

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor

October 2024

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FREE BOOKS

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

Cedar Sanderson <cedarlila@gmail.com>

The East Witch
The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack

Bill McCormick <billmescifi@gmail.com>

Far Future
The Brittle Riders
Splice: Hit Bit Technology

Jefferson Swycaffer <abontides@gmail.com>

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

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

Mainstream: not sf or fantasy
The Chain Forge

Independent: SF and Fantasy not in any series

Eye of the Staricane
Capitulation of the Carnivores

George Phillies <phillies@4liberty.net>

Minutegirls
The One World
Mistress of the Waves
Eclipse – The Girl Who Saved the World
Airy Castles All Ablaze
Stand Against the Light
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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Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Jean-Paul L. Garnier <https://spacecowboybooks.com>

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

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

Bob Jennings

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

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

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

Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFreviews.blogspot.com>

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Letter to the Editor

Dear George,

I want to ask “when are we going to see ads online for your book *Prose Bono?*”, but I guess that would be a little too facetious.

Most of Tom Feller’s reviews of Hugo nominees were absorbing. This was a good exposure the breadth of imaginative worlds creators are creating now.

Feller’s extended review of “*The Laundry Files*” captured my interest, because this is one of my favourite novel series. Most of Charles Stross’ in-jokes I caught right away, but it took me years to get the joke involved in the viewpoint character’s name.

I could go on, but there are more comment hooks in the N3F Review than there is space in your next issue for my responses.

Yours,

Garth Spencer

Vancouver, Canada

Novels

A Spaceship For Joe by Doug Irvin

Review by Pat Patterson

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

Welcome to the Golden Age of Science Fiction!

I’ve heard the Golden Age consists of whatever you were reading at age 12, and I have no reason to disagree. My Golden Age writers were Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, and had this been written 60 years ago, I would have added Doug Irvin to that list. This story of Joe, Melissa, and the other characters has all of the adventure gotten into by the boys, plus the rescue by the despised kid sister, that I devoured in 1965.

Please note: this is NOT about an Eagle Scout project gone horribly wrong. This is just a kid playing around in his uncle's backyard, and building a playhouse. It's errors on the part of aliens, not misbehavior by Joe and Melissa, that provides the drama here. Not only do the aliens mess up, they tend to double-down on their errors, thus making things worse. That's not to say that Joe and Melissa don't have any mischief, as when Melissa lifts an alien weapon.

If you were fortunate as I was in discovering books like “*Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*” as a teen or pre-teen, then you are going to love this regardless of your current age. Get a copy for yourself, and one for grandkids as well. Do it!

Arena Manager by Chad Opo

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well! I found this book when we interviewed Royal Guard Publishing on my podcast, The Blasters & Blades Podcast. You can listen to it on YouTube, Rumble, BitChute, or on Spotify. My podcast is my sanity-safe space where we talk about all things speculative fiction. Our guest, the RGP owner, Jessica, was on to talk about her company. In the pre-show, this book came up, and I jumped at the chance to read and review it. This really is the fault of Melissa McShane since she introduced me to the LitRPG genre.

What is this book about? It's the standard portal fantasy, where the main character is sucked into a new realm after he's blown up in the process of being teleported from his hometown to his girlfriend in England. He wakes up in a world where a game-like system, or god, controls their daily life through a progression fantasy novel. I really liked this one, despite how dark it is as a story. This novel is an epic romp through combat in a fantasy world. The story has plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat. It has cool creatures and gladiatorial arenas. I'd call it The Gladiator meets Tolkien but with dark undertones. So, grab your mead, sharpen your steel, and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

The Story

Assemble, Train, Compete, Dominate.

Frank lived for his three sons, busting his back to see they thrived in comfort. His good for nothing wife, she made him the happiest man in the world when she finally agreed to his divorce terms. His glorious day turned to ruin when an explosion hurls him through an unformed portal connection.

Lost to eternity and stuck in the void, a happenstance encounter allows him to relocate to the fantasy world of Dorbin. There's a drawback to Dorbin. It's a violent planet filled with ruthless cutthroats, hideous mythical creatures, and all the activities a heathen could ever wish for. Even the national militaries turn a blind eye to the atrocities, only enforcing the laws when they see fit.

The designer of Dorbin calls themselves the Creator. The Creator established a system of kiosks for trading, point tracking, and quest rewards. The being is all powerful and incredibly uncaring, and yet, they gave him a second chance. He arrives marred from the explosion, unable to speak the local language, and about infinitely cleaner than anyone else on the planet.

The challenges for Frank will be steep, the learning curve arduous, and the chances of going home are slim to none. It doesn't take long for Frank to realize there's no place in Dorbin for the weak or the meek. If he wants to survive, he will have to earn it and the ends sure as hell justify the means; especially when he selects to become an arena manager - a dominus of the pits.

Now that we've sold you on the novel's premise let's dive in deeper. First, the prose from Chad Opo was conversationally poetic, made even more incredible when you listen to Marcus Jahn and Alexa Roosevelt narrate the story. I listened to some sections several times to hear the neat accents these two put together for this epic production! Since this is the first novel I've read by this author, I can't tell you if this is representative of his entire body of work, but after this trilogy, I'm game to try them out!

I could keep going about the quality of their prose, but let's move on to the other facets of this story. This storyteller knew how to expertly pace the story so that it flowed smoothly from one plot point to another. It kept my attention while giving me room to breathe and process the various parts of this epic adventure. Even better, this novel felt like it was setting up book two to kick the action up a notch, and I'm here for it.

Another aspect of this story that is worth evaluating is the audiobook quality. This was produced by Royal Guard Publishing and was narrated by Marcus Jahn and Alexa Roosevelt. They hit the ball out of the park, telling me a story that I couldn't put down. They kept me going when I should've been doing other things; I should hate them for that! They nailed the various character accents, keeping my ears engaged from start to finish.

I don't have a lot of experience in this genre, but I'm finding I love the isekai story trope. The way he ended up in the new world was believable, quickly getting us to the meat of the story. Even the way Frank handled it worked and felt real to me. I can't speak to the other books in this genre trope, but this was a mature story that takes place in an extremely dark LitRPG world. I'm not a huge fan of the darker stories, but there was enough hope here to keep me engaged and turning the page of this adventure. The setting that he ended up in when he portaled into this world was grim, but despite that, Frank was a rational guy, operating as you'd expect someone from our world to do in a dark world with dark consequences.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the combat that occurred in this book. The writing quality was such that I was able to visualize the action. That's a huge plus for me and something that kicks a novel up a grade, in my estimation. When I read a novel, I tend to see it like a movie in my brain. This means that I love more descriptions than most modern readers. In this way, Chad Opo more than delivered and I think you're going to love it too.

Another facet of how Chad described the combat scenes stood out to me as well. It was in how the author kept in mind the limitations of the human or humanoid body. There was not a single scene where the combat required the character to bend the body in ways that aren't possible without breaking. I jokingly refer to this as my Barbie Test. Could you maneuver the action figure to act out this fight scene? It's a pass-fail situation, and Chad Opo passed with flying colors! The author clearly knows his way around combative sports. He showed that he knew how to write believable Medieval Warfare that felt real, which is important in an action-heavy novel.

Some of the action in this story happened in the arena, and it was what you'd expect. The combat was visceral, gritty, and over quickly. It was a mad melee of blades, fists, and magic. Because it was so quick, there was very little need for complex strategies. These fights were brute force versus brute force, regardless of the weapon or magical nature of the attack. However, the fighting also happened on the battlefield. The main character, Frank, ran a mercenary company that funded his arena dreams. Those combat scenes were complex and well thought out. The author used strategies that made sense for the situation, which I loved. He clearly knows how to wargame out a situation. Those sequences worked for me, and I'm here for more of it!

Finally, I really loved the complex relationship dynamics. The main character, Frank, has a few love interests and tries to stay aloof with them. He wanted to be a "good time Charlie" but ended up falling for these ladies. I was cheering for him when he ended up loving his new 'found family.' Sure, it was in his own unique way, but it was there. Even better, all of these lovers felt different! There were no cookie-cutter personalities, with everyone being fully actualized and real. They had their own independent motivations and it showed in the quality of the story and the writing. The author, Chad, knows how to

spin a yarn we're all invested in. He made us hate whom we're supposed to hate and love the good guys... moral ambiguity and all.

The Characters

This story is primarily told through the singular first-person view of the main character, Frank Ingrid. We get one intermission scene through the eyes of the Chaos Mage elf named Sapphire, but that was a drop in the bucket when compared to the larger narrative from Frank. Our dark, erstwhile champion starts this novel at home on Earth, trying to use their portal transportation system. Think Stargate franchise, except some bad people blow it up just as he was stepping through. He wakes up in the world of Dorbin, which is run by a system very similar to an RPG game.

When he wakes up in a strange void, he finds himself a cripple from the explosion. We don't know how long he was in that limbo, and neither did he. Frank just wakes up in the void under the laylines. From there, a disembodied voice talks to him and sends him to this strange new land so he stops polluting the lay lines. I loved that he doesn't wallow in his pain when he returns to alertness, instead choosing to just live his best life.

During the course of the book, we get to watch him level up as he learns about the Dorbin System by grinding out quests. I loved that he hit the ground running and never wallowed. As someone who deals with chronic pain from an injury I received in Iraq, I know how easy it is to give in to the disability. I loved that Frank chose another path, making the best of a bad situation. He embraces his life despite his pain at being pulled away from his sons during the accident. He realizes that he can't go backward, so he presses ahead.

When he starts to explore Dorbin, he is shocked at the barbaric culture that is a mix between the pre-Christian Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages. There is slavery and blood sport combat to the death in the arena for the amusement of others. Women are less than valued in this society and are at best property and at worst, well... you can imagine. I'm trying to be subtle here, but the struggle snuggle is common and nobody really blinks an eye at it. In the midst of that, Frank tries to do better. He doesn't force himself on anyone, though as an Arena Manager class and mercenary captain, he does deal in slaves. However, he also frees a lot of slaves and makes them mercenaries so they're free when they leave him. He saves orphans, abused women, and the downtrodden, giving them a second lease on life.

Those were the good qualities, but he had a dark side as well. Sometimes, I really loved this character. Other times, I wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp. He takes slaves from the various fantasy races and fights them to death in the arena for his own profit. He revels in the fights of other gladiators and beasts, cheering on the carnage. And I do mean carnage. The author, Chad Opo, doesn't shy away from that aspect of this novel. When he said he was inspired by GRR Martin and the Game of Thrones, he meant it.

During the course of this book series, we don't get to watch him grow in the traditional sense; he starts as a fully actualized adult who knows who he is. He is a man of principle, and his character is already firmly rooted in his belief in helping out those less fortunate than himself. However, we do see him overcome his limitations and the setbacks that life throws his way. We see a man mourning his family and his failed marriage. We see a man who deeply loves his people, his chosen family, in Team Zepplin, his mercenary company.

I said all of that to say this. The main character, Frank Ingrid, is a complex person. He wasn't some cookie-cutter, plug-and-play bozo. Nope, he was deep and nuanced in his worldview. His actions

throughout the novel reflect that. In some writing, there is a tendency to give you a cardboard character who makes a mockery of what it means to be good or evil. In this book, we see a more nuanced take, and the story is better for those shades of grey.

The final point that I wanted to discuss with regard to these characters was the sheer amounts of secondary characters who flew across the pages of the novel. Seriously, that breeze gave me whiplash! Because of that, it was hard to track who was who during the course of this book. I'm an audiobook guy, but I was constantly forced to use the ebook so that I could do word searches for various names. I needed to proactively figure out what was going on. I know that this is nitpicking, but I try to make these reviews deep and as insightful as I can. As an author myself and longtime reader, I don't know how else he could've told this story. The massive scope of the intersection of plot and world-building required a lot of secondary characters.

The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? It was expertly handled by Chad Opo, who knows how to tell a compelling story set in this dark but fully actualized world that he's created. Everything was extremely fleshed out, giving this setting a very lived-in feel. Unlike some authors, Chad didn't info dump all of his world-building up front. Instead, he fed it to us in drips and drabs. He expertly strung the reader along and left me wanting more.

But I couldn't talk about the world without reiterating how dark this book was. I'm not normally one for the Martin School of Writing; I prefer happy endings and hope to reign supreme in the books where I spend my leisure time. This novel wasn't that; it was a Game of Throne-Esq fantasy novel with all of the darkness that the author promised in the ad copy.

Things weren't all doom and gloom, though. We saw fantasy creatures galore, practically a monster's manual worth! We saw swords, sorcery, and even castles! Dragons, who doesn't love a good dragon? But wait, there's more! This book had griffins and Pegasus, too! Wait, is it pegasusi? What is the plural here? Anyway, there were also many nation-states, which meant there was no weirdly stilted world where things felt unnatural. It was dark brutal, and sometimes there was an underlying evil... but it felt real and lived in.

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 as Frank had to navigate the medieval politics of Dorbin's corrupt nobility. It was a background struggle in this novel, mostly because Frank is a one-man Killdozer who had a "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" attitude. We do see some racial politics, and by that, I mean between humans, orcs, and all of the other fantasy races. There are ancient tensions and grudges that play into the lay of the land that Frank has to navigate. What I did love to see was freedom being lionized through the story as Frank routinely freed the slaves and made them mercenaries instead.

Dorbin, where the story takes place, is a medieval setting. This proto-Europe backdrop is par for the course of a modern fantasy novel. Chad Opo just embraces the darker side of human nature. In addition to the world that's trying to kill the main character, the main characters must fight against the system itself and the gods who control it. Frank fights against the existential evil of greed, the pursuit of power, and an unthinking quest for vengeance. Predictably, it ends badly for everyone involved. Like in the real world, there are no real winners in war. Except for Frank, he wins gold crowns for Team Zeppelin. But this is nothing new; you've probably heard that before; it's a tale as old as time.

Content Warning

I couldn't write a content warning any better than the author did. From his own ad copy, we get a sense of the dark undertones I mentioned in the opening. This book is set in a brutal fantasy world that pre-dates modern society's values. It contains violence, gore, slavery, and other grimdark traits, along with fantastical beings and LitRPG elements. Think Game of Thrones with bloody gladiator fighting, mercenary teambuilding, and set from one man's perspective. If you don't have the stomach for such content, have a nice day. If you want action, violence, and to be entertained, welcome to Team Zeppelin.

Who is it for?

Did you enjoy reading the A Song of Ice and Fire novels? Love watching the Game of Thrones HBO Series? Then this book is for you because you're the target audience! This LitRPG novel, by Chad Opo, has the conversational prose of Tom Clancy, the darkness of George RR Martin, and the world-building of David Eddings. This book embraced the darkness, brightened the light, and will surely be a book you'll want to re-read on occasion!

Why buy it

This is the story of the everyman, an underdog cripple who eeks out his own path in the land of warriors. He overcomes his medical issues to achieve greatness in this fantasy name. If you like dark fantasy and don't mind the violence and brutality of the realm, then this is a book you're sure to love! If you love a thrill ride that would make Attila the Hun and George RR Martin proud, this is the novel for you!

Seriously, why haven't you clicked the link and bought this book already? If this tale doesn't make you pull your hair out, you'll end up a Chad Opo superfan! If you don't love it too, 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 Blue, Beautiful World by Karen Lord Review by Sam Lubell

Nowhere on the cover of The Blue, Beautiful World by Karen Lord does it say that this book is the third in a series (at least not on my pre-release ebook). Nor does the Amazon listing mention this. However, this novel follows her The Best of All Possible Worlds and The Galaxy Game in the Cygnus Beta series with some of the same characters. Readers should read those two books first as the author does not summarize them. While the book does have a helpful list of people and places in this series, it is at the end where many readers will not see it until they finish the book.

The novel begins with a coronation and a reception where an ill-prepared emissary claims to be glad the monarch's adoptive brother, currently in Paris, will no longer embarrass the family with his "whims and oddities". It then jumps to the adventures of Owen, a pop star with a mysterious past, and the security team protecting him. Much of this section is focused on Noriko, Owen's manager, and her growing realization that Owen is more than he seems. Owen is actually an alien with empathic powers and other aliens are on Earth to kill him. Although there is an embargo preventing travel to Earth, Owen and other aliens regularly use teleportation transit stations to bypass it.

The book then jumps eleven years to when 22-year-old Kanoa, a citizen of the Federated States of Polynesia, is chosen to be part of a Diplomatic Group of the Global Government Project. The Group's project is a First Contact simulation, using virtual reality, in which the aliens had infiltrated many of Earth's nations. Owen is identified as one of the creators of the simulation. But the simulation suddenly becomes real with a message from the Empress of the Galactic Council speaking directly to Earth, warning that "Your political and corporate bodies have been overrun by vermin from Alpha Lyrae."

Another plotline is the discovery of intelligent life in the depths of Earth's oceans. Kanoa, guided by visions of his father, becomes involved in this investigation since obtaining galactic recognition requires the inclusion of all intelligent life on the planet.

I found *The Blue, Beautiful World* rather disjointed. The Owen, the pop star, plotline appears, at first, to have only a tenuous connection to the young adults in the Diplomatic Group plotline. (There is a twist late in that plotline that firms up the connection.) And the deep sea creatures and Kanoa's visions seem to come out of nowhere. There is not much action in the book and no real villain. Although there are occasional mentions of Lyran cartels, the reader does not get a sense of who they are and what they want.

Perhaps this book would make more sense to readers of the first two, but I found that it did not sufficiently work by itself. Readers should read *The Best of All Possible Worlds* and *The Galaxy Game* before reading *The Blue, Beautiful World*.

Companions in Chains by Melissa Olthoff

Review by Pat Patterson

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

There are distinctive disadvantages to starting a series at other than volume 1. It's like wandering into the movie forty minutes after it starts, or bowling a frame and then wondering why your friends are talking about a rug that ties the whole room together.

In this case, I regret that I am unable to confidently credit the author who is responsible for inserting Simon, Theodore, and Alvin into the story as characters; they are delightful as deadly Flatar, and even if I couldn't stop singing "Christmas, Don't Be Late" during much of the book, I really enjoyed what Olthoff did with them.

Bree, also known as 'Ducky' and 'Squishy,' is a shuttle pilot searching for Rebel, a lost comrade. Earlier in the story, she was given reliable information that despite Rebel's craft being utterly destroyed, Rebel somehow lived. Bree now has as her main goal to find Rebel, and rescue her from whatever fate has brought her. To do that, she is willing to lie, cheat, and steal; these are, fortunately, all within her repertoire. Even more fortunately, she has won the devotion of various crew members, who manage to persuade her to allow them to help.

On the less fortunate side, Squishy/Ducky is an absolute loss when it comes to romance. What MOST sixth-graders figure out, she has not a clue about. So, the teasing which forms an immature basis for a relationship has to escalate to mild physical assault (and ain't THAT a bad look for romance?) before she is willing to admit that the feelings are mutual. Honestly, a few sessions with a counselor could have given her some better insight, and about 100 pages could likely have been dropped from the book without the story suffering at all.

It IS a complicated story, and my hat is off to Olthoff for succeeding in telling it. Half of the main characters are imprisoned in a simulation, and yet, the other half must find ways to interact with them. Only in the earliest part of the book was it a bit confusing, while the necessary reveals were being divulged. After that, the storylines merged beautifully.

Not a criticism of this book: I wish we could get an appendix listing the name and nature of the various alien species. I have no problem remembering that the aliens with a name like 'tarantula' are in fact, giant spider types, but I wish I had an easy reference for all of the others that crop up in bit parts.

The Essential Peter S. Beagle, Volume 1: Lila the Werewolf and Other Stories by Peter S. Beagle Review by Sam Lubell

Every reader of fantasy has read (or at least knows about) Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, which is a modern classic that been turned into an animated film, a graphic novel, stickers, and even a tarot deck. But fans of the book who have not discovered Beagle's short stories are missing out.

The Essential Peter S. Beagle, Volume 1 is a collection of 16 short stories plus an introduction by Jane Yolen that serves as an excellent primer to Beagle's shorter work, with one story from the 1960s, one from the 70s, one from the 90s, 12 from the 2000s, and one from the 2010s. Many of the stories are fully or partially autobiographical and give a better sense of the author's own life than most other single-author collections.

The stories include:

- "Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros" is a charming and oddly touching story of an aging academic and a rhinoceros that claims to be a unicorn and debates philosophy.
- "Come Lady Death" is the story of a bored elitist London socialite who invites Death to attend her ball.
- "Lila the Werewolf", which is also published as a standalone novella, is a character-driven narrative about a New York City man who discovers that his live-in girlfriend is a werewolf.
- "Gordon, the Self-Made Cat" is about a mouse who decides to become a cat and winds up the star pupil at a school for cats.
- There are four short animal fables – "Moth", "Tyrannosaurus Rex", "Ostrich", and "Octopus". My favorite is the dinosaur story that has a Tyrannosaurus Rex being told about the oncoming asteroid and the mammals' secret plan to evolve.
- "El Regalo" features a twelve-year-old girl who must constantly save her eight-year-old brother from the trouble his witch powers cause.
- "Uncle Chaim and Aunt Rifke and The Angel" is based on Beagle's real-life painter uncles who probably never had an actual angel demand to be painted as happens in this story.
- "We Never Talk About My Brother" is about Esau, the last of the great TV news anchormen who has the power to cause the news he reports.
- "King Pelles the Sure" is a cautionary tale about what happens to a gentle and kindly monarch when he desires to be remembered as a mighty war leader.
- "The Last and Only; or, Mr. Moscovitz Becomes French" features a Californian who turns French and loses his American identity.
- "Spook" has a verbal bad poetry duel between Walter the Spook, a haunt who accuses the homeowner of murdering him 170 years ago, and the homeowner, Farrell, assisted by the mysterious Andy Mac. It includes samples of bad poetry (and the reader can tell Beagle had a lot of fun writing this).

- "The Stickball Witch" is another tale based on Beagle's childhood, when boys in the Bronx played a form of improvised street baseball and dared each other to rescue balls hit into the yard of a woman they all thought was a witch.
- "A Dance for Emilia" is another autobiographical story about the narrator's relationship with the girlfriend of a recently deceased old friend of the narrator and the cat that she inherits.

All the stories in this volume are well worth reading and demonstrate the unique genius of Peter Beagle. These are definitely fantasy as literature with the fantastical element frequently low key. Volume two is also out with even more great stories by this fantasy legend. I think Beagle is a better short story writer than he is a novelist.

His Terrible Stall by Laura Montgomery

Review by Pat Patterson

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

This is (if my count is correct) the sixth installment in the Martha's Sons saga, and in writing the review I chose not to go over some of the essential elements to the NWWWLF story. I've only included those elements which are essential to THIS book, and ignored resolved plot-lines from earlier stories.

The Spencer rifle must have seemed near magical to the troops who were issued it during the American Civil War; whereas two shots per minute with a muzzle-loading rifle was considered a fair rate of fire, a soldier armed with a Spencer could easily send 20 shots downrange in that time.

And so it is on planet NWWWLF, where the few remaining modern weapons are at risk of failing from age and neglect. In a wilderness setting, a rifle is really good to have, whether it's used for hunting food, or for driving off human predators. Therefore, it is no small thing that Silas, the pilot of the last aircraft on NWWWLF, and a resident of Seccon, makes a deal with First Landing farmer Edward Dawes to provide him with a dozen Spencers in exchange for the life-saving assistance Edward and his family had provided Silas.

In addition to that transaction, the secret of the third, covert community of NWWWLF, dubbed Kentucky, MUST be preserved to protect it from the recalcitrant forces in First Landing who want to control everything. For that faction, anything that brings independence is bad. That puts both the exchange of the Spencers and the establishment of a third community at risk, and they have shown that they are happy to use violent means to force compliance.

The First Landing powers aren't the only players wishing to restrict technology transfer. Old grudges die hard, and there are some in Seccon who still seethe at the thought that not all of the disaffected First Landing people joined with them when they established Seccon. To these curmudgeons, there is no difference between the oppressors and the persecuted in First Landing.

Protagonist Peter Dawes has to deal with all these factors as he tries to close the deal with Silas to get the rifles to his brother. Given the distance, the only way of transporting them is in Silas' plane, and that is literally a unique and irreplaceable resource.

Montgomery weaves each storyline with care, and the resulting fabric is quite lovely.

The Icarus Twin by Timothy Zahn

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Gregory Roarke and his partner Selene defeated the Patth. Now they have to dodge a criminal organization that believes the duo betrayed their boss!

Former Trailblazers or “crocketts” Gregory Roarke and Selene now work for the secretive Icarus Project, seeking out more of the portals that could make interstellar travel instantaneous. Of course, this does not mean that they are not at risk: Sub-Director Nask, a member of the alien Patth whose stardrive would be rendered obsolete by the portals, still has a bone to pick with them. There are also poachers to worry about – something Gregory and Selene discover when one of their bioprobes is snatched on their latest planetary search.

But was it a poacher? Without a closer look, they can’t be sure. After they report in to the Icarus Project for a new bioprobe, another twist is added to the conundrum: a man named Easton Dent has been seeking Gregory Roarke and searching for recent uses of the word “Icarus.” If that weren’t enough, an attempt to meet the man ends with Gregory being accused of murder.

Maybe being Trailblazers was safer, even if the pay was touch-and-go....

The Story

Escaping confinement, Gregory confirms that the victim he stands accused of murdering is not Easton Dent. He and Selene go back to the planet they checked to see if they are still being tailed; they are, but this time they manage to snag a sample from the vessel. Using her highly developed sense of smell, Selene manages to determine that there were four humans aboard their tail’s ship and that a Patth was there at one time as well. That explains one riddle but leaves the duo with the mystery of who these people are and in the dark as to this particular Patth’s identity. While trying to figure this out, they are jumped by a man with a gun. Although they manage to get away, Gregory decides he wants a closer look at the people backing their attacker. Unfortunately he gets his wish: the people hunting him are part of Luko Varsi’s criminal organization.

Before he and Selene worked for Icarus they worked part time for Varsi, selling him plant samples that might make either good medicines or good drugs, as Trailblazing didn’t always offer enough money to keep fuel in the tank or food on the table. Gregory also name-dropped Varsi to Nask in The Icarus Plot to get the Sub-Director off his back for a time, so it could very well have led to the mobster’s death. On the other hand, Varsi’s own subordinate, Mr. Draelon, seems awfully keen to shoot Roarke on a mere rumor of his boss’s death via betrayal. It takes work and some surreptitious help from undercover Icarus agent Jordan McKell to postpone the funeral so Gregory can go meet Dent – who escaped his would-be murders – again, but this time he and Selene go as prisoners of Varsi’s senior enforcers.

Now the problem is shaking their babysitters, finding out what Dent does and does not know about Icarus, and most important, getting out of this mess alive. Acquiring replacement bioprobes will just have to wait until they are no longer in mortal peril....

The Characters

Gregory returns with all his wit and charm in this novel, but this time he also showcases his morality. Before he was out for revenge; now, he wants nothing so much as the information needed to avoid dy-

ing. That means staying a step ahead of the bad guys even when he walks into their arms, which makes for a nail-biting high stakes poker game. Selene comes through as serene as before, showing her own cleverness and skill by backing Gregory's plays even when neither of them are a hundred percent sure what the play is, exactly.

Characters from the previous novel get a some more development here, particularly Ixil, the Kalixiri alien. Along with his ferret-like outriders Pix and Pax, he provides the heroes with very helpful backup when they need it, sometimes before they know they require it. Add in the return of a more subdued Nask as well as new players like Draelon and Dent to the picture, and it becomes an all-out competition to see who has the better hand of cards!

The World

This time there is more of a Leverage tone to the universe than a Firefly one. With the general world already set up, the constant back-and-forth as various scams are put into play necessitates that the action remain tense but comparatively low-key. After all, which mobsters want whom dead is a little more pressing to the protagonists' concerns than what the rest of the galaxy at large is doing!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Some people die and dead bodies are described, as are near victims of misapplied medicinal drugs. That being said, none of it is graphic. The book earns a PG-13 rating.

Who is it for?

Readers who are seeking some Leverage-style fun with a good dose of Sherlockian intrigue and mystery will want to read *The Icarus Twin*. Fans of Zahn and his *Icarus Plot* novel will also wish to pick it up, while thriller enthusiasts will find the book fulfills all their desires. Even true crime audiences might want to give this novel a look as it bounces Gregory into a murder mystery before forcing him to face down some of the *Spiral*'s nastiest organized crime lords. There is something for everyone in *The Icarus Twin* and it will keep an avid reader busy for quite some time.

Why buy it?

It is a brand-new Zahn novel in a new universe with more twists, turns, traps, and puzzles than a Rube Goldberg machine. Most of all, though, it is fun. Anyone wishing for something good to read should have a great time with this book!

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

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

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

The story

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

The characters

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

The world

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

The politics

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

Content warning

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

Who is it for?

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

Why read it?

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

Look to the West by Tom Anderson

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Alternate history, like future wars, is a genre that lends itself very well to essay-writing, in which the author writes a manuscript that reads like a history book, rather than a more standard action and adventure novel. There are no characters, in any true sense; the author details vast sweeps of history – and conflicts – and while he may compose fictional diaries and war reports, the characters are not of any great importance. The important issue is the sweep of (alternate) history itself.

Short essays are very common, but book-length manuscripts are relatively rare and almost always, prior to the internet, published by specialist presses. This is, perhaps, unsurprising. Books like *For Want of a Nail*, *Invasion*, *Gettysburg* and *Disaster at D-Day* have relatively small readerships, certainly when compared to novels written by well-known authors that combine historical scholarship with entertainment (Harry Turtledove, SM Stirling), novels that appeal to a far wider readership that isn't particularly concerned with realism and won't throw the book away in disgust if the Germans deploy Panther tanks in 1940. Put bluntly, book-length essay-manuscripts are very hard sells. It is difficult to convince editors and publishers that they'll see a return on their investment.

The internet, and indie publishing, has changed all that by reducing the publishing costs to the bare minimum. That has given birth to a whole new range of specialist presses, including Sealion Press, which focuses on alternate history books and publications of interest to the AH community. Some of their productions are novels, but others are essentially book-length manuscripts like *For Want of a Nail*, on a much greater scale. The *Look to the West* series is one of the best of them.

History diverges from its planned course, according to Anderson, when Prince Frederick, King George II's firstborn son (whom, in the olde Hanoverian tradition, was detested by his father) made the mistake of sniggering when his father tripped during his coronation. Instead of dying relatively young, Prince Frederick was exiled to the Americas in the same year George Washington was born. Angry and ambitious, Prince Frederick plotted his return to London with the aid of the colonials, eventually taking the throne after his father died and his brother (the historical George III) was assassinated.

This alone would be an impressive achievement, but the historical outline continues to expand until it sweeps over the entire world. Without the American Revolution, and the Americas remaining part of a very different British Empire, the French Revolution takes a very different course. Different political ideologies are born, some very dangerous; the alternate French Revolutionary Wars, following a different technological development framework, include a French landing in Britain that does immense damage before the French are finally booted out, leading to a dictatorship fully akin to Bad King John before a civil war eventually restores order ... for the moment. The series touches on issues that plagued our own world – slavery in the Americas, serfdom in Russia; neither of which could be avoided – but always puts its own spin on them. It also draws in figures from our world, ranging from the well-known – Napoleon and Nelson, in very different roles – to the more obscure Henry Stuart, brother of Bonnie Prince Charlie, in his declining years.

Wars and politics are not the only issues of interest, as the books touch on social issues as much as everything else. Power shifts lead to different points of view, then to cultural issues intended to shape public opinion. The far greater chaos of the revolutionary wars in Europe leads to reaction, followed by more revolution. The different balance of power in the Americas leads to a different take on slavery

and racism, with a far less powerful slavery lobby that responds, at least in part, by doubling down on racism. Others fight back in more subtle ways, pushing people to question their preconceptions. For example, a hooded hero is eventually revealed, after 50-odd pulp adventures, to be black ... causing everyone to either scream in outrage or re-evaluate their positions.

The book also links back to our timeline, or something close to it, by touching on commentary from a cross-time team of explorers studying the alternate world and comparing it to our own. Their insights are very interesting, as – unlike the locals – they have a basis for comparison. They can assess developments and see how and why things went differently. And this also provides some tension, as the explorers – as of Book IV – to have been discovered by the locals.

It is difficult to exaggerate the sheer level of detail Anderson has worked into the series, although it can be a little overwhelming at times. It can also be hard to follow what's going on, as the borderlines are in very different places. (Anderson deserves credit for not creating the OTL British Empire, plus the United States.) The books do have the downside of being very dry in places, to the point where I skipped some sections and returned to read them later.

If you're looking for an action-adventure novel, *Look to the West* isn't for you. It reads, like I said above, as a history book. It is unashamedly written for the alternate history community, rather than a more general readership; it doesn't try to compromise in hopes of getting more attention from people who might not otherwise be interested. But if you're looking for a outline of an alternate history world, and a study of how one relatively small change can lead to a very different world, *Look to the West* has few equals. I highly recommend it.

The Middling Affliction by Alex Shvartsman Review by Sam Lubell

The Middling Affliction by Alex Shvartsman is a fun light urban fantasy with some mystery elements.

Conrad Brent lives in a world where magic is real but hidden from the ordinary citizens of New York and the world. He is part of the Watch, a volunteer group of magic users who protect regular people from dangerous magical creatures and evil magically Gifted people.

But Conrad has a secret he keeps even from his friends in the Watch. He is not himself a powerful Gifted but a lowly middling, one who can see magic but not cast spells. He survives in the Watch by using amulets and other magical objects and by outwitting (and frequently bluffing) his adversaries. He thinks of himself as a Batman-type, using gadgets to keep up with magical superheroes. But if he is discovered, his fellow members of the Watch would kill him since middleings are anathema and hated by the traditional Gifted.

When Conrad learns that a Travelling Faire plans on auctioning off another middling for the winner to kill, he resolves to rescue her. Although this enables him to discover a threat that would remove the powers of all the Gifted, his efforts to rally the Watch are stymied when his former apprentice exposes him as a middling. Now, stripped of all his magical resources, with only another middling, completely new to this world, on his side, he must use his wits, his bluffing ability, and his attitude to uncover and defeat a worldwide plot.

Conrad is a great character. He is smart and resourceful, always with a quip or a smart-aleck comment. He is clearly modeled after the film noir private detectives. Although Shvartsman says he had not read

Jim Butcher's Dresden Files books, its main character, Harry Dresden, is also based on this model. So fans of the Dresden Files will enjoy The Middling Affliction.

While the book is short for a modern fantasy novel at 239 pages, the cover declares it to be Book One of the Conradverse Chronicles. Book Two, Kakistocracy, is already out. I look forward to reading it.

Monster Hunter Vendetta by Larry Correia Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Round two. Fight

Today we continue the review of the Larry Correia Monster Hunter International series.

By the end of the first Monster Hunter International novel, all is right with the world. The villain was finished. Our hero, Owen Pitt, got the girl, and while there were a few residual hiccups along the way involving some of the crew becoming vampires, everything is perfect...

Except for one niggling little detail.

The story

At one point during the final battle of MHI, the government accidentally dropped a nuclear bomb through an interdimensional portal, getting the attention of a Cthulhuian elder god, who decides that only one human creature is to blame...

Owen Pitt.

Yup. This guy has Murphy's own luck.

Pitt is now being hunted by a death cult known as the "Church of the Temporary Mortal Condition," led by necromancer known as the Shadow Man. They all want to feed Pitt to their monstrous, world-devouring deity.

The (n)ever-helpful government wants the Shadow Man. They give Pitt his own troop of government bodyguards, including one Monster Control Bureau man-like thing known only as Agent Franks. It's the MHI versus the army of darkness, only they're better armed than Bruce Campbell ever was.

Monster Hunter: Vendetta might arguably be better than MHI. We need little to no setup for the action, the plot jumps out at you and never really leaves you alone, and we can't even have a nice, simply plot-starting exposition without it being menacing (when the two people telling Pitt that he has to save the world ... again ... are vampires, it's hard to have a relaxed conversation).

Since there is no such thing as a slow Larry Correia book (with one rare exception), this just speeds along with all the pacing of a Mickey Spillane. He consistently gives a pulse-pounding story almost every time.

The characters

Vendetta really proves that Correia has assembled a strong cast, and a great sprawling universe out there. There are no cardboard cutouts as characters, even the ones that you're not supposed to like.

Interestingly, despite Correia's attitude on government in general, while he could have left the MCB crew as a bunch of mindless government automatons, even they get character development in this book.

The world

Each book in the MHI series continues to expand the world. Usually, just enough world is explored to make the plot run. But there was a lot of plot in this one, so there was a lot of additional worldbuilding.

The politics

Libertarian. "Why, yes, there should be private ownership of attack helicopters. Why do you ask?"

Is the government completely useless? No, not completely, they're missing parts.

I kid. The government agents here are slightly more useful than they are in real life. That is to say that they do actually aid our heroes from time to time.

Content warning

There are horror elements, up to and including body parts being ripped off. In one case, that's okay, he'll just sew them back on.

No language issues popped out at me, but that pales next to dismemberment.

Who is it for?

Fans of Harry Dresden would definitely enjoy this. This is for anyone who has ever seen a horror film and wondered what it would be like if all the heroes had an arsenal at their command... or, at the very least, if the protagonists were smart.

Why read it?

It's basically epic urban fantasy with guns. Think of the later Dresden novels, where Harry needs a small army to deal with a massive, world-destroying threat. That's every MHI novel.

Never Again by Bill Fawcett

Review by JR Handley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Hey Space Cadets; I hope this review finds you well! I found this book when we interviewed Bill Fawcett on my podcast, The Blasters & Blades Podcast. That's my sanity-safe space where we talk about all things speculative fiction. Our guest, Bill, was on to talk about his near future military science fiction Blood and Armor Series. After we interviewed him about the first book in this series, I had to read it, and now here we are!

What is this book about? It's a near-future military science fiction novel about a young Kurdish Republic finding its way in a world that wants to see it destroyed. This epic romp through future combat has

plenty of action to keep you on the edge of your seat. It has cool combat suits, affectionately known as GOGs, and brave Peshmerga warriors to ride them to glory! So, grab your coffee, set some 5.56mm rounds out for their rifles, and prepare for the thrill ride of a lifetime!

The Story

The best steel is forged by the hottest fires and under the greatest pressures. So, too, have the Kurdish Peshmerga been shaped by thousands of years of warfare and oppression.

Now, for the first time in history, they have their own nation, and it's a chance to live, grow, and develop as a unified people.

But they are surrounded by hostile dictatorships intent on the destruction of their young republic. Out-numbered and outgunned as armored columns swarm their borders, the Kurdish Republic's only hope lies in a canceled DARPA project—an experimental, powered combat suit—and the business tycoon who refuses to allow the nascent nation to go under.

The only question is, will they be enough?

A compelling question that is answered in a way that will keep you guessing from start to finish. Let's start with the core premise, the existence of a Kurdish Republic. It was set up in a believable manner, and I could empathize with those struggling Peshmerga dreamers who just wanted a nation to call their own. The author cemented this reality with his intimate knowledge of the people and their culture. He did his research, and it shows right down to the names and speech patterns.

Next, let us talk about the technology used in this book. First, this is a near-future novel, so most of the weaponry and military technology is stuff that exists now. Sure, some of it is cutting-edge now, but it isn't unreasonable to assume it could be created. The one big handwavium piece of technology is the batteries used to make the rest of the magic work. It is the fairy dust of this world, but it is so subtle that you could forget that it isn't something we could go buy at the local Target store. From there, the rest of the pieces are supported. Sure, fake battery tech is the lynchpin holding up the foundation of this story arc, but Bill still manages to make it believable.

From the magical batteries, we get the coolest piece of military hardware that served as the backbone of this novel. What can I say? I was a fan of Ironman, and I really liked seeing a more realistic version of it novelized. This tech was named after the acronym from the shipping containers, the GOG representing the militaristic gobbledygook that is martial nomenclature. It was called the 'General Ordnance Garment,' which the troops shortened to the Gog. That term is biblically significant, as one of the nations that will be beaten by god in the final days. I thought that was cool to use as tech name, especially when the enemy thinks that the soldiers in these super suits are demons because they can't fathom how the wearers can move so fast and be so accurate. My only complaint was that I didn't think of it first!

One last point about the technology was how well it was described by Bill Fawcett. He mixed in enough realism in his descriptions that I had to Google whether or not this was a thing. He didn't just ask me to suspend my disbelief; he wrote it so well that I didn't even know it was fake in the moment. This takes skills as an author to pull off, but when done right, it is indeed a beautiful thing to experience. There is a reason I don't try to write hard science fiction! Speaking of that hard sci-fi, most of that is written as techno babble that navel gazes and is so in love with itself that it is unreadable. This was not the case here, and I loved it!

Since this is a military science fiction novel, we have to cover the combat scenes in this book. The warfare in 'Never Again' was beautifully written. I could visualize the action in my head based on the author's descriptions. The author deployed a solid understanding of battlefield tactics and used them creatively. He factored in the terrain, the enemy equipment, and the role of dumb luck in survival in war. Even better, he created a combat suit that wasn't infallible; there were limitations to the Gogs.

What I liked even more about his combat scenes was how he wrote about the enemy forces. They were not cardboard targets with no agency. We got to see the enemy's point of view, and they were capable opponents. Bill Fawcett showed that he respected the capabilities and limitations of both sides of this conflict. The Iranians, while under-trained and extremely superstitious, were warriors in their own right. This is crucial to adding stakes to the combat and conflict overall.

Now that we've covered that let's talk about the overall writing in this novel. I really loved how the author employed a workman-like prose that still managed to shine in a brilliant purple light. There was clean language intermixed in brilliant poetry of language that had me rereading scenes just to enjoy the verbiage. This allowed me to visualize the various scenes like a movie in my head. It was enjoyable, and I really wish that they'd make this into a movie for the big screen. Assuming that Hollywood doesn't jack it up.

I could keep going about the quality of their prose, but let's move on to the other facets of this story. This seasoned storyteller knew how to expertly pace his story so that it flowed smoothly from one plot point to another. It kept my attention while giving me room to breathe and process the various parts of this epic adventure. Even better, this novel felt like it was setting up book two to kick the action up a notch, and I'm here for it. However, I am not sure how Bill could possibly outdo this book. It was good, and I'm excited to see what's next.

Finally, I should mention that I didn't read this novel on the printed page. Instead, I listened to the audiobook performed by Daniel Wisniewski and what a joy it was. Seriously, he hit the ball out of the park, telling me a story that I couldn't put down. It kept me listening when I should've been doing other things, but I didn't care. He nailed the various character accents, keeping my ears engaged from start to finish. I predict this series will be one with staying power, and I don't say that lightly.

The Characters

While there are multiple point-of-view characters in Never Again, the main character of this novel is Timo Sheen. He starts this novel as the commanding officer of the Kurdish Republic's only armored battalion. We quickly see him promoted from Colonel to Brigadier General as he replaces his fallen mentor in the command staff of the Kurdish Army. From there, we follow a mad dash to prepare for the coming war with Iran and their fanatical Republican Guard forces.

During the course of this novel, we see him evolve from a competent warrior to a grieving family man. Or is this him devolving? Timo comes to the brink of wanting to commit suicide via combat during this process of his struggling with crippling grief. In the end, we see how he accepts his fate and rededicates his entire existence to serving his fledgling Kurdish Republic. We don't get to watch him grow in the traditional sense; he starts as a fully actualized adult who knows who he is. He is a man of principle, and his character is already firmly rooted in the soil of his nation. However, we do see him overcome his limitations and the setbacks that life throws his way. We see a man who deeply loves his country, his people, and the soldiers who serve under him. The kind of man you'd gladly follow into hell and thank them for the privilege of doing so.

The World

What's not to love about the world-building in this novel? First, it was helped by being basically our modern reality with a few tweaks because it is set in the near future. With that said, the world-building was expertly handled by Bill Fawcett. He clearly knows how to tell a compelling story set in a world that felt real and lived in. Everything was extremely fleshed out, and I could picture the scenes he described. Maybe it helps that I've been there in real life while I served in Iraq, but I think you'll be able to see it in your mind, too. He didn't info dump all his world-building up front. Instead, he fed it to us in drips and drabs around the compelling combat scenes. Seriously, he was the perfect drug dealer of the literary crack I crave. He expertly strung me along and left me 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.

Politics

First, this novel is political in nature because combat is political. Warfare is, after all, the failure of diplomacy. It features the fictional Kurdish Republic fighting countries that exist now. The politics are slightly different from what we know because they are set in the future. The events that happened before the start of *Never Again* made the nation of Iran larger than it is now. The Kurdish Republic exists with territory that is, on our maps, made up from parts of Iraq, Iran, and Syria. In that sense, as a military science fiction book, there are politics. However, the author doesn't preach at you or take any political stance other than it applies to this fictional version of our universe. There are political machinations, but they serve as plot points and not something more. Seriously, I don't think anybody on the left or right side of insanity would be offended. This is true for all the books that Chris Kennedy puts out; his imprints just want to entertain you, and Bill Fawcett nailed it out of the part on that front!

Content Warning

This novel would be appropriate for anyone over the age of 13. This is a near-future military science fiction novel, so there is combat. People die, and violence happens. If those things bother you, this book isn't for you. Otherwise, there isn't anything concerning in this novel.

Who is it for?

This book is for people who enjoy reading their military science fiction with a side of thriller mixed with near-future realism. This novel has the strange ability to mix the blunt prose of Clive Cussler or Tom Clancy with the flowery language that would make the Bard himself blush.

Why buy it

This is the story of an underdog nation, the beleaguered Kurdish Republic, and the commanding general of their small Peshmerga military. They are a nation in its infancy that strives to overcome the shortcomings of its small size and rise to global greatness. Jump into their combat armor and ride the rollercoaster to greatness with them! Watch as they use cunning, wit, and speed to triumph against larger and more powerful opponents. If you love watching the little guy punching up, this is the novel for you!

Ordeal in Otherwhere by Andre Norton

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

‘Ware the dream-powers of the Wyvern witches of Warlock!

Charis Nordholm is the daughter of education officer Ander Nordholm. She accompanied her father and a group of colonists to the planet Demeter, but some colonists were suspicious of those who work for the government, including the education officer and his daughter. Nevertheless, all seemed poised to go well – until a mysterious illness called simply “the white death” struck the colony, killing mostly the men. Ander Nordholm, Charis’s only protector, is among the dead.

When her attempts to get off world and seek justice leave her with either the option to be a slave on Demeter or a slave in the outer galaxy, Charis chooses the latter. Off Demeter she might be able to put in a call to the government and have them arrest the colonists who committed murder once the white death had finished its job. But Charis is not given the chance; she is sold to a trader headed for the planet known as Warlock, a world populated by a sapient saurian race where females rule supreme...

...or so it seems.

The Story

Charis barely escapes the torching of the government domes on Demeter before she spots a space transport touching down outside the colony. Unfortunately, it is not the Patrol ship she initially believed it to be, and she is caught by the remaining colonists when she attempts to reach the ship. These men resent her for her education and her connection – however slim – to the government. So they sell her to the Free Trader who just landed in exchange for the men he already has in freeze aboard his ship, since they need more men to keep the colony going after losing so many to sickness. Getting a message to the Patrol and the government to report the colonists’ actions now will be next to impossible for Charis to accomplish.

After some time in space, however, Charis is sold once more. A man named Jagan, a Free Trader trying to make contact with the native Wyvern witches on Warlock, buys her so he can use her to purchase the fantastic cloth made by the witches. He initially had another young woman who was not a slave at his post whom he hoped could parlay with the witches, but Sheeha could not stand their dreaming messages and has gone mad. He hopes that Charis will have better luck but she has her own ideas: every new contact world has a government outpost. All she needs to do to get justice for what happened on Demeter is to call them, and...!

The Wyvern witches interfere just as Charis gets her call through. She dreams and is somehow somewhere else, far away from the trading post. Soon she is taken directly to the witches, who teach her their ways and give her access to their Power. But when Charis finally encounters a member of the government Survey duo charged with monitoring access to Warlock after discovering Jagan’s trading post has been blasted with all hands murdered, she has other concerns to occupy her mind. Along with the Survey man, Shann Lantee, she learns that not all is as it seems on this new world. If they want to prevent the witches from declaring war on any humans who dare to land upon Warlock, then they have to find out how the Wyvern males slipped the witches’ control – and stop the men who freed them from fulfilling their villainous plan!

The Characters

Charis is the main character and her determination to survive as well as to pursue justice makes her an enjoyable protagonist. The acceptance of the witches and then the fracas after Jagan and his people are killed kind of drives out her initial hope of getting justice for what happened on Demeter, but that only makes sense, considering how much her survival depends on stopping something similar from occurring on Warlock. Although tempted believably to panic, Charis makes herself stay calm and she shows great courage under fire, walking into certain doom to save her friends.

Shann Lantee does not get as much screentime, but what he does get is impressive. The man is a fighter and while he wouldn't last long without Charis's non-combat aid, if he had given up earlier she would not have been able to help him. Despite not being a soldier he is a man with a solid grasp on what to do and what must be done in a battle, even if part of him does not necessarily like it. He also proves to be a fantastic negotiator, something Charis finds they need as they try to fulfill the witches' demands!

The World

Andre Norton crafted her worlds with care and Warlock is no exception. From the alien plants and landscape to the strange, often dangerous creatures that call the planet home, Warlock truly feels like an alien world. The addition of the witches' misandry makes their culture quite alien and, like other Norton heroines, Charis soon must face the stubborn will of females who believe men are worth nothing except for their muscle and the continuance of the species. In a world trying to imitate the society of Warlock, this is a timely setting for the action indeed.

Politics

What politics there are seem to lean left, but given the timeframe in which the book was written, this is not the demerit it would be today. Furthermore, these politics disappear within two chapters and cease to be a bother for the rest of the book. They just are not important to the story after that point.

Content Warning

None.

Who is it for?

Andre Norton fans will enjoy this novel, as will readers who love to devour classic sci-fi. Those looking for heroines and heroes to model in a world gone mad will also like it, as it is clear that the Wyverns' lifestyle is not going to last and causes far more harm than good. What will it profit them in the long run to keep their males bound in slavery and to treat all off-world males the same? In a modern era that insists on equality but does not give it, Norton proved to be prescient in how she presented the Wyverns' culture – and the cure for it. Those frustrated with how the world works at present may find solace and even some good ideas in this novel, as well as other Norton works if they enjoy this one enough to try the rest of her books.

Why buy it?

It is great classic sci-fi that takes a frank look at a world under a matriarchy. The adventure is fast-paced, the culture well thought out, and the fun continues to the last page. What could make the book unattractive to an audience hungry for something good to read?

Politics Kills by Declan Finn
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The first book was the easy part.

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

That, however, was the easy part.

The story

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

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

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

The characters

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

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

Perhaps the most interesting new addition to the cast is Fr. Healy, the head of the Holy Order of St. Patrick. The team gets to spend some time with him while making a stop to thwart an attack on the order's headquarters known as the *Foundation*. Fr. Healy is huge, has a large collection of whiskey, and enjoys singing songs about defeating the forces of evil. Armed with this knowledge, Kami finds it much easier to understand Ryan's unusual disposition.

There are a few others that Ryan adds to his band of misfits, each of whom has a unique aspect, whether they be blind, a former black ops operator turned merc, or a sociopathic love of violence, the team

has never been more dangerous.

The world

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

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

The politics

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

Content warning

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

Who is it for?

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

Why read it?

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

The Princess Seeks Her Fortune by Mary Catelli

Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Not all modern fairy tale fantasies are tongue-in-cheek....

Alissandra is the middle princess and the best one – just ask her elderly aunt, Donata. Alissandra's older sister Esmeralda and younger sister Iolande know this is not mere bragging on Donata's part, as do

her parents, and they hate Alissandra for it. It does not help that the middle princess recently used her dowry to pay the debts of a dead woman whose corpse would have been left to rot in the local chapel otherwise. A princess pay a commoner's debts to secure the woman's funeral? Whoever heard of such a thing?!

Hoping for a brief break from her family's sniping, Alissandra and her maid Lizina go out to deliver some shirts which the middle princess has made for the orphanage. But that is when fate intervenes....

The Story

As they make their way to the orphanage, Lizina asks why Alissandra paid for the woman's funeral. Certainly, the dead woman did charitable work, ministering to those afflicted by a plague until she herself fell ill and perished. But what made Alissandra commit this act of charity?

Irritated by the topic since she recently overheard her family discussing it, Alissandra looks at the other woman and pointedly asks, "What was I supposed to do?"

Lizina accepts this answer in silence and continues following her mistress into town. Along the way the two run into a blind girl trying to get water from a well, but most of it is on her little dress. Smiling kindly, Alissandra helps her get a drink, only for the "little girl" to smile and stare straight at her with apparently sightless eyes. The "girl" promises that every time the princess washes her hands, lilies will fall from them and every time she combs her hair, roses will fall from it. The "girl" is actually one of the Fair Folk and she disappears as soon as she has made this proclamation.

Alissandra soon discovers that the fairy is right; roses fall from her hair when she brushes it, and every time she washes her hands lilies fall from them. When her sisters try to receive their own gift it naturally goes wrong: Esmeralda is cursed to leave a stinking trail of mud wherever she goes, as well as for rotten fruits and vegetables to fall whenever she speaks. Meanwhile, Iolande is cursed to echo the last word that her oldest sister says whenever she speaks. Rather than tell their two daughters off for getting themselves into this mess, the king and queen agree to let them go on a quest to "save [themselves]" from the curse. Their parents also plan to send Alissandra along with them as their perfumer, since the smell of the roses and lilies she sheds counteracts the stink of Esmeralda's curse.

But Alissandra's not going to let them get away with that. She packs up her things and goes to seek her fortune, with Lizina her only companion. She rescues several birds along the way and acquires valuable feathers after assisting each group of avians. When she and Lizina arrive in the next kingdom they hear strange rumors about the prince there, leading Alissandra to form a plan....

The Characters

Alissandra is not your stereotypical strong female character who happens to be a princess. Despite not wielding a sword or possessing any magic beyond that gifted to her by the Fair Folk, Alissandra is a no-nonsense princess who is genuinely kind and loving even when it hurts. Having her whole family essentially hate her for showing them up causes her a lot of pain, but she keeps going all the same, which makes her very admirable. She also never gives up and is always thinking, which enables her to not only save her future husband, but to help him save her!

Lizina is a very mysterious woman. She only recently began working at the castle and she doesn't talk much. Nor does she react very often. But she backs Alissandra's every decision and comes to help her

when she needs it most. Given she has no weapons or magic of her own this seems a strange thing – until her secret is finally revealed.

The World

It is world where fairy tales are real, and the authoress does not poke tongue-in-cheek fun at the stories that inspired her work. Rather, Ms. Catelli crafts a world fraught with peril, one where those who ignore the stories are doomed to find a sticky end of some kind. Her fae are also not the sexy honeypots of the Dresden Files; they are inhuman creatures who long for substance, for reality. They are canny and very, very dangerous, so trifling with them ignorantly is not recommended!

Politics

None.

Content Warning

Some fairy tales have gruesome ends, and while these do not appear on camera, be ready for some Brothers Grimm type deaths to be mentioned. A few mentions of maternal care of an infant are also made. The book nevertheless earns a PG rating, as it is accessible even for young readers.

Who is it for?

Fairy tale fans will love this book. Those who enjoyed Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones or Patricia C. Wrede's Enchanted Forest Chronicles will find this novel hits the spot, albeit it possesses a far more serious tenor than those works. Anyone who loved Inkheart, the movie or the trilogy of novels by Cornelia Funke, will also like this novel, as it similarly earnest and treats the material from which it borrows with great respect. Romance lovers will enjoy this book, too, as it is something of a slow burn low-fantasy series. Clean romance readers will like it as well, and anyone looking for a warm comfort novel they can pick up whenever the world gets dark will want The Princess Seeks Her Fortune on their shelves or ebook files.

Why buy it?

It is a good story that pays homage to the fairy tales of old while creating its own world. There is mystery as well as good triumphing over evil, true love, princes and princesses rescuing each other, and all the good things Disney no longer gives us. What better reasons could there be to buy such a novel?

Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dreamland by L Jagi Lamplighter

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The weight of whole worlds is on her tiny, 13-year-old shoulders ... This isn't even counting school work.

Poor Rachel Griffin. She's spent the last six weeks going through a lot of trauma. She's been sent to the infirmary so much, she's bucking for a record. She holds secrets that could destroy the universe. Friends have died. She's been shot at more than most veteran police officers.

We won't even touch on the dragons, the death cults, the demons, the angels, the elves, gods or monsters. The weight of whole worlds is on her tiny, 13-year-old shoulders ...

This isn't even counting school work. Welcome to round three of the Rachel Griffin novels, *Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dreamland*

The story

Where do we start?

Let's start with some SPOILERS FOR BOOKS ONE AND TWO....Yes, you'd think after my *The Raven the Elf* and *Rachel* review, that would have been spoilery. It seriously, seriously isn't.

So, Rachel has defeated a demon, fought off a death cult — twice — including a dragon. Surely the cult out to destroy the world is no longer a problem, right?

Right?

Oh. Wrong. So very, very wrong.

Due to a magical experiment gone wrong, Rachel ends up in Transylvania, and the children of the night are restless. Due to circumstances beyond their control, a demon is unleashed. This is Morax ... servant of Moloch. If you don't know what Moloch is, then read through the book, and expect it to go dark. And by dark, I mean "When did early Peter Jackson start directing this film?"

Let's just say that, during the climax of the novel, there is a scene that Ray Harryhausen and Sam Raimi would have loved, because there's going to be an army of darkness, with no Bruce Campbell. And I was looking for a chainsaw.

Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dreamland wraps up many of the plot points in a neat little bow. The main plots of the book are neatly cleaned up. But that never stopped Rachel from getting into trouble, usually on the same exact day the last book ended. And there are still enough dangling threads that show some of where book 4 is going to go: more interpersonal complications to wrap up, psychological damage to at least two of our main characters to fix, as well as the hole in the world that needs to be dealt with.

Heck, we've barely touched on a violent episode that happened back in book 1, but was revealed in book 2, and only barely mentioned later on... Right now, I don't know if I approve, or disapprove of how it's being handled, or not handled, as the case may be. I'll bring it up in a later review, should they focus on it some more.

The characters

Now, I'm not going to say there's a shootout every 25 pages ... but there's at least a shootout every 50 or so. Though this one also places an emphasis on emotional conflict, internally and externally. The *Magical Princess of Magical Australia* is magically annoying at times, and is getting into problems with Sigfried, who is one part Dickens Character, and one part Parker from *Leverage*. And, of course, Rachel has to deal with all of the various and sundry crap she never dealt with from the first two novels — ie: she's dealt with none of the trauma she's already gone through. Because that'll make for a mentally healthy 13 year old.

I do so enjoy these books. There is no question of Rachel just happening along as she trips over the solutions to problems. Rachel is a highly active character. She knows there is an enemy, and is doing everything in her power to stop it. It's highly refreshing after certain other YA novels spend most of their time overhearing just the right conversation to get some detail, and have some Hermione look up the data for them.

It's also nice to see that, in all three of these novels, the adults aren't completely useless. In fact, they're doing something odd — like THEIR JOBS. The adults have a learning curve. Like "Gee, maybe we should listen to the children here." Or even better: "Hey! Maybe we should give our kid a fast-acting wand to shoot spells against the bad guys who seem to be actively out to kill them." The adults here are at least smart enough to conclude that, yes, the kids really are in danger, they really do know that something is going on, and the next time something like this happens -- because it's obvious even to the characters in universe that something is going on -- that the kids should be allowed to defend themselves...

... I didn't realize this while reading it, but looking over that paragraph makes me think this novel has a Second Amendment commercial in there somewhere.

The world

This world. Wow. There's a lot to unpack. And dang, the references. I wish I could tell you all of the references. From comic books to Norse and Greek mythology, to Biblical in-jokes about the Temple of the Unnamed god (for you biblical type folks who read it, think Saint Paul in Athens). We won't even go into the lion the size of a plushy doll. I'm trying to figure out if Jagi is amazingly subtle, or hitting readers over the head with a brick. I guess it depends on if you're an information sponge, like me.

If there is a mythology Jagi hasn't built into this world, I can't think of it offhand.

Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dreamland also expands the world. We know more of the culture of Australia and Transylvania, and even hints at Bavaria. More importantly, we get more and more glimpses at what the "World of the Unwary" looks like, from cops to how historical events are handled.

The politics

I think I covered the "politics" at the high-capacity wands. This is a fantasy set in an alternate history. Any politics are strictly that of the world.

But if you're offended that Aslan is a character... you're a killjoy and you shouldn't even be reading books.

Content warning

This is going to get creepy by the end. Not quite Evil Dead creepy, but "human sacrifice" and "skeletal armies crawling out of the dirt" put this solidly in the "probably not for children" camp. (Unless you're a weirdo like me who read Mary Stewart and TH White when I was 12.)

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who enjoys Urban Fantasy, alternate histories, inventive uses of magic, and deep mythology... all wrapped up with white-knuckle action and emotional depth of characters. This is defi-

nitely PG-13. Yes, children can read it, but I do recommend reading the climax of this novel in daylight.

If you want something more in the magic school genre, this should satisfy you. If you think that genre is too shallow, this should also satisfy you.

Why read it?

Because this is great fun. All in all, I am enjoying the heck out of this series. Keep in mind, I typically hate YA novels. You have to be Timothy Zahn or David Weber to make me read it. But, like Narnia, this series really is too good for children.

Riptides by Blaine Lee Pardoe

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In book one, Splashdown, the human race slowly realized that they were not alone. There was an alien race hiding in the oceans. Then they finally attacked. Devastation reigned.

But those were only preliminary attacks.

Now, the war begins in earnest.

The Story

It's difficult to describe the story more than I already have. The first trilogy of books really do feel like a story arc, introducing our primary characters in book one, and developing them over time.

Since the first book, a few weeks have passed. But while humanity has put together intelligence teams on the aliens they refer to as "the Fish," they're not much further along than with the attacks started. The world is divided, each country facing the Fish on their own. The Fish have started dismantling the areas they've conquered. The military has based their response team out of Los Alamos.

While everyone is still trying to catch up, the Fish strike in earnest—everywhere, and all at once. And all hell breaks loose. The resulting story ends up exploring the intersection of the military, civilians, journalists, scientists, big business and intelligence.

Albert Einstein said that "The definition of genius is taking the complex and making it simple." What Blaine Lee Pardoe has here is a work of genius. Not only has he managed to balance nine (yes, nine) point of view characters and make them easily trackable, he has a heavily detailed human response, and has an equally well-defined collection of aliens, as well as the technological advances for both sides, and the cultural and societal changes in American culture. It's like Pardoe decided that Tom Clancy was an amateur and said "Hold my beer." Pardoe even takes advanced technology and boils it down so that someone as stupid as myself can figure it out.

Imagine if War and Peace was readable, enjoyable military science fiction, and you can track all of the characters without flash cards.

In case I'm not clear: this is an awesome, solid ride from start to finish. This is a thick book, but I finished it in short order. The first third of the book is catching up with our cast of characters before the fun starts. And unlike the first book, the shooting starts around 40% in.

The Characters

Our roster of characters have not changed from the first book. In fact, we have some new point of view characters.

Our first addition is Private Reid Porter. In book one, he was a side character under Marine Corporal Natalia Falto. Since Porter spent most of the invasion of Guam saving civilians and evacuating fellow Marines, he's being given the media of honor, whether he likes it or not. He's declared the new Audie Murphy, but his only goal now is to get back to the front line.

Submarine Commander Titus Hill has been promoted to Captain, except his boat is in for months of repairs. Like Porter, he wants to get back to the fighting. But without his sub, he has to figure out how to even get into combat.

Aston Slade is still very much the Jack Ryan of this world. He's in intelligence, babysitting all of the eggheads analyzing the Fish, and all of the folks developing emerging technologies.

One of these eggheads is Kent Warner, an engineer developing some of the emerging technology.

In our first book, the military vet Anton Colton was selling drugs to make ends meet. Now that the Fish have come to his city, he's going to take everyone with nowhere else to go, and they're going to strike back at the Fish by any means necessary, starting a local militia unit.

CC Chen is alone in the street of Los Angeles. Her father is held prisoner by the Fish from the attack on Guam. Her mother is missing in action. But she's about to make new friends, and they're armed.

Then there's Jay Drake, who has all the tech of Elon Musk, the ambitions of Bill Gates, and he seems to be developing a Bond villain complex.

Reporter Dana Blaze is now a front line reporter ... and is somehow still a calculating sociopath.

Riptides takes everyone from Splashdown and we see how they all quickly evolve during the war once it begins in earnest. Criminals become soldiers. The fearful find their courage. Everyone develops.

Except for Adam Caine. He's still an a-hole.

The World

This is a heavily detailed, vivid world, explored with deft, concise writing.

Politics

This is relatively light on politics. You could argue this is an ad for the second amendment, but that's not pushed or stressed in any way. Every civilian in the war zone is a militia member, if only for survival reasons.

Content Warning

This is a war. I don't remember cussing, but the Fish do have some experiments on human beings that would probably make Dr Mengele flinch. I skimmed those sections, honestly.

Who is it for?

Military science fiction readers who want a good helping of character development along the way, with a good amount of mech combat.

Why buy it?

Buy this because the book is truly excellent.

The Romanov Rescue by Tom Kratman, Justin Watson, and Kacey Ezell

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Better dead than red.

3 skilled historical writers play with an exciting "what-if" scenario, wherein the Romanov family was not executed by communists in the 1910s, but were instead rescued by a daring officer at the helm of an airship.

The story

This is a piece of historical fiction that requires you to know a little bit of Russian history in order to grasp the ramifications of what's going on. The short version is this: the Romanov dynasty governed Russia for over 300 years, from 1613 to 1917. The direct male lineage stayed intact for the first 150 years or so, until one generation only produced female heirs. In order to keep the Romanov name going, a German royal family married into the dynasty.

This made Germany and Russia's royalty family. That matters because in *The Romanov Rescue*, the familial tie prompts a German officer to go rogue and rescue the Romanovs once he learns just how much danger they are in. If the Bolsheviks carry out their plans, a brutal murder awaits the Russian royals.

The characters

There are, of course, the Romanovs who are in immediate peril, namely Nicholas and his wife Alexandra, with their four children.

The zeppelin on the cover is captained by Ludwig Bockholt. His wireless operator, Wilhelm Mueller, also features in the formation of the plot to go get the Romanovs.

And the man with the most influence in the "alternate" part of this alternate history is German Major General Max Hoffman, who puts the plot in motion: he issues the order to Major Brinkmann, who is then accompanied by a Russian named Daniil Kostyshakov, who speaks perfect German.

If the names are a mouthful for you, you're not alone; my own bilingualism takes me into the Romance languages, away from the Teutonic and Cyrillic, so there was a bit of training involved in getting the names to make the right sounds in my head as I read them. But once you get these core characters down, the rest start to fall into place.

The world

As with any alternate history, it starts with our own world and plays with a few details. So the Romanovs did rule Russia for three centuries, the Holstein-Gottorp Germans did intermarry, and the Bolsheviks did rise up to overthrow the government.

And since it's in Russia, holy crap it's cold outside. That gets even worse when you're working at altitude, as becomes apparent right out of the gate:

"Not for the first time, Wilhelm thanked his lucky stars that he'd been trained as a wireless operator, and therefore got to spend most of his time in the forward control compartment. They could still smell the engine fumes, but it was nothing like the noisy, vibrating, hellish environment of the engine compartments.

"On the other hand, being up front was no picnic either. Between unexpected turbulence, and unpredictable weather at altitude, no one on the crew of a zeppelin had an easy time of it. It was a mark of a man's toughness--both physical and mental--to be selected for airborne service. They were an elite group, hand-picked for this important mission, and justifiably proud."

From there we hit the rough transition from World War One to the Russian Civil War, which would drag for six miserable years.

The politics

Powerfully anti-communist, as the factions opposing the Bolsheviks are the protagonists of the story.

The authors are students of history and very much present this story from the angle of individual liberty, while still preserving the structure of royalty-based governments as the norm of the day.

The writing

On that note, this is where I'd like to point out an issue with collaborative storytelling, where more than one talented author brings his or her skills to the table: books like this can easily end up with an inflated word count, or overly descriptive scenes. The cold that bites the skin, the shovel that scrapes the dirt, the peculiar function of a specific weapon--this problem doesn't always rear its head with two authors, but with three it seems to become a little more obvious.

Kratman is retired Army, a retired lawyer, and a current novelist, while Watson is a West Point graduate and Ezell is a retired Air Force chopper pilot. The military bearing is definitely on point with the three of them and their experience.

The Romanov Rescue tips the scales at a hefty 560 pages and there were places where I felt it could have trimmed the fat. By the time I got to the final chapters, the narrator pausing to describe the goal of using a flamethrower in an enclosed space was a bit of a speed bump.

That said, the action was clear because the necessary details were always there, sometimes in excess, but it was easy to know just what was going on. As a final note I appreciated the visual aids included, such as historical pictures of people and vehicles, as well as floorplans of different buildings.

Content warning

The Romanov Rescue does not shy away from military-accurate levels of profanity and violence, there are no kid gloves on this story.

Who is it for?

This is historical fiction written for history aficionados. I consider myself to be just that, however my area of interest hasn't overlapped much with the history of Russia. I had to hit the history websites a couple of times throughout the read to understand why one particular event or person was relevant to the story.

But I enjoyed that, because good historical fiction should make you want to learn real historical facts.

Why read it?

If you're unfamiliar with this particular sequence of Eastern European events, it's a great primer for knowing who was on the board, where they went and why, as well as how these things went on to affect the rest of the 20th century.

And if you're already acquainted with the details of post-Great War Russia, it will move even faster for you.

All told, I liked it. It presented a change of pace from most of the other Baen books I've read, which fall into the thriller category by comparison. The heft and depth of The Romanov Rescue are a testament to the love its authors have for its subject matter.

Sons of Heaven by Chuck Dixon

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Chuck Dixon gets a chance to write his own version of a Richard Sharpe novel.

Sons of Heaven is the fifth of Chuck Dixon's time traveling action novels. We've reviewed the first three.

Review of Book 1: SpecOps gunmen go back in time to save scientists traveling through time.

Review of Book 2: Go back in time to see buried treasure be buried.

Review of Book 3: Go up against the legions of Rome to save a Carpenter's Son.

Chuck Dixon's Bad Times #4, Helldorado was fun. Most of what I would comment on in a review was absent. It was essentially one long run-and-gun sequence. It achieved some goals that will carry over into this review. Two major elements came out of Helldorado: our heroes went back in time to recover

lost member Rick Renzi, who had been left behind in book 1. Second, in the present, one of our resident scientists behind the time machine had been kidnapped by a billionaire rival of series antagonist “Sir Nigel” — this newcomer knows about the time machine, and wants our heroes to run a recovery operation through time.

In book #5, Sons of Heaven, Chuck Dixon gets a chance to write his own version of a Richard Sharpe novel.

The story

In Sons of Heaven, our merry band of Rangers have grown slightly, and are about to be thrust into the middle of the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1865; a rebellion that ended with 30 million dead.

The billionaire’s target? The biography of Genghis Khan. Sons of Heaven is different from the other novels because it has less of a multi-level plot structure. Less time is spent on storylines in different years, and more time is spent in 1865—that’s mostly because 1865 China is such a clusterf*** it makes a Richard Sharpe battlefield look neat in comparison. Let’s just say that current events in China, with Uighurs being cut up for spare parts, or for breeding stock, seems like a natural evolution of the history of barbarity. But this story throws in everything: siege warfare tactics? Check. History of munitions? Check. Historical cameos? Check. Full scale battles with overwhelming enemy forces? Check. All told, Sons of Heaven is a fun book. I’m just trying to figure out how the final book is going to wrap up everything, given how this ends.

The characters

The big character moments here all revolve around the horrors of war. Despite every character being a military veteran, Chinese warfare of 1865 is a whole different level of Hell from what they know. It’s more on par with, again, Napoleonic warfare, with all the savagery that can be conjured up from the horrors of warfare history. This time, the world very much impacts our characters, whether they like it or not.

The world

Dixon does love his research and you can see it, even in the discussion of weaponry. Since the latest time period is modern, they have to be extra careful in what they bring back. Which leads to an interesting historical conversation about bolt-action weapons, level-action, and that Chinese knockoffs go back as far as China does.

Speaking of research, Dixon even has his team prepared for “they’d all had shots for malaria, yellow fever, rabes, typhoid, cholera, three kinds of meningitis, an alphabet soup of hepatitis, encephalitis, and tetanus boosters.” These and other things glossed over by time travel fiction; take that Doctor Who and Michael Crichton.

The politics

Depends: if you think that highlighting the barbaric past of warfare is somehow racist, or if you think that history must only show barbaric white people, then this book is not for you. Then again, it's 1865 warfare, which makes Fallujah look like Kindergarten. Like all the other Bad Times novels -- it's "right wing" in the sense that it is "Based," since this is thoroughly based in reality.

Content warning

This one shows that war is Hell, and it does not shy away from it. Not for kids. Casual slaughter happens. It's generally messy.

Who is it for?

Anyone who has ever read a Bernard Cornwell novel should enjoy this. Anyone who likes time travel stories who knows history. If you read the military scifi of David Weber or John Ringo, you should easily have a blast with it.

Why read it?

Read this because it's the continuation of a great series, with all the action you could ever want.

Stand Against the Dark by Denton Salle Review by Becky Jones <http://ornerydragon.com/>

Stand Against the Dark is the fourth book in Denton Salle's Avatar Wizard series where the myths and magic of Eastern Europe come to life. Jeremy, the panda-shifting volkh wizard has passed his Third Level tests and is becoming more powerful. He is powerful enough to attempt the ritual to call the Lord of Winds and Winter to ask a favor – a ritual that others have died attempting.

Master Anthony has reason to believe that a plague outbreak in the port city of the heron shifters is the work of necromancers and the return of the Dark. Jeremy's love, Galena has been there with other healers attempting to solve the mystery of the plague and save those who fall to it, without any luck. Under the guise of sending more supplies to the healers, Master Anthony sends Jeremy and his friend Bolgor, another healer, to uncover the source of the plague.

The port city of Venetsiya is filled with politics and power struggles all underlaid with a sheen of Dark magic and the deceptive manipulations of necromancers. Jeremy gets a taste of the fear and hatred others have for the volkh. Yet Jeremy and his companions must find and stop the necromancers behind the plague before this key city falls to the forces of the Dark, with or without the resident's help.

In the Avatar Wizard series, Salle brings to life the legends and myths that stalk Eastern Europe and parts of Texas to this day. His descriptions bring the keep of the volkh, the cities, and other locations to life and do so within the context of the action of the story without resorting to long descriptions. You experiences the sights and sounds of the city as Jeremy explores the market square and discovers the Sheban merchants.

In Stand Against the Dark, the political machinations at the superficial level (a plot to take over rule of the city) combined with the more manipulative and nefarious plans of the agents of the Dark work together to create a rich context and connection with the previous books. The entire tapestry of work is starting to come together, and readers are getting glimpse of what lies ahead for Jeremy and the other volkh.

I powered through this fourth book in less than a day (yes, I did read it non-stop) and now I'm going to go back and start at the beginning of the series and read all the way through. Then I will eagerly await book number five.

If you are not familiar with the myths of Eastern Europe, do yourself a favor and start with *Sworn to the Light*, book one of the Avatar Wizard series, and go from there. If you are familiar with those stories, you will truly enjoy Salle's use of them to bring the world of the Avatar Wizard to life. I promise you won't be disappointed. Watching Jeremy and his panda avatar grow and mature into a powerful, yet still human, wizard is a lot of fun and a great adventure.

Translation State by Ann Leckie Review by Sam Lubell

Translation State was one of the best 2023 books I read. I was not alone in thinking so as it was a Hugo finalist, although it lost to *Some Desperate Glory* by Emily Tesh. This book is set in Leckie's Imperial Radch universe (which was also a finalist for the best series Hugo) that includes *Ancillary Justice*, *Ancillary Sword*, and *Ancillary Mercy*. While the events of the earlier books happen in the background of *Translation State*, this book stands alone.

Translation State has three main characters. Enae Athtur (pronouns Sie/Hir) has spent decades living with Grandmaman, taking care of the rich old woman and her household. But when Grandmaman dies, the new inheritor of her name and influence arranges for Enae to become a Special Investigator for the Office of Diplomacy assigned to find a fugitive for the Radchaa'i Translators Office. Even though sie knows nothing about investigating and is told this is just an excuse to allow hir to travel, sie takes the assignment seriously and goes out into the universe.

Meanwhile, Reet, who has a state-mandated job as a pipe repairperson on Rurusk station, is told his unique genetics may mean he is a descendent of the Schan, the ancient Hikipi rulers of Lovehate Station. He believes there was something wrong with himself, even though he has outgrown his desire to dissect the people around him. He starts attending meetings of the Siblings of Hikipu, which he considers an odd but harmless ethnic heritage group.

Would anyone reading this be surprised if I say he is wrong in that?

The third main character is Qven, who narrates Qven's part of the story in the first person. As a Little and Middle, Qven is grouped with similar others who occasionally open up other Middles to see their insides. Qven is trained to be a diplomatic operative and translator to go into the human universe. Naturally, the careful reader knows that these three are somehow connected and there are mysteries involving Reet's heritage and Qven's background and purpose. Enae becomes the reader's surrogate, whose investigations allow hir to explore Leckie's rich Radch universe and discover the truth behind Reet's ancestry. Leckie is careful to show rather than tell, which makes for a slow revealing of what Qven is and what Qven is meant to do.

Translation State is not a typical space opera with battling starships and laser guns. There are some action scenes, especially at the end, but the focus is more on the characters and on who and what they are. The book is actually a mystery as the reader tries to understand what is going on and the choice that Reet and Qven must make.

I strongly recommend *Translation State* as an intriguing science fictional exploration into what it means to be human and not human.

Prose Bono

Building to a Climax

Cedar Sanderson

<https://cedarlila.substack.com/>

I'm at this point in the novel-in-progress now. Finally managed to get all the players on the same part of the gameboard map, so to speak, and am driving the action towards a pinnacle of...

But you don't want just one. Instead, you'll want to do smaller peaks, leading your readers upwards, then letting them fall into a valley of not-quite-success, before you finally hit the big one, blow the roof off your world, and then you can slide into the far side of happy-ever-after or at least for now, in a golden glow of achievement. This isn't the same as the try-fail sequence you may have used in the overall plot to set up the final climactic series. This is a building, one step leads to another, sort of thing.

For one thing, it sets the final 'win' up better than just proceeding there directly. If you have established the foundation of that success, it will be more believable to the reader. The valleys are also necessary. They give the reader a little break from the tension of a climactic scene, but they also show that the main character(s) aren't just handed their goal on a silver platter by the author. You want them to earn it. It has to be a little – ok, a lot! – bit of work to get there.

For another, it will wind the reader up more than a linear progression. They are anticipating the finale, and then you take them somewhere slightly unexpected. Don't take them wildly out of expectations, that's more likely to result in a walled book, or a disgusted huff and tap back to library on an e-reader. When mountain climbers are ascending a truly difficult peak, they do it in stages, and every stage is more dangerous than the one before. Give your readers the whole journey, not just the summit, and the book will be the better for it.

Which is not to say that you need to accurately depict all of the boring bits. Some, yes, to convey that waiting and boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror is the manner of life and combat both. Not so many that your readers' eyes glaze over and they fall asleep. Eliding over most of this can be done fairly easily, and should be, even in a full novel or series. You want to portray the parts that are relevant to the plot, the character's development, or setting up the next climax.

Another thing to check is that your progression is in order. You don't really want to have the big peak... and then more, smaller ones that come after it in the book. If you do, you want to see if perhaps what you have is a series, with a break point between the big one, then the successive ones being in another book, having given your reader some recovery time in between (which needn't be much! Write both books, release fast, get more readers and more money).

You absolutely should give your readers, and your characters, what Dan Hoyt told me is the 'cigarette moment' after the last climax. Even if you do intend to set up a series, and do awful things to the main characters to motivate them into that next book, don't do it here. Give them a moment to enjoy the win, even if it is bittersweet. A purely bitter anticlimax will put a reader off, and they may not follow you into the next book if you leave them with a bad taste in their mouth. Allay the pain with sweetness, give

a little hope to lighten the shadows, a moment of joy and they will follow you anywhere. It doesn't need to be a 'happy ending' but it should promise that such a thing is possible, given enough time and perseverance.

Build them up, blow their minds, and leave them happy. Really, this is the way to write a book, and so much more. Some things in life are universal.

Preparing to Succeed
Cedar Sanderson
<https://cedarlila.substack.com/>

This last week, I've written consistently every day, and met or exceeded my wordcount goals each day. I didn't just suddenly decide I was going to do this (although those who saw me make a snap decision in my Discord server may have come to that conclusion) I'd begun preparing for it over a month ago.

These last few years have been full of disruption for me, both physical (moved twice, from Ohio to Texas and then from apartment to a home) and mental (husband's health issues and my own which were less profound, as well as my last child moving out). While I've been able to write, it's been erratic and faltering. I've been making art, but that uses a different part of my brain (so to speak, I'm not certain of the neurology in the physical organ, but I do know that art and writing come from different places in my psyche). All of this, plus an increased sense of frustration at my own inability to force myself to put words on the work in progress, turned into a cycle of defeat.

I realized, somewhat late in it, that part of the issue was that my day job made my desk a place where I did not want to be at the 'end of day' when I was trying to make myself write. So I set up a writing desk in my art room, once I had that organized and cleaned out. There, I could go, shut the door as a clear signal to be let alone, and write for an hour. I can do a thousand words (the current wordcount goal) in an hour. I also realized that transitioning from the day job right into writing was a bad idea, so I took the time to schedule an intentional rest period in between them, long enough to let my mind fully disengage, not so long that my writing time would interfere with making-dinner time.

In other words, after some self-analysis and soul-searching, I deliberately set up a mental and physical place for my writing. Everyone's version of this is going to look different. Part of the trouble I had was imposing old routines into the new home/job/family situation, and those were no longer a good fit and didn't work for me. I had to break down what the new routines I'd fallen into were, and along the way make deliberate new patterns that would accommodate my writing times. For that end, I used a time management and habit-former app to help me, as I'm dreadful about making habits. I also had to make a space for the writing in my physical realm, one that wasn't the same spot I'd been sitting in for nine hours at the day job. I wound up making several spots, from the comfy chair my husband calls my nest in the bedroom, to the walking desk on my treadmill, to the secretary desk in a bookshelf which wound up being the most effective for me. I have options, and options are good. I can get up and move from one to another – or I could also sit at the dining table, the little table in our shared office, at the living room couch, there are so many options. I had to convince myself they were all good, I wasn't locked into one space.

Finally, I had to simply sit at a keyboard and start typing. The first day or so I wasn't worried about being good, simply being there for the thousand words. Which, to my surprise, came easily and with more as the story flowed for me. Taking the slow, deliberate time to set up myself had worked. I focused on the novel first. Then I switched it up to the short story I'd promised for the library charity anthology, and it came out even faster as I'd already done the reading for research, then let that have time to perco-

late through and come out as a story with a suggestion from Jim Curtis to crystallize my initial character idea.

Now, I have to work through the non-routine days, to give myself the writing time in those, as well. I headed out for a trip to Austin, then Houston, this weekend. I'm traveling with a friend who does the driving, so in theory I can write while we're on the move. Yesterday we had a waiting period, and I managed my writing goal during that, because I had writing tools with me and ready. Today I'll see how writing in the car works for me! I plan to finish up that short story, which is a good thing, as a success will embolden me to keep pushing forward on the novel, and that will trigger more happy brain noises which will keep me writing.

Really, that's what works for me. Giving myself the time to think, without the distractions of endless scrolling. Giving myself a space, both physical and mental, to write in. And telling myself that it can suck, this is just a warm-up, trips over into real creation very easily. I'm at a point where I decided I needed to focus more on the writing again, but it wasn't that simple. It took a lot of time and work to set this last week up, and knowing that there will be a day in the future where I'll fail, I can plan to allow that without pitching myself right back into the frustration cycle.

The Blank Wall Cedar Sanderson

<https://cedarlila.substack.com/>

I am at P-Con this weekend. Sitting, as is my wont on a con weekend, in the lobby quietly sipping my frankly dreadful hotel coffee (this hotel has only room keurigs, no lobby coffee, and dehydrated creamer does nothing to tame bitterness), and tapping away on the writing device of choice.

I did not hit my writing goal yesterday, for the first time since I decided that I would be writing a thousand words a day until the end of the year. However, I'm not unhappy with my progress of a few hundred words given that Friday contained far more than the con and much company of good friends. I still managed to write, and today I will write early, rather than trying to come up with story past nine at night and coming up blank.

I have been managing far more than a thousand words most days. The average means I can take a short day in stride. That, and even a day completely unwritten would not necessarily be a failure. However, I want to talk about something else today. The blank wall of stress and depression that builds up between the creative and their imaginations.

Talking with so many friends, sharing joys and burdens, gave me much food for thought (soul food, conversations are!) and two in particular stood out when I contemplated what I'd write about today. One was the reaction of a friend who threw up his hands when I explained my thousand word goals. I looked at him in surprise, told him that it's a modest goal, I was once able to do much more in a day. He laughed and told me that didn't help, so I walked it back to when I began writing and thought I couldn't write a story longer than 2500 words, and those weren't written in a day. I wrote a lot of flash fiction. I had many days where I might have managed a few hundred words and been happy, not mildly disappointed in myself. However, the more I wrote, the more I could write. I'll get back to the point where I can produce a few thousand words on command. And he can get there, too. Like any exercise, you start where you can, then slowly add more until you have reached your capacity.

Which leads me to the other, half-finished conversation I intend to complete this weekend – and if not, one of you will be reading this from a link – about depression and its effect on creativity. It's not simply that you wake up one day and find there is a blank wall all around you, not simply an obstacle you can go around, but a dry, cold, opaque barrier. That happens slowly, edging upwards – or perhaps you sink – making it more difficult to gain access to your joy, the beauty of your soul that comes out as what we call imagination. Finally you find yourself at the bottom of a dry well, wondering if this is the end of that, and what will become of you now.

It is not an end. It is, quite simply, a challenge. Overcoming it may require outside intervention, much will depend on the precise etiology of your challenge. Personally I have dealt with it stemming from more than one cause, I can assure you that it will pass. It will also require you to take some actions, which may at first seem like they are silly and pointless, even if you are also seeking help externally. Get up and move. As much as you can, at first, which may only be a few steps. Get outside in the sunshine. Reach out to someone you care for – if you can't bear to talk to them in person, drop a postcard in the mail, or a letter. Give yourself grace on days you don't manage any of these, much less all. Sit down and write a few words, and don't mind if you think they are 'bad' because how can words be bad? Worry about their arrangement later.

Finally, bear in mind that (as stupidly controversial as this may be in our crazy years) male depression presents differently than female depression. The men of my acquaintance or family will withdraw, becoming more and more silent. I learned the hard way over the last several years that cardiac symptoms and depression mask and confound one another. Check on your friends. Reach out and offer a cheerful word. It's up to them what they do with it, but cheering them on might be helpful.

The empty well, the blank wall, they are temporary. Prepare your groundwork first – trite, for me to say to take your writing blocks and stack them into a stair to climb up and out, when you can easily say 'how?!' A few words a day, that's how. Read good books, even if you can only manage a few paragraphs at a time. Listen to music that makes your heart lift. Take a walk. Do something, every day, and that tiny momentum will build over time. Give yourself grace. Frustration over lack of production snarls you up like a cut barbed wire fence that coils around you and will rip you to the bone if you don't stop fighting yourself and patiently begin to snip through it a strand at a time.

For men? I'm not an expert, but based on my observations I'd say they need to do more physical exercise, more social outreach, and get off the internet (if you don't know what black-pill means, don't look it up. Just get off the angry bitter online scene and go outside. Touch grass.). Finding someone they can trust, and begin to talk to, and no, I don't actually mean a therapist here. Therapy for men, and in particular men in certain fields, is fraught with fears and perceived dangers. Black humor with a buddy while out walking the hunting dog pretending to be in search of meat on the hoof may be more effective than any blank-walled medical office. Every one of you is going to be unique and different. Every one of you is worthy of you taking the time to befriend yourself, stop talking to yourself like that, and start working towards where you want to be, in a joyous imagination alive with action, adventures, and characters who you can write down their stories. It's just going to take time. Preparations. You can't just lower your head and bull your way out of this.

A few words at a time. That's where you start.

Interview with Hans G. Schantz: The Based Book Sale

Interview by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Jimbo's SF/F Reviews: Greetings! We always aim to please here at Jimbo's and I got to thinking. How could I share the most books at the best prices just in time for Cyber Monday? Enter Hans G. Schantz and his Based Book Sale. Mr. Schantz, while an author himself, has taken time to put together a sale where everything is on sale for ninety-nine cents or less. No, really. He took his own time to put this together to help out his fellow authors. I think that's awesome. He was also cool enough to say he would swing by and tell us all a little bit about what he's got going on. So, in the interest of the (never) hard hitting journalism we practice here at Jimbo's SF/F Reviews, let's throw him a softball to get him started. Hi, Hans! How ya doin'?

Hans G Schantz: Doing well! Now that the Based Book Sale is running, I had the opportunity to have a relaxing Thanksgiving with the family.

JSFFR: Good! So I know you're here to talk about the Based Book Sale, and we'll get there, but for now, why don't you tell us a little about yourself.

HGS: I'm a scientist. My doctoral research was in theoretical physics studying how bound or reactive electromagnetic energy decouples from an antenna and radiates away. I put that theoretical expertise to work designing some of the first commercial ultra-wideband (UWB) antennas, developing the theory to describe near-field wireless links. I'm an inventor with about forty U.S. patents to my credit including UWB antennas, near-field indoor location systems, and a host of other inventions. Finally, I'm an author. My first book was *The Art and Science of Ultrawideband Antennas* in 2005 which went to a second edition in 2015. I've also written a series of science-fiction alternate-history technothrillers, *The Hidden Truth*, *A Rambling Wreck*, and *The Brave and the Bold*. My latest book is *The Wise of Heart*, a courtroom drama of biological science versus transgenderism that brings the Scopes Monkey Trial into the twenty-first century. My current project is *Fields & Energy: How Electromagnetism and Quantum Mechanics Work and Where Physics Went Wrong*.

JSFFR: Good to know. Now, Hans, we are not Communists. We believe that you should be compensated for your time. In order to do that, I'm going to need to get some people to buy your books. It is Christmas time after all. So, tell me about about your latest book, *The Wise of Heart: A Modern-Day Re-Imagining of the Scopes Monkey Trial*. If you throw in a buy link you'll save me from having to do it myself. Not that I'm lazy or anything.

HGS: No problem! One evening in the early summer of 2022, I settled in to watch *Inherit the Wind* on YouTube - not the 1960 film starring Spencer Tracy, but rather the 1988 television movie version starring Jason Robards and Kirk Douglas. I got a few minutes into watching it, and I had a sudden epiphany. This would make a great story set in the present day, featuring a high school biology teacher caught up in the transgender craze arrested for teaching the facts of biological science in defiance of a state law requiring unquestioning gender affirmation. I turned off the movie, and instead, I hunted down the transcript for the Scopes Monkey Trial.

And so, *The Wise of Heart* was born.

I commissioned Elin Chancey to illustrate my novel. As we got close to release, I decided to launch a crowdfund campaign to pay for the art. Kickstarter approved my campaign. I was fully funded and days

from closing when they changed their minds, cancelled my campaign, and returned all the pledges. I described what happened here: <https://wiseofheart.substack.com/p/cancelled-by-kickstarter> The evil they intended turned to good. I replatformed on Funding Into Comics, and the resulting publicity on Fox News, The Blaze, Bounding Into Comics, and Upstream Reviews more than doubled the pledges Kickstarter took from me, including funding an audiobook production. I described how “cancelled by Kickstarter” became the new “banned in Boston,” here: <https://wiseofheart.substack.com/p/cancelled-by-kickstarter-is-the-new>

The real-life story behind the book was an adventure almost as exciting as the story itself. The real heroes are the backers who refused to let my cancellation stand and who followed me over to Fund My Comic and the additional backers who supported me when they heard what was going on. I’m very grateful for the wonderful support Elin and I received to get this project funded.

JSFFR: Sounds like fun. Actually, I follow your Substack, so I’ve seen parts of it already. Speaking of which, why don’t you go ahead and drop links to your Substack, your author page and anywhere else the fans can find and interact with you and/or purchase your work. Enquiring minds want to know.

HGS: I’m serializing The Wise of Heart at my Substack: <https://wiseofheart.substack.com/>

And I’m also serializing it on Arktoons: <https://www.arkhaven.com/comics/drama/the-wise-of-heart>

Or you can buy the book in ebook, paperback, or hardcover, here: <https://amzn.to/3QZfBPM>

My Amazon page gives you access to all my books: <https://amzn.to/3GfwH7l>

JSFFR: Thanks! I appreciate it. Now, I know that The Wise of Heart: A Modern-Day Re-Imagining of the Scopes Monkey Trial isn’t your first published work. Tell us a bit about your earlier work.

HGS: Sure. When I was updated The Art & Science of Ultrawideband Antennas to a second edition, I made a remarkable breakthrough in understanding how electromagnetism works. Conventional wisdom is that electromagnetism is due to one entity: a photon that is a union of opposites encompassing both wave and particle behavior. Instead, I realized that electromagnetic energy flow consists of two distinct phenomena: fields or waves guiding the flow of energy. And since the fields and the energy take different paths through electromagnetic systems, they cannot be the same thing.

I am amazed that the idea I uncovered wasn’t picked up on by Hertz or Heaviside or one of the other nineteenth century electromagnetic pioneers. What if they had? What if the result had been suppressed by an evil conspiracy? After all, Hertz, Fitzgerald, and even Maxwell himself died young. Could it have been murder? And what if that conspiracy were the secret masterminds who pull the strings behind all the other groups and coalitions people think are trying to run the world? That was the premise behind my Hidden Truth novels: <https://amzn.to/40Szz3v>.

I wrote the first novel in 2015, and I set my stories in an alternate history timeline, because I was afraid such far-fetched and outrageous concepts as hopelessly corrupt government agents doing the bidding of their evil technocratic and oligarchical overlords in a massive plot to establish totalitarian social control over global society might defy readers’ suspension of disbelief.

While a number of readers have expressed their delight at realizing the physics actually works out as described in my novels, far more enjoy just reading them: “...[A] masterpiece of alternative-history

techno-thriller science fiction.” “Like a Heinlein juvenile, but frankly, better.” You can check out *The Hidden Truth* and its sequels and judge for yourself.

JSFFR: Let’s get down to the purpose of this interview: Tell us a little bit about The Based Book Sale. First things first, why is it important, and what made you decide to start it?

HGS: The Conservative Libertarian Fiction Alliance held a monthly “Booknado” with a similar concept. Authors would all pick the same week of the month to offer books for sale and then all mutually promote the sale and each other. I thought that was a great concept, so when they discontinued it, I picked up the ball and ran with it.

JSFFR: Terrific. Just to confirm, let everyone know what the pricing for your sale looks like and why you picked those numbers.

HGS: \$0.99 is the lowest price Amazon lets you set a sale price. Some people like setting books to free for a sale, but I prefer pricing at \$0.99 so the reader has a bit of skin in the game and incentive to read the book to make their investment worthwhile. Many authors will set the first book in a series to \$0.99 in hopes that a reader will like the first one and buy the rest at full price, or perhaps read through the series on Kindle Unlimited.

JSFFR: Cool. Now, give us a list of a few authors that are on the list. Also, since you’ve had these types of sales in the past, how would an author get put on the list in the future? I am well aware that there is one going on now that ends on November 28, 2023, but do you have your next one planned yet?

HGS: It’s easier for me to just give you the complete list. We have works that have previously appeared in one of my sales from these authors: P. Abbott, Kyle Adams, James Alderdice, P Alexander, J.M. Anjewierden, Hawkings Austin, Daniella Bova, Leigh Brackett, Graham Bradley, Timo Burnham, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Howard Butcher, Jonathan P. Brazee, Henry Brown, Rachel Fulton Brown, Bokerah Brumley, V. A. Boston, Jacob Calta, Blake Carpenter, Carlos Carrasco, Kit Sun Cheah, Paul Clayton, Travis J.I. Corcoran, Lucca Dejardins, Jon del Arroz, Declan Finn, Marina Fontaine, Milo James Fowler, A.M. Freeman, Jake Freivald, Adam Furman, Dennis Garcia, Leonard Getz, Peter Grant, Steve Griffiths, Paul Hair, David Hallquist, Eric M. Hamilton, M. Anthony Harris, Harry Harrison, Julian Hawthorne, Frederick Heimbach, Alexander Hellene, Robert E. Howard, Daniel Humphreys, C.S. Johnson, Becky R. Jones, Michael R. Kayser, Joseph Knowles, Robert Kroese, L. Jagi Lamplighter, Moe Lane, Christopher Lansdown, N.R. LaPoint, Frank B. Luke, Robert A Lupton, Loretta Malakie, T.J. Marquis, Russell May, Yakov Merkin, Connor Mccoy, Plum McCauley, Jack Mikkelson, Jonathan Moeller, Neovictorian, Brian Niemeier, Richard Nichols, Andre Norton, Christopher G. Nuttall, John M. Olsen, Chance Paladin, Julie Pascal, Richard Paolinelli, Iris Paustian, George Phillies, P.A. Piatt, Francis Porretto, Justin Robinson, J. Trevor Robinson, Matthew W. Quinn, Hans G. Schantz, Thomas Sewell, Richard Sezov, E.E. “Doc” Smith, R.H. Snow, Steve Stinson, John Taloni, Michael Tierney, Kevin Trainor, Kalkin Trivedi, Henry Vogel, Erik Waag, David J. West, H.G. Wells, Benjamin Wheeler, Ryan Williamson, Christopher Wilson, Dawn Witzke, Fenton Wood, and John C. Wright.

And the sale has new works from these authors: Tony Andarian, J.M. Anjewierden, D.S. Blake, Graham Bradley, Henry Brown, R.J. Burle, C.J. Carella, J.D. Cowan, C.M. Craig, Richard Davis, Mel Duntay, Jeff Dunteman, Declan Finn, Milo James Fowler, Julie Frost, Karl K. Gallagher, Mark Goldblatt, Josh Griffing, M. Anthony Harris, Seth Hobbs, Rob Howell, Michael F. Kane, Joseph Kellogg, Chris Kennedy, L.S. King, Robert Kroese, L. Jagi Lamplighter, Frank B. Luke, TJ Marquis, Russell May, Christopher Menkhaus, Diana Murray, Ron Nielsen, M.A. Nilles, Melanie Nilles, John M. Olsen,

Chance Paladin, S.Kirk Pierzchala, George Phillies, Thomas Plutarch, Francis Porretto, James Pyles, Alexander Robb, David Rowlett, Denton Salle, Steve Stark, K Steele, Kevin Steverson, James R. Strickland, Donald Jacob Uitvlugt, S.C. Vincent, Allison Wade, Matt Waterhouse, Thomas J. Weiss, David J. West, Ryan Williamson, Marisa Wolf, John C. Wright, and Page Zaplandam.

Email has become unreliable. For instance, if I send an update to the fifty or so of my authors who use Gmail, Gmail assumes I'm a spammer and blocks the message.

The next sale is tentatively scheduled for: (LibertyCon) Wednesday, June 19, 2024, 12:00 AM PDT through Wednesday, June 26, 2024, 12:00 AM PDT. The best way to keep in the loop is to follow me online or at one of the author groups I'm in:

Telegram: <http://t.me/aetherstream>

Gab: @aetherczar <https://gab.com/aetherczar>

Twitter: @aetherczar <https://twitter.com/AetherCzar>

Wise of Heart Substack: <https://wiseofheart.substack.com/>

Facebook (Write of Center Authors): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/writeofcenter>

Facebook (CLFA Group): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CLFAGroup>

The sale has grown so big, I'm going to have to evolve my processes to deal with it. But I'll make announcements through my social media and in the Facebook groups.

JSSFR: Good to know. Tell everyone where they can find the sale. Drop a link.

HGS: Right here: <https://aetherczar.com/black-friday-cyber-monday-based-book-sale-starts-soon/> The sale runs through Tuesday November 28.

JSFFR: Thanks! Last question, and I ask this of everyone I interview: What question should I have asked that I didn't, and how would you answer it?

HGS: I'll take the opportunity to discuss my current project. I'm serializing *Fields & Energy: How Electromagnetism and Quantum Mechanics Work and Where Physics Went Wrong*. At a separate Substack: <https://aetherczar.substack.com/> If you're interested in a novel take on electromagnetism and how it works, check it out.

JSFFR: Awesome. Thanks for spending some time with us! It's been an honor having you. Let me know next time you have a sale I can help promote it again. Stop by again sometime. You're always welcome at Jimbo's.

Hints for Hollywood
by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Usually, when I need help with something, I will look at someone nearby and say, "Help your boy out." Their boy being, of course, me. This time, however, I'm going to take a different tack. This is me looking at the writers, producers and businessmen in Hollyweird and saying, "Let your boy help you out." Seriously, I'm going to list a few simple rules below to help these yahoos succeed with all of these re-boots, remakes and "you waited how long to release a" sequels so that they'll stop failing. I'm not going

to tear anyone's particular product apart. I'll simply ask how often big budget Science Fiction and Fantasy movies have succeeded since Avengers: Endgame hit, and how often they've failed.

It's not burnout folks. The problem is the industry itself. You have sucked the life out of your own product. Most of these will also apply to totally new universes as well, if the current crop of cowards actually decides to show enough courage to make something that hasn't already been made. I'd actually like to see it, even if that's not the same thing as expecting to.

1.) Make a Quality Product

This should go without saying, but unfortunately, it does not. I've seen too many big budget special effects masterpieces with scripts that feel like they were written by amateurs the last few years. Story is important. Acting is important. When Star Trek: The Original Series was in development, the producers teamed up with the writers to invent the transporter. It was a cost saving measure. Instead of doing expensive stop motion landing sequences every time they came to a planet, they could throw glitter in the air and voila! They were on the planet. What made Trek work was a good story week after week (with the exception of "Spock's Brain." There's no defending that mess.) and not an expensive effects department. A good enough story will make your audience fail to notice that you didn't include tens of millions of dollars of CGI. Seriously.

Poor writing killed the Fantastic Beasts franchise. Seriously, I just finished watching The Secrets of Dumbledore for the first time. It's the best written of the Fantastic Beasts movie, but that's a lot like saying it was the best idea that Dr. Doofenshmirtz ever had. Poor writing murdered The Flash. That movie had massive potential before it went face first into a wall at near light speed. I could provide more examples but you should get the idea by now.

This is important because...

2.) Fans of the Franchise are Under No Obligation To Support Your Product If It Sucks.

This sounds harsh, I know, but it's true. I placed the trailer for Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire above because I'm a believer in what's coming. Ghostbusters: Afterlife convinced me that the people in charge of the current iteration of the Ghostbusters franchise know what they're doing. Afterlife was a terrific movie. The plot made sense. The characters were entertaining. We all cared about the outcome. They brought back some fan favorites and gave us new people to care about. It was amazingly done. I've seen it several times and will watch it again.

Keep this in mind: The fans don't owe you continued success. You owe us. You need us. We're the people who have bought the tickets, watched the TV shows and bought the merchandise. Without us, there's no you. Without you, we'd find something else to spend our time and money on.

3.) Leave the Characters That Exist Substantially As You Found Them.

No, this does not mean you can't have a female, black, brown, transexual, gay, bisexual, asexual, whatever else character. It does mean to leave existing characters alone. Seriously. I'm convinced that at least part of what killed the last Star Trek movie was that there were rumors that they were going to give us a gay Sulu. Does that mean Trek fans won't support a product with a gay character? Not at all. Star Trek Discovery has a gay couple and it has a fifth season about to start in a few months. But, and this is the key: They were new characters. Changing a fundamental part of a character to meet your political agenda is an insult to the people who have spent years of their lives and thousands of their dollars

supporting the character the way they've always existed. George Takei agrees and he's married to another man.

So, it's simple:

4.) Include Diverse Character(s) if You Like, But Make New Character(s) to Do So.

This is also known as doing your job. Any good writer can conceive of a new character. Creating characters that the audience cares about is the be-all end-all of a writer. So, if you want a transsexual minority member of the bridge crew in Star Trek make one. If you need a love affair between two male Stormtroopers, just make sure that Finn isn't one of them. If you want a war movie with female soldiers...

Ok, Starship Troopers did that and did it well. It has a cult following and a slew of sequels decades later. So do your thing. We'll pay for it if it's done right.

Well, most of us. There will be some whiners who take their ball and go home. Of course, there will be some whiners who will take their ball and go home if you DON'T include that diverse character. The middle road to attract the most fans (while acknowledging that you'll never make everyone happy) is to follow my advice. You'll offend the least amount of people on both sides and sell the most tickets/draw the highest ratings by doing things my way. And by the way...

5.) Make All of Your Characters Including, But Not Limited to, Diverse Characters Relevant to the Story.

In his book *I am Spock*, published in 1995, Leonard Nimoy states that he wouldn't do Star Trek: Generations because the Spock character served no purpose in the story. When he decided not to do the movie, DeForest Kelley decided he wouldn't either and that's why Generations was minus two of the most important characters from ST:TOS. This is a valid point. If the character is there, have them do something that matters to the plot. Seriously.

I've heard a lot of complaints about the Rose Tico character in Star Wars: The Last Jedi. Despite claims to the contrary, this is not because no one wanted an Asian in Star Wars. No one had a problem with minority characters before Rose Tico. Lando Calrissian has been a popular character since Empire. The problem is, and always has been, that she added nothing by being there. She was there simply for the color of her skin.

And listen folks, I don't know why minorities would accept this, either. Are you so easily led as to accept the insult give to you when someone includes a character that looks like you and won't find an actual spot for them in the story that matters? I mean, I guess showing a marginalized minority with a marginalized character is somehow reflective of the real world, but why would you not demand better? Seriously, if you believe in stuffing irrelevant characters into stories just to show off their minority-ness without mattering, please explain that to me below because to me demanding that minorities be including as no account characters strikes me as being more racist than not including them at all.

6.) Don't Market Exclusively to a Woke Crowd

I'm also convinced that Donald Glover lost a big chunk of his audience by proclaiming the Lando character as being pansexual. I don't even think it's a problem with pansexual characters for most of the people who refused to see the movie. Here's the thing that a lot of people don't realize: There are many

of us out there (and yes, I am including myself here specifically) who see your bragging about the diversity of your characters as admitting that your script sucks. Yes, I did say that.

If you want to sell your product to both sides and maximize profits, you need to spend your time bragging about how good your product is and not how diverse you are. People will pay to see your dark-skinned and/or LGBT characters. Black Panther and Brokeback Mountain both made money. Here's the thing, though: When the people who marketed the movies wrote the advertising they talked about how good the movie was instead of focusing on demographics.

That's not to say that people didn't notice. Black schools took black kids to see Black Panther, but there were plenty of white/Asian/Middle Eastern/etc. people that saw the movie because they expected to enjoy the experience. There is a lesson to be learned here if you are willing to pay attention.

It's weird too, because I've never heard a woke person complain about a story being too good. They don't seem to be offended by good scripts or good acting. Sell your product based on its quality and not on skin color and genitalia and you'll do much better. You're never going to force a non-woke person to see your movie by screaming something ending in -ist or -phobe if they don't. I can't put it more simply than that.

I'll take this a step further: I'm a Christian. I like Christian movies. I own a couple of Bibles and have given some as gifts. I know, having seen it happen, that there are many other Christians out there who consume Christian entertainment. But here's the thing: There is no way that I would make a blockbuster style Christian movie with a budget comparable to those of the latest few superhero movies. Why? Because I would know that I'm limiting my audience and I wouldn't make my money back. Too much of the population would turn their backs against it because of its Christian message. Touting your wokeness works the same way. You can expect the same results.

And that's really it. Follow those rules and it's bound to get better. If your creators won't follow the rules, get new ones. I can recommend plenty of people who know how to write. I've been publishing reviews for almost nine years now. (Actually about eight years and nine months for you pedantic types.) I can point you in the right direction and I'm willing to do so for a modest finder's fee to be negotiated later.

~Finis~