

The R3F

Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
September 2024

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FREE BOOKS

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Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

Become the Hunted
Not In Our Stars
The Captive’s Rank
The Universal Prey
The Praesidium of Archive
The Empire’s Legacy
Voyage of the Planetslayer
Revolt and Rebirth
The Demon Constellation Books: Urban Fantasy
with Demons
Warsprite
Web of Futures
The Iron Gates of Life
Deserts of Vast Eternity
The Last Age
The Shadowy Road
When Angels Fall
The Computer Ferrets
The Sea Dragon
The Thug Acrostic
What You See
Painterror
Adrift on a Foreign Sea
The Silver Crusade
Each Shining Hour
Gravelight
The Valley Left Behind

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

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

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

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

Simultaneous Times

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

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

Editorial

Are you an aspiring writer? Many authors wrote their first million words — the ones they wisely did not try to publish — by writing fan fiction, fiction based closely on Star Wars, Star Trek, The Golden Amazon, Captain Z-Ro, Lost in Space, and many more. You can't publish it commercially, but you can circulate it to people, some of who may give you polite, useful advice.

And now the N3F is giving you a chance to gain that circulation and commenting. You are invited to publish your fan fiction in our APA N'APA. Publication is open to dues-paying members (\$6/year) which by the time we cover software, the VPN on which the software is mounted, various URLs...only covers part of the club's per capita costs. Send your material (formatted .DOC, .DOCX, .PDF are preferred) to the N'APA Editor, Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>.

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

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Novels

Barrayar by Lois McMaster Bujold

Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Backstabbing political intrigue of a futuristic feudal world.

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 Konstantin 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.

Bloodsworn by Tej Turner
Review by Chris Nuttall
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

"Everyone from Jalard knew what a bloodoath was. Legendary characters in the tales people told to their children often made such pacts with the gods. By drawing one's own blood whilst speaking a vow, people became 'Bloodsworn'.

And in every tale where the oath was broken, the ending was always the same. The Bloodsworn died."

It has been twelve years since The War of Ashes, but animosity still lingers between the nations of Sharma and Gavendara, and only a few souls have dared to cross the border between them.

The villagers of Jalard live a bucolic existence, nestled within the hills of western Sharma and far away from the boundary which was once a warzone. To them, tales of bloodshed seem no more than distant fables. They have little contact with the outside world, apart from once a year when they are visited by representatives from the Academy who choose two of them to be taken away to their institute in the capital. To be Chosen is considered a great honour... of which most of Jalard's children dream.

But this year the Academy representatives make an announcement which is so shocking it causes friction between the villagers, and some of them begin to suspect that all is not what it seems. Just where are they taking the Chosen, and why? Some of them intend to find out, but what they discover will change their lives forever and set them on a long and bloody path to seek vengeance...

* * *

Endorsed by writers such as Anna Smith Spark (critically-acclaimed author of the Empires of Dust trilogy), Bloodsworn is the first instalment of a new and exciting fantasy series by Tej Turner.

Its tale begins as many epic fantasy stories do; a handful of characters from a medieval world – some of them coming of age – who find themselves swept into a series of world-changing events, but it takes a grim turn and becomes something darker. It is a novel which will simultaneously feel familiar to readers but yet keep surprising them.

Drawing his inspiration not only from the fantasy genre but also a wealth of manga and anime he absorbed during his youth, the world Tej Turner has created is divided between two rival nations; Sharma and Gavendara.

Sharma is a green country, blanketed in meadows, forests, and woodlands, whilst Gavendara is a land of grassy plains and much more barren. This stark difference between the resources at their disposal is but one out of many reasons that the two nations have a complex (and sometimes bloody) history with each other.

In the times preceding the beginning of Bloodsworn's story, feudal and warlike Gavendara has seen some of its imperial ambitions become realised. It has annexed the lands Babua and Vallesh – to its north and south – but, its foremost desire has always lain to the east, beyond the Valantian Mountains, and within the green and fertile lands of Sharma.

A group of mysterious and secretive men, working within the shadows of Gavendara's aristocracy, have discovered a new secret which they believe to be the answer to fulfilling their ambitions: a method of

enhancing people, making them stronger, by carving runes into their flesh during arcane rituals. Initially, it seems like they have created the perfect warriors – for these people do not only become possessed by immense fortitude and dexterity, but they are also much more docile, and thus perfect, obedient soldiers.

But some of those involved in the creation of these soldiers are beginning to have second thoughts. They notice other, unforeseen changes, and start to wonder just how high the cost is for messing with nature... and how much of their humanity will both themselves and the subjects of their experiments lose along the way.

Tej Turner's intention when he forged the concept of this series was that he wanted to create something which not only contained the usual tenets of epic fantasy – political intrigue, gods, swords, and sorcery – but also novums usually restricted to the genres of horror and science fiction, such as mutant creatures and metamorphosis. He has also – like in his two previous urban fantasy novels, *The Janus Cycle* and *Dinnusos Rises* – featured a diverse cast of characters, even channelling some of his own experiences undergoing prejudice growing up as a gay man into the threads of one of his central characters, making *Bloodsworn* an #OwnVoices novel.

One thing which might strike people as a little odd about the map of the world he has created is that there are very few human settlements on its coasts (and the ones which do exist lay a little inland from the shore), and there is a reason for this. Tej Turner has set this series in a world cosmologically different to our own, with longer years and, most notably, three moons. This means that the seas are more tumultuous, and thus coastal areas are not as safe for habitation. Other consequences for living in such a strange cosmic alignment include that the civilisations of the story have not yet discovered any other continents beyond their own, because seafaring is a much more dangerous (and thus seldom risked) venture. Nights are most usually brighter than in our own world, and thus, people are at liberty to be more active during such times, and rare occasions where the sky turns black and the sky fills with stars are events which can evoke a wide range of emotional responses from the members of its populace.

The Book of Feasts and Seasons by John C. Wright
Review by Christopher R. DiNote
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A love letter to speculative fiction, and the Catholic Liturgical Calendar

What's the sign of a "great" book? Or, if not a "great" book, what makes a "meaningful" book? I'm not going to answer that, but I do think one of the characteristics of such a book is that you return to it more than once.

For me, this brief 2014 collection of short stories by John C. Wright is one of those books. I've read it twice, and I just completed listening to the audiobook version. Calling it a "science fiction book" or a "fantasy book" would be accurate, but accurate in the way that describing a lion as a "big cat" is accurate but insufficient. This is a deep one, steeped in philosophy, theology, and canon, both Western Literature canon, and Canon, as in Catholicism.

Hard copies are difficult to find. This review is specific to the ebook edition.

The Story

The collection's unifying concept is a chronological walk through the Catholic liturgical calendar. This

links the stories thematically, but the individual stories are not linked to each other directly, although given the significant role of time travel throughout the collection, they may be more connected than it seems. Some of them were previously published via John C. Wright's website.

So, we'll go down the list, and the specific date (Gregorian calendar) or season of the liturgical calendar they represent and let that tell the tale of the book.

(January 1st) New Year's Day / The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God: "The Meaning of Life as Told Me by an Inebriated Science Fiction Writer in New Jersey." (Originally published 2010).

Whew. While the title gives the Texas band ...And You Will Know Us By the Trail of Dead (no kidding) a run for its money in the name department, the story is exactly what it says on the tin.

Except the story is told in first person by John C. Wright himself, talking to a very drunk Harlan Ellison at "the Science Fiction Writers of America mansion in New Jersey," who tells him that time travel is real, the machine described by H.G. Wells and depicted on film by George Pal is real, and many earlier science fiction writers have broken the barriers of time, much to their own detriment. Earth is a quarantined planet, and dark forces are constantly at work to keep humans from mucking with the time streams that lead to those dark forces' preferred futures.

This story is Wright's shout out and exposition on many of the greats of the SF&F field and their work, told in such a way that it makes you think...nah, couldn't be.

(January 6th traditionally) Epiphany: "Queen of the Tyrant Lizards." (2014).

You might have read this one before, or at least heard of it. Or, at least heard of the dubious Hugo Award winning story it was written in response to. I will not name that story. I will say this. Wright takes the same concept, same starting conditions, and shows us how it's done. This is vastly superior to its "inspiration" in every way, much as Nick Cole's Soda Pop Soldier is a certain similarly themed novel, except done right.

(March 25th) Annunciation: "A Random World of Delta Capricorni Aa, Called Scheddi." (2010).

This flash-fiction sized story is a "Contact" story, and an alien abduction story. It includes the classic "grays" of Ufology. To say any more would spoil it.

Good Friday: "Sheathed Paw of the Lion." (2012).

This is quite an allegorical story. In the future ruled by a tyrannical, decadent, globally hegemonic Middle Kingdom, Earth is visited by extraterrestrials responding to a great "disturbance" that took place on Earth a long time ago. This disturbance, taken as a great distress signal, drove the aliens to respond with all their powers and means to help heal Earth and its people. They send an emissary. Meanwhile, a rebellious team of cold-sleep watchers holds on to hope that the power of the Middle Kingdom and its emperor will be broken forever. I think there's some call backs to the original 1929 Buck Rogers novella, for those familiar with it.

Easter Sunday: "Pale Realms of Shade." (2014).

The story begins (and ends) with a selection from the poem "Thanatopsis" by William Cullen Bryant. Hard-boiled war veteran private eye Matthias (Matt) is visiting his wife. Nothing wrong with that,

right? Except Matt is dead. This story is a noir detective story, and an "urban fantasy," with magic, the supernatural, and travel through time and space. Matt haunts his (former) wife Lorelei, his former partner and friend Slyvester "Sly" Steel, determined to learn the identity of his killer and solve his murder. Did they do it for the insurance money? And what of his fate in the afterlife?

My second favorite story in the collection.

(The Fortieth Day After Easter Sunday) Feast of the Ascension: "The Ideal Machine." (2014, originally in Sci Phi Journal #1)

On the plus side, this story feels reminiscent of *The Twilight Zone*, or *The Outer Limits*. On the downside, it's also more of a political treatise dressed up in an interesting alien visitation story. Similar in idea to "The Sheathed Paw of the Lion," an alien race journeys to Earth, and offers up a gift intended to aid humanity to solve its problems and better itself. Humans manage to screw up, badly, but there's still hope.

Honestly, it's my least favorite in the collection. While Wright is eager to show the high stakes of the conflict at the center of the story, it slides too much into lecture. I don't dislike the story; I just think it's the weakest of the bunch.

(The Fiftieth Day After Easter Sunday) Feast of Pentecost: "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds." (2014). Nominated for a 2015 Hugo Award.

This fantasy is my favorite story in the collection. My absolute favorite. I'm not ashamed to admit I've cried tears after reading it. It's an "after the End" story, but not in the way you might expect. This is the HIGHEST of high fantasy, and I agree with this reviewer, Wright hits heights not often seen since Lord Dunsany.

What looks like a simple animal fable, isn't. What DO the animals do once Man has faced his final destiny, and the Earth is left to them? It also strikes me as a perfect story to adapt as a one-act play. It reads like something ready for the stage, like a medieval morality play with echoes of ancient Greek mythological plays.

(October 31st) Halloween: "Eve of All Saints' Day." (2011).

I love old timey weird fiction, and this story is in the spirit and form of old timey weird fiction, a 'la Arthur Machen and William Hope Hodgson.

Here, Wright gives us the story of an amateur mad scientist in the weird fiction tradition. He's about to embark on an experiment based on the old popular pseudoscientific theory that man is capable of an "awareness" far beyond his normal natural senses. Naturally, this entails a special combination of training in meditation known only to Eastern mystics, drugs, injections, electrical currents, and machines designed to tap into the Aether's different wavelengths and vibrations. What the narrator encounters on that Halloween night excursion into the unknown will change him forever.

(Always begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, always falls between November 27th and December 3rd) Advent: "Nativity." (2012).

A widower named "Mr. Went" wants to see his wife one more time. In Rome, he encounters a man who claims to be a relative of Nikola Tesla, who was the unnamed Time Traveler described by H.G. Wells.

This man shows Mr. Went the Time Machine built by Tesla and Edison in Menlo Park. Instead of traveling to see his wife, there is someone he wants to see even more, to try and get an answer to the hardest question of all: Why? However, he discovers he's not the only traveler seeking that answer, and the trip turns out to be more dangerous than he expects.

(December 24th) Christmas Eve: "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus." (2013).

Full disclosure: this story was a major source of inspiration for my own "Tracking Santa." (2021).

Wright's story shares a title, and some thematic connections to the time-honored story of eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon, who, in 1897 wrote a letter to the editor of the New York paper The Sun, asking the question "Is there a Santa Claus?"

In Wright's story, it's Christmas Eve, and a six-year-old girl named Ginny lies dying of cancer in a hospital bed. Her father is deployed overseas with the Army, and unable to return home. Her mother, also named Virginia, is with her at her bedside as Ginny dies, still praying and waiting for a visit from Saint Nicholas.

This is a hard, but hopeful, story to read.

The Characters

I'll only highlight a few characters who stood out most to me, the most memorable.

Well, the first story features John C. Wright "in high spirits," and a very drunk Harlan Ellison. I mean, what more do you want?

The main character of "Queen of the Tyrant Lizards," well, there's many of her, but the one narrating the story has something the others do not. She's a powerful representation of the sacrificial nature of genuine love, the real thing.

The main character of "Pale Realms of Shade," Matt, is a hard-boiled supernatural detective, like a Mickey Spillane character crossed with John Constantine and Harry Dresden. Except he's a ghost. A poltergeist. A bitter one at that. He is the strongest and ironically the most fleshed out viewpoint character in the entire book, and the easiest to relate to. He is akin to the narrator detective character of Wright's City Beyond Time: Tales of the Fall of Metachronopolis.

"The Ideal Machine" shows a classic conflict between two military men and a Catholic priest. While archetypes, the three have distinct personalities, as I guarantee you've met all three of these men before, or remarkably like them.

Fox is the touchpoint character in "The Parliament of Beasts and Birds." He's blessed with an incredible ending monologue to the story, it's the speech that sold me on the idea that this story could make a great short play.

The Santa Claus of "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus" isn't the one you're thinking of. He's the inspiration of the character you know as Santa Claus: Saint Nicholas of Myra. This Santa is regal, a bit severe, wise, and yet full of love. Some people need tough love. His characterization also contains a little of the Ghost of Christmas Present, and just a little bit of Kris Kringle from Miracle on 34th Street.

The World

Except for "A Random World..." all stories are set on our Earth or some close variant of it, at vastly different points in time. The worldbuilding draws across the entire spectrum of classic science fiction and can sometimes be a game of "spot the reference."

While most stories begin in or close to the present day of the early twenty-first century, the scope encompasses the dawn of creation all the way to a time after the biblical Book of Revelation. There are forays into the supernatural world. Wright's work often includes themes of "deep time," understanding the true vastness of space and how long journeys through space would take. The worldbuilding is thematically connected to other works of his, such as Superluminary, Somewhither, Count to a Trillion, or the aforementioned Metachronopolis.

Politics

Wright doesn't hide his politics, as a quick perusal of his website will demonstrate.

While all have either a political undercurrent or an overtly political moment, the stories "Sheathed Paw of the Lion" and "The Ideal Machine" are the most openly political and polemical.

Well, I must qualify that, because the political elements are never about politics for its own sake. These are stories about morality, ethics, values, and virtues. The problem of evil. What constitutes the greatest of all goods? Human politics is never divorced from these things, nor operates in a vacuum.

In that sense, Wright resembles G.K. Chesterton. He makes no bones about his Catholicism, and applies all the tools of reason, classical philosophy, metaphysics, Thomism, the works to layer a lot of depth into these short pieces.

Content Warning

One thing about Wright's work is that he's never shied away from death, violence, gore, or frank discussions of the facts of life. None of this is done for the sake of gratuitous shock value, but to demonstrate quite clearly the depravity of evil, and how much of that originates in the human heart.

There are elements of horror inherent to many of these stories, and that horror is built on the claim of Christian theology that evil, sin, has both temporal and spiritual, supernatural aspects to it. It's the horror of demons seeking the ruin of souls, but also the horror of what humans can willingly do to each other.

This means, however, that certain stories are very much for older readers. I would say PG-13 suffices, but with parental discretion. However, be prepared to answer some uncomfortable questions, especially about documented torture techniques including execution by sawing, scaphism, napalm, and torture by pitchcapping. And crucifixion.

A word again on "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus." While it deals with a very tragic and heart-breaking event in a very hopeful and respectful way, the subject of the death of a child might be too much for some readers to bear.

Who is it for?

Fans of John C. Wright owe it to themselves to pick up a copy, especially for the outstanding performance of the audio version. For those new to John C. Wright, I don't recommend this as your first foray.

Overall, anyone who likes their fiction deep, intellectual, philosophical, and metaphysical will appreciate this book.

For Catholics skeptical of whether speculative fiction holds anything for them.

Why buy it?

You'll be challenged. Wright forces readers to confront their own assumptions about the world, and most importantly, why they assume them.

Emotional impact. I don't expect everyone to have the same reactions that I have to the stories in this volume, but I don't see how anyone could come away unaffected.

Easter Eggs. References galore! Connected in ways that just make sense.

Christmas In the Stars by Sarah A. Hoyt
Review by Pat Patterson
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

It's March, and I'm reviewing a collection of Christmas stories. Why? I don't even LIKE Hallmark movies, and I also don't like those songs and stories that tell us something schmaltzy and then ask "why can't we have Christmas all year 'round?"

I hope you will believe me when I say that there is no hidden agenda in this review. The reason I'm reviewing Christmas in March is because March is when I read the stories. Nothing more. Boring, I know, but there you have it.

Home Star. John is LOST IN SPACE, and on Christmas Eve, too. Back home, they will soon be opening presents; meanwhile, he is trying to figure out how long his supplies will last. The pesky AI which is largely responsible for getting him around the universe has posted him in an unknown area, and stubbornly refuses to do anything to resolve the problem. So, when his supplies run out, John will die. Don't think he's the sort to only be concerned for his own well-being, though; his mind is back with his family. His dad is still trying to find a way to live after the death of his life partner, and his nephews are trusting their Uncle John to find a new star to name after them. He is burdened by thinking of the new grief that will be coming their way, courtesy of his demise.

If only they could put a candle in the window, so he could find his way home.

Good Will to Men. Brax and Drav refused an obvious suicide mission, and headed for the hills, making them deserters. Three years later, they have a survivable situation, which is disrupted by the emergency landing of a craft not far away. Long-range observation provides evidence sufficient to persuade Drav that the newcomers are involved in enslaving children for sexual exploitation, but Brax isn't convinced. Drav's rush to take action has now resulted in his death, due to careless handling of a sword. Somehow, though, he speaks to Brax, who has no alternative but to listen.

On Christmas Day in the Morning. There is a reprehensible act of abandoning pets in the wilderness, performed by the self-centered who can no longer be disturbed by being responsible for their charges.

This story is not about an abandoned puppy or kitty, but about a robot servant who has been replaced by a more capable unit. Not everyone agrees that freeing the older model was the right choice.

The Christmas Cat. Take the opening scene in John Wick 1; swap the dog for a cat; don't include the evil Russian gangster plotline. What you have left is a lovely little story of love transcending the separation that comes with death. Yes, it IS a miracle, but the kind that people can make happen.

Even when it ISN'T December, this is a good read. Go for it.

Dark Day, Bright Hour by Julie Frost
Review by Declan Finn
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Dante with guns.

If I were to lay money who was going to recreate the journey of Dante and Virgil through the levels of Hell, and then add handguns, rocket launchers, and using the power of faith to punch a Kaiju demon to death, I would have laid money that it would have been NR LaPoint. It's very much his wheelhouse.

Nope. This time, the book I described belongs to "werewolf author" Julie Frost. I encountered Julie when we were in an anthology together (Venus, from Tuscany Bay Press, if you're curious), which was so good I want the rest of the series. While at the recent LibertyCon, she mentioned Dark Day, Bright Hour, a book "Too Christian for most publishers, and too gritty for Christian publishers."

Not that I would know anything about that. Heh.

The Story

Anthony is a hitman, killed by irony; he died trying to save a woman after her car went off a bridge. They both drowned, and now the two of them are in Hell ... except she's a parole officer and a virtuous woman who's not supposed to be there. There's been a clerical error. Her guardian angel is even at her side. Since no demon wants these two in the abyss, a crossroads demon named Derek is assigned to escort them through the inferno. Along the way, they've been tasked with recruiting for yet another rebellion, against Satan himself.

The resulting story is one part Dante's Inferno with a touch of The Screwtape Letters. Just add guns that explode demons, enable the virtuous to beat up devils, and make Screwtape into middle management who hated everyone else in Hell.

First of all, this book Should Not Work. It is literally told from a rotating first-person point of view. All four characters get their chance to tell the story at certain legs of the trip. However, Julie Frost makes this work entirely because they have long stretches of narration.

It helps that the plot is constantly moving. Sometimes it moves a little too fast. Sometimes, the story doesn't even wait a beat before the next damned (literally) thing falls out of the sky (or crawls out of the dirt, etc). As I said, the plot is pure Dante, where the story is an escort mission out of Hell, with a subplot of a recruitment mission, polling the demon kings of Hell to see who wants to overthrow Satan before he tries starting things with Heaven again. There are moments of comedy, again, like Screwtape, in seeing the various demon factions snipe at each other.

Overall, this was a fun ride that was part action, part comedy and just enough gonzo to make it a perfectly enjoyable cocktail. Yes, I probably killed that metaphor.

The Characters

Anthony is a hitman who died saving someone else but is in Hell anyway. He's only a little confused, since he only killed people who had it coming. He also has an Ivy League degree and was born into the family business and was just too lazy to get another job.

Freddi is the virtuous one, whose parole officer career was cut short by a car accident. She's in Hell entirely by accident.

Zeeviel is a guardian angel, attached to Freddi's side.

Derek is ... pretty whiny as a demon. Like Tom Ellis' Lucifer, one of his major character traits involves serious Daddy Issues. Also like the aforementioned Tom Ellis character, this personality trait is as boring as it is grating

Everybody here is fleshed out, with their own back stories and motivations. There's almost enough character here to make it a character-driven story, but there are too many fireworks to make that characterization. And the character exploration is integrated so well into the plot, I really didn't notice until I looked back over the story for this review. It was just that well done.

The World

It's Hell. There's not much to discuss.

Politics

Depends. Do you believe that a belief in God, or Hell, or redemption, is political? Then this is political. Otherwise, no.

Content Warning

It's ... Hell. Everything you might have a problem with in Dante's Inferno, you're going to have here. Nudity. Torture. Violence. Probably some cussing, but I don't recall. And a mercy killing that I'm not 100% certain makes sense in context.

The biggest issues you might have are theological. Some plot points require God to deliberately not be omniscient and takes "turns His face away" to mean that God means He ignores and allows Himself to be ignorant of something.

As I said, it's required for the plot, and this is a line in the last ten pages, so it's not that big a deal, unless you're a mildly neurotic reader with a philosophy degree, like me.

Who is it for?

Take the total gonzo action of NR LaPoint (or any similarly pulpy author) writing Dante's Inferno, only Hell is more like The Screwtape Letters.

Why buy it?

If you want to enjoy something that could be "Christian Fiction" but is too much fun to fit into that genre, you should be buying this book.

Dragonheart by Charles Edward Pogue

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

You've seen the movie. Now read the book!

A knight sworn to a forgotten Code. A young tyrant no weapon can kill. A peasant girl who wants freedom for her people, and a dragon seeking redemption. Bound by chance, brought together by fate, they each pursue victory. What will it cost them to gain their hearts' desires?

The novelization of the film starring Dennis Quaid, David Thewlis, and the late Sean Connery, Dragonheart is as good a book as it is a film. In some ways it is better, since it gives fans of the movie greater insight into the story that was brought to life on film.

The story

Bowen is a knight of the Old Code, the protocol of King Arthur and the Round Table, which has fallen into disuse. He intends to rectify that by training the next king of the realm, Prince Einon to be a better man than his father. At the behest of Einon's mother, Aislinn of the Celts, Bowen has been drilling the young future king in tactics, swordplay, and the Code.

While practicing amidst the ruins of a Roman fort, Bowen overcomes his pupil, only for Sir Brok to arrive with a message: the peasants are rebelling, and the king wants his son to see his father overcome them in battle. Unhappy with this turn of events, Bowen nevertheless accompanies Einon to the front lines. During the conflict the king is killed, and his son charges into the fray to find him. Taking his crown from his not-quite-dead father's hands, Einon is accosted by several peasants, including a girl named Kara. When an opportunity presents itself, she mortally wounds him.

Desperate to save the prince, Bowen rushes back to the castle with the boy to bring him to his mother, who knows of a single hope to save her son and the realm. Aislinn leads a caravan including Bowen and Einon to a dragon's cave, where she convinces the creature to share his heart with Einon. Although suspicious, the dragon wants the misunderstandings and violence between their species to end as well. He does as Aislinn requests after having Einon swear to uphold the Old Code.

The next morning, however, the three of them and the kingdom itself are betrayed. For Einon is not his father; he is worse. Enraged, Bowen vows to kill the dragon who corrupted his charge and dashed his hopes in the process.

Four long years pass, during which time Bowen becomes a skilled dragonslayer. He corners his latest mark near a waterfall, only to learn that this dragon is the last of his kind. But Einon still lives, which means Bowen has failed...

...Or has he simply lost his way?

The characters

The characters are given a fair bit of depth in the novel that can only be inferred in the film. Eionon in particular is revealed to be more despicable than when he appears onscreen, shown time and again to have no concept of love because he believes all that springs from it is weakness. Although he does beg for love to be shown him once, his inability to comprehend love prevents any attachment forming between him and others, including his own mother.

Bowen's and the dragon's thoughts are laid bare, and readers are privy to some extra scenes that did not make it into the movie. Kara and her worldview are also given more time to shine, as she laments the fact that Eionon not only murdered her father, he stole her virginity as "punishment" for trying to assassinate him. Seeing her mourn the loss of the only dowry she can claim as a landless peasant when Bowen proposes to her is moving for certain.

Tertiary and side characters receive more development here as well. From the largely unnamed peasants of the film to the slimy nobles of Eionon's court, to Aislinn herself, we get to see more of the characters we came to love in the movie. It is easy to picture the actors' voices as those of the characters in the book, and to enjoy the story on its own merits if one has never seen the film.

The world

The world is deeper and richer in the novel than the movie, as it has time to delve into the day-to-day workings of the characters' lives. Readers will learn more about the dragons and how they fit into the world of Dragonheart through this book, which will explain how we reach the ending seen in the film. It also emphasizes the injustices practiced on the peasants which led them to rebel in the first place.

The politics

Dragonheart's politics are entirely internal and have nothing whatsoever to do with the modern day. It is a relief and a breath of fresh air for certain.

Content warning

Kara is raped, offscreen, but the scene may still bother some readers. We also see one of Eionon's lords philandering with and drooling over a peasant girl he employs for his pleasure. Other than that, there is nothing objectionable in the book.

Who is it for?

Fans of the film on which it is based, fantasy lovers, and those who like reading about dragons. Any readers interested in the Dark Ages and early Medieval history will also enjoy this book. The novelization does not require one to have watched the film, as it contains the entire story and needs no viewing of the movie to understand. Pogue knew his business and wrote well for both mediums.

Why read it?

It is a translation of a good movie into a good book. You do not find those often, so why let this one get away?

Flame by Katie Cross
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well! I am reviewing another novel by the legendary Katie Cross. I found this book from an author who I adore. I've read two of her other books and was hooked. Even cooler for me, Katie Cross is a frequent guest on my podcast, The Blasters & Blades Podcast, where we talk about all things speculative fiction. She writes YA fantasy novels and is the wife of a former U.S. Army special squirrel. After I interviewed her on her book *A Spring for Spears*, I had to read it. It was awesome, mind-blowing and life-changing! After that, I was hooked and had to read her back catalogue. All of it. All 9 BILLION novels! The rest, as they say, is history!

What is this book about? It's a fantasy novel about two young women's coming-of-age story. These twin sisters are pretty awesome because they have magic and dragons! What's not to love? This epic young adult fantasy adventure has plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat. So, grab your coffee, set out fresh mountain lions for the dragons, and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

If this cover looks like it's up your alley, click the link below and give it a read! If the cover doesn't speak to you, read it anyway. This is a good one, honest! This book will have you hooked from page one! Keep reading my review to see why you should be reading it!

The Story

In Anguis, magic is forbidden.

Deep in a magical forest lives the sleepy village of Anguis, where dragons are the rulers and witches are the Servants.

Seventeen-year-old twins Sanna and Isadora Spence must soon face the Selectis—the moment when a dragon chooses them. For Sanna, the Selectis can't happen soon enough. For Isadora, she'd rather die.

When unexpected events at the Selectis turn their world around, Sanna and Isadora are each forced to make a decision. Each sister will choose the wrong path, and each sister will suffer for it.

Can they come back together to save their family in time from far more nefarious foes than they'd known existed?

Or will the simmering tension in the dragon village finally crack and go up in a burst of flame?

Join the beloved sister witches in *FLAME*, the first book in the Dragonmaster Trilogy.

This novel was the gripping tale of two sisters coming of age and learning to live with the consequences of their actions. Rationally, you know that those choices were only wrong in the context of the world of Alkarra. Like in life, all things are relative in fiction. That doesn't make it any easier for them to deal with the fallout of those choices during the course of this novel. But the sharpest blades are forged in the hottest fires. I found this to be an apt analogy for this novel. Life, the cruelest taskmaster known to man, is tempering and shaping them into fine young warrioresses, and we get the privilege of experiencing that ride.

One of the things that I loved about this story by Katie Cross was how deep it was. It wasn't a shallow creek; no, this was a raging river of complexity. She dug into deeper themes and concepts throughout the course of *Flame*, and I was there for it. One of those underlying themes was a deep dive into the nature of divinity. In the Letum Woods, there were gods, false gods, and maybe gods. Which option applied to whom? Well, no spoilers, but the ride was worth the thought exercise. We see the twins grappling with the idea that the god they were taught to worship, Drago, might not be real. Then, we get to meet the other goddess of the forest, Deasylya. While real, she might or might not be an actual goddess. She could just be a powerful, magical being. In grappling with all of these, the reader must confront their own religious inclinations. From there, the twins and the reader have to determine what they believe to be real because their parents told them it was instead of something they believed on their own. Definitely worth thinking about!

Another one of the themes that Katie explored was the nature of truth. The characters in *Anguis* grappled with lies that had been told for so long they didn't know which way was up. We, the reader, deal with them through the characters of Sanna and Isadora. With the aid of the twins, we get to have those same conversations with ourselves. What is true? How do we know the truth when we encounter it? If that sounds like college philosophy all over again, you're not wrong. That said, it's worth the thought exercise. I don't know that I could give you the right answer myself. The book doesn't try either, leaving that up to you at your discretion through the experience of the characters.

Another aspect of this thought-provoking novel's depth was the nature of leadership. That, and the juxtaposition of leadership and tyranny. We see both from the dragon overlords. Unlike most of the stories that include the draconic, the dragons in this novel are not oppressed beings, gentle companions, or fiercely feral predators. Instead, at the beginning of the novel, they are the tyrants enslaving the citizens of the hidden forest town of *Anguis*. I can't say more without spoilers, but it was written by someone who knows what it's like to make decisions for the lives of others. That fits, Katie was a nurse, and she's a mom... she's literally held life in her hands.

Speaking of dragons, I loved how Katie incorporated things I hadn't seen before. In this novel's lore, the dragons have skin that's hot to the touch. Literally, it burned the unlucky person. We're talking about the painful blisters level of bad. It was a cool plot point, and I really appreciated it because I'd never seen it before. I don't know if this is common because I haven't read nearly enough books with dragons in them. Obviously, I need to fix this! Anyway, I liked how it was carried out so consistently in the text. Further, I loved how it was addressed by the bond between the dragon and their human. Somehow, it made the relationship between the two paired beings more intimate and personal.

This goes without saying, given the name of this novel is *Flame*, but during this novel, we got to see the role of fire. We see it in the lifecycle of the forest known as Letum Woods. In many ways, the fire belated by the dragons symbolizes the cycle of life and death, as it causes the rebirth of the forest. If you haven't studied forestry, fires often eliminate the smaller and weaker trees. This clears them out to give resources to their larger brethren. This process also cleans out the canopy, allowing for a healthier wood. It also clears out old and overgrown vegetation that limits the ability of the trees to gain the appropriate resources. When the fire burns itself out, it recycles nutrients back into the soil. Fire isn't bad; it is destructive and can take life... but it also allows for the rebirth of the world around it. Fire, like the phoenix, is generally a neutral entity. I loved how that was all incorporated into the scope of this novel.

Another theme that this novel explored was about fear and control. They're often linked together; you're either afraid and let it control you, or you control your fear and embrace your destiny. In this case, the twins have to decide whether to submit to the expectations of the society they were born into or to embrace their individual dreams. It is a hard thing to swim upstream, and it takes a willingness to embrace

yourself. To stop letting fear control you and hold you back, allow the example of Sanna and Isadora to inspire you to achieve your own greatness. I get it; in fiction, we can do anything, and the good guy always wins. Life isn't like that; at least, that's what we tell ourselves. But maybe, just maybe, if we follow the example of our fictional heroes, we can do better. A lot to think about, but this novel tends to inspire those types of thought bubble exercises.

While I talk about the book, I should mention that I listened to the audiobook and didn't read a physical copy. This book was narrated by Fiona Dexter and produced by Antebellum Publishing. The quality of the audiobook was everything you'd expect from Katie Cross Publishing. The narrator did an amazing job with the accents; they were consistent and seemed to embody the characters as she portrayed them. She helped to set the mood and keep the tension high through her artistic rendering of the work Katie Cross created. I would definitely listen to more books read to me by Fiona, and that is the best compliment I can give a voice actor. With audiobooks, it's a go or no-go situation for me, and she's definitely a go at this station.

My only quibble with the audiobook was that the transition from one character's point of view to the next was confusing. It took me a few moments to realize it had switched. An easy fix would be to add a header to the POV shift so the narrator reads the verbal cue. However, this might be a hang-up of my traumatic brain injury, so your mileage may vary. I only mention it because I pride myself on being honest about the good and the bad of what I'm reading. This was a minor issue for me and was nothing a quick rewind couldn't solve. Do with that knowledge what you will.

We can't talk about this book without addressing the elephant in the room. The most important thing to consider when picking up a new book is the creator's authorial voice. In this case, Flame felt like I was sitting around a campfire as my friend told tales. This had to be what it was like in an oral storytelling tradition, where our soothsayers or shamans told us stories of our ancestors and their gods. Her voice was glorious; it was as bubbly as Katie herself but not in a childlike or cloying manner. No, it was just a hopeful adventure despite the darkness of the world of Alkarra.

Finally, we can't talk about this book without covering the pacing. When it comes to that aspect of the novel, Katie did everything right. This was the fastest long book I've ever read. For clarity, this book was 412 pages or 12 hours in audio. The book seemed to fly by in the blink of an eye. I literally finished it, thinking, 'How is it over already?' Any book that gives you that reaction was paced at a level that merges her technical skill with the sublime. This novel was a zen-like affair for me, letting me escape the heat as I listened to this book while walking.

The Characters

This novel is told from the dual point of view of the twin sisters, Sanna and Isadora. The scenes bounce back and forth between them, but I'm used to that, and it didn't bother me. I was so hooked on the story that I forgot to focus on the kind of things that I would normally write about. I couldn't tell you if this was a first- or third-person novel, but I could smell the moss-covered trees and the heat of burning dragon scales. I don't know what the girls looked like, but I could feel the wind in my hair as I flew through the skies on the backs of a dragon. It's a trade-off, but I am ok with it. And... well... those losses could be a me thing and not an authorial issue.

Sanna Spence: First, I'll be honest and say that I don't have an idea of what she looks like. I don't know if the author didn't say it or if I just missed it. What I do know is that, unlike her sister, she loves dragons. She finds them to be majestic, if somewhat wild. She loves the woods and her connection to it. She's often seen swinging from the vines like a female Tarzan. No howling or loincloths, but she's wil-

der than her mom wanted. Her mother tried to civilize her, but it just didn't take. She's fearless, loyal to a fault, and devoted to her family and the dragons she reveres. She's a woodsy type of medieval tomboy who sounds like it would be fun to have with you on a camping or hunting trip. Further, she's in stark contrast to her sister. Since they're twins, I'll assume they look the same... but their personalities are anything but.

Isadora Spence: First, I'll be honest and say that I don't have an idea of what she looks like. I don't know if the author didn't say it or if I just missed it. What I do know is that she's an oddity in her hometown because she loves magic, which is forbidden under the rule of her dragon overlord. Slave master is more accurate, but why quibble? She hates the town where she was born. She hates the society and culture of her youth and wants something more. Unlike her fellows, she hates the dragons and resents that serving them has caused her people to slowly starve so they could keep the massive dragons fed. She is woefully naïve about Alkarra, but not for a lack of interest. However, while she hates her hometown, she still feels more at home in the woods than in a bustling megacity. She loves people, but in moderation. But more than that, she loves her nuclear family and wishes they'd abandon the woods to come with her.

The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Katie Cross, who knows how to tell compelling stories set in beautiful worlds she's created. In this case, the larger world is called Alkarra, but we don't see much of it, so I'll narrow it down to the region where this story takes place. This novel was almost exclusively set in the Letum Woods, and more specifically in the area around the forest town of Anguis.

Within the scope of that town are humans calling themselves witches. Even the men are witches and not wizards. That's another change for me; I thought a wizard was a male witch, and that change signified that this wasn't my daddy's fantasy setting. I loved reading about the woods; it was the setting I'd kill to live in. Seriously, living in the woods is the dream for many a city boy, and I'm no different. I could almost smell the wood and soil as she wove the story around the trees that gave life to the town of Anguis.

The one shocker was the witches in the Letum Woods can't do magic. You read that right; there were witches that couldn't do magic. It was a fun shift, and we got to learn about the magic of Alkarra, along with the twin sisters. I still don't have a handle on what that looks like, but neither can the sister, so the reader isn't at a disadvantage. Even better, the promise to learn more has me yearning to start the second novel of the Dragonmaster Trilogy.

One of the things I liked about this story was how Katie avoided cursing by using made-up words. It made this a book I could comfortably listen to while my kids were around. Those universe-specific words were confusing in one aspect of the story. Again, it could be the TBI, but there it is. The denizens of Anguis don't use the words, mom and dad, instead using 'Mam' and 'Daid.' Again, it did help solidify that we weren't in Kansas anymore, so overall, I liked it once I figured it out. The other oddity of nomenclature was the use of the word 'network' instead of kingdoms or empires. It was just one of those things setting the otherworldly tone, so it's worth mentioning. But I really liked the world she created, so I had no complaints about it.

Everything in the Letum Woods and the town of Anguis was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, this incredible author didn't info dump all of her world-building up front. Instead, she fed it to us in drips and drabs. Seriously, she was the perfect drug deal-

er... she expertly strung us along and always left us wanting more. I know that sounds toxic, but trust me, this story was anything but. It was an exciting thrill ride from start to finish. What's not to like about this already expansive world? Seriously, I'm practically going full fanboy over this novel.

Politics

This novel was apolitical in the sense that it didn't deal with any real-world politics. However, we did see some political struggles from the political parties or networks in this world. It was a background struggle in this novel, though there were hints of more to come in future books. What I did love to see was how personal autonomy was made a central issue for the twin sisters, who worked separately and together to overthrow that tyrannical regime.

Alkarra, where the story takes place, is a magical medieval setting. This proto-Europe backdrop is par for the course of a modern fantasy novel. In addition to the world that's trying to kill them, the main characters must fight the existential evil of greed, fear, and religious zealotry.

Content Warning

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Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoy reading about dragons but are comfortable with some of the tropes being flipped on their heads in the best possible ways. This novel, by best-selling author Katie Cross, tells a story that's as compelling as it is poetic. The words flow together so beautifully that I found myself listening to sections multiple times just to send the tingles up my cerebral cortex. Seriously, her ability to craft words puts the Bard to shame!

Why buy it?

This is the story of the everywoman, twin sisters who struggle in their village in the woods. They're the proto-typical underdog at the beginning of the novel. Seemingly, neither looks like they have it in them to do great and wonderful things. One sister is stifled by the soul-crushing culture, and the other is at the mercy of the unknown as she dreams of serving their dragon masters. Together, they swim upstream and achieve the beginning of greatness. These two ladies, Sanna, and Isadora Spence, are earnest in their quest to find their own way in the world. If you love a thrill ride over the river and through the woods, this is the novel for you! Fair warning: the grandmother's house is sold separately!

Exit

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? If this tale doesn't make you a superfan of Katie Cross, then you didn't read the same book that I did! Once you buy and read the book, come back and share your thoughts! Oh, and be sure to leave a review!

The Golden Key and Other Fairy Tales by George MacDonald

Review by Christopher R. DiNote

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

A new illustrated collection of stories by the 19th Century "grandfather of the Inklings"

First, a "few" words...

So, most of my reading these days is based on answering one question: "Is this something I want my kids to read?" That's it. That's the entire rubric. With one about to turn ten (the Punkin), and one on the way (the Monkeywrench), the word "curate" doesn't begin to describe my curmudgeonly approach to this task. Case in point, I read poetry with the soon-to-be-oldest, and we've just started Lloyd Alexander's *The Book of Three*. The next sit-down daddy-daughter movie night will be *The Song of Bernadette*. My wife is incredibly patient.

They're all doomed by the fact that I worked in a public library as a teenager, so when it comes to things fantasy, weird fiction, or sci-fi, I like to go back to the beginning. One hot summer's afternoon, 16-year-old me, sorting the stacks, found a massive hardcover tome of the work of H.P. Lovecraft, a lurid cover of course, and including letters and literary criticism. By the time I finished that cursed volume I was also reading Lord Dunsany, William Hope Hodgson, Clark Asthon Smith, Robert E. Howard, and like the meme says, making the formative Gen X mistake: reading a Stephen King book way too young; I spent all junior year of high school toting around a hardcover, unabridged copy of *The Stand*. My forearms were jacked by the end of the school year.

Anyhow, I've spent my life since then playing catch-up. It's only been in the last few years that I've gotten serious about the Inklings and their contemporaries beyond their most famous works.

This personal deep dive is what brought me to this book of stories by nineteenth-century Scotsman George MacDonald. A fairytale author writing in the tradition of the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christien Andersen, and medieval morality playwrights. MacDonald was highly praised as an important influence by the Inklings as well as Inkling-adjacent and inspired writers including G.K. Chesterton, J.M. Barrie, and Madeline L'Engle.

Stories

MacDonald is not out of print but seems to have been all but forgotten by public consciousness. In late 2023, the new children's book imprint launched by Catholic ministry Word on Fire, called "Spark," set out to reverse this with a new, gorgeously illustrated hardcover of three of MacDonald's most important fairytales.

The volume reprints the titular "The Golden Key," as well as "The Light Princess," and "Little Daylight." The recommended age range according to Amazon is "eight to fourteen" and after reading the book with my family I agree that's an accurate description. The book also contains an especially useful introduction "for young readers" by Spark line editor Haley Stewart that provides background and context for both parents and children alike. I was happy to see that the original spellings, punctuation, and word choices were preserved as close to the original versions as possible, and even included short footnotes to explain words and phrases unfamiliar to modern readers. The illustrations by Anastasia Nesterova are gorgeous.

Here's a summary of the three stories:

"The Golden Key:" The most profound of the three, and the most difficult to understand and to like perhaps. It's not the most active story, being the tale of a young boy and girl searching for the locked door which fits an enchanted golden key, which will lead them to a beautiful unknown country, "the place from whence the shadows fall." It's more of a dream-like prose poem than a story. It's also very flexible with time and space, even looping back on itself if I interpreted it correctly.

It has the strongest connection to and description of "Faerie land" as a distinct place, "far from the fields we know," that one also finds in Lord Dunsany's *Elfland*, and that Neil Gaiman attempts to invoke in his work. It's the story that most evokes Celtic mythology and feels the "most Scottish" of the three. There are elements to this which would not feel out of place in a modern work like Howl's *Moving Castle* (both the book and the Studio Ghibli film), or a Hayao Miyazaki film like *Spirited Away*.

It's also the most allegorical of the three stories and expects the most of the reader's assumed familiarity with classical books of the Western canon: everything from the Bible to ancient European faerie lore. I enjoyed it, but then again, I read a lot and have a penchant for '90s shoegaze. I get it man.

"The Light Princess:" The king and queen of a small lakeside kingdom are finally blessed with a child. Unfortunately, the absent-minded king forgets to invite his own sister to the christening. That sister also happens to be a powerful witch, and she curses the beautiful baby princess to a horrible fate. She loses her very gravity! The king and queen desperately search for a way to keep her from floating away forever.

This was my daughter's favorite story of the three. It's also the funniest, done in a "fractured fairytale" style mimicked by everyone from the *Muppets* to the old *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. The humor is very British, even Monty Python-esque. I think it's highly likely that Tolkien drew a lot of inspiration from this style in his more juvenile works, such as *The Hobbit*, *Roverandom*, *Mr. Bliss*, and *The Father Christmas Letters*.

"Little Daylight:" This was my favorite of the three. Again, a young princess is cursed by a witch, this time a slighted fairy. This time, a beautiful young princess is cursed to sleep by day, and only wake by night. Also, her health, age and beauty follow the lunar cycle of waxing and waning. Can anyone break the curse? Note, the story itself lampshades and acknowledges its similarities to the oft-told *Sleeping Beauty*. Personally, I would not be surprised to learn that the 1959 Disney film version drew on this unique version of the story.

What sold me was MacDonald's description of Princess Daylight's nighttime dancing; she dances away from her home (protected of course, by three fairies), in ever expanding concentric circles, moving throughout the forest until she tires and falls asleep with the coming dawn. Her movements mimic the orbital mechanics of the moon circling the earth (as understood in the mid-1800s), and it's charming.

The Characters

Each story maintains a small, simple cast of characters who are more archetypical than individual. There's a young man and a young woman, who either start out in love or end up in love by the story's end. There are magical beings who either help them or hinder them along the way. There are other human characters, usually incompetent boobs, who either start them out on their journeys or hinder them. I'll outline each story's characters and end with an observation that I found interesting.

"The Golden Key:" There is a young boy who is told by his great-aunt of the magical golden key, and she tells him that his father once found it but that no one knows what door it unlocks. He sets out to find it and finds his way to Fairyland, where he is accompanied by friendly talking animals who name him "Mossy," since his real name never comes up. There is a girl called "Tangle" which isn't her real name either but it's what the servants always called her. Once she journeys to Fairyland, Tangle is taken in by "Grandmother," who, despite being "thousands of years old" looks young and beautiful. I'm absolutely convinced that Grandmother is a direct inspiration for Tolkien's character Goldberry, the wife of Tom Bombadil.

There are also the three Old Men (of the Sea, of the Earth, and of the Fire). To say more would spoil the story.

"The Light Princess:" There's the nameless and quite silly king and queen of Lagobel, their daughter the nameless title princess, who starts the story as a spoiled brat, and her nameless and hapless suitor-prince.

The only characters whose names are revealed in the story are the evil witch Princess Makemnoit, and castle servants with bit parts, including two bumbling "Chinese court Metaphysicians," Hum-drum and Kopy-keck.

Yes, really.

"Little Daylight:" The Princess Daylight is the only named character in the story. Everyone is "the prince," or "her father," or "the fairy disguised as an old woman."

Given the deliberate use of Fairyland as the main setting of "The Golden Key," using pseudonyms and protecting one's true name, i.e., "You may call me..." fits in with folklore. However, the deliberate lack of naming of the main characters, except either for villains and commoners, the Princess Daylight herself, in the other two stories could be intended as encouragement for children to imagine themselves in the stories, to shift their focus away from the characters as characters, to the readers themselves in a universal "what would you have done?" sense. There may even have been some politics to it (see below).

The World

Each story is set in the fairytale world, described in loving naturalistic detail. Only "The Golden Key" ventures into Fairyland itself as a distinct place. The forests and lakes of the three settings are lush and real, inspired by MacDonald's Scotland. I find echoes of his style in Tolkien's famous (or infamous, depending on your mileage) level of detail in his descriptions of the Shire in the first half of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and his descriptions of Beleriand in *The Silmarillion*.

Politics

None. Welllllllll.....there's gentle ribbing of royalty and nobles, and the upper classes in general, done in the dry British wit reminiscent of classic Monty Python but lacking the mean-spiritedness.

Content Warning

None. There are some dark moments in these stories, as there should be in any fairytale. For example, the journey and end of "The Golden Key" story itself heavily imply the earthly death of Mossy and

Tangle, but also their passage into Heaven.

The witches and evil fairies of the other two stories are rightfully witchy and evil, scary in a way that suggests they may have influenced Disney's Wicked Queen, Mad Madam Mim and my absolute favorite Disney villain, Maleficent. (You, NOT YOU).

Bear in mind these are 19th-Century stories built on even older fairytale tropes, characters, and ideas, and through the lens of a Scottish Presbyterian minister. Furthermore, this edition is published by a dedicated Catholic ministry emphasizing a classical approach to "the true, the good, and the beautiful," always pointing to the proper ordering of the world and right worship of God. It is a very deliberately Christian book, however even with strong use of allegory and metaphor MacDonald never beats one over the head. The stories are enchanting and entertaining more than anything else.

Who is it for?

I think several disparate audiences can enjoy this book. First, this is for parents (like me) who are often desperately searching for something to read to their children but feel very alienated by contemporary works either because of content, themes, worldviews, and dumbed-down writing. Second, most children around 8-14 years old are more than capable of reading this book on their own with a little assistance provided by the editor and footnotes, and this can help prepare them for more challenging texts. Third, this is for readers of the Inklings and like-minded contemporaries interested in learning more about the writers and works that influenced them. Finally, this is for people who just enjoy 19th-Century British Literature, and if that's you, you are in for a treat.

Why buy it?

The best endorsement I can give is that my almost-ten-year-old daughter loved it and kept the book for herself. While "The Golden Key" itself put her off a bit, she loved "The Light Princess" and "Princess Daylight." I have a feeling that as she grows, she'll start to figure out "The Golden Key" on her own.

Finally, rediscovering "lost" writers is plain cool, period. If you are a fan of any of the Inklings themselves, you really owe it to yourself to read this and other work by MacDonald. I promise, it will enhance your reading and understanding of Tolkien and his colleagues. Finally, it's a beautiful little hardbound, with enchanting illustrations. Highly recommended.

The Lost Fleet Series by Jack Campbell

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets, here's another one of my book reviews in the military science fiction genre! So, without further ado, here is the next installment in my series of book reviews. However, because I got so into this series, I forgot to write individual reviews. Instead, I'll be writing a review of the entire series.

First, let me say that none of what I'll say in this section couldn't be found on the back copy of the novel. Heck, I cribbed this summary from the back, and then I added my own twist! And not even much of one, since most of the books I read have kick butt descriptions (aka blurbs). If the blurb doesn't catch my eye, then I tend to skip the book unless a friend recommends it. Generally speaking, my goal is to provide a spoiler-free review, so here goes nothing!

The Alliance has been fighting the Syndics for a century—and losing badly. Now its fleet is crippled and stranded in enemy territory. Their only hope is a man who's emerged from a century-long hibernation to find he has been heroically idealized beyond belief....

Captain John "Black Jack" Geary's exploits are known to every schoolchild. Revered for his heroic "last stand" in the early days of the war, he was presumed dead. But a century later, Geary miraculously returns and reluctantly takes command of the Alliance Fleet as it faces annihilation by the Syndics.

Appalled by the hero-worship around him, Geary is nevertheless a man who will do his duty. And he knows that bringing the stolen Syndic hypernet key safely home is the Alliance's one chance to win the war. But to do that, Geary will have to live up to the impossibly heroic "Black Jack" legend....

Follow this adventure as the Alliance Fleet fights a long retreat home.

Like most of the military fiction, I love to read, this was an action-packed series of novels. The overarching arc of this series was one of a long retreat home, with shades of the Arthurian mythos of the hero who didn't really die, but is instead waiting in the wings for when humanity needs them the most. This was all expertly done in a way that was easy to follow. It never really lagged for me; the adventure was non-stop but with enough lulls in the fun for the reader to catch their breath. I was able to suspend my disbelief and buy into the entirety of the premise, so I'd call that a win for author Jack Campbell. Overall, the premise was interesting, and the set-up was well executed. I couldn't ask for anything more; excellent premise, perfect execution, and fantastic pacing!

Characters:

This series of novels had four main characters, at least how I interpreted the novels. There were so many secondary characters that I got dizzy from the constant breeze from them exiting stage right. The main characters, however, were entertaining enough to make it worth the hassle; Captain John "Black Jack" Geary, Co-President Victoria Rione, Captain Tanya Desjani and the Battle Cruiser Dauntless. Like most novels with multiple POVs, each one served a unique purpose in the evolution of the plot. Each of these characters were well written, and you could feel enough depth to make them believable. Because I know tracking characters during a long series can be tricky, especially if you don't read them all back to back, I've included hyperlinks to the Lost Fleet Wiki for each of these characters.

Captain John "Black Jack" Geary: He's an officer in the Alliance Navy during the start of the war between the Alliance and the Syndicate Worlds. His first command, the Merlon, was destroyed at the Battle of Grendel, where he fought a desperate last stand. He did so to allow the rest of the fleet to retreat and regroup. After the other ships in his task force jumped out of the Grendel System, John ordered the rest of his crew escape, before taking on the Syndicate forces himself. When everyone was safe, and he couldn't do more, John managed to get into his own escape pod just before his ship blew up. He spends the next 100 years in cryosleep, only to wake up and find that he was turned into some mythic hero, destined to return to save the Alliance. I took him to be somewhat of a modern retelling of the Arthurian Legends.

Once his escape pod is recovered and brought aboard the Dauntless, John suffers a deep depression that's only abated by the responsibilities of command that Admiral Bloch thrusts upon him before he's killed by the Syndicate naval forces. His dictate to John was to get as many of the ships of the Alliance Fleet home as possible, so they could be used to defend their homes against the inevitable Syndicate counterattack. During the course of his long retreat home, John struggles against his own navy. The skills and military culture of the Alliance have gone into disrepair, caused by the high casualty rates it

suffers. So many naval personnel die that they can't pass on their traditions and skills, making each successive iteration less competent than the one before it.

During this series, we get to relate to John as a man and as a naval officer. I found him to be entirely believable, reminding me of the officers I served with in the U.S. Army. He was a likable enough man, though his constant "am I really the man from the legends" nonsense got old. It felt overdone, though this was more to do with publishing timelines than anything else. Each book had months and/or years between them, so the author had to keep key points fresh in our minds. However, when I binge-read the books they were all already published. I cut them slack on this one and think you should too. Overall, he's the kind of guy you'd drink a beer with. He was a well-rounded character who was sympathetic and believable, precisely what you'd expect from a beloved main character.

Victoria Rione: She's the co-president of the Callas Republic and an Alliance Senator who also speaks for the Rift Federation. She was a hard woman to like, though I suspect that to be done by design. She's a woman who lost her husband to the war with the Syndicate Worlds and who managed her grief by throwing herself wholeheartedly into her work as a politician. She went on the mission into Syndicate space as a representation of her political faction and as a counterweight to the Senate's distrust for the military establishment. Her additional role in the crew is to prevent the military coup that she fears the senior naval officers are planning. Overall, I found her to be an unlikeable but believable character. She was well rounded with a fleshed-out back story that we learn as the series progresses.

Captain Tanya Desjani: She's an officer in the Alliance Navy during the war with the Syndicate Worlds. She's the commanding officer of the battlecruiser Dauntless, which leads the Fourth Battle Cruiser Division. Her ship has also become the flagship for the Alliance Fleet as it fights its way out of Syndicate territory. During the series, we see her as a competent and efficient officer, one who's beloved by her crew. Tanya Desjani also genuinely cares for those serving under her command – something not common in other officers. During the course of this series, she becomes the love interest of the fleet commander, John Geary. The romantic tension between them is one of the many undercurrents of this series. Overall, I found her to be a tough person to relate to on an emotional level because she's so stiff and business-like. She has a personality; she just isn't someone you can picture yourself drinking a beer with. Despite her gruffness, she was a believable character whose devotion to duty was something I could empathize with. Finally, Desjani was a well-rounded character, which is all we can ask for.

Dauntless: This is an Alliance battle cruiser and serves as the backdrop of the entire series. It's where the main characters spend the entirety of their time during The Lost Fleet Series and become a character in its own right. This vessel is the flagship for the Alliance Fleet and Fourth Battle Cruiser Division. In this series, the captain and the majority of the crew from this ship are from the world Kosatka. The Dauntless has many of the newest upgrades to make her combat effective; a null field projector, hypernet keys, missile, and gun batteries and a superior intelligence department.

World-building:

This is one area where author Jack Campbell shines like a nova! His universe felt very real to me, and it was so gripping that I dove in. This series had a very fleshed out world that was consistent, made sense, and sucked you in. I loved the way they handled inserting new tidbits about the larger universe and history in such a way that you didn't even notice. The author did it so well that you never felt like you were missing anything important. Though parts of the world were not described, however, rather than detracting from the world-building, it made the universe feel larger. It definitely made me want to become part of the larger world. I never felt like I was missing key bits of information, though I do feel

like this is a universe where there's room to expand the canon. Okay, I'm hinting here, in case Jack Campbell is reading this, but I wanted more. Like, more than the four spin-off series that are already out there. Overall, the world-building was well done, and I was sold on the way it happened. It felt believable, and the characters fit within the universe Jack Campbell created. It was a fun ride that made me wanna suit up...which is the goal of action/adventure authors!

This series was chock-full of visualization, and you could definitely imagine yourself in this world. Except if you wanted to know what the characters looked like. What he did describe, Jack Campbell, hit the entirety of the sensory spectrum; sights, sounds, smells, and even how the world felt. However, as I mentioned before, there were plenty of places where I couldn't visualize things and had to jump over to the wiki to get a better picture. I know that there's a trend where less is more for descriptions, and I hate it. For me, this is the one place where I felt let down.

Narration:

I've read this series many times, it's one of those worlds I revisit from time to time. In the past, I've enjoyed this series in both audiobook and ebook format. However, this time around I listened to the books exclusively as audiobooks. In full disclosure, Christian Rummel narrated my book *The Reservist*. I love his skills as a narrator, and I've listened to many of his books. This series of audiobooks was published between January 2008 to April 2010. This meant that we're listening to Rummel's older body of work. That showed because some of the narration wasn't as well done as his later stuff. Still, it was well done; the accents were consistent, and I didn't want to rip my ears off. There wasn't a whole lot of range from the character accents, but the narrator did good! His audiobook was of a professional quality and got progressively better with each subsequent book, so I had nothing to complain about. Well, except the occasional sprinkling in of music for the dramatic scenes. It was enough to be annoying, but not so much that I turned the book off. Most importantly, he didn't commit the Cardinal Sin, which is my only real requirement; he didn't sound like a robot, he didn't bore me, and he didn't use accents that annoy the bejeezus out of me!

Overall:

Okay, let's get into the weeds on this one! I've organized my overall assessment by putting the stuff I didn't like first so we can end on a high note. I also want to be clear that I really loved this series overall, it's why I plowed through the audiobooks so quickly that I had to write a series review instead of an individual one for each of the six novels that make up *The Lost Fleet Series*.

Alright, let's rip off the band-aid and dive in. There were many parts that I wasn't thrilled with in this series. There were a lot of places in the series that felt repetitive, re-treading the same events. This often happened between books, which I knew was to refresh the memory of the readers. This was specifically important given the four-year window that existed between the start of this series and when the last book was completed. However, this also manifested with tiresome references to whether or not John Geary was a man of myth and legend. I understand that that part of the story was necessary, but the author was a bit ham-fisted with it.

As well as the repetitive details of the myths, I also felt there were too many secondary characters. I never connected with them, we never really learned anything about them, which made them feel one-dimensional. There were so many officers zooming on and off the stage that I felt like I was going to catch a cold from the breeze. I realize that this was done to add depth to the series, but it just rubs me the wrong way. This could just be an issue of taste, so your mileage may vary.

While I loved the audio narration, I did have one complaint about the production decisions. During several periods where they were trying to set the mood, to ramp up the tension, they added dramatic music to the audiobook. This was done at a volume just below the narrator's voice, so it created a layered effect that allowed you to still hear Christian Rummel's dictation. For whatever reason, it annoyed me, and I briefly considered putting the audiobook down. I'm glad I didn't because once I tuned that out, this audiobook became a rollicking good adventure!

Finally, let's look at one more area that was a little disappointing was the combat scene between the fleets. It was really hard to picture the battles; I knew they were massive, but I never really knew how many forces were in the Alliance Fleet at the start of the campaign into Syndicate space. Without that sense of scope in the beginning, everything was just a list of random ship names and combat maneuver formations. I wanted to see it in my head, but I couldn't visualize it. That was frustrating, because military science fiction is my jam, and I want to get to know all of the characters. However, this wasn't enough to make me put down the series despite having run several times.

Right, now we get to talk about the good things! First, I loved the basic premise of this series. The concept of a long retreating action in space was a lot of fun to see played out, especially given that the technology in most science fiction negates this as a possibility. The way Jack Campbell pulled this off was nothing short of amazing. The tension was high the entire time, and I often wondered if he would live. I forced myself not to acknowledge that the follow-on books existed so that I could experience the tension of their dire situation.

If it wasn't clear, I really liked this space odyssey. It felt like a modern adaptation of the classic Horatio Hornblower saga, which I'm a huge fan of. If you didn't know this was set in space – you could almost imagine the smell of salt in the sea and the creaking of the wooden boats. This, when combined with the undercurrent of the Arthurian mythos, made this a highly memorable universe. I really felt like the two concepts merged well together, and I really wish I'd thought of it first!

Next, I'd like to say that this series was a lot harder on the physics than what I typically read. However, the focus on the laws of relativity were dumbed down enough that even I could understand them. I didn't check his math, but it came off as extremely believable. I would probably never try writing a series that wasn't vetted by professors at my alma mater of Handwavium University, but the author made it work!

Another area where the military culture it was spot on. There was even that rivalry between the fleet and her marine compliment! This was just what I'd expect from a naval officer and ship handling veteran. That's right, Jack Campbell served in the U.S. Navy, and it showed in his understanding of the culture of the swabbie! Because of this, the author made it clear that his world was flushed out and didn't fall into some of the traps most military sci-fi did. The sailors run out of bombs and power cores for their cannons, dumb luck happens, and good sailors still die. It was everything you want from the space fleet subgenre of military science fiction. The battle scenes were believable, gripping, and I never felt like the author missed a chance to get creative with the tactics. Well, at least with the parts that I could visualize. Such a detailed portrayal of fleet tactics is rare, so it was nice to add another universe to the list!

Am I gushing too much yet? Because another way that this universe shined brighter than a nova was in the multiple distinct political groups that the author created. There were at least four main polities, and every single one was slightly different, giving some depth to the universe. I really wanted to know more about all of them, to explore the nooks and crannies of life in the worlds that Jack Campbell's im-

agination spewed for us to read. I think that you'll feel the same, so let's pressure the author to keep writing and giving us more to love!

Okay, have I hinted that I enjoyed this universe yet? Good, I want it to be obvious! So, to wrap this bad boy up, I loved this series. Each one of these novels was at least 90,000 words long, about what you expect from the genre. Despite the length, each book felt like a quick read. If you didn't know how long each novel was, you could almost imagine them as short stories. This is because they were so engrossing that the reader loses track of time, while they temporarily live in the story. The author definitely made me want more from this universe, and I'll definitely be reading the follow-on series that are already available. Seriously, any offer that can make me read their books multiple times is doing something right. This is at least the fourth time I've read through these books, and I never felt like I was wasting my time in coming back to this familiar stomping ground.

Seriously, I realize I've gone full fanboy, but the author definitely raised the bar for space fleet military science fiction authors everywhere. I was hooked from the first page/minute! Jack Campbell wove the action into the onboard drama among the fleet in such a compelling way that you wanted to sign up in the Alliance Fleet, despite the stench of their sailory ways! Basically, Campbell had me hooked from the beginning and kept it going throughout the whole series. These are books that I would happily recommend, and an author I will definitely read again. Buy these novels! But hey, it's easy to spend someone else's money!

If this book sounds like it's right up your alley, check it out! You won't regret it! Well, unless it keeps you up all night and you're late to work... and then your boss fires you because you became a book addict and a rabid Jack Campbell fan. And then you track him down and climb into his window in your skivvies, and he shoots you with his phasers set to kill. Okay, the fanboy/fangirl syndrome MIGHT kill you. Be warned but enjoy the high!

Odd Magics: Tales for the Lost by Sarah A. Hoyt

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.

Or All Will Burn Anthology Introduction by Kacey Ezell Review by Pat Patterson

[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

A small word about Kacey Ezell, prompted by her writing of the Introduction to this collection. If you meet her, do not be deceived by her charm, grace, and wit; this woman does not NEED a helicopter to put you under the ground (although if she DID need one, it would no doubt appear). In her own words:

"Every life matters. But as a parent, in my mind, my daughters' lives matter more than anyone or anything."

Yes. The female of the species IS more deadly than the male.

Please, for your own sake, keep that in mind! And, should you ever encounter Kacey in person, remember to be polite; that way you will never have the (brief) experience of 'the she-bear thus accosted.'

Authors in this volume have provided stories allowing you to vicariously have the experience of bothering the she-bear from a great distance, which is the only way in which it may be survived without tissue damage. Enjoy!

A Mother's Pyre, by J. Kenton Pierce. A mother's responsibility to her children does NOT seem to be limited by her abilities; the 'Protection' switch seems to have two settings: Active and Standby. In this story, the mother is more than symbolic, but other than biological. I did NOT say 'less than biological.' The ship HMS Ascension of Man feels the motherhood drive very strongly, and patiently sets about doing her job, as well as possible.

Peer Review Parenting, by A. Kristina Casasent. The relationship between pets and owners is not QUITE the same as that between parents and children, but surely this is a matter of bandwidth more than devotion. Uplifted dogs and cats address that limitation, so that partnership is a better description of the relationship they have with their human counterparts. When a close-minded criminal is placed in charge of the lab, her agenda includes murdering the new sapients. This is NOT an approved approach.

Fur, Fangs, Family, by Wally Waltner. The saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' is illustrated across species lines in this story. People have a place, too, and their loyalty is not questioned.

A Father's Promise, by Kelly Grayson. We have already discussed the lethal force a mother can exert when her children are threatened; this story looks at the mayhem an organized, systematic father can bring.

Beneath Red Sky, by Moze Howard. In the days after TEOTWAWKI, small communities spring up. They will provide a way to reclaim much of a technological society, IF the bandits will leave them alone. When one community is raided, a father places an obligation on his wife with his dying words. She must rescue their children or die trying.

Pia, by Andrew Milbourne. Nobody likes a child-slaver. Pia REALLY doesn't like them, and her intention is to end them, each one.

The Country Road, by Daniel G. Zeidler. Andvari Ironfist is on his way home. Nothing will deter him from reaching his destination. Nothing, other than rescuing innocent children in need, that is.

Werewolf Nation, by TC Ross. Werewolves prowl the land in this story of TEOTWAWKI, but there is something strange about their behavior. Investigate? Or kill them all?

And The Void Stared Back, by Kacey Ezell and Marisa Wolf.

Ouch.

Ouch, because these are two of my favorite authors, and I didn't understand one bit of this story. If you can find meaning, or even coherence or continuity in these words, you have access to a knowledge base with which I am quite ignorant of.

Sorry.

What Was Once Wild, by Sarah Arnette. Parents can be other-than-human. In this case, the parents are cats; uplifted, to be sure, but cats nonetheless. Shy, the star of our story, prefers a life in the wild, because she doesn't want anyone else to be in control of her life, and particularly not in control of her food supply. However, as so many parents have discovered before her, everything changes when you have kids. Figuratively, Shy sells the sports car and buys a mini-van. Even so, it's not a bad life.

Pack Dynamics by Julie Frost
Review by Vanessa Landry
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

It is a wild ride— as you'd expect with werewolves.

In the first five pages, our mostly main character, Ben Lockwood, recent veteran turned PI, gets kidnapped, shot and tortured after taking an industrial espionage case.

Who knew the world of biologics could be so vicious?

But when you are dealing with the ramifications of werewolves, vampires and other denizens of the night being available for genetic manipulation, all bets are off. Especially when the lives of loved ones are at stake.

This is not the sort of book where you have to wonder who the bad guy is. We see this in the first five minutes of reading. But it is the kind of book where you wonder what the next twist is going to be.

It is a wild ride— as you'd expect with werewolves.

The Story

After months of being a POW in Afghanistan, Army Ranger Ben Lockwood is now a Private Investigator, and just wants a safe, boring life. With his boss (his girlfriend's mother) on vacation, he takes an "easy" case of pharmaceutical espionage.

In short order, he's caught in the crossfire of werewolf hunting to cure his dying vampire wife, a mad scientist, and himself. Ben's blood is the key to the vampire's recovery, and the werewolf wants his blood, one way or another.

This is the beginning of a series and reads something like an episode of *Leverage* with severely weakened plot armor. After the opening kidnapping is resolved, the action just keeps rolling as a beleaguered Biotech company is threatened with murder and mayhem, while they desperately try to figure out why. Then we find out that a chance meeting wasn't so chancy, and saying no to an unreasonable request can have dire consequences.

Over time they coalesce into a team through adversity and nearly constant threats.

There are even some boardroom scenes towards the end, but they are anything but dull.

This is the kind of book that grabs you by the throat and keeps shaking until the very end.

The Characters

While the plot is a very real thing, it is largely driven by a cast of vividly drawn characters. This first book is ultimately about how the group is brought together and becomes a team. Who thought Ben Lockwood's employer Alex Jarrett, the Elon Musk of Biologics, would be tossed together Ben's girlfriend/coworker Janni Miller. Janni is a Daphne personality but with more aplomb, steel in her spine, and demonstrated investigative ability.

Alex's personal assistant, Megan Graham, has her own spicy personality. She reminds me of Pepper Pots with a VERY private life, complicated by secret, monthly Wolf transformations.

Last but not least, we have Ben, our PI Veteran who has some serious ongoing PTSD which is handled vividly throughout, though he gets introspective and over-reactive to those forces. Ben is handled with utmost skill— I only wanted to slap him (hard) twice in the book. Maybe three times if you count the flashback. It's hard to get too upset at him because he is sympathetic steely and complex. He also goes through a very great deal, and I can forgive him for acting like it's a lot— because it IS.

Even the villains are well drawn and vividly presented, rather like a *Colombo* episode. They are not mustache twirling villains, but definitely evil— for their decision making, brutality and definition of "acceptable risk" to others. But their motivations are more than understandable; they are almost sympathetic, if they weren't so willing to destroy everything to get what they want.

The World

While this is a traditional "secret history" sort of world, it's almost more like an open secret. Society won't acknowledge it, the Supernaturals won't openly talk about it, Because who wants crowds showing up with pitchforks, torches, and Molotov cocktails? The underground has a sense of what is going on.

All of this is focused in a few places in the LA Area. You can tell that Julie Frost has some experience with the area because she doesn't cover any special monuments in particular— save a very nice park most people haven't heard of.

Politics

Politics aren't really covered in this book unless you count office politics or the mechanics of espionage.

Content Warning

There's no described nudity (one shower scene and a reverse-wolf-shift). There are a couple of people dating each other, but all sex happens off screen. There might be some lightly described PDA. I didn't notice a lot of "F" bombs (there may be some). The violence is vivid but not grotesquely lingered over. This is not slasher horror, but people get pretty badly hurt a number of times.

There are couple of scenes with suicidal ideation delved into pretty deeply, plus a number of scenes with non trivial mental distortion, i.e.. PTSD looked at from the inside. Plus the experiments that the main character experiences directly. Also, there are several runs of experiments on animals that go badly.

Who is this for?

This is for a fan of Larry Correia, Jim Butcher or Declan Finn who wants to a industrial espionage bio-thriller with werewolves, vampires and mad science. There is a lot of action and violence, but the consequences are dealt with in depth. This is a thinking man's action piece, with thoughtful attention to the cost.

Why buy it?

Buy it because it is chock full of great vivid characters, intense action, deep introspection and portrays the biotech associated with supernatural creatures in a real and wonderful way. This is a binging book that haunts you weeks after you've read it. Yes, it is worth buying all extant books before reading so you don't have to wait around for the next one!

Phantom Orbit by David Ignatius
Review by Jason P. Hunt
<http://SciFi4Me.com>

The Cold War. It was a time when the US and the Soviet Union didn't quite get along. Suspicions everywhere. No one was completely trustworthy. And here in the United States, we all knew the Russians were coming, the Russians were coming.

Only they didn't. And the Cold War ended with pretty much a fizzle. (Of course, given the current political climate in this country, maybe they made it over here after all...)

Phantom Orbit makes an interesting choice in starting things with a Russian protagonist; Ivan Volkov is a student of math and orbital mechanics. He finds opportunity to study at a university in China, where they take note of his skill and hope to recruit him for their own satellite program. And as we learn through the course of the story, everyone who's interested in Volkov is connected in some way to an intelligence agency, and that includes the CIA in the form of Edith Ryan, who gets too personally involved and loses her position at the China station.

Ryan, for her part, gets only a little POV coverage in the beginning of the book, her story picking up years later after Volkov attempts to make contact with the CIA to warn them that there's a "kill switch" that's been loaded into various satellites that have been built by the Chinese.

A bulk of the story follows Volkov as he navigates the space between being a student and trying to avoid being recruited as an informant for the KGB during his time in China. All he wants to do is work on space technology — rockets and satellites — and he isn't in the least bit interested in political intrigue, even though he knows that living in Russia means at some point he's going to get caught up in it whether he likes it or not. It's an interesting character study as he evolves into a more cynical space, but ultimately, I was a bit disappointed because of just how little happens in this story.

Volkov and Ryan are both on the outer edge of a bigger series of events that happen "off screen" away from the narrative of the book. There are hints of things happening elsewhere, but we only get glimpses, teases, as the two are reunited under a blanket of suspicion. And while I wasn't expecting Ignatius to be another Tom Clancy, I still found myself wondering when something was actually going to happen. The realization that the Chinese have designed a master "kill switch" for satellites should have been a much bigger thing. I mean, this is happening all during the Cold War, for the most part, and it continues into the modern era post-pandemic. At the very least, I would have expected the tension to ratchet up as Volkov got deeper into realizing just what his academic pals in China were really about.

From a craft standpoint, Ignatius definitely has chops as a writer. And you can tell he's got familiarity with the subject matter, having been a reporter covering the Cold War for so long. But in the end, the story kind of fell flat for me. There was just enough technology, just enough intrigue, just enough personal entanglements, just enough to draw me into the story. But most of the time is spent with things happening to Volkov. He doesn't drive the story, and I think that takes some of the energy out of it.

Queen of the Martian Catacombs by Leigh Brackett
Review by Caroline Furlong
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

To stop a war, Eric John Stark must infiltrate an army. But is the warlord the real danger, or is his queen the true threat?

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!

The story

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 blackguard 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?

Running Into Time by Cedar Sanderson
Review by Pat Patterson
[goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson](https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson)

I hesitate to compare Sanderson's storytelling to the technique of teaching swimming by tossing the learner into the deep end of the pool. For one thing, there is no chance of drowning in Sanderson's work (although it would be a delightful way to go). Nevertheless, in this particular tale, the reader is immediately permitted access to the deeper parts, without having to go through the wading process. Preliminaries? Back-story? Forget that; what you need will be given to you by the time you really need it, and not before.

Thus, we are introduced to Garry (for Garry Owen) and Olly (for Olympia) in the middle of a class dealing with intricacies of time-travel, without much bother about who they are, and how they are related to one another. Fear not! That will be made available in short order, and in the meantime, we are able to move at speed into the meat of the issue: brother Pol (for Apollo) is fooling around with the fundamental elements of existence.

With the assistance of a white rat named Gus (for Augustus). (It's not his FIRST rat; just the last rat, the one that lived long enough to be awarded a name.)
And the bad guys are on the way.

Will the military prowess of Garry and the science-based chops of Pol be enough to counter this (and future) attacks?

I'm not going to tell you that. The work is here for you to read, and I won't spoil it.

Savage Wars by Jason Anspach and Nick Cole

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

It's hard to believe, but just a few short years ago, I heard about this Nick Cole guy, and how he was this great GameLit author who had just been banned because he said something naughty. At the time I kind of pigeonholed the guy and decided he was a writer of GameLit (which I love) and I'd probably never see anything from him BUT GameLit. I was okay with that though, because he was good at it and, let's face it CTRL ALT REVOLT was a pretty awesome story and so was Soda Pop Soldier, although I seem to have failed to review the latter. My bad. My seriously bad, because Soda Pop Soldier was not just an awesome book, it was a gamer's dream in a lot of ways.

Oops.

Yes, that is my official excuse.

Then one day, along comes this Anspach guy, throws him in the trunk and refuses to let Cole out till he agrees to co-author some awesome Military Science Fiction.

I mean, probably not. But that makes a good story, so that's what I'm going with.

Anyway...

This is a really awesome book. Apparently, I missed it when it was first released because that's life in the salt mines, but I'm glad I got caught up.

It's weird because I hadn't read the Galaxy's Edge or Galaxy's Edge: Savage Wars series and for some reason I assumed that the Savages would be some kind of alien. And they kind of are. The Savages in the book are humans who left Earth to settle the stars in sublight ships and have evolved into uhh...

Something? Post humans? Monsters?

I'm struggling to find the right term here. They are, however, definitely xenophobic toward both other groups of Savages (basically, anyone from a different ship) and the rest of the human race, including those that stayed behind on Earth and eventually moved out to populate the universe using faster than light ships and got there before the Savages.

The Savages tend to invade a planet, take what they need and leave...

Eventually.

And at some point, they begin to obtain FTL engines and it's on.

The scary part is that no one knows where they are out in the void. Anspach and Cole seem to have a grasp of the fact that space is freaking huge and there really is no way to find something in the Darkness if it doesn't want to be found. I like that.

Our story starts right in the middle of a fight against the Savages when they invade New Vega. The fight is up-close, intense and personal. Neither author seems to have wanted to spare anyone the details and I like that. Too often, Military Science Fiction (as well as Military Fiction and quite frankly Military Non-Fiction) seem to want to shy away from the goriness of it all. This is war at its ugliest (or at least the ugliest it can be to those of us who don't experience it in person) and it feels real and gritty.

Something else that feels real is the lack of true leadership at the highest levels. The feeling I get here (and I could be a bit off) is that the various human militaries that have been fielded for this battle are under the command of an entity that is a close analogue to the United Nations in terms of aim, purpose, usefulness, and competence.

For those of you that missed it, that means that The Galactic Confederacy (Sort of. The GC is more of a hope than a governing body at this point) is a group that wants to make things better, has no clue how to do so and stumbles over itself through cluelessness and a general lack of trust. I'm thinking that Savage Wars is a trilogy prequel and hopefully things get better for humanity's last great hope, but for right now I don't think much of them. Still though, the whole new society aborning thing does give Savage Wars a feel similar to the better parts of Star Trek: Enterprise only without the ending that I hated so badly.

Our main characters are soldiers stuck in a war against an enemy that they can't understand. The trans-human nature of the enemy is something that they grapple with and eventually figure out, but it's not really like fighting typical human beings for the most part. Also, the Savages tend to enjoy a large technological advantage. And that brings up an interesting point.

I don't think you need to read the Galaxy's Edge series to enjoy Savage Wars because I haven't read the other series, and I loved this book. I do, however think I may be missing something here. I can't quite wrap my head around the fact that the Savages have developed super weapons over centuries in space (and the alien super weapon thing is a theme in the story) with no reason given. It messes with my mind a bit. I mean, once you accept that they have everything that follows makes sense. I just feel like maybe there's a threat out there that I don't know about, or maybe they've made war against each other previously or...

I dunno, sumfin'

There are twists and turns aplenty in Savage Wars and that makes sense. War is not a static situation where one side can simply dictate how things go. Both sides have a say, and things go wrong regardless of which side you happen to be on. If some things made me want to scream, then so be it. They work. Savage Wars, at least from the point of view of this fledgling author, seems to have been well planned and executed. The characters may not have known exactly how the Battle for New Vega was going to go, but the authors clearly did and it flows smoothly, believably and entertainingly.

Oof. I was feeling another -ly ending there and couldn't come up with one. Feel free to pretend it's there.

Of course, we don't do spoilers here at Jimbo's and so I can't talk about my favorite part of the Savage

Leben's company had highly-classified defense contracts so the disappearance of his body gets the Defense Security Agency involved. Its Deputy Director is Anson Sharp, who served with Benny in Vietnam. They had issues, and Anson is willing to abuse his power to settle a personal score with Benny. The local cops assigned to investigate the corpse's disappearance are Julio Verdad and Reese Hagerstrom. They are both widowers who take a personal interest in the case, especially when they connect the corpse's disappearance with a pair of brutal murders. This compelling thriller, originally published under the pseudonym Leigh Nichols, reminded me of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, although with a scientific rather than a supernatural explanation.

The Sinister Booksellers of Bath by Garth Nix— Review by Tom Feller

My wife Anita and I visited Bath after the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow and really liked it. Much of this urban fantasy is set there during an alternate December 1983. It is the sequel to *The Left Handed Booksellers of London* and takes place a few months later. The rare book business is a cover for magical good guys to fight evil magic users and supernatural creatures. They are assisted from time to time by the local cops, Scotland Yard, British intelligence, and the Royal Army. The story begins when Vivien St. Jacques, a worker at their bookstore in Bath, discovers a map hidden in an old book that came from an estate sale. She asks for help from her brother Merlin, who just happens to be cross dressing in a Regency-era costume, and he is accidentally sucked into the place shown on the map. To rescue him, she enlists the aid of his girlfriend Susan Arkshaw, who is an art student and a demi-mortal, the daughter of the Old Man of Conniston and a human woman named Jasmine. Raised in Bath, she is trying to live a normal life. They encounter an entity they refer to as the Stone Lady who practices human sacrifice every seven years on the winter solstice and discover that Susan is her next target. During the story, they encounter animated statues and an evil branch of the Freemasons, and Susan meets with the Celtic-Roman goddess Sulis Minerva. Despite an excessive amount of descriptions of food, clothes, cars, and weapons, this is a good thriller with a satisfying ending.

Splashdown by Blaine Pardoe Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

If Tom Clancy did big stompy robots

This is my review of Blaine Lee Pardoe's "Splashdown." It's a brilliant MilSF technothriller, and I highly recommend it. - Declan Finn

For years, Blaine Pardoe nearly was the Battletech universe. When he was cancelled over the ravings of a deranged social media psychopath, he moved on to greener pastures. And while he's still in the "big stompy robot" genre, this first book has surprises in it.

The Story

Around the world of 2039, strange events are happening. Ships disappear for no reason. Rogue waves are hitting ships. People near the water are mysteriously killed or disappear. Plane crashes in the water have been laid out and reconstructed ... while still under water. The world is about to be hip-deep in a war of the worlds, but only a few have even a clue.

Captain Ashton Slade of Defense Intelligence has come to a conclusion: Aliens have arrived on Earth.

Wars. I will say that it's the best kind of twist: I had no clue before it happened and then couldn't believe I missed it afterward. I am, however, seriously peeved that I can't mention what I want to and totally plan to stick my tongue out at whichever author I meet if I ever happen across them at a con.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Crusty NCOs

Scattered, Smothered and Spellbound: They Call Me Tully by Kelly Grayson Review by Pat Patterson

goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

Anyone who spends time with me knows that my go-to eatery is a Waffle House. I have reasons for that, but unlike Tully, mine include the fact it's the only restaurant in which I could wear a tuxedo and sing along with Elvis on the jukebox in a spirited rendition of 'Blue Christmas.' If I tried that at Marietta Seafood, they'd put me in the parking lot.

Tully is a telepath+, and he finds a place for his talents in the Marine Corps of the late 1960's. It helped with accomplishing missions, but eerie magic stuff does NOT trump short rounds, as he discovered to his great loss. It also doesn't prevent bad things happening to people he loves. After he gains some degree of physical recovery, he dives into a bottle to find completion; and, unfortunately, that's figurative speech. He doesn't actually dive into a bottle, like a genie; he just drinks from a long series of them.

Then, as so many of us have, he finds rescue at the Waffle Haus. Magical, yes; but there is practical benefit to be found in three pecan waffles, eggs over easy, and a breakfast steak medium rare. And then: boom goes the dynamite, and Tully has a new job.

If you live near a Waffle House, eat there while you read this. It's good for you!

Shadowfire by Dean Koontz Review by Tom Feller

By all accounts, Eric Leben was a 41 year old genius who had become a multi-millionaire in the genetic engineering business. The results of his research make this into a science fiction thriller. Unfortunately, he forgot to look both ways while crossing a street and walked directly into the path of a garbage truck. The paramedics declared him dead at the scene and promptly transported him to the local morgue in the city of Santa Ana in Orange County, California. (Under California law, autopsies have to be performed in accidental deaths, no matter how obvious the cause of death may be.) Then his body disappears from the morgue and the story really gets going.

Rachael Leben was his 29 year old trophy wife who married Eric when she was 24. This was the upper range of his Jeffrey Epstein-like taste in women, and his 16 year old mistress becomes an important character later in the novel. Rachael had moved out after Eric struck her, and the opening scene takes place immediately after they leave the lawyer's office following a meeting that determined her divorce settlement. She had asked for far less money than she was entitled to under California law, and they had one last argument before he crossed the fateful street. Since they had not yet signed the divorce papers, she is now the sole heir to his fortune.

After Rachael moved out, she met Benny Shadway, a real estate agent who found a house for her. They immediately hit it off, and they are in the early stages of a romance that is not yet consummated. He is a Vietnam veteran (the book was first published in 1987) who served in the Marines, and his martial arts and weapons training come in handy before the book is over.

They have been hiding in the oceans for nearly five years.

And they are about to reveal themselves. And there is only one thing that can stand in their way: the giant mechs called ASHURs.

All in all, this is Tom Clancy writing a military science fiction novel. Had Tom Clancy written this, we would have gotten three unrelated plotlines that eventually intertwine somewhere after page 100 (in standard hardcover format).

Blaine Lee Pardoe, however, has eight point of view characters. Each one of them have their own distinct voice. And the characters carry the novel. And when I say they carry the book, keep in mind, the fighting doesn't even start until 60% of the way through the novel.

We start with a scene out of *Gojira*, where a boat disappears. Then a sequence out of the *Jurassic Park* novel, where curious little creatures turn out to be a murderous swarm.

Splashdown is almost like *Jaws*. Or the original *Gojira*—you may not see the monster until halfway into the film, but you can't really look away.

(Yes, I did prefer the original to the Raymond Burr American version. So sue me.)

Despite all of that slow burn, *Splashdown* is not a slow read. It's around 100,000 words, pretty standard for SciFi; I still finished it in a matter of days.

Reading through *Splashdown* does give you an appreciation for weaponizing certain technology. I knew about water cutting tools that act like a laser, but Blaine weaponizes them very well for the aliens.

Keep in mind, the first three books of *Land and Sea* read very well back-to-back. They read so well together that I thought they may have originally been one long longer, like *Lord of the Rings*.

The Characters

Captain Ashton Slade is "Just an analyst." He'd seen his share of fighting, and now he just wants to analyze data and write his books. Him and Jack Ryan. Frankly, this is one of the better analyst characters I've seen in years. Perhaps since Jack Ryan. (Seriously, there are multiple reasons I compare these books to Tom Clancy novels.)

Corporal Natalia Falto is a newcomer to Guam, and she's a great character for following some of the infantry meeting up with the aliens.

Dana Blaze is a reporter, and she is more of a blood sucking monster than most vampires. The culture of reporting as more entertainment than information is ... unfortunately, a little too close to current events. Funny enough, she's doing the job of an actual reporter, genuinely digging into stories and trying to be first on the ground to get The Story. But she's less motivated by the truth and more driven by making certain she gets the clicks. She's one part Lois Lane, with all the worse aspects of your average social media influencer.

Jay Drake is all the genius of Elon Musk and all the worst instincts of Bill Gates. His interactions are largely with Dana Blaze, leading to an unholy alliance that will have interesting long-term consequences.

Cassidy Chen is a normal California teenager. Except she likes her family. Her father is about to head overseas ... to the new Marine facility on Guam.

Antonio Colton is a veteran who's fighting the VA while dealing just enough drugs as a side job to make ends meet. He's an interesting character, and I feel like he's one of the more detailed ones. He's conflicted over dealing, suffers from PTSD, feels largely dead inside. But he's about to get a Hell of a redemption arc.

Sergeant Adam Cain is an ill-tempered crank who "is always right" and is annoyed about how wrong everyone else is. He is a soldier who hate civilian life, has wrecked his family, and doesn't know how to interact with his command structure. He has a chip on his soldier bigger than he is. Seriously, he makes Bernard Cornwell's Richard Sharpe look laid back. But he's an ASHUR pilot.

Commander Titus Hill is a submarine commander of the USS Virginia. But despite being second in command of a hunter killer submarine, something is hunting them.

Even characters in throwaway scenes get a quick, efficient background in only a few lines of text. It's awesome.

The World

The year is 2039, nearly ten years after the Bratva War, where the US and Russia fought a war in Alaska. Blaine condenses the war in a matter of paragraphs, and you feel like you just read an entry in a well-written history textbook.

The United States government ... still sucks, really. Nothing changes. The top military brass are REMFs.

Drones are now ubiquitous in everyday life, both military and civilian.

Blaine goes into so many details on technology and how it has changed society, and how the news is reported, and how information is distributed. This is complete with holographic interfaces on par with what we've seen in science fiction from Babylon 5 to Iron Man. Every soldier is chipped, with digital records implanted in the arm, with adaptive camouflage gear, and helmets with visors that have on board nods. I especially like digital duplicates of classic actors in new films.

Blaine even has segments that goes into what combat cocktails may look like in fifteen years.

And of course, there are the ASHURs—Augmented Soft/Hard Unconventional Combat Rigs. They're mechs with everything from thermobaric explosives to laser cannons to on-board fifty caliber machineguns and more. They're detailed with backstories going back a decade.

The aliens themselves are a varied collection of species that come off feeling like they're the Covenant from Halo.

And again, all of this is quickly and easily described in dense prose that doesn't waste any space. I think one of the few aspects of society he didn't touch on includes religion. But there's a reason for that.

Politics

Honestly? This is very politically neutral. It's promilitary, anti-officer. That's the biggest political point

here. Asides from cynicism about the government and media.

Content Warning

It's war, but it's nowhere near as graphic as storming Omaha Beach in Saving Private Ryan. There isn't much in the way of cussing—I think there is more cussing in my notes than in the book.

Who is it for?

Splashdown is if Tom Clancy wrote military science fiction for Baen, fighting aliens with giant mechs.

Why buy it?

Hell, you can buy this book to just read it to study the writing. It's that awesome.

Star Wars X-Wing: Rogue Squadron by Michael A. Stackpole

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Morality in war? Now there's a novel concept....

Star Wars was dying long before Disney got their hands on it, but once, it was a living and very exciting franchise. During that time frame many interesting and even great books were set in a galaxy far, far away. They have all been remanded to "Legends" status, sadly, but they can still be purchased by those eager for some good entertainment.

One series in the Expanded Universe (what "Legends" was once called) which a modern reader might want to pick up is the first entry in the X-Wing series. Written by Michael A. Stackpole and focusing on the new Rogue Squadron formed after Return of the Jedi, the series had as one of its stars a briefly seen hero from the films: this would be Wedge Antilles, perhaps the most moral or ethical character in the old Star Wars universe.

And boy, does Stackpole deliver on that premise of Wedge's character...even is the primary character in the narrative is one Corran Horn, descendant of a Corellian Security officer with some very Force-ful skills!

The Story

It starts with the Redemption scenario, a much-feared final test all Rebel Alliance pilots must face. Much like Star Trek's infamous Kobayashi Maru test, the Redemption scenario is supposed to be unwinnable – the simulation has would-be elite pilots protecting Alliance medical shuttles bringing wounded to the Alliance ship Redemption for treatment, only for an Imperial frigate to arrive and send out TIE fighters. These fighters, piloted in the simulator by Rebel Alliance veterans, attempt to take out the rookies and/or to destroy the vessels they are protecting.

In contrast to the Kobayashi Maru, in this case, the test lives up to its reputation. Along with the other Squadron hopefuls, Corran loses the object stated in the test but is surprised to learn from another hopeful that he actually won. He ended up dead in space – everyone else just ended up "dead," period. Feeling good about this, Corran goes to see the pilot he beat who was flying the TIE that left him floating dead in space, only to find it isn't the man he believed he duled. But this stranger doesn't give his name

before after complimenting his piloting and leaves the room with a security escort to boot. So, Corran is left wondering who could possibly have the skill to out-fly him yet not be out flying for the Rebels in combat, not to mention be under security's watchful eye!

Meanwhile, Wedge Antilles goes to see his superiors, Admiral Ackbar and General Salm, the latter of whom is running the training center. Salm has refused a couple of people whom Wedge wants in the newly reformed Rogue Squadron, but Antilles is hoping that Ackbar will approve them. Essentially, he is praying he can get around the stubborn general by going to the admiral, and it works – sort of. Ackbar okays one of the trainees no problem, but the other one is not so easy. This is the man who beat Corran. He is the man whom Wedge wants as his XO – Tycho Celchu, former Imperial pilot, citizen of the destroyed Alderaan, and former captive in the current head of the Empire's personal gulag: Lusankya.

Normally, getting out of an Imperial prison would not require restrictions to be put on someone. But those who escape Lusankya are often brainwashed so that they will commit sabotage and assassinations when the proper command comes through from Ysanne "Iceheart" Isard, the present head of the Empire. She even uses these former prisoners to get information on Alliance movements, too. So, it is not hard to see why the brass is suspicious of Celchu, as even though he and his friends are sure he isn't compromised, there is no proof that he got out clean.

Ackbar, however, takes one look at the restrictions that Celchu has agreed to accept on his movements and calls the man in to confirm he really means he will abide by them. Having been a slave for five years to Grand Moff Tarkin, one look at the list gives Ackbar flashbacks. Does Celchu understand he would be a veritable slave if he accepted these terms?!

Yes, he does, but he wants to fight. Restricted or not, Celchu wants to go with the Rogues. But no one tells the newbies about his past, so the suspicious Corran Horn is left to try to puzzle out why this man Wedge respects so much is under restraint as they prep to become a squadron that will be the Empire's worst nightmare – and biggest thorn in the side – over the coming two months. Is Wedge's confidence misplaced? Or is more going on than anyone realizes?

The Characters

By far, the best characters in this novel are Corran Horn and Wedge Antilles. The rest all have their time to shine, of course, but these two make the novel as Corran's practiced skepticism and past experience in Corellian Security (CorSec for short) makes him understandably suspicious. Once a space police officer, always a space police officer. But is he suspicious of the right people?

Wedge comes into his own in this novel in a way that Zahn initially touched on in his Thrawn trilogy. Upbeat and optimistic, Antilles is nevertheless a no-nonsense commander who wants his people to not only succeed in their missions, but to come back alive. His loyalty to Celchu and those under his command is also on full display in this novel and makes one cheer him on almost more than any of the other protagonists.

The World

The world is Star Wars-that-was, and though the technobabble can cause some to get lost in the heat of aerial combat, the general view of the universe is remarkably thorough, particularly for Corran's insights. What would it like to be even a former police officer in a galaxy far, far away? What would lead

someone from the police force to join the Rebel Alliance rather than the Empire? And those are the questions for readers interested in Corran's point of view. For others, there is a different set of questions: what would it be like if the head of Imperial intelligence took the Emperor's throne, and what if she had her own personal gulag in which she could form and send out sleeper agents who have no idea they are being used? Is there any way to beat someone named "Iceheart" without resorting to the same types of tricks she uses? If so, how?

Politics

Some of the politics are more to the left than the right in this novel, but given the time in which it was written, that is to be expected. For the most part, though, these do not interfere with argument between the Rebellion and the convulsing Galactic Empire, so any allusions to real-world politics can be easily ignored if they irritate a reader.

Content Warning

Someone tries to lust after Ysanne Isard, the poor fool, and a girl does her best to catch Corran's attention by letting down the zipper in the front of her flight suit more than she should. This girl also tries to corner him, but he manages to hold her off. The book is an easy PG-13 as neither of these things are that explicit.

Who is it for?

Star Wars fans and those who just want some good space combat. Anyone who likes Mil-SF mystery will enjoy it as well, and those who want some space opera that they can chew on will like the book. Star Wars X-Wing: Rogue Squadron is not as thick as Timothy Zahn's works nor as deep as Declan Finn's White Ops series, but it is solid Mil-SF to its core and will appeal to readers in that demographic. Anyone who misses the old Expanded Universe from Star Wars or who wants an idea of what it was like will definitely be well served by picking up this novel and giving it a read. Fans of Wedge Antilles will also like it and anyone interested in how Jedi were portrayed prior to the prequels will benefit from reading this, too.

Why buy it?

It is good Mil-SF action with a twist in a familiar universe. It is also vintage Star Wars. What other reason could there be to buy it?

The Third Circle by Amanda Quick Review by Tom Feller

This novel is the fourth book in the author's Arcane Society series centered on a secret organization that studies the occult in late Victorian England. Leona Hewitt is a 20-something crystal worker who makes a living helping people with bad dreams and owns a wolf-like dog known as Fog. Thaddeus Ware is a mesmerist with the psychic ability to control another person's mind for short periods. He is independently wealthy but works as a private investigator known as The Ghost and occasionally helps Scotland Yard. They meet when they are both crashing a party hosted by Lord Delbridge. He is known as an eccentric collector, but has the ambition of joining a secret society within the Arcane Society. Delbridge is believed to be responsible for at least three murders. Both Leona and Thaddeus are looking for the Aurora Stone, a crystal believed to have strong magical properties, and come across a murdered woman. They later find out that the murderer was a psychopath with strong magical powers

named by the press as the Midnight Monster, who, during his leisure time, murders prostitute. In this case, the murder was an assignment from Delbridge. This book is a lot of fun and a fast read, and I look forward to finding more books in this series.

Titan Mage by Edie Skye
Review by JR Handley
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

In a turbulent world full of political shenanigans, it was a relief to find a genre that was irreverent and fun. There was no larger message, neither side of the great divide telling me I was evil for not being in their camp. This book was just clean fun with a few naughty scenes in there for good measure. It was Grade A Awesome!

What was awesome? None other than the novel Titan Mage by Edie Skye, a fun fantasy romp through a steamship paradise inhabited by giant stompy robots and cool monsters that need killin'! The world was fleshed out from page one and left me wanting to know more. I was thoroughly invested from jump and can't wait for the author to write more in this universe.

So, let's talk about this book that hooked me. This is a harem novel about a man who was isekai-ed into a fantasy world. He enters a world where his newly acquired magical prowess and ability to control the Titan mechs make Locke extremely desirable. The ladies throw themselves at him, and he ends up with a bevy of beauties. Voilà, a harem is created. All the characters that inhabit the pages of this book were awesome and I liked them. I haven't previously read this genre, but I love giant stompy robots and dream of piloting one. It was an easy buy-in for me!

The Story

Magic powers? His own mech? A whole airship of gorgeous women desperate for his genes? Yes, please!

Paralyzed by a drunk driver, let go from his job, and stuck in a sad, stagnant town in the middle of nowhere, Joseph Locke was having the worst day of his life.

And then he died.

But considering that he wakes up with a brand-new body in the cockpit of a badass steampunk robot on an airship of nothing but hot babes, his next life may not be all that bad. Especially when he learns that he's a void mage—the rarest and most powerful of all mages in the world of Haven. And his shipmates want to help him make more.

As if that weren't enough, they offer Locke a job piloting one of their mechs, which they call Titans. In the meantime, Locke has to learn his way around this exciting world, all while coming to grips with his new—and dangerous—occupation. Will he be able to master his Titan? How can he best upgrade the machine to become as badass as possible? Why's a strange parasitic sludge falling from the sky? And what's up with the ghost of a space witch living in his Titan—and inside his head?

Let's dive in! That's the summary from the book, and it nailed it! This ad copy caught the vibe of this book, which is helpful for future readers. The author, Edie Skye, is irreverent, fun, and has a witty sense of humor.

Speaking of the novel, this book was well-written and a lot of fun to dive into. The prose was clean, and the storytelling was top-notch. The author, Edie Skye, gave a master class on how to tell a story in a conversational authorial voice. She told a story that was expertly paced, with enough pauses in the right places for the naughty scenes and to balance the action-oriented aspects of this story. This novel was the overlap of expert wordsmithing and a compelling story with characters you'll learn to love!

Continuing along, let's talk about the pacing and plot of this story. No reason to say this coyly, so let's be blunt. This book was expertly plotted out by Edie Skye. It was easy to believe the character's transition from Earth to Haven and the deal that brought him there. I wanted to believe in this world and this adventure. Luckily, the author made it extremely easy to do. We had a perfectly paced coming-of-age story as the main character, Locke, finds himself and his place in the world. There were enough lulls in the action to give you breathing room, so you didn't feel overwhelmed. The action was interspaced by stops for naughty sex scenes and battles with the big bads. There were plenty of hills and valleys that gave us time to breathe, which is important in a novel of this length. And since this is a harem story, the pacing of which partner got time with Locke was also done in such a way as to give us room to accept that jealousy was managed by his ladies. Truly, this was a master class of epic proportions.

The other important part of this story is how well-plotted out this novel is. I am writing this review of book one as I am listening to the audiobook for book four. As we dive deeper into this series, it feels like the author thought out the larger story arc in advance. Minor details in this novel pay dividends in later novels. If Edie Skye shot from the hip, it didn't show and that's all that truly matters. The book was written so that every piece of tidbits pays off later and in a big way. I am not sure how else to express how enjoyable the plot of this novel was, so we'll move on!

Now, let's talk about the audiobook for this novel! This book was well put together and expertly done. The audiobook publisher, Royal Guard Publishing, set the standard of excellence. Not sure how else to say that this was an audio production was amazing other than to just say wow. Just wow. The narrators were top-notch, and I'd definitely listen to other books narrated by them. I have never listened to books narrated by Daryl Mayfield or Jess Trepanier, and they impressed the hell out of me. The two worked well together, seamlessly blending their style of coed narration in such a way that I sometimes forgot that there were two of them. At this point, I'm willing to listen to anything this Dynamic Duo reads to me! Or solo, since their talent is something worth honoring!

I really enjoyed what Edie Skye gave me. The story was a lot of fun, it was well-written, and the audiobooks were well-performed. From the writing side, Edie Skye had a mastery of the craft, and she was a joy to read. This book was told in conversational prose, which I'm a huge fan of. The characters were all believable; I could envision meeting them in the real world. It sounds corny, but I judge the people in the books where I temporarily make my home on whether or not I could see myself having a beer with them. On that front, Edie Skye nailed it.

In conclusion, the sex was written with just the right amount of spice, and the monster fights were a lot of fun. I didn't grow up watching the same anime or those other animated adult entertainment videos that were referenced in the text. Because of that, I didn't get some of the references and inside jokes in this book. Luckily, I don't think you needed those cultural references to enjoy this story. I think those references could've made the story hit harder, but you're fine without them. I guess, in a nutshell, this novel was so good that it made me dive into the rest of the series and the larger genre. Further, I went on to buy all of Edie Skye's other books. My wallet hates me but should be a few more hours of entertainment. What can I say? Buy these books and join me in my new addiction!

The Characters

This novel is told from the point of view of Joseph Locke, a young man from Grassroots, Kentucky. He's offered a deal too good to pass up and ends up being transported to a whole new world. While he is obviously the main character, I contend that the entire cast of characters is the main focal point. This is a harem-lit novel, so there were multiple people for us to know and love. All of the characters that inhabit the world of Titan Mage are well-written. They were fleshed out and felt real. The kind of people I could have over to a barbeque and have a beer with. They have an air of laid-back chill, which is what I loved about this book. Hopefully, the wider genre will bear this out as well!

Joseph Locke: He is the main point of view character of this adventure, but he isn't the only main character in this adventure. However, because he serves as the 'everyman' archetype, we can envision this as ourselves when we read it. Classic wish fulfillment, what's not to love? When the series starts out, he's a cripple, wounded by a drunk driver and paralyzed below the waist. He's down on his luck and takes a desperate job from an enigmatic woman he randomly meets in his hometown of Grassroots, Kentucky. That job ended up killing his earthly body, allowing him to be reborn in Haven with the body of a Greek God. He's likable, and through his eyes, we learn about this strange new world and the characters who live there. Throughout the arc of this boxed set, we get to watch him grow and learn and become the kind of man we all wish we could be. What can I say? I like the dude, but I wouldn't let him date my sister!

Captain Alyssa Harper: She's the captain of the airship, the Blue Heron, where the story takes place and runs the 'down on its luck' Harper's Harriers. They're a company in the business of hunting down corrupted monsters and protecting the world from that rot. She's gorgeous because, of course, she is in this genre. She is a no-nonsense kind of lady who only has 'relations' to relieve her stress. She's otherwise all business, serving as the perfect foil to the more fun-loving characters like Bexley. She always thinks about business and allows the reader to get a more grounded view of the world where the story takes place.

Chief Engineer Bexley: As her title would suggest, she's the mechanic for the airship and her complement of Titans. Those are giant robots powered by magic that are used to fight the monsters of this world. She is funny, irreverent, and salaciously sexual in all the right ways. She has exactly two modes throughout this story; horny and ready to get it on and irritated and ready to fix something the others broke. She also loves bawdy music and a good sausage... probably because she likes that double entendre. She has a checkered past with her previous partners but seems to have decided that Locke was enough for her and hung up her... spurs.

Ember Q'Van: She is a Titan Mage from the well-to-do floating city-state of Vador, home of all things posh and affluent. She pilots the other Titan in the Harper's Harriers and is a lot of fun. She vacillates between all business and a firecracker of a bedmate. She was a lot of fun to read and someone I wanted to see more of. Maybe I just have a thing for redheads, but I doubt that's it! LOL! She was just a good blend of fun and professional magical warriors.

Peth: She is an entity that is trapped in the Titan Chimera, who brings Locke to the world of Haven. She is a Precursor with memory issues and is trapped in the Titan. She is, quite literally, the ghost in the machine, and there she will stay until Locke can pull her out of there and make her a new body.

The World

Seriously, what's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Team Edie Skye, who know how to tell compelling stories set in beautiful worlds she created. It was a place I could easily imagine and visualize. She managed to do that without info dumps; instead, she strung us along with details as we needed them. She fed it to us in drips and drabs, making us work for it, and at the end of this book, she left me wanting more! Seriously, this lady was the perfect drug dealer. I know that sounds toxic, but trust me, this story was anything but. It was an exciting thrill ride from start to finish. What's not to like about their already expansive world? The cool part is that we get to learn about everything as the main character does. Since he was brought into this world, it is the perfect point of view to learn about all of the dark corners of Haven. It was a perfect way to introduce new information to the reader, and Edie did it well. I can't say it enough: everything in the setting was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel.

Politics

If you are thinking about real-world politics, there is none in this novel. However, this novel exists in a new fantasy setting and there are governments and thus politics in that world. That said, it is all in service to the plot and in no way preachy.

Content Warning

This is a steamy book with several naughty scenes that will fog up your windows and give you heart palpitations. This is not family-friendly, so be warned before you buy this novel! Oh, and there is a fair share of curse words, so if an F-Bomb or ten bugs you... skip this novel!

Who is it for?

This is a harem book for people who like fantasy novels with giant stompy robots and aren't easily offended by smut or vulgar words. This is my first novel in this space, so I couldn't really compare it to anything else.

Why buy it

Do you love conversational prose? Are you a fan of fantasy novels or giant stompy robots? Do you like naughty harem books? Then buy this book!

To Shape a Dragon's Breath by Moniquill Blackgoose Review by Tom Feller

My first thought after seeing this title was the 2010 animated film *How to Train Your Dragon*. In the film, a Norse teenager makes friends with a young dragon. In this novel, a 15 year old female "Native American" named Anequs is present at the hatching of a female dragon, whom she calls "Kasaqua", and the baby dragon chooses her as her lifelong companion. This is a steampunk fantasy set in an alternate 1845. The Norse, who were never converted to Christianity, have colonized the eastern part of what we would call North America, which is not its name in this story. (Amerigo Vespucci may not have even been born in this alternate history.) Both they and the indigenous peoples have domesticated the dragon. The title refers to the fact that these are fire breathing dragons, and if they cannot be taught to control their fire, they have to be put down. Feral dragons are considered so dangerous that it is always open season on them.

Indigenous peoples are referred to as “Nackies”. (Christopher Columbus may also have not been born to misname them.) The branch of the Norse who settled what we call New England are called the “English”. Anequs, whose father is a whaler, is required to attend a boarding school called Kuiper’s Academy of Natural Philosophy and Stiltakraft, where all the students have bonded with dragons. Naturally, this invites comparison with Harry Potter. Although there is no such thing as “muggle-born”, Anequs and one other Nackie named Theod, who is one year ahead of her, have to endure prejudice, both from some of the teachers and most of the other students. Like the Harry Potter books, the last chapter consists of an end-of-the-year meeting with the school’s head, Frau Karina Kuiper. During the year, she meets Liberty, a indentured-maid of African descent, Sander, a student in her class who is high functioning autistic, and Ulfar, a paraplegic professor disabled from his war-time service. Her roommate is Marta, the only other female student.

This novel won both the Andre Norton and Lodestar Awards this year, which were well deserved, and the author was a finalist for the Astounding Award. This book is an enjoyable read with excellent world building, subtle infodumps, and interesting characters. The short chapters encourage the reader to keep turning the pages. My only reservation is that indigenous culture seems too idealized, like in the movie *Dances with Wolves*. It is the first book in a series, and I look forward to the next one.

Unraveller by Francis Hardinge
Review by Tom Feller

Kellen, the title character, has been cursed. He had an encounter with a “Little Brother”, a spider-like creature that implants “curse eggs” in people, when he was twelve. Normally, the egg gives the person the ability to curse people they hate, but in Kellen’s case he is the one cursed. His particular curse was that every kind of fabric unravels when he touches it. Since his father is weaver, he has to leave his village in the highlands of Raddith, but eventually discovers that iron can control the curse. However, the curse is also a blessing in that he finds that he can unravel the curses put on other people. At the beginning of the book, he is fifteen and people are coming to him for help.

One of the people he helped, Nettle, is a fifteen year old girl who has attached herself to him in a Platonic way. Her particular curse was that she was turned into a heron. She and her family had been living in the lowlands, aka The Wilds, a kind of haunted marsh in Raddith. Nettle and her three siblings had been cursed by their wicked stepmother, and one brother was turned into a hawk and the other into a seagull. Her sister, unfortunately, had been turned into a dove and was dead by the time Kellen arrived.

Kellen and Nettle are approached by a representative of Raddith’s government, called the Chancery, for help with investigating a conspiracy in which people implanted with the curse egg are being helped to escape from the “Red Hospital” where they had been confined. That representative is Gall, who has sacrificed one eye so that he can bond with a marsh horse, a large and carnivorous variation of the species.

This fantasy novel is structured like a detective story as Kellen and Nettle get to the bottom on the conspiracy, and the world building is excellent, especially Mizzleport, Raddith’s capitol, and the Moonlit Market, where anything, including people, are for sale. The plot is rather episodic, because every encounter with someone who has some information becomes a mini-story in itself, such as their meeting with Pale Mallow, a bog witch. Therefore, the pacing is rather leisurely until the climax, which is quite exciting. The author was educated and still lives in Oxford, and she is definitely an heir of Tolkien and Lewis.

Uplink Squadron by J.N. Chaney and Chris Kennedy

Review by Pat Patterson

goodreads.com/review/list/68527557-pat-patterson

Confession: when I watched "Beauty and the Beast" for the first time, I rooted for the Beast. I even had a bit of regret when he (spoiler for the movie) got turned back into the person.

Why? Because he was so POWERFUL in Beast form. Sure, it was a costly transition, but it did bring him a great benefit as well.

I know that's not a unique reaction; else, why do kids like to dress up as the Incredible Hulk? Why do Anne Rice's vampires have fan clubs?

Now, in this book, we are given some fighter pilots as our population under consideration. I would put forth the idea that they aren't exactly pudding-hearted people in the beginning, but that they have a deep love for the adrenaline rush available in a cockpit. My own dad was a career pilot, flying freight and people all over the world, and I KNOW he was different in the pilot seat than in the chair at the dinner table, although some characteristics remained no matter where he was.

Two particular pilots, Lieutenants Lance Baker and Sofia Jimenez, are chosen to take part in a need-to-know (and you don't need to know YET) save-the-Earth mission. They are normal for fighter pilots, which may mean abnormal in other roles; it definitely means that they aren't wall-flower types. And when they discover that without their knowledge, and certainly without their explicit permission, they have received brain modifications that will allow them to form a mind-machine interface (MMI), their reactions are mixed, but powerful.

Such a drastic (and we might also say sneaky and unethical) operation is not without justification, however: aliens with superior technology have appeared in the solar system, and wiped out what few forces might have mounted a defense against them. Baker and Jimenez aren't the only persons affected by the invasion, obviously. The governments of the USA, Russia, and China are forced to form a partnership, with each contributing technology, materiel, and personnel to an effort to effectively confront the alien threat.

They are, however, in a unique class with other fighter pilots tasked to form an MMI with a new super space-fighter (with some atmospheric capability), the F-77B. The most remarkable characteristic of these new fighters is not the combined space-and-atmosphere function, however; it's the MMI capability.

At least, that's what the military-industrial complex (always behind adoption of new equipment) wants the space force to BELIEVE. It turns out that for some pilots, the rush of experiencing the interface is so seductive, they never want to leave.

Bad things happen. Pilots are lost. Baker and Jimenez are replacements; and, along with the routine low-level harassment given to the New Guy, they are both assigned to an F-77B that has suffered a pilot loss in the past.

Wait until you get to the weird part. Yeah, it does get weirder. Enjoy finding out; I sure did.

White Ops by Declan Finn
Review by JE Tabor
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Unapologetic heroism

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.

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.

Prose Bono

Interview with Chris Kennedy
by Jim McCoy

Jimbo's Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews: Welcome, once again to Interviews with Jimbo. Or sum-fin'. Listen, I've done a few of these now and I'm starting to think I should have a name for them. I haven't picked one out because I always the interview I'm writing will probably be the last one, but I always seem to be wrong. So, if you've got an idea for a good one, drop it in the comments. And look at me. I'm off topic already.

With us today is Chris Kennedy, author and owner of Chris Kennedy Publishing. Chris is one of the creators of the Four Horsemen Universe, so full disclosure: I am the Public Relations Officer for The Mercenary Guild: The Official Four Horsemen Universe Fan Association. I may be fanboying a bit here but, almost four hundred posts in, I've earned it. So, let's see if we can catch Chris off balance with a tough question up front. It's an honor to have you, Chris. How are you today?

Chris Kennedy: I'm doing great. Thanks a lot for having me today, Jimbo.

JSFFR: Glad to hear it. I'm a little perplexed as to how to start this interview, so I guess I'll just start here. I've read a whole freaking lot of authors in my life. I've been an avid reader since before I started kindergarten in <REDACTED>, and that was a long time ago. Offhand, I can think of like three who have started their own publishing companies. What made you decide to start yours?

CK: Like becoming an author, it just kind of happened. I published the first few books I wrote myself. They did pretty well, and a few people came up to me and said, "You look like you know what you're doing. Would you publish mine, too?" I did, and after a (not really long) while, I had published fifteen books by other people. One morning I woke up and realized, "Holy cow! I'm a publisher!" With that realization, I started acting like a publisher and everything just kind of flowed from there. Now I have over 400 books published from other people, not counting all the ones I've done in German, French, and Spanish.

JSFFR: That's awesome! So, tell me a little bit about Chris Kennedy Publishing itself and whatever imprints you might have that are part of the company. What does each imprint specialize in? Drop a link to the website if you don't mind.

CK: The main website is here: <https://chriskennedypublishing.com/>. Chris Kennedy Publishing focuses on fun, message-free science fiction and fantasy. It specializes in military scifi but can be found across the spectrum of both scifi and fantasy. There have been a few others in the past, but there are five imprints currently publishing:

Theogony Books: The umbrella imprint for most scifi like Salvage Title, The Last Marines, The Lunar Free State, and The Prince of Britannia.

Seventh Seal Press: The imprint for the Four Horsemen Universe.

New Mythology Press: The imprint for fantasy.

Blood Moon Press: The umbrella imprint for several post-apocalyptic series like "The Fallen World."

Quillcraft Press: The imprint that helps novice authors build their craft and business.

All of these can be found on the main website. Readers can join the mailing list at <https://chriskennedypublishing.com/newsletter-2/> to get a free short story in the Four Horsemen Universe and keep up with all the special sales and promotions.

JSFFR: Awesome! Thanks! I've always had a bit of trouble keeping that all straight. I know you probably can't get to everybody, but who, other than yourself, are a few of your best-selling authors?

CK: Wow, that's tough. Where do I draw the line on that? Here are some of our best known, in no particular order: Kevin Steverson, Kevin Ikenberry, Mark Wandrey, William S. Frisbee Jr., Fred Hughes, Kacey Ezell, Marisa Wolf, Jon R. Osborne, Rob Howell, Nick Steverson, Melissa Olthoff, Casey Moores, and D.T. Read. If you've read all their books, let me know, and I'll give you another group of names.

JSFFR: I know you've got some mega universes out there, and I frankly haven't been able to keep up with all of them. Name a few, give me the titles of the first books in the series, and drop a buy link or two if you don't mind.

CK: Sure. We have four main shared universes. They are:

The Four Horsemen Universe, which starts with "Cartwright's Cavaliers."

<https://chriskennedypublishing.com/product/cartwrights-cavaliers-ebook/>

The Salvage Title Universe, which starts with "Salvage Title."

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07H8Q3HBV/>

Murphy's Lawless, which starts with "Shakes."

<https://chriskennedypublishing.com/product/shakes-ebook/>

The Fallen World, which starts with "This Fallen World."

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07KHLG54J/>

Of note, Salvage Title is also being made into a series of movies, which we're really proud of.

JSFFR: Awesome. With a big series it's important to know where to start. I bought a few books in the middle of a series when I was a kid and hadn't learned any better yet. But help me out here: I know you and Mark Wandrey created the Four Horsemen Universe. Tell us all how that came to happen.

CK: Like all good author deals, this one started in a bar. Mark and I were at a convention in Indianapolis one year, and he approached me with an idea for the series, for which he already had the first book

mostly written. I liked the idea so much, I wrote the second book before he'd even completed the first. Everything just kind of exploded from there, and we're now approaching 100 books in the series. It's so much fun as a universe that lots of authors have wanted to play in it.

JSFFR: Sounds like fun! So, I know you're just starting to sell your own work instead of strictly on Amazon. Help me out here. What's the link to your store? Will all or only some of your titles be featured? I know a lot of CKP fans buy your titles on Kindle Unlimited. Will they still be available there? And, since I just looked and this part of the site isn't up yet, when will books be available to purchase at chriskennedypublishing.com?

CK: Due to the way Kindle Unlimited works, if you're in it, you CAN'T sell books anywhere else. So, when I sell a book on the website, I have to pull it out of KU first. Typically, that's why we're starting with a lot of the back catalogue that doesn't get a lot of love on KU, but all are great books that are worth a read. The benefit of the shop is that it gives us the ability to run great sales that aren't permitted on KU and sell signed copies of the books people want, as well as swag.

The shop is now live. You can find it here: <https://chriskennedypublishing.com/shop/>.

JSSFR: I saw you mention something about a coming swag shop on your website. I know it's not up yet, but what are you looking at offering there? Any idea when it will be open? No pressure, but it's almost Christmas. Also, I know there are some Four Horsemen Universe pieces available for purchase already. Where can I find those?

CK: We're still deciding, but we're looking at selling a variety of patches, shirts, art, coins, and other things. All of these will be brought in as we can get them sourced.

JSFFR: Cool beans. That's enough of the publisher Chris Kennedy. Let's talk to the author Chris Kennedy for a minute. It looks like (assuming I'm remember correctly) your most recent work to be published in English is *To Challenge Heaven* with David Weber. Tell us a bit about the book, about the *Out of the Dark* series and let us know how it was working with David Weber. Drop a link.

CK: Actually, my most recent series is the *Uplink Squadron* series of books. In order to stop an alien invasion, we develop the ability to plug into your space fighter and control it merely by thinking about what you want it to do. There are, however, accidents that occur, and shenanigans result. I really love this series and am really proud of it. You can find it here:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09X4W1R6T/>

As far as writing with David goes, I've written two books with him, "*Into the Light*" and "*To Challenge Heaven*." Writing with David is awesome—as you might expect—and I learned a lot as a writer doing it.

JSFFR: We've talked a bit about the 4HU up to this point but tell us about some of your other works. I know I've reviewed some of your books here, but I don't think I've gotten to all of them. If you drop a link, people are more likely to buy. I'm just sayin'.

CK: *Uplink Squadron*, for sure. I also have the *Occupied Seattle* series, which starts out with "*Red Tide*" (which is available on the web site here: <https://chriskennedypublishing.com/product/red-tide-ebook/>) and has "*Occupied Seattle*," *Janissaries*," and eight more books after it. My most recent books

in the 4HU are "The Lyons' Pride" and "World Enders." "Pride" can be read without reading the previous books and is available here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0B96JZB1B/>.

JSFFR: Awesome. I don't want to hold you up too badly, so we'll skip to the last question. This is something I ask everyone I interview on the blog. What question did I not ask that you wish I would have, and how would you have answered it?

CK: One of the things I get asked about all the time is, "Do your anthologies have open spots for new authors?" The answer is, "yes." We always try to save four slots for new authors to compete for so that they can get a leg up. I got into an anthology I probably didn't deserve to be in when I was just starting out, and this is my attempt to pay it forward. New authors (and anyone else for that matter) can join the mailing list at <https://chriskennedypublishing.com/newsletter-2/> to find out about upcoming opportunities. Readers also get the free short story mentioned above and info on all the great upcoming sales and promotions.

JSFFR: That's all I've got for today. Thanks for taking the time, Chris. It means a lot to me and the rest of your fans. Enjoy your holidays and know you're always welcome here at Jimbo's!

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