*. I am sure glad I did. The novel reminded me more of Philip Jose Farmer's *Riverworld* series than Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* or Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, though they're all slightly adjacent, similar to the hexagonal ecosystems that compose the world explored by the protagonists. Chalker's book is a little more outre, occasionally downright bizarre, reminding me of some of the looser countercultural sf written in the '60s. And it's largely a morality tale, albeit a light-hearted and far from heavy-handed one, offering some advice and insight on human nature, the purpose of human existence, as well as some speculative cosmology and theology.

Spacer Nathan Brazil—a heroic character with depth whom I'd love to read more about if there ever was one—diverts his route to respond to an emergency signal, finding evidence of a vicious slaughter of those populating a scientific outpost. Once there, he and other passengers are drawn through a mysterious portal to what seems to be a distant planet or pocket universe. There, they pass through another portal, transformed into another form—various alien races—and assigned to an appropriate subsection of the world, each with a climate and features appropriate for its respective alien race.

Brazil proceeds to track down two of the people sent to the world—one evil and one who might be misguided—who are interested in using mathematics to unlock the secrets of the Well of Souls and gain what they expect and imagine to be unlimited power—the power of a god. The group ends up recon-

vening, and they learn more than they bargained for once they reach the Well: about the world they've been exploring, about the nature of reality, about the purpose of life itself, and the intended role of love. That's where the moral aspect comes into play, and you can sample some of the ideas communicated by Chalker in select quotes posted in my blog at <https://tinyurl.com/chalkerquotes>. It's thought-provoking stuff.

While the scientific and technological aspects of the book are slightly prone to hand waving, the philosophical elements of the book are compelling. So are Chalker's various alien races, ecosystems, and societies that populate the world around the Well of Souls. There's plenty more of that world to explore, should the need arise. Chalker also incorporates some narrative aspects addressing the nature of addiction and the abuse of others, and sex plays a fun and functional role in the story.

So thank you, Patsy, for the recommendation! Chalker is an author I'll return to. As my friend Stevyn "Iron Feather" Prothero said online when he learned I was reading Chalker, "He created many interesting universes. Fascinating series. I recently discovered he wrote follow-up books about some of those characters and worlds. Great stuff. Enjoy." I most certainly will.

## Monster Punk Horizon by HP Holo Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

When the description said monster hunting, I thought they meant monster hunting like Larry Correia.

They meant kaiju.

The story

Jaz and Pix are two monster hunters in an island of monster hunting. Portals drop new creatures from the sky every day.

Except when a new monster comes to town, it tears through the local ecosystem to see where it fits in the food chain. Unfortunately, it may be at the top. Once that happens, the hunters may be next on the menu.

Unfortunately for Jaz and Pix, their skill level is somewhere around level one.

This was a surprisingly fun book that was almost solid adventure from the first page. Especially when the monsters fall out of the sky almost immediately.

It's extremely well-plotted, so much so that there are few things mentioned that don't go towards forwarding the plot.

I will give a warning that this is technically a slow start. I didn't feel that the book picked up for the first 16% of the novel (I had an eARC). But once it gets started, you won't want to put it down. And in that first 16%, you'll probably want to read it just for the entertaining data dumps and exposition.

Once the story kicks off, it's very entertaining. I even enjoy the way that Holo does fight scenes.

## The characters

Like most of the rest of the book, the characters are bare bones, but incredibly serviceable. They're quirky, with all of the personality they need for the book. I don't mean that as an insult. I respect the book too much for that. The characters' personalities and backgrounds are revealed inasmuch as they forward the story.

Jaz is impulsive and more of a "smash first and ask questions maybe" and Pix is an analyst. Jaz plays well with kaiju, while Pix thinks ahead to "when does this friendly monster turn into a threat?" We get to see most of their personalities through their actions than getting full biographies of either. Their backgrounds are sketched out enough that we know they met in college, what their degrees are—because they're mentioned in the course of the plot.

While both leads are effective heroines, neither of them is annoying or obnoxious. This is a cute trick, because the opening almost makes Jaz seem to be a high fantasy Kardashian with a great sword. (Seriously, Jaz is special. She literally forgot her friend's real name, since she deemed it too hard to pronounce back in college.)

We even have some fun with the side characters. One is an old cat (approximately three-feet tall) with rocket knives) and a kitten with a taser.

## The world

The world is fleshed out as we go, and it's well sketched out. The island of monsters (Which I believe is actually called Skull Island) has its own culture, which is filled with flexible sanity. One has to be crazy enough to fight kaiju, and sane enough to deal with others on a regular basis. The world runs on hunting monsters and collecting the magic gems that they spawn—or "loot drop" if you want to use the in-world language.

The world gets a lot of mileage here. There are specialists in carving magic gems so the world can operate. One of our heroines has a gem carved into her great sword so she can swing it one-handed if need be. It's a fun, creative way of executing magic, and I haven't seen it used to this extent before.

But as mentioned above, there's also a college system in this world. I honestly want to know more.

I also want to give points to the amount of thought given to both the monster design, as well as the thought given to "what will a new alpha do to the ecosystem." No, this isn't environmental politics, this plays as much with planetary ecology as *Dune* ever did. Holo goes into naming conventions for monsters, local habitats and habits, and even monster personalities. (I particularly enjoyed the one where the monster was so irritable, it attacked rocks because the rocks "must have looked like they'd been throwing it shade.") I suspect there's science in Holo's background, since I don't remember the last time I saw someone discuss auto-brewery syndrome.

This also feeds into character, to some degree, since it's mentioned that there is no such thing as a pure human anymore; even our heroines have "dragon" in their family line. It's fun contemplating the D&D labels of a "half-fey, half-orc barbarian."

For all the fun parts of this world, there are still Otaku.

## The politics

None. Literally, none. There aren't even politics of the world. There is barely interpersonal politics. It's so refreshing. Then again, if you think politics must be in everything, then we can shoehorn them in. Everyone is armed in this world. Because when monsters fall out of the sky on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis, you carry weapons. You can read that as pro-second Amendment, or you can read that as a fantasy setting with kaiju.

## Content warning

Language. There's a lot of Witcher level language and cursing.

## Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys monster hunter genre of the video games should enjoy this. The same goes if you're a fan of Larry Correia, kaiju fiction, and probably straight-up RPGS.

## Why read it?

Anybody who wants a straight-up action-adventure fantasy story will enjoy this.

## The Mummy of Monte Cristo by J. Trevor Robinson Review by Trevor Denning

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Edmond Dantes had it all: a promising career, a loving father, and beautiful fiancée. Then, in a moment of petty jealousy, three bitter men conspire to ruin his life to advance their own fortunes. Of course, the problem with digging a pit is that you often fall into it yourself. When Edmond comes back from the dead (literally and figuratively in this retelling), he's educated, wealthy, cunning, and has a chip on shoulder under those wrappings.

## The story

Even if you haven't read the classic French novel (I haven't), you know the story. A wholesome young man is framed as a political dissident and sent to an island prison where he meets an erudite and wealthy prisoner. After escaping the prison, he uses a hidden treasure to fund his revenge. Of course, people and circumstances have changed while he was away, and he has to reconsider some of his plans.

## The characters

This is a huge book, and without a spreadsheet I couldn't begin to go over everyone even if we had the time. But to mention three we must begin with Edmond Dantes, the young sailor wronged who returns not just as the Count of Monte Cristo, but as its mummy (and inventor of a tasty new sandwich). In a dark fantasy like this, we don't need metaphor. He literally gives up his humanity to pursue revenge.

Mercedes is the woman taken from him, who unwittingly marries one of Edmond's rivals and has son whom Edmond rescues. Fernand is the chief conspirator, who manages to steal Edmond's life and the

woman he loves. He can also conjure fire.

## The world

This is an alternate history, where Napoleon defeated a zombie outbreak, and all manner of supernatural horrors abound. The time period of the original novel remains, but the addition of magic and monsters forces some significant changes. Robinson does an admirable job of incorporating these new elements in a way that really feels organic. The werewolves, vampires, and lesser known ghoulies aren't just there for their own sake. Every new element serves to develop the story and flesh out the world.

## The politics

France at this time was in upheaval, and Edmond is accused of conspiring to help Napoleon return to power. The politics, while present, are only there so much as to put the story in motion. From there, this is really about the characters and the moral consequences of their actions. Any political points that may have been present in the past take a backseat to pure revenge fantasy.

## Content warning

Well, there are monsters. It could be argued that Edmond's transformation from man to mummy is a sort of body horror, yet it's handled tastefully. Robinson maintains the style and tone of the novel. Except for the monsters.

## Who is it for?

It may seem geared toward the *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* crowd, but while that and its innumerable imitators was written as a silly cash-grab that worked, *The Mummy of Monte Cristo* is so much more. Robinson's rearrangement is written from the heart, with a deep respect for every source from which he draws. Anyone who loves classic literature and the darker side of folklore will find chocolate for their peanut butter.

## Why read it?

One of the advantages of fantasy is that it allows us to consider the real things of life from an unrealistic perspective. So while monsters may seem like a heretical addition to a story that has already stood the test of time just fine on its own thankyouverymuch, they can also help us notice things that were always there, always true, and easily overlooked. Also, it's a good time. Because, monsters.

## Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys

### Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

One day soon I'm going to have to sit down and have a chat with one Mr. Daniel Humphreys. You see, Mr. Humphreys seems to enjoy messing with me by putting the best parts of the books right where I'm about to be interrupted. Now you, dear reader, may be tempted to tell me that Mr. Humphreys had no way to know during what part of his stories I would be interrupted while reading. Others out there may want to point out that even if he did, I am hardly his only reader and so why would he tailor everything

to me? In response I can only state the obvious: I am the Great and Terrible Jimbo, sole possessor of Jimbosity and many other good things. My sheer amount of awesome and good looks is surpassed only by my incredible humility...

>AHEM< So, now that I've set all of your bullshit meters off... I received a copy of Daniel Humphreys' *Night's Black Agents* because I'm on his ARC team, so I get to review all of his stuff as soon as it comes out. Of course, it's always been my pleasure (all two times I've done it) because he writes really well. He gives us all some really believable characters and a world only slightly outside our own. Seriously, it's just far enough off to be interesting but close enough so that it all feels familiar. I really liked this one, in large part because of how well Humphreys blends the two worlds.

Our hero, once again, is Paxton Locke, budding mage and a Fade who can both see and communicate with ghosts. Locke is at war (and, despite my saying the same thing about my mother over some teenage spats this fits) with his mother Helen. Helen, you see, killed Paxton's father while Paxton watched. This was all covered in the first book *Fade* but it's worth repeating. It's not a fight he particularly wants. He's been forced into it by his mother who has broken out of prison and wants something that he has.

Helen Locke, for her part, is like a modern-day female Raistlin Majere, only without the hourglass eyes and regret that saves the universe. She is four parts evil and no parts even tolerable. This is a woman who covets power for its own sake and will do whatever it takes to get it. She will lie, cheat, steal and murder. As a matter of fact, she has done all of the above and doesn't seem to be the slightest bit remorseful for any of it. I love to hate this chick. The only thing that I can kind of identify with about her is that she's chasing a rare book. Granted, it's a grimoire full of magic with potentially evil applications, but hey, it's a book, right?

Helen and her group of three followers make up a coven of witches that are actually pretty frightening. None of them are all that experienced in magic and mayhem but they more than make up for the lack with power and enthusiasm. These girls want to kick ass and they manage to do so. I can't help but wonder if a certain amount of subtlety might serve them better than just charging ahead seems to do, but that's how crass newbies act. They're dangerous enough already. If they actually get their poop in a group, they're going to be horrifying effective. It's a good thing Paxton still has room to grow because things are looking rough for him in the near and far term future.

Of course, Paxton has friends too. The government agents in Division M are on Paxton's side. Well, for the most part. It's not like they actually TRUST him, but they damn sure don't like his mother, so as long as he's up against her, they'll back him. Or maybe they'll use him, but whatever he needs the help. And if not everyone is who they seem to be, at least it's fun to watch him try to figure it out.

Of course, as far as Paxton knows, his mother isn't, and really shouldn't be, the main focus of his life. He finds out in the first chapter (or maybe two, I didn't take notes) that there are two missing young boys and that they've been taken by a cult. The cult appears to be out to sacrifice them. Mr. Locke, not wanting to see something terrible happen to two kids who have done absolutely nothing to deserve it, goes to their rescue. A large part of the book involves his search for them. He's not exactly clueless about the fact that his mother is looking for him. He just isn't focused on her because he has other things going on. He does realize that he has her grimoire and that she'll be looking for it, but he has other things on his mind.

While I'm happy to say that this book features far less depravity than the first one, it is not without its fair share of mayhem and destruction. That's good though, because it just wouldn't be Paxton Locke

without some blood (or maybe ichor) and gore at some point. Night's Black Agents, like Fade before it, has a very strong central conflict which can only be resolved through explosions and force blades and magicky stuff. (What's a force blade? Sorry, I can't tell you. I guess you'll have to buy the book to find out. I can tell you that it has nothing to do with Star Wars.) So, if you're a person who likes things that go BOOM, this is the book for you.

I can't really find anything to complain about. The book moves. The characters are believable. There really is never a chance to catch your breath, but that's a good thing. Humphreys switches back and forth between different point of view characters to always keep things fresh and moving forward. Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind seeing this as a television/Netflix series once there are a few more books out. Humphreys' writing has an ability to consistently shift to wherever the action is that would work well on the small screen. I'd even hang on through the commercial break and make the sponsors happy.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Ichor Splatters.

## Odd Magics: Tales for the Lost by Sarah A. Hoyt Book Review by Becky Jones

<http://ornerydragon.com/>

Odd Magics, by Sarah A. Hoyt, is a collection of classic fairy tales reimagined as short stories set in the modern world. They don't quite follow the original story, but those who know their fairy tales will quickly figure them out. Sarah Hoyt has given us a collection of stories that are quirky and fun and take you out of your head for a short while. The entire book is a quick read that will give you a lift and inspire you to look for the magic in everyday life.

Here's the blurb for the collection:

This is a very strange collection of fairytales, recast for modern life. In it the prize isn't always to the fairest, the magic is rarely to the strongest. But lonely introverts do find love, women who never gave it a thought find themselves at the center of romance. Doing what's right will see you to the happily ever after. And sometimes you have to kiss an accountant to find your prince.

These stories started as quick story posts on her blog, "According to Hoyt." A number of blog commenters asked for more each time one appeared and thus was born Odd Magics.

Fairy tales were designed to be cautionary tales, sometimes morality tales, sometimes joyous tales. They were meant to teach lessons and give examples of how to behave and how not to behave. They showed us that not only did evil exist, but that it could be defeated. These reimagined, odd, tales show us all that and more.

No matter how hard we try to organize our lives and follow a plan, whether ours or somebody else's, it seems that life always finds a way to do what it will. What do you do when your grandmother's caretaker calls to tell you grandma is looking for her glass slipper and you find it? Can a mortal step into fairyland and find true love? Can an immortal hide and try to ease his loneliness by working as an accountant?

If you look at the world from a slightly different, some might say odd, angle, you will greatly appreciate these fairy tales told from a slightly different angle. Even if you don't look at things from an odd



angle, you will enjoy these stories.

Fun, hopeful, quirky, and yes, happy endings. It doesn't get much better than that.

Odd Magics: Tales for the Lost is available on Amazon.

## Politics Kills by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

In Declan Finn's White Ops, Sean Patrick Ryan and Associates defeated a belligerent alien race and staved off attacks from the true enemy, the Animi, as well as finally getting the goods to take down President Douglas Wills.

That, however, was the easy part.

### The story

Having learned the truth of Animi and their desire to not just dominate, but eat most of the life in the galaxy, Sean Ryan and his White Ops team decide to take the fight to them. With the help of Admiral Sherman Newcomb – hero of the Pharmakoi War – they manage to forge an alliance amongst the sentient races of the galaxy to form a united front against a common enemy.

However, behind the scenes, Wills and his loyalists are working with the Animi to undermine it all. Wills works to orchestrate assassination attempts, military coups and far more through his telepathic Thought Police and a shadowy special operations group known only as The Division. Those efforts create plenty of problems for White Ops, above and beyond the Animi themselves. Between civil wars and rescue missions the team is plenty busy.

In fact, if I were to make one complaint, it would be that there is too much going on. Wars that could be books unto themselves are usually dealt with over the course of a chapter or two. I wouldn't even mind seeing expanded stories since I know Finn can also slow things down and focus on the characters more. Still, it is fun to see how much creative destruction is handed out to the bad guys as Ryan and crew jump from conflict to conflict.

### The characters

The cast of characters expands in Politics Kills and those that were smaller players in White Ops play a bigger role here. For instance, Kami Figlia moves from the main female member of the team, to a presumed second in command of White Ops, as demonstrated when no one even thinks of questioning her stepping up during Sean's unexpected absence.

Arthur Sharpe, the intelligence operative that provided the evidence to take down Wills also turns out to be someone with a large affinity for explosives. That makes him a perfect fit with the team, given the frequent need to blow up...everything.

Perhaps the most interesting new addition to the cast is Fr. Healy, the head of the Holy Order of St. Patrick. The team gets to spend some time with him while making a stop to thwart an attack on the order's headquarters known as the Foundation. Fr. Healy is huge, has a large collection of whiskey, and enjoys

singing songs about defeating the forces of evil. Armed with this knowledge, Kami finds it much easier to understand Ryan's unusual disposition.

There are a few others that Ryan adds to his band of misfits, each of whom has a unique aspect, whether they be blind, a former black ops operator turned merc, or a sociopathic love of violence, the team has never been more dangerous.

## The world

The galaxy is a dangerous place. It is full of telepathic aliens that want to eat you, politicians that will launch entire fleets of warships to settle an imagined personal grudge, angry generals that desire global domination and shadowy government organizations with their own agendas. Fortunately, there is Sean Patrick Ryan and Associates to make it safer. By nuking the hell out of everything in their way.

There are also quiet spaces and moments in between. It's a world that Ryan insists still has time and room for the better things in life, like protecting the innocent and even falling in love. There are multiple cases of characters finally admitting their feelings for each other. By the end of things, several characters, even Ryan, come to terms with not just their emotions but their pasts that might have been getting in the way.

## The politics

The name of the book is Politics Kills, so as you might imagine the politics of the book definitely doesn't have much nice to say about business-as-usual politics. But the true politics of the book are formed by Ryan and his way of seeing the world. In his vision, evil is evil and good will triumph, all it takes is good people with the vision and the will to fight.

## Content warning

If you don't like positive views of monastic life, action heroes that don't jump into bed with the femme fatale at the first chance, and evil punished with extreme prejudice, then you won't much care for this. If that sounds good to you – buckle up.

## Who is it for?

Thinking about this segment, my mind went back to the many action comics of the 1990's. For those unfamiliar, many of them featured a paramilitary team who hit their enemies 'hard and fast'. However, White Ops doesn't have the grim and cynical feel of those books. Imagine instead the violence of X-Force with the cheerful "I'm gonna kick your ass" attitude and smirk of John McClain.

## Why read it?

Because in this day and age I think we don't need another reminder of how messed up the world is. What need is to be reminded that it is possible to push back, to go forth with a strong moral vision in your heart and mind, a sword in your hand, and a song on your lips.

Queen of the Martian Catacombs by Leigh Brackett  
Review by Caroline Furlong

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

War comes to the Red Planet once more as a man claiming powers beyond mortal ken raises an army from the tribes of Mars. On the run for breaking the law, Eric John Stark is offered the chance to wipe the slate clean if he will find out more about Kynon of Shun – and stop him, if he can. But danger lurks in the shadows and not all is as it seems. More than Kynon’s ambition threatens to send the desert world tumbling into the bonds of slavery and death!

On the run for aiding planetary primitives in their fight against those who would use and abuse them, Eric John Stark drives his mount to exhaustion in his flight from the Earth Police Control. If they catch him, he faces twenty years in a Lunar prison without hope of seeing the sun again for at least that long. Death in the Martian desert would be preferable.

With his mount unable to continue Stark sets up behind a rock, prepared to make a last stand. Only the police have prepared for that; they set up a Banning, a device that can shoot an electric beam to kill...or stun. If the latter setting is used Stark will be captured and brought to Luna, to die a lingering death of spirit in the catacombs. His own position has put him out of range of his opponents, meaning he cannot fire on them with any hope of hitting them. The police have the upper hand, and they all know it.

Then one of the policemen – Simon Ashton – comes forward and asks to talk with him. Ashton found Stark when the latter was a wild boy captured and held caged by miners in the canyons of Mercury. The miners caught Eric after they killed the tribe of Mercurians who raised him under the name N’Chaka, meaning “Man-without-a-tribe.” Though of Earth stock Stark naturally relates more to the savages of the solar system than to civilized men.

Understanding that, Ashton doesn’t blame him for doing what he did to land in this mess. But the fact that Stark is headed to meet Delgaun of Valkis for a job – that he dislikes. Delgaun is in league with Kynon of Shun, a man whipping the Martian tribes into a frenzy over an old cult from a tribe long dead. All the civilized men on Mars and on Earth fear something is afoot, but the Martian tribes will not allow sophisticated men into their ranks. They will, however, tolerate an outworld barbarian much like themselves.

If Stark goes to Valkis as Ashton’s agent, then the policeman can get the charges against him dropped. Otherwise, they will use the Banning to bring him in and Mars will be left to its fate. With a choice like this before him, Stark knows he has no recourse at all. He accepts Ashton’s offer and the police leave him to complete his journey to Valkis.

#### The characters

Eric John Stark is a protagonist in the mold of Tarzan of the Apes. A savage at heart, he nevertheless has enough civilizing influences that he is rational, calm, and controlled in most rational situations. But when the fighting starts, he becomes a primeval force to be reckoned with, frightening even the battle-tested barbarians of the Martian desert.

The other characters are well-drawn and memorable. Kynon is the charismatic leader of the tribesman with ambitions to rule all of Mars. Though despicable it is easy to see why people follow him – he has a

silver tongue and he knows how to use it. Berild, Kynon's ostensible mistress, is cunning and cruel, with her beauty making her twice as perilous as she would be otherwise. Delgaun himself is a black-guard who seems to think Berild belongs to him, when her only interests are her own.

Finally, there is Fianna. A girl with eyes older than her body Fianna helps Stark navigate the intrigue swirling through the upper echelons of Kynon's army. But she can only tell him so much, and her mysterious past has more bearing on the present than is immediately understood. Of all the side characters in the novel she is the most likeable despite receiving less "screentime."

## The world

For a barren, desert world, Mars is absolutely rich in detail. Brackett brings the politics and culture of Mars to life as a master weaver spins threads into tapestries. This isn't Burroughs' Barsoom but it is a very lifelike Mars which one may easily get lost in.

## The politics

All the politics in this book are related to the story and have nothing to do with current or past policies anywhere on Earth.

## Content warning

There is some drug use in the story, though it does not occur in a modern form. Brackett does not spare the reader the horror of addiction, so some might find it a touch graphic nonetheless. Berild and Stark also have some romantic scenes together but those are far less explicit than modern ones and are easy to skim if a reader finds them problematic.

## Who is it for?

Sci-fi lovers, space opera fans, and those who just enjoy a good story will love Queen of the Martian Catacombs. Andre Norton fans and those who like paranormal plot twists and powers will find this tale a fantastic read, too. This is classic Sword and Planet fiction at its best, and anyone interested in the genre should take a look at this book ASAP.

## Why read it?

It is a story written by one of the best sci-fi writers of the 20th century. Leigh Brackett wrote for Hollywood, but the reason George Lucas hired her to write *The Empire Strikes Back* was her science fiction. What other reason do you need to pick it up and give it a read?

Ringworld by Larry Niven  
Review by Heath Row  
<http://N3F.org>

For the life of me, I don't know how I could possibly go for so long without reading this novel. As a fan of Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* and subsequent novels—and recently enjoying Jack McDevitt's *The Engines of God*—I thoroughly appreciate science fiction novels that focus on mysterious constructs, ancient alien artifacts, and the remnants of once-grand alien civilizations. This book has all of that in spades!

The first of four Ringworld novels, *Ringworld* is also adjacent to Niven's Known Space stories, as represented in about a dozen novels and short story collections, as well as the shared-world *Man-Kzin Wars* anthologies. The Nebula, Hugo, and Locus award-winning novel also catalyzed five *Fleet of Worlds* prequel and sequel novels by Niven and Edward M. Lerner. This, then, is the book that kicked it all off.

The basic idea of the story is that four characters—200-year-old human Louis Wu, cowardly two-headed puppeteer Nessus, extremely lucky young human Teela Brown, and savage kzin diplomat Speaker-to-Animals—travel through space to examine a mysterious construct encountered by the fleeing race of puppeteers. The construct is a ring 93 million miles in radius, 600 million miles long, rotating at 770 miles/second around a sun at the center.

While the ring itself, with its shadow squares, ghost wire, outer walls, ostensibly impervious surface and other mysterious features, is fascinating in and of itself, the land inside its outer walls facing the sun, its inhabitants, primitive societies and religions (to paraphrase, "Every contact is First Contact"), the architectural and infrastructural remains of once proud cities—including floating castles—also bear exploration as the four characters strive to learn what they can about Ringworld's past, present, and future, as well as the alien race that built it but mysteriously disappeared, abandoning the Ringworld and leaving its mechanisms to decay.

But the real reason to read the book is the characters. Each of the four protagonists, including their back stories—even racial histories—bring an equal importance to the novel. It is, in fact, their relationships and interactions, the shifting alliances, mood swings, and fluctuating spirit of collaboration and camaraderie that make the book such an interesting read. These are characters to return to, even Prill and Seeker, introduced relatively late in the book.

A new favorite, and there's more to explore between the other Ringworld, *Fleet of Worlds*, *Known Space*, and *Man-Kzin Wars* books. What a wonderful, wonderful book. It's understandable that the novel received so much recognition when it first came out. It remains a thoughtful, innovative, and compelling work.

The Road to Damascus by John Ringo and Linda Evans  
Review by Caroline Furlong

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

If a machine is told to do something, it typically follows its programming to the letter.

But what happens when the machine in question is deliberately designed to think for itself, until and unless someone puts a limiter on its artificial mind?

Can anything break the limiter without destroying the mechanism? And could such a device possess a rational – if not an immortal – soul?

The story

BOLO Mark XX SOL-0045, nicknamed “Lonesome Son” by his commander and called “Sonny” for short, begins the story headed to a rebel camp. The dissidents have fought against the government of the planet Jefferson for several years, waging a guerilla campaign for freedom that has cost many lives on both sides and caused a great deal of destruction. Sonny has been tasked with destroying the renegades’ largest camp, where enemy leader Commodore Oroton has stationed his troops and their families.

Sonny is most unhappy with this assignment. Prosecuting a civil war was never in his programming; he was designed to fight the Deng and other alien threats to humanity, not humans. Humans are supposed to command and befriend BOLOs, to give them needed direction so they attack the enemy and do not harm innocents. This bloody, despicable conflict has harmed more innocents than even Sonny can count, and he wants it over almost as much as mankind does. More to the point, his physical condition is poor, and he has no human commander, something which leaves him feeling rudderless. He answers directly to the president of Jefferson, who has ordered him into the enemy’s stronghold without backup in an attempt to claim victory over the revolutionaries. Tired of these conditions, which he has labored under for some time, Sonny is a particularly cranky BOLO in this moment.

Though he has yet to outthink Commodore Oroton and dislikes the eerie silence hanging over the encampment, the idea of the war ending fills Sonny with a grim kind of cheer. Just a little further and he can end this mess, which will allow him to finally rest. The carnage will cease, and things will no longer be so complicated or dispiriting. Perhaps, somehow, he can have a new commander assigned to him when this over.

But Sonny soon finds his hopes frustrated by a four-year-old insurgent with a popgun. The only visible survivor of a chemical attack on the rebel base, the boy stands his ground and refuses to acquiesce to SOL’s orders to move aside. When the BOLO attempts to use his weapons to remove the child from his path, the guns will not fire. He finds he cannot simply roll onward and crush the boy, either; his treads refuse to carry him forward.

For the rest of that day and on into the night Sonny, a Mark XX BOLO who has lived one-hundred-twenty years and fought in countless battles, is held at bay by a four-year-old.

Running diagnostics on his systems, SOL finds a software block in his circuits that prevents him from

continuing with his mission. Unable to work around or overcome it, his only chance is to break it. To do that, he has to go back through roughly twenty years of history – from the day he was loaned to the planetary government of Jefferson to the present moment.

What he finds will put the conflict in a new light entirely, and it will cause him to question not only what he has been told, but everything he has done. More importantly, he will wonder if he can be forgiven.

## The characters

The characters are all well drawn, to the point one easily becomes invested in their adventures and wants to see them succeed. Aside from Sonny there is his commander, Major Simon Khrustinov. Though remanded to the backseat of the narrative due to an injury midway through the book, Simon is a fighting man with his hands tied by politics. It is not for nothing that, once he is sidelined in the novel, Sonny is easily ordered about by those with an agenda to enforce. Without Simon's guidance, the BOLO would have fallen into their hands sooner.

Kafari Camar, the woman who eventually marries Simon and has a daughter with him, proves her mettle throughout the book. Forced to watch her husband nearly assassinated in a political move, then be sent away to recover safely, she sees her homeworld fall into chaos and worries for her daughter's well-being as she is drawn in by the politicians' propaganda. When they finally go too far and civil war erupts, Kafari gets her daughter to safety before joining the battle for the heart and soul of Jefferson.

Yalena Khrustinov, Simon and Kafari's daughter, represents a generation taught to be dependent and self-absorbed so that they may be better controlled. When circumstances finally force her to face years of brainwashing, she proves to have inherited both her parents' fire and steel. A much more likeable character by the end of the book, there are times a reader will wish she would get her "wake-up call" earlier in the narrative.

## The world

Jefferson is another planet, with its own geography, fauna, and culture. For all that, though, there are parallels to the present and callbacks to Earth's past, giving it a feeling of being set in an alternate world. By far, the most exotic parts of the book are the chapters focusing on the mind of Sonny. A BOLO is completely unlike any modern machine and the glimpses of SOL's thought processes are absolutely fascinating reading.

## The politics

An unabashedly right-wing book, if you want something that explores history and the present with an eye to realism, *The Road to Damascus* will more than satisfy. Even if a reader disagrees with the politics, the fact that the novel goes against the grain of most sci-fi dystopias will make it worth reading. There are so many sci-fi tales that draw from the same political playbook on the market for their story that finding one which does the opposite is a relief.

## Content warning

Innocent citizens are vivisected – dissected alive – in the novel. A Reign of Terror that sees body parts

strung from streetlamps occurs when the conflict finally begins. There are also discussions of mutilation as part of genocide against the population of Jefferson, along with talk of sex, pornography, and a fair amount of profanity. Younger readers and especially children are not the target audience for this book.

Who is it for?

Students of history who want a frank look at the past being repeated in the future, as well as those tired of the same political arguments rehashed unbelievably in the majority of entertainment. Those who like living tanks or machines that think will definitely enjoy this novel for Sonny's perspective. Anyone who feels isolated by the common narrative in science fiction today will find *The Road to Damascus* a refreshing alternate view of the genre.

Why read it?

It is an honest story with a living tank seeking redemption as the main protagonist. Linda Evans and John Ringo's prose bounces off the page, and their story is thought-provoking. Is there any better reason to pick it up and give it a read?

## Rogue Magic by Amanda S Green writing as Ellie Ferguson Review by Pat Patterson

A great good morning to all my friends and neighbors out there in Internet Land! And to family members who have dropped by, I'll be seeing some of you soon, and some on the Other Side. Meanwhile, Power Llama coffee is G-o-o-d for morning Go Power.

It seems that because the house is recently paid off, therefore we need braces, dentures, a newer car, and other medical things not covered by insurance. Kenneth is a sophomore, Alicia Ann a freshman, and so, for the first time since 1992, it might be possible, or even desirable, to consider a move in a few years after they finish high school.

Selling the Patterson Domicile would bring in stupid amounts of dough, but: where would we move? We have 15 grandchildren (with one on the way), 1 great-grandchild (with one on the way), and we have a deeply felt need to babysit. At the time of the contemplated relocation, four of the grands will be adults, and the balance are in clusters: West Virginia, north Georgia, central Georgia, and who knows? One cluster of three might move to Colorado or East McKeesport.

What can my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, and I do? Where ever shall we go?

Since Tara is right out, I'm thinking Mossy Creek, Texas.

Cover Image: Biker Girl by Andrey Armyagov.

Is it not lovely?

Cover design by Amanda S. Green.

Is it not lucid?



Now, don't get your panties in a wad! Sure, there are some things about Mossy Creek that are a bit bizarre, even for Texas. I've lived in San Antonio twice (1959-60, Sunset Hill ES; 1972-73, C-2, Medical AIT & BAMC, Fort Sam Houston), and while the dirt was the wrong color (not a speck of red clay anywhere!), I never saw anything more bizarre than an ancient Green Beret Master Sergeant.

And, as strange as that might be, Mossy Creek has houses that will lock the doors to intruders, and people that shape-shift (in retrospect, the Master Sergeant might be a shapeshifter).

On the other hand, Vanessa is a legal parapro, and Mossy Creek has some BODACIOUS attorneys who would hire her in a moment. AND! They now have a new veterinarian, who I expect would do WONDERS for our cats, and we could finally get those puppies I've been wanting for ages.

AND! They have BIKER CHICKS! Admittedly, they ride classier bikes than I do, but they don't have an attitude about it. (SEARCH COMPLETED : no snootiness found.)

I could go on and on about why I'd like to move to Mossy Creek, but I'll sum it up this way: If I can't be a superhero, I'd at least like to live in a superhero-friendly environment. Also, NONE of the people with non-standard abilities are primarily that. Every character HAS a character, including those who are not primaries. Green (or Ferguson, if you prefer) writes real people.

Depending on whether you count prequels or not, this is #5 or #3 in the Mossy Creek/Eerie Side of the Tracks saga. At least, that's by my count; AND more has been published.

It seems that there is a yearning for the otherwise, no matter what your origin is. If what I have read of some pre-Industrial Age societies is correct, a regular part of growing up included a vision quest. It's my understanding that snooty rich people took a year-long tour of some parts of the world, before settling down to run an empire, eat bon-bons and persecute the working class; some clusters of peoples have what is referred to as a wanderjahr, and I wonder if the mission year done by some high-commitment churches might fill this role; for my cluster, it was either a term or so of military service, and/or a hitch in the pen. Whatever the reason, there are a LOT of Mossy Creek folk who have gone away, or been driven away, and are now drawn to return.

Keep that in your mind; it cannot POSSIBLY be a spoiler, if it is a major plot line: folks are drawn to return.

The lady on the bike is the hard-working veterinarian Dr. Jacqueline Powell, known as Jax by people who care about her. She is one who was driven away, mostly by her parents. What kind of parents were they? Well, if Jax had been a dog, the veterinarian would have reported them for abuse, neglect, exploitation, and refusal to be nice (that's not really a thing. btw). And what draws her back is a 911-type call from her goddaughter Ali.

Here's how important the call is: Jax KNOWS she is dumping her job in responding by immediately booking a flight. At the precise time of the call, she doesn't care for some aspects of Mossy Creek AT ALL; that matters not at all. She is DEEPLY bonded to Ali, to Ali's mother Quinn, and to Ali's aunt Annie.

I had to make a spreadsheet to diagram all the relationships. They aren't COMPLICATED, but there are four generations (at least) involved, and I've been reading this series for some small number of years.

So, what's the emergency? NOT TELLING YOU! HA HA HA HA HA!

I will say this, and it's a clue, and not a spoiler: NOTHING is more toxic than a toxic family, and nothing brings that toxicity to a boil than fights over money. (I actually think, courtesy of Bunker Hunt, that the play is not for money, it's for power, and money is just how we keep score.)

So, how do the superpowers enter? NOT TELLING YOU! HA HA HA HA HA!

However, it's FAR more important to have a rested, resolute heart, than it is to be able to leap tall buildings at a single bound.

There is a brief, mildly explicit sex scene between two consenting adults forming a permanent pair bond. It's my understanding that this is essential for literature in this genre; it certainly isn't enough to attract porn addicts. If you don't like that, it will be easy enough to skip those two or three pages. I am strongly biased toward sexual activity as a participatory rather than spectator sport, and I didn't find it problematic; YMMV, but don't get all bluenose on us, okay?

As an exercise, I searched for the terms "love" and "lust." Of the three appearances of "lust," one of them was a biker expressing admiration for a motorcycle. That leaves the ratiom at 44:1, in favor of love; hardly an X rating. If there is adult language or drug use, I didn't see it. (I can't remember if there are any other things I'm supposed to notice/warn/wail about.)

"Rogue Magic" was a delightful book for me to read. I found it to be upbeat, even though there was the potential for tragedy at MULTIPLE points. Those situations are treated seriously, but the character defects of the Good Guys never tend toward betrayal of those beloved, for personal benefit. There is also a great reveal that has implications for the entire series, not just this installment.

## Second Chance Angel by Griffin Barber and Kacey Ezell Review by Pat Patterson

Since I read "Gilded Cage" in the "Fistful of Credits" anthology back in 2017, the writing of Kacy Ezell has astounded me; [click here](#) to read my review of that story. I don't recall ever devoting an entire blog post to a single story in a collection, but this one was well worth the exception. She's not my ONLY favorite author, but she is definitely at the top of the list.

All of my favorites write about why THIS exploding spaceship is significant. Sure, the suits of the Mechanized Infantry are fantastic in themselves, but it's Johnny Rico we care about it. Kipling tells us FIRST about the widow in England who weeps for her lost son, before we know about the samadh of a hundred heads.

It's PERSONAL, see?

Therefore, at least a PART of my reading/reviewing plan includes ANY of the new releases by authors who I have marked as good storytellers. That doesn't mean ANYBODY gets an automatic pass; I've written at least one one-star review for an author at the very top of my list. I mention that because I've had a person who hates Heinlein accuse me of indiscriminately tossing out five-star reviews. (Since my reviews tend to run LONG, I also reject out the "tossing out" accusation...)

Thus, this review emerges some six months after I was given access to a review copy. I regret the de-

lay; it is not a function of anything but the influence of LTUE.

I see from other reviews that the noir aspects of the story have been acknowledged; personally, it was a lot more specific than that. However, I mis-remembered, and had the protagonist labeled as "Sam Spade." His last name IS Muck, after all, which is something you might use a spade to eliminate. However, reviewing the hard-boiled detectives disclosed that the big Unresolved-Sexual-Tension-duo was Mike Hammer and his secretary Velda.

Ralston Muck is the Big Lug, although he's not a former cop working as a private eye in a seamy office in LA; instead, he's a former MILITARY cop, working as a bouncer in a seamy bar in Last Stop Station.

I like science as much as anybody, I guess, but science alone does NOT make for a good story. Here, the necessary-but-not-sufficient science aspects include that humans were recruited by aliens to fight a galactic war; Artificial Intelligence is advanced enough that they run major environmental functions; relatively cheap interstellar transport and communications is real; lots of aliens exist, and interact; humans can receive AI modifications that enhance various capabilities. The rest of the story is the really good part (one exception).

At the time of these events, humans have gotten over the trauma of Earth's destruction. It's something they are aware of, but nobody is bent out of shape about it anymore. The identified Bad Guys, the Xlodich, have been wiped out, and life goes on. One of the places it's going on is Last Stop Station; think Sam Spade's Los Angeles.

The presumptive heroine of the story is Siren, a singer in the dive where Muck works. She's only with us at the very beginning of the book; it's her abrupt disappearance that triggers the main plot line. Muck gets involved because he was the last person to see her alive, having escorted her home after a fan attempted to get to her while she was on stage.

Here's the BIG event: Siren's implanted AI is somehow removed, and finds her way to Muck's shabby domicile, and inhabits his body! This implant, taking the designated term for such entities as a personal identifier (Angel) is determined to find out what happened to Siren, and get back inside her body again. For reasons explained in the story, she is a semi-welcome presence. Key passage, narrated by Angel:

"I remained silent awhile, fascinated by how thoroughly I had misread my temporary host. Muck was far more than I'd thought. I don't know why I had thought he would be any less complex than Siren, but I had."

This is really the beginning of what I term 'the good part,' which involves assorted entities interacting with each other. Although science is involved, frequently, it is the interactions that matter, and Barber and Ezell have a lovely ability to imagine and describe the interactions so that they are believable and compelling. I'm not familiar with Barber's other work, but Ezell has astounded me on numerous occasions with her compact characterizations of vivid, sometimes horrifying, events.

I mentioned earlier that there was one exception to the good stuff being non-science. I found that exception in the way that interactions, extending as far as mortal combat, are described between machine intelligences. The authors string together words that I don't think were ever designed to represent struggle, and make conversations between AIs a real event, and then escalate that, so that AI combat seems as bloody as Hammer's kick to the legs and .45 slug to the guts. (You thought the Mike Hammer refer-

ences were over, didn't you?)

I'm tempted to suggest that some of the content might not be suitable for teens; then I remember that I was reading James Bond when I was 11. But, sure; if you are going to give this to your teen or pre-teen, make sure you are available to talk to them. I DO think there would be some GREAT conversations held about the relationship between Angel and Muck, concerning their reactions to initiating intimacy. That bit HAS to be Ezell's; prove me wrong.

## The Shadow by James Patterson and Brian Sitts

### Review by Heath Row

<http://N3F.org>

I was slow to learn about Conde Nast's plans to revive and revitalize the classic pulp and old-time radio hero, the Shadow, and when I learned that James Patterson had been tapped to pen the new titles—this is the first of an intended series—I was perplexed and skeptical. Patterson's an extremely prolific writer and best-selling author who now mostly plots thrillers and young adult books, primarily working with co-writers. Despite his potential sales appeal to readers, he would not have been on my short list of authors to put pen to paper in place of Walter B. Gibson writing as Maxwell Grant. Maybe Andrew Vachss, Max Allan Collins (who had a hand in several Dick Tracy books), or Paul Di Filippo. Perhaps even the recently departed Mike Resnick. But Patterson?

My skepticism was well placed. There's very little of the original Shadow in this book, at least very little of Gibson's tenor and tone, pulp stylism, or the characteristics that made the supernatural vigilante hero so popular originally. Much of that has been jettisoned to reassert the Shadow for a new, modern audience, particularly a young adult readership. In fact, the Shadow is largely eclipsed by a distant teenage relative, Maddy Gomes, who is developing supernatural powers of her own. This might very well be a YA novel.

The opening of the book is as close as we come to the original pulps and radio show. It's set in 1937 New York City, and Lamont Cranston is about to propose to Margo Lane. They are poisoned, and Cranston rushes the two to a hidden laboratory for treatment. Fast forward to 2087 and a dystopian police state of a city, a global government, and the still-alive Shiwan Khan as world president, oppressing the populace and planning a new, ever cruel approach to world domination.

Most of the book involves Cranston's revival, rediscovery of his powers, search for Lane, and assessment of the threat posed by Khan. In parallel, we learn more about the state of the world, the lives of teenage Gomes and her grandmother, and their lineage. Not only does Gomes discover and develop her own powers, similar to Cranston's, but he develops new powers that were never addressed in the original stories.

Those are occasionally referred to, with commentary on Gomes's appreciation for the old magazines and radio program. "Inspired by me, obviously," Cranston says. "But I never dressed like that. Never even owned a hat. Never carried that ridiculous gun. I guess they had to jazz things up to goose their sales." That was humorous at first but soon became irritating, as though Patterson was trying to disavow himself of—and distance himself from—the original.

In a May 2021 Forces of Geek review, Steven Thompson wrote, "[I]f you absolutely felt the need to

use the Shadow, why go out of your way to change him so much that he really isn't recognizable as the Shadow any longer? Only a few of the names are the same by the end of the book. Change those and you have all new characters." Ain't that the truth! Not only is this more a Maddy Gomes book than a Shadow book—a teenage heroine for a teenage readership—the Shadow we do get is largely divergent and almost unrecognizable from the original. That might meet the perceived needs of new, younger readers and retain copyright, but it doesn't serve older, long-time fans.

Conde Nast hopes for additional titles in the series, and for films to spring from the books, as well. Additionally, Patterson has been tapped for a Doc Savage novel expected by the end of the year, with a sequel already scheduled for next year. Unfortunately, if this novel is any indication, my hopes for those are low. Will I still read them? At least the first Doc Savage. To be honest, we're better off returning to the paperback reprints and pulp reprints, such as those published by Sanctum Books.

## Spelunking Through Hell: A Visitor's Guide to the Underworld by Seanan McGuire Reviewed by Samuel Lubell

Spelunking through Hell: A Visitor's Guide to the Underworld is the 11th book in Seanan McGuire's InCryptid novels about a family of cryptozoologists who study, protect, and hunt (when necessary) supernatural creatures. While most of the novels (as opposed to the short stories and novellas) have focused on the current generation--Alex, Verity, and Antimony Price plus an adopted cousin Sarah Zella-by--Spelunking through Hell tells the story of their grandmother, Alice Enid Healy. But drop all assumptions of elderly grandmothers, Alice barely looks twenty, is armed and dangerous, and stubborn and obsessed beyond sanity.

Sixty-five years before the book's main plotline, Alice's future husband and then-current romantic interest, Thomas, sold his soul to the malign spirit of the crossroads in return for its help saving her life. The prologue shows how, after they had been married for just five years, the crossroads collected on the bargain, taking Thomas away shortly before Alice birthed their second child. Since then, Alice has traveled the dimensions, with the help of sorcerers, route witches, trainspotters, and others, trying to find Thomas even while everyone else in the family was convinced he was long since dead. This obsession has hurt her relationship with her children (and grandchildren) who think her fixation has made her dangerously crazy.

But the consequences of events in previous books in this series have given Alice new hope. One of her grandchildren has killed the crossroads spirit and told her that the crossroads do not kill those they take, but hide them far away. So she resolves to go back to dimensions she had previously rejected and use them to go further into other realities using magical tattoos she receives from a giant snake professor, who may be an ally helping her in return for her work as a pan-dimensional bounty hunter or who may have a more sinister agenda.

Although Alice lacks magic or preternatural powers, she does possess a high tolerance for pain and the Healy family's luck, "which is sometimes good and sometimes bad, but is never, ever boring". She's a little more selfish than the other members of her family, deserting her children to quest after her missing husband, but still basically good. One minor problem with her characterization is that, although she was born in 1938 and lived on Earth through 1965 before starting her dimension-hopping, McGuire writes her as if she were a contemporary of her grandchildren.

Even though this is the 11th book in the series, McGuire still takes care to provide enough information for new readers to follow the plot, even though they may not get all the nuances. Since most of the books in the series are episodic, there are only a few spoilers for the earlier books (mainly involving the crossroads). As with many of the other books in this series, DAW has added a bonus novella, in this case, the story of how Alice lost her father and what happened after that.

I had been a little disappointed with the previous two volumes in the series, which felt like one story puffed out to be two volumes. So, I am pleased to report this book has returned to the earlier volumes' high level of quality. There may be a bit less humor (the Aeslin mice make only brief appearances) but there is plenty of action and world-building.

Anyone who enjoys light fantasy adventure with interesting characters (most of them women) will enjoy Spelunking through Hell. There is a reason why McGuire almost always has one of her series up for best series Hugo.

## Titan by Robert Kroese Review by Graham Bradley <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

When a billionaire tech genius finds a way to pull mineral-rich asteroids into Earth's orbit, he keeps the U.S. government off his back by letting them in on the operation. The catch: America's debt-laden treasury will tie its currency to the future of the asteroid mining efforts. A saboteur steps in to throw a wrench in the works, and soon the world descends into chaos...

Kade Kapur—a man who is not entirely unlike Elon Musk as far as brains, wealth, and ambition are concerned—runs an aerospace company called Ad Astra. He's pushing the known boundaries of human capabilities in space, lassoing asteroids from the cosmos and pulling them into Earth's orbit so that mankind can reap the benefits of space mining.

However, his timing couldn't be worse: the United States Congress just flipped to the asset-grabbing Left, and Kapur's company is at the top of the list for nationalization. In order to hold off the 800-lb gorilla, he pitches a plan to the president: attach the US Treasury's future to a space mining operation that can grab asteroids whenever it wants, guaranteeing an ongoing supply of rare materials like cadmium and iridium.

This is all well and good, however no government likes to be challenged by a power it doesn't control. Kapur is double-crossed in the coming years by a Federal mole, and the "High Frontier Mining" project is thrown into chaos. Without its success the American economy crumbles overnight.

And this is only the first volume in a trilogy. Buckle up kids, things are going to get ugly.

### The characters

Kade Kapur, the son of an American woman and an Indian man who emigrated to the States. He's always had a sharp intellect and, due to his upbringing, an inability to yield to bullies. He gets his start in software and moves into his dream industry: aerospace engineering.

Rami Essak is an Egyptian hacker who crosses paths with Kapur, and though they are different in several key ways, they share a similar drive and ideology. Essak becomes a key player in the success of Kapur's ventures over the years.

Valerie Munoz, a childhood friend of Kapur who held a torch for him throughout her life and comes to his rescue decades later when he needs her the most.

Davis Christopher, an early investor in Kapur's genius, though he regularly warns him of the potential pitfalls of his ambitions. Through Davis we get a breakdown of the historic "Mississippi Scheme" that bankrupted several investors in 1720. Kapur's "High Frontier Mining" plan is scarily similar to it, and of great interest to the reader as well.

There are several other important characters, but these ones form the focal core. Overall, Kroese manages to keep about twenty different people in the spotlight and makes them distinct enough that they don't get mixed up in the complexity of it.

## The world

The key events of the story start some 10 years ahead of the current day, though we get regular flashbacks to Kade Kapur's childhood in the early 2000's. Federal spending and the national debt continue to explode, to the point where the US Treasury is on the verge of insolvency. If it cannot meet its bond obligations, the American experiment is over—especially with China and Russia waiting in the wings.

This is a world that is maybe 10% different from ours, due largely to time and technology. While the companies and people in the story are fictional, pretty much everything else is real and current.

And that oughtta scare you.

## The politics

Again, realistic to our world. Kroese doesn't mix metaphors or use euphemisms for Republicans and Democrats. There are definitely more collectivists than conservatives in power, and they control the culture even more than they do now.

As for the protagonists, the reader ends up cheering on the individualists who want to keep what they make. The enemy is the statist thief. We're treated to frequent monologues (though not so preachy) by characters who understand the mechanisms of the economic collapse, and how to lessen the impact that it has on those around them.

Many times, this book shows itself to be an informative lecture on various topics like finance and public policy, and then it puts on a fake nose and glasses to carry on with the entertainment.

## Content warning

"R" rating for language, and while there's some violence, it's not excessive or graphic. We see some deaths and some mobs. There are allusions and references to sensual scenes, but we're never "in the room" when it happens.

## Who is it for?

Personally, I recommended it to a friend who's much more familiar with cryptocurrency and block-chain than I am. What I know of these things comes from a series of Internet lectures, and while it all lines up with what I've heard, I'm sure someone who deals with it daily might have a different opinion on the details. Nevertheless, if you've got any interest in crypto, finance, resisting government over-reach, space navigation, or high-orbit mining, this book has plenty for you.

There's also a bit of "how to survive an economic collapse" to it, as Valerie takes her daughter Sophie across the country once the dollar falls apart. The third act of the book was perhaps the most tense, but instead of devolving into a blackpill narrative, the story remained hopeful against staggering odds.

Why read it?

Because it's highly relevant and informative. It takes a great deal of information that would otherwise be too dry to read and wraps it up in these characters that are admirable, characters you root for and want to see win.

I'll admit it got my blood pressure up a little bit at times, only because I listened to it the same day that Russia invaded Ukraine and Biden announced we were throwing our hat into the ring. Everything happening in our economy today could easily be a prelude to Kroese's Mammon timeline, and that's not the happiest thought in the world. Hopefully Elon Musk starts roping space rocks soon...

### The Unspoken Name by A.K. Larkwood— Review by Tom Feller

The author was one of the finalists for the Astounding (formerly John W. Campbell) Award for Best New Writer, and this is her first novel, the first book of a fantasy series. The main point-of-view character is Csorwe, a fourteen-year-old girl at the beginning of the book. She is living in a temple out in the middle of nowhere and is a month away from being sacrificed to the Unspoken God. She and the other people in the area are Oshaaru, a humanoid species notable for their tusks. An itinerant wizard named Belthandros Sethennai visits, because he wants to do research in the temple's library. His humanoid species, the Tiaanthese, have pointy ears, but no tusks. The ambitious librarian Oranna cooperates in his search for the Reliquary of Pentraverse. He is still there on the day of Csorwe's sacrifice but persuades her to run away with him. They all live in a fantasy multi-verse called the Maze of Echoes with gates to various worlds. Sethennai and Csorwe travel to several of them over the course of the next several years while Sethennai is searching for that artefact and training Csorwe to be an assassin. Sethennai is also the exiled ruler of Tiaanthe and eventually they make their way to that world. Csorwe enters the household of the usurper where she meets Talasseres Charossa who will become her best frenemy and helps Sethennai regain his throne. In part two of the novel, set five years later, Csorwe and Talasseres travel to a dead world where they meet Shuthmili, a Qarsazhi mage who is doing archaeological research there. Sethennai believes the Reliquary is somewhere in the Hollow Monument that the archaeologists have begun investigating, and their mission is to find it and return it to him. This is a very impressive debut novel.



Uprooted by Naomi Novik  
Review by Igor Koyfman

For hundreds of years, a world-weary wizard, the Dragon, protects the kingdom from a supernatural evil. To accomplish, this he needs someone rooted in the land, so every 10 years, he takes a 17-year-old girl from a village to his tower as a servant. In his own way, he cares about the peasants and occasionally helps them, as long as that doesn't compromise his mission. He's very intelligent and educated—and sick of the intrigue in the capital, so his social skills are in a bit of a decline because no intelligent conversation is to be had within reasonable distance. Well, his social skills are practically nonexistent at this point. He doesn't do anything horrible to the girls—in fact, after their 10 years of service they emerge rather well off—but he doesn't respect them either.

Agnieszka's friend Kasia is beautiful and skilled at domestic duties (gender roles are a given in this medieval society), and has been groomed from early on as the obvious pick for the Dragon. But Agnieszka possesses magic, so he's obligated to take her instead. Agnieszka is terrified. Kasia is relieved yet disappointed. and the Dragon is trying everyone's patience with his brusque style.

Once she figures things out, Agnieszka becomes a force of nature, though the Dragon still has centuries of experience on her. Just when you think you know where the story is going, the supernatural evil goes on the offensive and the entire kingdom—and perhaps the whole world—faces a danger that only escalates with every turn. And there are plenty of turns. The story is darker and more mature than readers might suspect from the initial chapters, and there is a significant death toll. Just when you think you finally know what's going on, there is another surprising twist.

The writing is lyrical, the story is beautiful, and Agnieszka and the Dragon complement each other in unexpected ways. Only together can they overcome their numerous trials, and only through personal growth and mutual respect can they harmonize their magic.

The Violet Mouse by Cedar Sanderson  
Review by Pat Patterson

Among the good writers, there are writers of great beauty. Not EVERY good author writes great beauty, and that's okay; desirable, even. I'm not sure we could take it if EVERY writer stamped great beauty on every page. I've got six lines from more-or-less obscure-ish works (not on the NY Times Best-Seller's List) that I could probably quote to you verbatim. Half of those are from three different authors; the other half come from the eclectic genius we know as Cedar Sanderson.

You may be eagerly awaiting the revelation of what beauty-writing I have found in THIS short work; get used to disappointment. I may not tell you. Not WILL not; MAY not. That's because it would be an unconscionable spoiler. It's the fourth line from the end of the story, though. DON'T go there first! What are you, eight years old?

Sanderson has acquired multiple skill sets over the years, but for the recent past, has been employed in a laboratory where Science happens. As she has done in previous works, she uses her experience to bring out a richness of characterization, while constructing a solid plot.

In this story, three laboratory workers proceed with an ethically and legally risky next step, after discovering that the covert work of one of them has permitted a complete color change on two select rats.

And that's VIOLET, as in purple, lilac, etc. Although, I first read it as including an 'N,' making it a VIOLENT mouse. I wonder if the story had an origin with a mouse that beat up the other mice, and bit fingers?

## White Ops by Declan Finn Review by J.E. Tabor <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Humanity and its allies are attacked by an upstart alien race called the Pharmakoi wielding unbelievably advanced weapons. And that's just the beginning of the threats they will face in this new space opera by Declan Finn.

It soon comes to the attention of those investigating the war that the Pharmakoi weren't acting alone – someone was arming them and then pointing them in the right direction. Private Mercenary and telepath Sean Patrick Ryan is determined to find out who.

His investigation uncovers a plot linked to the most powerful people on Earth, and threatens every living being in the galaxy.

The story

Out of nowhere, a backwater alien civilization called the Pharmakoi picks a fight with the big players in the galaxy: Humanity and another advanced but isolationist race known as the Renar. The Pharmakoi are packing weaponry that goes far beyond their capability, and while the war is bloody, Humanity and the Renar win the day, but the threat is much greater than anyone guesses. Private mercenary and telepath Sean Patrick Ryan sets out to find out who and what were behind the Pharmakoi War and discovers layers of conspiracy that lead to the centers of power on earth and mysterious demonic monsters from another galaxy. He forms a group, which he dubs "White Ops" (as opposed to "Black Ops") to keep the monstrous threat on its heels to give the rest of the galaxy time to get organized and defend themselves.

In the background, political operatives on Earth consolidate power through any means necessary: murdering their political opponents, stealing an election, and building their own secret police force. Earth's pols have no scruples, and are perfectly willing to throw humanity under the bus to get where they want to go. Earth's corrupt politicians force White Ops to wage an entirely different kind of war on the home front while battling monsters on the edges of civilized space.

The characters

Ryan is the most dangerous man in the galaxy: a flashy guy the size of a refrigerator who wears an electric blue suit and customized organic armor that dresses him like Sherlock Holmes. He also spent most of his childhood growing up in a Catholic monastery and has a lot to say about Jesuits and speaks in a cheerful Irish brogue. Ryan is a man of action, not words, and things tend to explode around him if he stays in one place too long. He tends to be good natured, but his temper can get white hot under the

right circumstance.

Ryan is on a mission to discover the origins of the Pharmakoi war, and he puts together a team of operatives that includes a military genius well versed in classic science fiction, Earth's ambassador to the Renar, who gained their respect thanks to his humane treatment of the enemy, and the daughter of a war hero and a senator who might be the best pilot in the Earth fleet.

The moniker "White Ops" is an apt one – despite their clandestine nature, the heroes feel guileless compared to the villains. Sure, they pull their share of tricks and tell their share of lies, but their methods and motives are up front for all to see.

Their human foes, politicians and bureaucrats, are envious, entitled, and assume that everyone is as self-interested as they are. This creates a stark contrast between hero and villain, and it is easy to know who to root for here. The alien villains are, well, alien, but their motives and methods are familiar. They want to turn our galaxy into their own cattle yard, alternately using brute force but also diabolical guile, using their mortal pawns' own weaknesses and desires against them.

### The world

The galaxy is a big, strange place, with aliens of all shapes and sizes and exotic locales including a rickety Dyson sphere stratified between rich and poor, complete with slums and alien gangs. The members of White Ops fight with lasers, nanites, swords of fire, flechette guns, nuclear weapons, and as is often the case with Ryan, plain old slug throwers.

Finn's rich descriptions make it easy to picture the strange creatures that populate his world, and they are what make White Ops a true space opera. There is plenty strange in this world, but Finn makes most of it seem utterly familiar. I never felt disoriented among the various oddities in people, places or things in White Ops. On the contrary, Finn weaves the familiar with the strange, making use of Earth history, religion and pop culture to give context to the world of White Ops.

### The politics

The world of White Ops is strange, but the politics are straight out of a newspaper. Between the details of a stolen Earth election, lampooning public healthcare, and some side commentary on Earth history, White Ops does not shy away from the political. Finn takes an unabashedly American, conservative, and Roman Catholic point of view in this story, along with some ribbing at the Jesuits.

### Content warning

There is plenty of violence to go around, but nothing too graphic in its description. There are also some sexual situations as the shadowy telepathic aliens from another galaxy are expert tempters.

### Who is it for?

If you like noir, spec-ops military fiction, and Catholicism mixed in with your epic galaxy-spanning space operas, White Ops is for you.

### Why read it?

Read White Ops for the unapologetic heroism in the face of cynical politician villains that are all too familiar, and the rich descriptions of alien races and worlds. Also, the action. Lots of action.

## You Sexy Thing by Cat Rambo

### Review by Jason P. Hunt

Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

After interviewing Cat Rambo twice now on Live From The Bunker (here and here), it's past time for me to review her work. And I'm glad You Sexy Thing is the first title on that list.

Captain Niko Larsen and her crew have escaped the Holy Hive Mind, which if I have it right, is a type of mental web where a person's consciousness is stored in a collective that draws from everyone's experiences. (Think the Empire plus the Borg plus Zuckerberg's metaverse.) The only way to escape permanent absorption is to have an artistic talent, and Larsen has pulled her crew into running a restaurant — The Last Chance, located on a far-flung space station known as TwiceFar.

That's a basic establishment of the setting, and the story starts to roll out from there following the arrival of a famous restaurant critic and a wealthy visitor who owns a sentient living starship, You Sexy Thing. When Larsen and her crew find themselves on board the ship facing peril from multiple sides, including a threat from Larsen's past as a Free Trader (freighter captain, smuggler, scoundrel?).

I wasn't sure what to expect before I cracked this open, but it's pretty standard space opera fare, complete with faster-than-light drives and aliens bent on dominating the galaxy (and one race that just sees the entire galaxy as their playground — literally!) You Sexy Thing has echoes of Moira from Farscape but is more advanced in that she can communicate directly with Larsen and her crew. She's also got the ability to learn, and their time spent together provides plenty of opportunities for the ship to learn a great many things from social interactions to friendship to the importance of a good meal.

Niko and Dabry, her four-armed Sergeant and best friend and chef, have a long-suffering rapport throughout the book. I found it easy to believe these two have known each other for a long while and have been through a lot of hellish things together. Indeed, the camaraderie between Niko's entire crew feels lived in, so when the stakes get higher, there's a genuine concern between them, especially when it starts to look like not everyone is going to survive.

The notion of a living ship isn't new, but Rambo takes the idea and puts a new spin on it, with the ship able to replicate pretty much anything out of its own organic structure anywhere inside its walls. The fact that the ship is also sentient adds another emotional layer to the plight of Niko's crew, mainly because the ship is partially responsible for the situation. But as they continue on their journey, watching the ship learn new things and start to enjoy learning new things made for a nice refresh of what could easily have become a trope.

The pace of the book zips along, not too quickly, not too skimpy on details. It feels like a story universe where I could stay a while, and as it's the first book, I know there are going to be the usual expected points where the reader has to be introduced to everyone and everything in this world. Rambo deftly weaves those pieces of exposition into the dialogue and flashes back to earlier encounters in a way that's organic to where we are in the story.

The only quibble I have is the use of the “they” pronoun for a single character. I frequently had to remind myself that this is just one character we’re talking about, and that was slightly annoying, but it wasn’t enough to be jarring or take me out of the story. I’m old. “They” is plural for me.

Still and all, it’s a good story. A fun read with a slightly rushed third act — I would have liked to see more of their final destination — but solid with good believable characters that I can see myself re-visiting from time to time.

### Zodiac by Neal Stephenson Reviewed by Sam Lubell

Neal Stephenson's Zodiac is much less complicated than his Snow Crash or The Diamond Age; in fact it is close to being a conventional thriller. It is set at most a few years in the future with the hero functioning as a "Granola James Bond" or what he thinks of as a "Toxic Spiderman" working for the Group of Environmental Extremists fighting the polluters through public relations spectacles, pouring concrete into pipes, and measuring the environment through lobsters. This is not -quite- cyberpunk although the hero is clearly part of the counterculture, referring to bacon as a carcinogen and he doesn't turn down nitrous oxide.

A first person narrator, Sangamon admits to being annoying, "One of the problems, hand out with me, is that I can turn any topic into a toxic horror story. I've lost two girlfriends and a job by reading an ingredients label out loud, with annotations, at the wrong time." However, he makes up for that by being amusing and quite capable, early in the book we see him bring a polluter company to its knees by the strategic placement of toilet gaskets and salad bowls.

The science fictional element in this book is fairly minor, the leakage of a genetically engineered bacteria that causes a virus into Boston Harbor which, when Sangamon comes close to discovering it, leads the polluters to frame him as an environmental terrorist and try to kill him (notably in a wonderful scene where thugs with guns are out-manuevered by our hero in the Zodiac boat of the title.) Meanwhile, the scientist who created the virus, now infected with it, is out to become a real terrorist, by killing the presidential candidate who masterminded the creation of the bacterium.

The real science here is that of environmentalism. The hero is earnestly worried about the environment and the ways in which the polluters try to deceive the public with comparisons like an eyedropper's worth in a football field and portraying the environmentalists as extremists. This both fits his character and provides an alternative voice in science fiction to conservatives like Jerry Pournelle who paints environmentalists as the villains in Fallen Angels.

Zodiac was published in 1988, before his books became so bloated. This is a tightly written action adventure that will appeal to fans of the mystery and thriller genres as well as to those who enjoyed Snow Crash and Stephenson's other works.

# Literary Criticism

## Cheers for Neffers!

Neffers Melody Friedenthal reports that her short story *Country Lane* has been included in Bardsy's romance anthology "Love is Blind".

## Expanded Universe by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

"Each copy is guaranteed – or double your money back – to be printed on genuine paper of enough pages to hold the covers apart."

### Heinlein's Introduction

*Expanded Universe*, published in 1980, is an odd collection of miscellaneous short stories, non-fiction articles and commentary written by Heinlein himself. It is an expansion of *The Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein*, but well-worth reading in its own right. And yet, given that it collects a number of stories that weren't published too often, it is also a guide to Heinlein's earlier and more limited works. There are insights here, but also reminders that Heinlein took time to develop into the Grandmaster of Science-Fiction we admire.

Some of the stories can be dismissed fairly quickly. *Cliff and the Calories*, for example, features a girl who is trying to diet in hopes of impressing her boyfriend. It's sloppy, sentimental and very unlike Heinlein. *They Do It With Mirrors* is a murder mystery with a curious resolution (and Heinlein himself notes that crime does not pay – enough – to convince him to keep writing whodunit stories.) *No Bands Playing*, *No Flags Flying* takes an unsentimental look at bravery; *A Bathroom of Her Own* is a political story of dirty tricks and naivety, perhaps based on Heinlein's own experience, with a surprising twist at the end. *Nothing Ever Happens on the Moon* and *Searchlight* are both stories of adventures on the lunar surface, the former reminding me – again – why I didn't like being a Boy Scout. But it does have a scoutmaster who actually remembers he isn't one of the boys.

Other stories take a look at how technology can change the world – and wonder, in a curiously pessimistic way, if we will survive our own technology. *Blowups Happen* suggests that there will always be disasters, no matter how many precautions we take; Heinlein, in his reflection, points out that nuclear disasters have never been as bad as the naysayers claim, a sharp response to the hysterics of anti-nuclear activists. *Solution Unsatisfactory*, by contrast, speculates on what might happen when the United States develops an ultimate weapon; radioactive dust, dropped from the skies. It is a curious story, one that was outdated even when written; indeed, in many ways, it illustrates the limitations of Heinlein's thinking at the time. It's worth studying in more detail.

The story is focused on Clyde Manning, a retired US Army officer who became a congressman after being forced to retire for heart problems. (Panshin suggests, in his detailed analysis of the story, is that

there was more than a little wish-fulfilment in this.) Manning is hand-picked to run a project intended to produce new weapons for the military, a project that eventually leads to KO Dust. Dropped from the skies, the dust can exterminate a city's population within hours. Manning, believing that this changes the world, insists that the dust be used to force Germany to surrender and establish American hegemony over the entire world ... in self-defence. The alternative, he insists, is a cycle of destruction that will end with civilisation reduced to barbarism.

But each shift in the balance of power – a war, the foundation of an international authority to control the world – puts Manning closer and closer to absolute power. And, when it ends, Manning is the de facto world dictator. Did he aim for power all along? Or did he merely take advantage of each and every opportunity to enhance his position? And what happens when his dicey heart kills him? Panshin suggests that there is a whiff of sulphur around Manning, and he isn't wrong. Manning, in most of Heinlein's stories, would be the villain. Is he the villain here? Even if he is nothing more than a well-intentioned extremist, doing what he believes has to be done, he's laying the groundwork for tyranny or global war. It is a disturbing story, although it glosses over points where someone really should have said 'no' to Manning.

Life-Line, pretty much the first story Heinlein wrote (or at least the first one he sold), is both different in tone to his later stories and yet, in many ways, a clear sign of Heinlein's approach to such issues. He postulates a new piece of technology – in this case, a device that lets you predict your date of death – and then asks himself what impact it would have on the world. In this case, the losers are insurance companies. As one of them moans: "It gets worse every day. We've paid off thirteen big policies this week; all of them taken out since Pinero started operations."

They do try to stop the inventor, first by taking him to court in hopes of getting an injunction placed on his activities. The inventor, however, pours scorn on this suggestion:

"It is true that the [insurance firm] has lost business through my activities, but that is the natural result of my discovery, which has made their policies as obsolete as the bow and arrow. If an injunction is granted on that ground, I shall set up a coal-oil-lamp factory, and then ask for an injunction against the Edison and General Electric companies to forbid them to manufacture incandescent bulbs."

And the judge agrees:

"There has grown up in the minds of certain groups in this country the notion that because a man or corporation has made a profit out of the public for a number of years, the government and the courts are charged with the duty of guaranteeing such profit in the future, even in the face of changing circumstances and contrary to public interest. This strange doctrine is not supported by statute nor common law. Neither individuals nor corporations have any right to come into court and ask that the clock of history be stopped or turned back."

The inventor is one of Heinlein's most personable characters, alternatively lambasting the hidebound scientists in universities while praising the press (who talk like stereotypical reporters from that era) and daring the insurance men to stop him. He is both a good guy and a bad guy, in some ways; he has a point, but he's also something of a jerk. His reluctance to explain how his device functions works against him, although he's quite correct to argue that he can prove that it works through correctly predicting dozens of death dates. And his refusal to share means that the secret of the device dies with him (it's revealed at the end that he predicted his own death.)

Despite its crudeness, in places, Life-Line touches on matters that have considerable modern-day rele-

vance. Each technological development leads to winners and losers – Amazon has displaced many traditional publishers, while Uber has threatened taxi companies – and it's natural for the losers to try to turn back the clock. But they can't turn it back. Companies – and governments – that fail to adapt go the way of the dinosaur. Heinlein does not touch on other matters – if you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you do? – but he doesn't have to in order to make his point. Change happens. Adapt or die.

The Happy Days Ahead is a curious mixture of fiction and non-fiction, the story of a story that starts with the idea 'what would I do if I ran the government?' It may well be the precursor to stories like Executive Orders or The General's President, where someone from outside government is appointed to fix the mess caused by the professional politicians. In this case, a presidential candidate appoints a dark horse candidate as VP, which puts her in the Oval Office when the president dies in a drunken accident. Yes, here: Heinlein not only presented a female president, he presented a black female president. She promptly ignores suggestions she should resign and starts improving the country. As is always the case in this sort of story, the suggestions work perfectly and the country thrives. And many of her suggestions are very good ones.

The non-fiction articles are of considerable interest, although many of them are quite dated now.

"Pravda" Means "Truth" and Inside Intourist discuss Russia and the communist threat to the west, outlining how communists bend the truth to their will as well as detailing the dangers (particularly to your wallet) in travelling behind the Iron Curtain. Some of the truths are still with us today, most notably the fact that communists will not only try to keep people ignorant, but repeat lies time and time again until they sink in beyond all possibility of doubt:

"We were waiting in the Kiev airport, May 14. The weather was foul, planes were late and some 30 foreigners were in the Intourist waiting room. One of them asked where we were going and my wife answered that we were flying to Vilno.

"Vilno? Where is that? My wife answered that it was the capital of Lithuania, one of the formerly independent Baltic republics which the USSR took over 20 years ago—a simple historic truth, as indisputable as the fact of the Invasion of Normandy or the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

"But the truth is not pravda.

"A young Intourist guide present understood English, and she immediately interrupted my wife, flatly contradicted her and asserted that Lithuania had always been part of the Soviet Union."

I've never been to Russia, but from what I've heard Heinlein understated the case. Spies everywhere; a tourist was not (is not?) supposed to go anywhere without a government minder. The USSR was a prison camp above ground and a mass grave below. And yet, there are people who hold it up as a great dream. It was a nightmare.

The remaining pieces of non-fiction touch on this to a greater or lesser degree. Heinlein's call to arms – and nuclear testing – that eventually lead to Starship Troopers is overdramatic to my ears, but Heinlein wasn't actually wrong. The Soviet Union was inherently untrustworthy, lying to its own people as well as to foreigners who wanted to believe the pretty lies. And yes, there was a reason to want nuclear testing stopped that benefited the USSR; they were behind at the time and knew it, although the US didn't know it. Later, Heinlein discusses the importance of patriotism, the spin-offs of the space program (which has paid for itself a thousand times over) and the future within our grasp. It can be ours if we



reach out and take it.

Overall, Expanded Universe is something of a mixed bag, but the stories within its pages are well worth a read. And Heinlein's commentary is often amusing, often droll ... and an insight into a man who'd had a remarkable career.

## The 2021 Hugo Best Series Finalists Reviews by Tom Feller

Although the voting has already taken place and the winners announced, I still had some books and stories on my Nook that I downloaded as part of the Hugo Award packet. I am reading them at my leisure. These works were all nominated in the Best Series category. There are two space operas, two epic fantasies, one urban fantasy, and one alternative history. A few of them actually have some common themes.

### John Scalzi's *Interdependency*

Set in the 36th Century, humanity has spread out to the stars after discovering the "Flow", a extradimensional way to travel faster than light through natural river-like passages between almost 50 stars. Humans in those star systems live in an empire called the Interdependency. Unfortunately, the Flow is not eternal, and one scientist has discovered that it is on the verge of collapse. To add to the crisis, there is only one Earth-like planet in the empire, and they have long since lost contact with the Earth itself. The rest of the human race lives either in space habitats or domed and underground cities on planets, and they need interstellar trade to survive. No one world is self-sufficient. The main characters in *The Collapsing Empire*, the first novel in the series, are Cardenia, the recently crowned empress who only inherited the throne because her older half-brother died in an accident, Kiva, the greedy, over-sexed, and foul-mouthed scion of an important merchant family, Ghreni, the scheming scion of another important merchant family and one of the principal villains, and Marce, a young scientist and minor noble from End, the only earth-like planet in the empire. He is also the son of the scientist who discovered that the Flow was collapsing. Some reviewers compared it to *Dune*, but the prose is not up to Herbert's level and lacks the epic feel of the *Dune* books. Furthermore, Scalzi uses the F-word more frequently than I like. Otherwise, this space opera was a lot of fun to read. It was nominated for a Hugo a few years ago and holds up well on a second reading.

### S. A. Chakraborty's *Daevabad Trilogy*

This trilogy is set in the 19th Century Middle East, mostly in the legendary city of Daevabad, which, according to tradition, was somewhere in modern day Afghanistan and invisible to pure blood humans. At the end of the second book, Daevabad was conquered by the Daeva tribe of djinn led by Manizeh, a female magician. It had been previously ruled by King Ghassan, a member of the Geziri tribe of djinns who had overthrown the Daeva tribe several centuries previously. (The Daevas actually come from Persian folklore rather than the Arabian.) In addition to the Geziris, Daevas and other djinn tribes, members of the city's lowest class are called the Shafits, who are a mixed race of djinn and human. The three point of view characters are Ali, Ghassan's younger son, Nahri, a Daeva healer with magical powers who is also a Nahid, a kind of Daeva royalty, and Dara, a powerful djinn warrior from 14 centuries previously whom Manizeh resurrected. Together, they comprise a kind of love triangle. Nahri is actually half-human and half-djinn, but her supposed mother is Manizeh, which gives her considerably higher status than the Shafits. The identity of her father is not revealed until toward the end of the last

book in the trilogy. During her career as a healer, she insists on treating the Shafits as well as the djinn which causes some conflicts with the djinn rulers.

Ghassan had forced Nahri to marry Muntadhir, his older son and heir. She would have preferred Ali, who in the second book had returned from exile after five years due to the efforts of his mother Hatset and sister Zaynab. In *Empire of Gold*, the third book in the trilogy, Nahri and Ali flee to Cairo, and much of their story lines concern their efforts to return to Daevabad and retake the city. Together, they meet Sobek, the crocodile-like god of the Nile River from Egyptian mythology, and Fiza, a female pirate. Separately, Nahri meets the Peri, who are elemental gods, and Ali meets Tiamet, the goddess of the Indian Ocean. Muntadhir, who is a closet bi-sexual, and Nahri had no children, because she has access to birth control potions which she took secretly. She also would have preferred Dara, who is Manizeh's chief deputy in establishing control over the city. Ghassan is now dead, Muntadhir is Manizeh's prisoner, Zaynab is leading the resistance against her, and Hatset is relatively safe in her home city of Ta Netry, because Ghassan had exiled her there in the second book. The story lines come together toward the end, and the closer the book gets to the climax, the more difficult it is to put it down. My Nook edition was over 500 pages, but there were few wasted words. I was even kind of sorry to reach the end, because the central characters are so endearing, and I knew I would miss them.

### Seanán McGuire's October Daye Series

The premise of these stories is that the supernatural creatures from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* are real and that beings from the faerie world not only live in a world parallel to our own but even walk among us. October "Toby" Daye is a changeling, that is, she had human father and fairy mother, which puts her at the bottom of the pecking order in the faerie world.

### Strangers in Court

This novella is set in 1992 when Daye is working as a pickpocket for Devin, a changeling who functions as a Fagin-like character except that he sexually abuses the female children who work for him. At the beginning of the story, she takes a home pregnancy test that comes back positive. Devin is NOT the father, because by this time Daye is fully grown and has gotten too old for Devin's tastes. Instead, the father is Cliff, a human who does not know that she is half-fairie. She had already decided to leave Devin's service for Sylvester Torquill's, a pure blood faerie duke. On her way to Devin's headquarters, called "Home", she discovers that the knowe, a combination palace and gateway to the faerie world, of San Francisco's faerie queen has collapsed after a ritual went wrong. She foolishly goes into the ruins and rescues a noble female pure blood fairy who then helps her with her efforts to leave Devin.

### Rosemary and Rue

This is a full-length novel, the first of nine, with a prologue set in 1995 in which Daye, having left Devin, is working as a private detective investigating the disappearances of two pure blood fairies of high rank. This stops abruptly when one of the suspects casts a magic spell that turns her into a fish for fourteen years. Six months after the spell has expired, Daye is passing for human, working the graveyard shift of a supermarket, and is estranged from Cliff, whom she had married, and their daughter. During those fourteen years, he had her declared dead, and, since she had never revealed her fairie heritage or even the existence of magic, it's not as if she can explain that she spent those years as a fish. All Cliff and their daughter know is that she has been gone. The two missing fairies eventually turned up while Daye was still a fish, although it is implied that the reason for their disappearances will come up again in a future story.

Daye gets involved in the murder of a high-ranking female fairy who herself has been passing as a rich human businesswoman. Daye investigates the murder, which gives the novel a plot, and re-connects with her friends and acquaintances in the fairie world. Among those friends and acquaintances are Devin, Tybalt, the King of Cats in the San Francisco area (in this world cats have their own kings who answer only to Oberon himself), Sylvester Torquill, who is still her immediate liege lord, Connor, one of Daye's ex-boy friends who is now married to Torquill's daughter Rayse, Lilly, an undine who lives in a pond in Golden Gate Park, and the Queen of Mists, who is the fairy-in-chief over northern California. As a whodunit, the book was fairly good, although I guessed the identity of the murderer rather early on. I still enjoyed it, as I have all the other books by this author that I have read.

### A Local Habitation

Between Torquill's dukedom, called Shadowed Halls, and another dukedom, called Dreamers Glass, is a county named Tame Lightning, aka Fremont, California. It serves as a buffer between them and is ruled by January O'Leary, Torquill's niece. He has not heard from January in some time, so he "requests" that Daye drive there in her Volkswagen Bug and investigate. (Her magical powers do not include any that provide transportation.) She is accompanied by Quentin, a sixteen-year-old page in Torquill's court. He is a pureblood, but his parentage is a secret, which means that he is probably of high rank but serving Torquill to gain the experience needed by a ruler.

When they arrive, they learn that January has been trying to get in touch with the duke, but something is blocking communication between them. It is rather urgent that they talk to each other, because there have been several murders in her court. Now her court is not what we would expect in a fantasy novel. Instead, it is a high tech company, and January functions as the CEO. Her adopted daughter, April, is a dryad who inhabits their local area network. As a whodunit, this novel is much improved over the previous one, because the identity of the murderer was someone who I had considered early in the book but rejected for several reasons. Therefore, it took me by surprise but was quite logical in retrospective. It is structured like Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* in that suspects are eliminated by killing them off. However, I do fault Daye for not making figuring out the reason for the Duke and the Countess not being able to communicate her first priority.

I have already alluded to the concept of "passing". In *Empire of Gold*, Nahri and Ali pass as humans while they are hiding out in Cairo. They are tempted to continue the masquerade as they could easily imagine a good life together there. However, that would have been a completely different story. In the October Daye stories, when a pure blood fairy passes for human, they are slumming, like Daye's mother. She and her mother are estranged, because the mother returned to her high status in the fairie world and left Daye behind. Daye herself passes for human as a way to avoid the rigid and blatant class structure in the fairie world. The next series also utilizes the concept of passing.

### Martha Wells's Murderbot Diaries

The point-of-view character of this series is a security android, aka SecUnit, who vaguely remembers murdering 57 people. Because it was so valuable, its owner, referred to as The Company, decided to erase its memories rather than destroy it. They were not entirely successful. Moreover, they inadvertently disabled its "governor module" which forced it to accept external commands from the owner or a representative of the owner. It now has free will, and, in a sense, it is mixed race, like Daye and Nahri, in that it has a combination of electronic, mechanical, and organic parts. It is also addicted to entertainment videos, especially a trashy soap opera called "Sanctuary Moon" and would much rather watch

them than interact with humans. The Murderbot Diaries not only won the Hugo for Best Series last year, but her novel *Network Effect*, another entry in the series, won in that category as well.

### All Systems Red

At the beginning of the first story, a novella, SecUnit is still pretending to be under the Company's control. It is working under a security contract for a small scientific expedition on a newly discovered planet. The scientists include Mensah, the leader, and Gurathin, an augmented human, meaning he has electronic implants that are quite noticeable. However, they learn that their expedition is being sabotaged, and they have to figure out the identity of their enemy and what to do about them. While all this is going on Mensah learns that SecUnit has free will. At the end of the story, Mensah purchases SecUnit from the Company and informs it that it is free, although legally SecUnit is still Mensah's property.

### Artificial Condition

In the second novella, SecUnit is off to the mining planet Ravi Hyral, where the 57 murders took place. It is passing as an augmented human, because it is illegal for androids to travel without some kind of human supervision. In return for entertainment videos, it obtains passage on a transport named Periheleon, whose artificial intelligence SecUnit calls ART. ART functions much like HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and runs the ship. It helps SecUnit by using its medical facilities to alter its appearance to look more human and, having observed passengers and crew members over the years, gives it advice on how to pass. Their interactions are the best part of this story.

After arriving at the space station orbiting the planet, SecUnit hires itself out to a group of humans to gain passage to the planet itself. Their research has been stolen by their former employer, and, with the assistance of a sexbot, a kind of robotic prostitute, SecUnit helps them recover it. SecUnit also visits the scene of the murders and learns that while it was present, it was not responsible. Unfortunately, neither it nor the reader learns the reason for the murders. The author is saving that for another story. I have liked all the stories that I have read in this award-winning series.

### R. F. Kuang's Poppy War Trilogy-

Nikan, the fantasy world in the author's *Poppy War* trilogy is set in, is loosely based on imperial China, although the dominant religion is polytheistic with a pantheon of 64 gods. Other countries are the Federation of Mugen, loosely based on Japan, the Hinterlands, loosely based on Mongolia, and the Republic of Hesperia, loosely based on the western countries, especially Great Britain. The main character is an orphaned female named Fang Runin, aka Rin, whose skin is darker than the normal Nikaran because she is a native of the island of Speer. Its population was wiped out by the Mugenese in a deliberate act of genocide, and she is the last Speerling. The author has stated that she was inspired by Mao Tse-Tung. In the first novel, she was adopted by a family of provincial opium smugglers who had planned to marry her off to a rich, middle-aged merchant when she turned fourteen. However, with two years of intense study, she passed the Keju, a standardized test required for admission to one of the imperial universities and intentionally resembling a test for civil service used during China's Song dynasty. Her score was so high that she qualified for Sinegard Academy, the most prestigious university in the empire. After her first year, she apprenticed under an enigmatic master named Jiang with the intention of becoming a shaman. One of the students at the university was Nezha, the son of a warlord and her worst enemy among the student body. Later they become good friends and almost lovers, but then become enemies again. Their love-hate relationship drives much of the plot in the trilogy. Another stu-

dent was Venka, Nezha's girlfriend, daughter of the imperial finance minister, and Rin's second worst enemy, but they also later become friends. Finally, there was Kitay, the son of the imperial defense minister, the smartest person Rin ever met, and her best friend. They become estranged at one point, but later reconcile and eventually undergo a ritual that bonds them even closer.

In the first novel, *The Poppy War*, the Mugenese invade, and, like all her classmates, Rin had to leave school to join the army and was later assigned to join the Cike. In peacetime, they were assassins for the Empress but during the war, they served as a special forces unit. With a few exceptions, they are all shamans with different powers and resemble a superhero team. They include Chaghan and Qara, twins from the Hinterlands, Aratsha, a shaman with water magic powers, Baji and Suni, who provide some needed comic relief, and Ramsa, a sixteen-year-old explosives expert. Rin eventually becomes their leader. By the end of the first novel, the Mugenese are defeated in an act of fire magic by Rin and her god Phoenix that resembled the atomic bombs, only worse. However, Rin is so horrified by her own actions that she is afraid to use those powers again.

## The Dragon Republic

Rin and the Cike are outlaws at the beginning of the second novel, set three months after the first book ends, and under the protection of Moag, a pirate queen for whom they perform assassination missions. They later join up with Vaisra, Nezha's father and warlord of the Dragon province, in his rebellion against the Empress. During the course of the second book, Rin finally meets some Hesperians. They are more technologically advanced than the Nikarans, and some of their devices include paddle wheel steamboats, airships, and arquebuses. Their religion combines the 18th Century concept of God as a watch maker with elements of Zoroastrianism. Among the Hesperians she meets are Petra, a combination priestess/scientist who is a nasty racist, and August, a missionary who represents a kinder and gentler kind of racism. Since the back story and the world building of the series have already been done, this book really focuses on the action and the characters, especially Rin's confrontation with Su Daji, the Empress.

## The Burning God

At the end of the second book, Rin, Kitay, and Venka have a falling out with Vaisra and Nezha. By the beginning of the third, they have allied themselves with another warlord in the southern part of Nikara and find themselves fighting Mugenese forces still in Nikara, Vaisra and Nezha, and the Hesperians. Rin even returns to Tikany, her home town. Working with Kitay, Rin learns to control her fire magic. Then she is re-united with Jiang, allies herself with Daji, and meets Riga, the former emperor. The course of the war with Vaisra and Nezha resembles Mao Tse-Tung's campaign against Chiang Kai-Shek after World War II, and Rin tries to re-create the Cike by creating a squad of shamans. I would not call the ending a happy one, but it is logical and ties up all the loose ends.

## Mary Robinette Kowal's Lady Astronaut Universe

The first premise of this alternate history series is that Dewey defeated Truman in the 1948 presidential election and greenlighted the research of Werner von Braun and his team of German rocket scientists so that they could put nuclear warheads into orbit. The second is that an asteroid crashed into Chesapeake Bay in 1952 and not only killed many people in the coastal areas but changed the climate to the point where the Earth will be uninhabitable in about 50 years. A crash program to put as many people into space as possible is under way, and many of the astronauts are women. These are short stories from the series.

## We Interrupt This Broadcast

The protagonists of this story, but definitely not the heroes, are Fidel and Mira, who are computer programmers at the Pentagon in 1952. Fidel had been in the Manhattan Project but became disillusioned after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Using punch cards, he re-programs the trajectory of a satellite carrying a nuclear warhead to hit an asteroid making a close approach to the Earth and change its course so that it comes close to Washington, D.C. His purpose is to eliminate the United States as a great power and does not consider the potential consequences for the rest of the world. Myra is his chief assistant who discovers a flaw in his program, not accounting for the 1952 leap day, and realizes what he is trying to do. She keeps his secret, and both having already contracted tuberculosis, they decide to stay in Washington and die when the asteroid hits.

## Articulated Restraint

Ruby Donaldson, a female astronaut in 1960 (between the events of the first and second novels), knew she should not have gone dancing the night before she was scheduled for a training session in the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, a glorified water tank, because she sprained an ankle doing the Lindy-Hop. When she arrives, she discovers that the original exercise has been cancelled in favor of one designed to duplicate an emergency that occurred during a docking accident on the space station Lunetta the night before. The passengers are still stuck in the spacecraft with the air locks jammed and will run out of oxygen in sixteen hours if they are not rescued or resupplied. Not revealing her disability, Ruby manages to gut it out and find a way to fix the problem. It is a simple, but effective story.

## Amara's Giraffe

This flash fiction story is set on the moon. Alyshondra is taking her eleven-month old daughter Amara to visit her grandma when the girl's stuffed giraffe behaves anomalously. This gives Alyshondra a clue that she has to make a course correction. It's a cute story.

## The Phobos Experience

This story is set on Mars after a colony has been established in 1972. A U.S. Air Force general sends three people to Phobos to investigate its cave. They are Mo, the pilot, Darlene, their navigator, who just happens to have a problem with vertigo in micro-gravity, and Lindquist, a geologist. Unfortunately, they discover hostile astronauts there.

## Rockets Red

By 1974, the Martian colony is sufficiently well-established that they celebrate its founding with fireworks. They have to be imported from Earth, of course, along with the punch cards needed to program the computer controlling them. Naturally, something goes wrong.

## The Lady Astronaut of Mars

The title character is Elma York, who is also the protagonist of first two novels in this series. This story is set thirty years after the first Mars expedition, of which York was a member, and she is now living on Mars with Nathaniel, her computer-programmer husband, who is terminally ill. In a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, their doctor is Dorothy, who had met Elma when Dorothy was a child. Although Elma is still on the active astronaut list, she has not flown a mission for a long time. Now she has been offered a mission in which she would be flying by herself for three years with no guarantee that she

would ever return home. She wants to accept the mission, because this will be her last chance to go into space but is torn over whether to leave her husband during the last few months of his life. It won the Hugo in the novelette category in 2014.

~Finis~











