Tightbeam 292

January 2019

Jose Sanchez — Mars Project

Tightbeam 292

Editorial Note

Films Fantastic

Films Fantastic is a wonderful zine. It's clearly appropriate, and easier for your publisher here to handle, if henceforth *Films Fantastic* appears separately as the newest, eighth, N3F Zine.

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Anime Reviews are courtesy Jessi Silver and her site www.s1e1.com Ms. Silver writes of her site "S1E1 is primarily an outlet for views and reviews on Japanese animated media, and occasionally video games and other entertainment."

Fiction reviews are courtesy Pat Patterson, Cedar Sanderson, Tom McGovern, Bob Jennings, Greg Hullender, and Eric Wong.

Pat Patterson's reviews appear on his blog https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com and also on GoodReads and Amazon.com.

Cedar Sanderson's reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/ and its culinary extension cedarwrites.com/eat-this-while-you-read-that/

Greg Hullender and Eric Wong publish their reviews at RocketStackRank.com

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Letters of Comment

Hi George & Jon;

Received issue #291 of Tightbeam a few days back, this is the first time I've had time to sit down and read it all the way thru. Nice front cover illo by Jose Sanchez, however I should point out that the exact same piece of art was previously used as the cover illo for my fanzine Fadeaway, issue #41, the June-July 2014 issue.

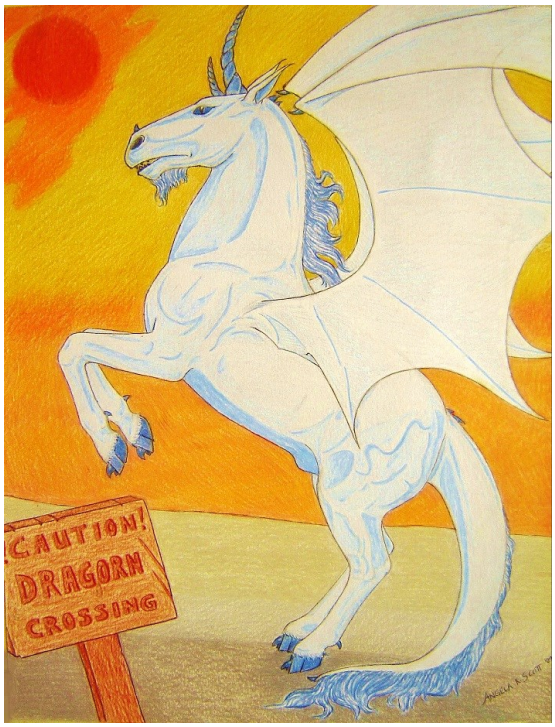
My understanding is that Jose is working on new artwork, but you might want to be aware that virtually almost all his older art has already been published in fanzines. The main exception is the pic of the naked blue robot girl in the giant petrie dish which seems to have offended George's sensibilities when it was scheduled to be used as the cover for a recent N'APA mailing.

I remain impressed by the depth and detail Jessi Silver provides on the anime video selections she chooses to discuss, despite still having no interest in any kind of anime stuff, including electronic games based on anime material. I'm sure her comments will be useful to those who do, however.

In reference to Lloyd Penney's letter, the DragonCon awards may seem like an intrusion on the traditional world of the WorldCon Hugo Awards, but the fact is that DragonCon attracts quite a few more people than the SF worldcon does, (by several magnitudes!), and these people represent both a much wider range of interest in fantastic literature/cinema/gaming/audio and everything related to all that, but they also represent a younger demographic. The nominations and the awards DragonCon gives out seem to represent not only a wider variety of material, but the voting also seems to be based on what a lot of enthusiastic fans are actually reading/ viewing/ listening to these days. I am not sure that is necessarily the case with the Hugo Awards any more. It makes good sense to pay attention to the DragonCon Awards as clear indicators of where the fields of the fantastic are actually going in this new century.

So far as blogs and podcasts go, my suspicion is that there are a lot of them out there whose audience consists almost entirely of family members and close friends. In the past these people might have been drawn into traditional print-style fanzines, offering up their comments and opinions as columnists or article writers, and also writing LOCs to other zines. The internet has opened the doors to a universe of self expression, but it seems to me that in most cases it has also narrowed the range of the communication except for the very lucky or the very talented few who somehow manage to break out and actually attract a decent audience. It's a clear indicator of where the fields of the fantastic are actually going in this new century…Oh wait! I said that already.

I enjoyed most of the reviews by Pat Patterson. I am grateful for a couple that told me about novels I will be sure to avoid. For example, his commentary on the novel "Uncharted" was generally upbeat and positive, but the entire theme immediately turned me off. I am not a big fan of alternate history novels to begin with, and a fantasy story involving historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, who has become a powerful and wealthy wizard in a fantasy setting slightly post-colonial era America, with magical creatures, a magical barrier that makes the Atlantic Ocean uncrossable and involving other real life people such as the Lewis and Clarke expedition to weave the story paraphrasing their real cross continent journey except with magic strikes me as ludicrous, and poor writing as well. I personally believe taking real life events along with real life people and tacking on a few elements of fantasy to create a 'new' story is cheating. I have no respect for that style of writing. The real skill of writing SF/fantasy is to create something original and interesting using original characters in situations that do not merely echo the pages of history.



Excellent film section this issue. The articles by Eric Jamborsky are informative and well written. I do question his contention that the 1915 Universal feature of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" was the first science fiction film. There were a number of others that came out in the decade before, altho all of them were much shorter. Georges Melies in France had produced a number of fantasies and science fiction pictures before Universal got into the act. His monumental "A Trip To the Moon" might well be considered science fiction, despite the dancing chorus girls and the moon wincing as the rocket lands in its eye; and somewhere around here I have an old film fan mag (Photoplay or Picture Story or the like) that describes and has an ad for a silent depicting super bombers from "a foreign nation" whose generals dressed a lot like the officers in Germany's army, bombing New York City. Needless to say that is a lost film, and I haven't even been able to turn up any posters or publicity stills from it either.

Jeffrey Redmond's article on recent science fiction movies from India was also interesting, altho I wish he had concentrated a little less on the economics of the situation and told us what the movie(s) were about. It's nice to know that the recent efforts are reaping big box office receipts, especially with their Chinese release, but I am unsure if these recent hit movies are science fiction, fantasy, or exactly what they are. A few photos and maybe a shot of a movie poster or two would have added a lot to the presentation. He mentions that at least one of the new films has been scheduled for release in an English language version, including an English language DVD after the movie has finished its run in theaters (if I'm reading that correctly). If so this would be something I would be interested in seeing. Possibly a follow-up article on the titles would be in order with some comments about those expensive special effects he mentions.

I thot Jon Swartz had come up with another genre author I had barely heard of (Robert Nathan) until I read thru his list of novels and stories. While I recognized many of the gentle fantasies he wrote that have been turned into feature films, the story that immediately stood out in my memory was his "Digging the Weans".

This short story was turned into a great radio play that ran on the CBS Radio Workshop on 11 November 1956 as "Report on the Weans", and was so well received that it was repeated at least once. The story had appeared in the November 1956 issue of Harpers Magazine and has been snapped up by the producers of the Radio Workshop immediately, one of their fastest, and in my opinion, one of their best adaptations of a short piece of fiction. Anyone interested can hear this program offered for free on at least a dozen different internet sites. Critical and popular response was so strong to both the short story and the radio presentation that Nathan expanded the story into a novel titled "Digging the Weans" (1960) which sold well in both hardback and paperback editions.

Not sure what to make of all your (George's) various Supergirl character redesigns. An exercise in how to stretch one's imagination perhaps? Lots of wannabe authors should try doing that, especially with their short stories.

Another interesting Tightbeam issue. I'm looking forward to the next one.

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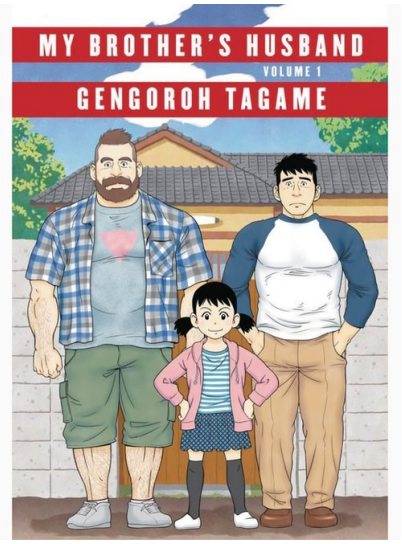
Anime

Father of the Year – 2018
Review by Jessi Silver



This Mother's Day, I rummaged through the anime I'd watched over the past year or so and chose an example of an anime mother who I thought was worth talking about. Parents in anime tend to exist in the background (if at all), so I thought it would be interesting to feature some of the few that make meaningful, impactful appearances in some of my favorite shows. It was difficult enough to find a mother character who had enough screen time and was actively involved in story activities, but for some reason I thought it would be easier to find an example of a great dad. Maybe it was because I had the idea in my head that most dads are men, and males tend to make up the bulk of anime protagonists, so therefore there should be more fatherly-type men from which to choose.

I was surprised, then, to discover that identifying a great father figure to feature was leaps and bounds more difficult than coming up with a mother figure. As a long-time anime fan I feel like I should have known better, but I think this is definitely a blind spot of mine. I began to realize that, while male characters abound in all sorts of anime, many of those male characters are children or teenagers (or they act like them and have the same level of responsibility). Having children, being gainfully employed, and doing all the other things that are required of parenting are beyond the scope of what many anime protagonists are asked to do (saving the world, being the butt of the joke, or even just surviving high school are lofty enough goals for most characters). In addition to that, if parents exist at all within an anime series in many cases the father of the family is mostly absent, working late or at least trying to enjoy a beer and the newspaper rather than get overly-involved. There are of course counter-examples – shows like Poco's Udon World, Sweetness and Lightning, and Bunny Drop all feature dads or father-like figures as primary caretakers for young children – but those are exceptions rather than rules. While it seemed like this type of story might become more of a trend, they've tapered-off lately. Which is inconvenient, because that would have made for an easy post!

I started trying to think outside the box a little bit, towards male mentors in anime. Mentorship, especially in sports or competition anime, is an important role that I think fulfills the spirit of what I'm trying to feature. I imagine there's an easy answer to this in an anime series or movie from the past year, but I suspect it may be from a series that I don't watch. My understanding from friends of mine is that My Hero Academia has cultivated this sort of relationship between Deku and All-Might, as Deku's actual father is not in the picture. Maybe I'll give that series a watch this year and have something to write about for next year. As for the anime that I have watched (and there's been quite a bit), it was not working out as a good source. All of the characters who came to mind had as part of their character some sort of problematic aspect to

their personality or actions, which in my mind removed them from consideration as one of the best father figures.

One character that fits into this kind of problematic pseudo-parental role is Elias Ainsworth from The Ancient Magus' Bride. Elias, an ageless magical entity, becomes guardian to Chise, a teenage girl with magical powers. He helps to instruct her in ways to hone her abilities and provides an environment that's relatively safe and constant (at least more so than she had previously). It's living with Elias that Chise is introduced to her true potential. This would seemingly be a great starting point for an examination of important male mentors, if not for the fact that the relationship between Elias and Chise is much more complicated than that of a parent and child. Elias technically has ownership of Chise, and it's made clear that she's something of an experiment for him. They're also painted as potential lovers, though as two emotionally incomplete souls even that becomes difficult to fathom within the snap shot that the anime provides. There are unequal power dynamics at work that, as much as I truly enjoy the series, I have a difficult time overlooking. It's intriguing and dangerous, but not so appropriate if you're looking for something paternal.

Reigen flies off to go be an adult.

A character who gets a bit closer to my mental ideal is Reigen Arataka from Mob Psycho 100 (technically okay for me to reference since there was an OVA episode focused on his antics that was released earlier this year!). Reigen is a scoundrel, a liar, and a phony, with only a bag of table salt and some middling charisma on hand to dupe people into thinking he can exorcise malevolent spirits. At first glance it seems like he only associates with Mob, his young "protege," for the potential boost in business – Mob is the only one of the two with legitimate telekinetic skills, and Reigen can at least recognize that having Mob around is advantageous to his bottom line.

Despite his many faults, though, Reigen has something that not many anime characters have and he wields it like a weapon – his superior maturity. His skepticism towards the theatrical and cliche opponents that appear before himself, Mob, and their companions serves as the backbone to a series that isn't so much about cool dudes with powers fighting each-other as it is about self-reflection and the duty of gifted people to recognize the worth and talents of others. One of my favorite "Reigen" scenes occurs in flashback near the end of the series, where young Mob first visits Reigen's office in search of some help with handling his abilities. Reigen imparts a piece of good advice – having special powers doesn't make one any less human, nor does it put one on a pedestal above others. Rather than domination, the goal of any person should simply be to achieve a state of kindness. For a series known for its killer animation and sometimes ridiculous situations, that idea cuts surprisingly deep. My only real qualm with Reigen-as-dad is the fact that he's essentially a con artist who not-so-secretly takes advantage of his young protege's talents, and that still doesn't sit well with me even though I love the character and the series.

Kondo shares some philosophy using a well-loved bookmark.

One of the last bits of middling inspiration I had was that Masami Kondo, one of the two protagonists from the series After the Rain, might be an interesting subject to try to tackle, since he's actually a father (*gasp*) and also ultimately serves a mentorship role. Kondo-san is the middle-aged manager at a family restaurant; he's divorced with a young son. As we enter the story,

one of his employees, a high school girl named Akira Tachibana, has concluded that she has romantic feelings towards him and refuses to take no for an answer. There's a lot of the typical mental denseness that comes with a story like this since it takes a while for Kondo to realize that Tachibana is nursing these difficult and inconvenient feelings. When it finally dawns on him he just becomes more awkward about it and manages to keep from addressing the situation directly. There are also some tense moments where it seems as if the pursuit of this relationship at face value might take place. It's only after a certain point in the story (a little late for my tastes, honestly) that both Kondo and Tachibana realize that each has some emotional emptiness in their life (Kondo gave up writing fiction, and Tachibana was a track star until a major injury sidelined her), and it's misguided emotions related to that emptiness that are fueling thoughts about their specific relationship to one-another.

Kondo, despite how good-natured his character is, probably would never have been my first choice as a focal subject for this post, because the series itself has a troublesome premise (or at the very least plays a bit of bait-and-switch) and while watching it I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop (and crossing my fingers that it wouldn't). Once I finished watching it and confirmed that it wasn't actually aiming to feature a problematic romance, I did take the opportunity to look back at the series in retrospect and was able to appreciate the characters a bit more. While Kondo is initially portrayed as kind of a hapless goof, the kind of dad who shows up in uninspired TV commercials or old sitcoms, he proves himself to have some self-awareness, as well as some canny insight into his life and a decent grasp of what Tachibana is experiencing. While I can certainly look back on my own life and remember what it was like to experience some of the high school indecisiveness and misguided longing Tachibana is suffering, I can understand firsthand Kondo's feelings towards having given up doing things that he loved for the sake of existing in the "real world." He's someone who shares his life lessons willingly, and chooses kindness rather than bluntness. There is something very comforting and inspiriting about that. It's that lack of straightforwardness which is partly what makes me hesitate, however; I would have loved for Kondo to give Tachibana a proper "no" earlier in the series, to make it clear that there could never be a romantic relationship between them, rather than finding multiple ways to skirt by and avoid her awkward attempts at affection. There's something about that which keeps me from fully forgiving the character, unfortunately.

After spending so much time scouring my mental anime catalog and ultimately feeling underwhelmed by my choices, I was honestly considering ditching this post entirely. Disappointing, but sometimes you just have to move on in life. It was then that my experiences reading manga arrived to save the day. Earlier this year, I finally got around to reading the first volume of My Brother's Husband, which deals with the subject of homosexuality and prejudice in Japan. The protagonist is a man named Yaichi, a fairly average guy who's divorced and works from home so that he can parent his young daughter, Kana. One day a very large Westerner arrives at the front door. The man's name is Mike, and he's the widower of Yaichi's estranged gay twin brother. Yaichi gets to know Mike, and through doing so, starts to learn more about the brother who became a stranger to him.

The manga itself is excellent and I would recommend it to almost anyone, especially those who are interested in supporting LGBTQ+ stories and storytellers (the author is one of the more famous members of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan), or people who just enjoy slice-of-life stories. It does a good job of explaining and demonstrating some of the specific ways in which homophobia presents itself differently between Japan and the West, and it also demonstrates the beginnings of character growth that are the result of challenging one's assumptions. The most important point as far as this post is concerned, is that I got the impression while reading this manga that Yaichi's story, his reaction to learning about Mike and coming to terms with who his brother was, would have turned out quite differently if Yaichi weren't also a father.

As it usually is with these types of stories, the rambunctious child character is the one who steals many of the scenes and becomes the heart of the story even though they're not the main character. Kana is immediately drawn to Mike, has no qualms about asking him loads of very straightforward questions about his life (including things about what it means to be a gay person), and is almost immediately accepting of any answer she receives. I've heard many people in real life, those who are nursing some sort of phobia towards people with various sexual identities, gender identities, or whatever other arbitrary marker they're angry about at the moment, get extremely bent out of shape about how normalizing various types of romantic relationships will only confuse children and cause them to, I don't know, also not conform to society's arbitrary definition of what's "normal." In my experience, however, it's the children with minds still open and malleable, who have very little trouble parsing a straightforward answer about what being "gay" or "transgender" means. Kana doesn't know not to be curious or ask questions. She's not so concerned with what being gay means in the greater context of society. She's simply excited to know a foreigner who knows things about distant lands (like Canada) and who's willing to spend time with her and show her love.

Though Yaichi is initially put-off by Mike's looming presence, especially since he's a reminder of a relationship in Yaichi's life that deteriorated due in part to his own prejudices and can now never really be repaired, watching Kana take to Mike so readily gives Yaichi a chance to question his own thoughts and motivations. it gives him the opportunity to realize that it's not necessarily natural or automatic to look at someone like Mike and be concerned about what his existence means to the balance of society, or to think that Mike should just "get over it" and integrate like everyone else. Because of his love for Kana and due also to Kana's boundless enthusiasm and open-armed acceptance, Yaichi starts down the road of becoming a better person.

Yaichi's definitely not a perfect person, but the manga is as much about his attempts to learn and be a better person as it is about anything else, and watching him learn from Mike and Kana demonstrates the real potential and power that a father's love can have. Ultimately, I think that's a good thing to try to celebrate.

I'd be interested to hear whether this past year left you feeling impressed by any anime (or manga) dads. Please let me know in the comments!

Sanrio Boys
Review by Jessi Silver

Kōta Hasegawa is a high school boy who loves the yellow Pom Pom Purin dog. By mere coincidence, he ends up attending the same school as Yū Mizuno, a boy who likes the bunny My Melody. Yū tells Kōta that there's nothing to be ashamed of for liking Sanrio's cute characters. Together, Kōta, Yū, Shunsuke Yoshino, Ryō Nishimiya, and Seiichiro Minamoto learn to accept their love of the characters instead of feeling embarrassed. – ANN

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Streaming: Crunchyroll
Source: Original
Episodes: 12
Review: This review may contain spoilers for the series.
When was the first time you felt ashamed for liking something? When I was in elementary school, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was huge. I loved the cartoon series and the video games more than almost anything else. I really wanted to own some of

the toys, but as a fourth-grader without a steady source of income, it was up to me to try to get my parents to buy them for me. Looking back as an adult, I can logically say that there's nothing wrong with a girl wanting to own action figures, but all the toy commercials had boys in them and even at my young age I was afraid of being judged or laughed-at for wanting to play with toys made for boys. The happy ending to my story was that my mother never once judged me or made fun of me for my preference, and I went on to build a large collection of action figures, Star Trek figures, and other miscellaneous fandom toys that eventually led to the overgrown collection of anime figurines I have today.

That, of course, was just my experience, but not everyone has the luxury of crossing society's arbitrary gender boundaries with their likes and dislikes, especially boys and men who enjoy things typically aimed at girls and women (because believe it or not being a girl or woman is valued as lesser by our society, even by people who might not necessarily think so consciously). I know my husband has gotten some flak for his enjoyment of My Little Pony and preference for pinks and purples, and in an even broader sense, there are people who are harassed and harmed because their gender expression doesn't fit into a certain narrow binary. Sanrio Boys isn't a heavy hitter when it comes to discussing the latter; in fact, the series doesn't really touch on gender itself very deeply. But it does spend a lot of time looking at the former – boys who express themselves through their enjoyment of characters and products typically aimed at women.

Kouta was picked on for his love of Pom Pom Purin.

Each of the five main characters in this series exemplifies the different ways that people experience liking things outside the mainstream. Kota, the everyman protagonist, was picked on by his peers as a child because he carried around a Pom Pom Purin stuffed animal. Yu loves My Melody without shame, but his younger sister finds his hobby disgusting. Ryou is the youngest sibling in a family of older sisters, and fears being pigeonholed into the role of an effeminate younger brother. There's nothing particularly complicated about any of the guys' circumstances, but the simple injustices of their situations are laid bare for the audience in a way that I find very relateable. I like to think that most viewers would tend to realize how hurtful bullying someone for their hobbies is (and I imagine there are a lot of anime fans out there who have gotten picked on for being into "weird cartoons"), but the straightforward, sometimes ham-handed way the series insists upon the fact that young men can and do like cutesy characters and merchandise is something some fans may not have thought much about, even considering their own circumstances.

Beyond its central message, the show is pretty light on narrative and hits a lot of trope-y beats that would be at home in any high-school-based anime series. There's a strong emphasis on friendship and relationship-building between the boys, a sprinkling of dramatic interpersonal conflict, a whole boatload of earnestness (and some dramatic overwork-to-the-point-of-self-destruction) from our main-man Kota, and a school culture festival to tie the entire thing up with a sparkly bow at the end. It also spends some time paying attention to its assumed viewer base (young women, the same individuals who tend to be major consumers of Sanrio products) by not only featuring cute guys being cute together on a regular basis, but also getting those same characters into situations where they hang out together buying merchandise or take on princely personas for the sake of a school theater production. There's certainly nothing wrong with this; as far as fanservice goes it's easily some of the more innocuous I've seen lately. It

does distract a bit from what I see as an atypically good toy commercial disguised as an average anime series.

It's a fun day at Sanrio Puroland.

The commercialized bits of the series are admittedly pretty entertaining and mostly forgivable. The boys go shopping for Sanrio toys and merchandise on a regular basis (naturally) and those bits made me long for the days when there was still a Sanrio store at the Mall of America (I'm probably showing my age by saying that). They also make a big mid-series trip to Sanrio Puroland, the Sanrio theme park in Tokyo with costumed characters and themed areas and performances. There's a particularly ridiculous montage in the episode where the boys wander through all the areas and big attractions, dressing up in costumes and interacting with their favorite characters. It's pure fanservice in more ways than one, but it's indulgent rather than trashy – I'll give it a pass (and be jealous that I'm not in their place). Having seen many more shameless toy commercials disguised as anime in my time, the fact that this series blends the fluff with some fairly substantial character moments is pretty good by me.

Ultimately whether viewers are likely to glean anything from Sanrio Boys' lessons in subverting gender essentialism will be based on how much they can also tolerate being advertised to and whether they enjoy cute-guy pandering. I happen to be a Sanrio fan who likes shows starring cute guys, but it's obviously not everyone's specific cup of tea. I'd argue, though, that those who go in with an open mind will likely come away with something worth more than the price of admission (and some stickers and key chains).

Pros: The show is strongly in favor of people enjoying what they enjoy, gender roles be damned. If you like Sanrio, that's an added bonus.

Cons: The second half of the series is especially filled with common tropes that stray away from some of the positive messaging in the first half.

Grade: B-

Novels

Average Guy with Fangs
Review by Tom McGovern

Yeah, it was another free book from Amazon for Kindle. Sometimes they can be pretty good, as attested by some of the reviews I've done in these pages in the past. Some are interesting and amusing, but really just average on the scale that runs from great literature to incoherent slop. Somewhere at about the halfway point in that continuum lies ***Joe Vampire*** by **Steven Luna**.

That's not to say it's a bad story. The premise is interesting, after all. We all know from popular literature and films what vampires are like, right? They are seemingly young (even when they are hundreds of years old), good looking, socially adept and very sexy. You would almost never think to ask the question; *don't ordinary folks ever become vampires*? Why are they all athletes and supermodels? What would happen if some average working

slob got bitten and turned into a vampire? This novel dares to explore that highly questionable territory. It's written in the first person as a series of blogs, from the viewpoint of the unwilling convert to bloodsucking.

The story is pretty funny, at least to begin with. There are a lot of humorous points, especially in the first third or so of the book. How does a guy who has to hold down a nine-to-five job deal with fangs that grow out within a few hours? Why, he gets a power drill and puts a grinding wheel on it. The practical problems of vampire life create many a funny moment, and this is sufficient to maintain interest throughout the first portion of the book. Joe has a messy love life, and just as he is ready to ask out the girl of his dreams, *This* happens (*This* is how he refers to his new life as a vampire). As a result, Joe withdraws back into his shell and actually alienates his crush. Joe is also a musician who is involved with a rock band, and his new lifestyle doesn't help that already troubled group to stay together. Contrary to most popular depictions of vampirism, Joe comes to realize that being a vampire can really screw up your life.

I'll confess that, as with most Kindle books, this novel took me quite a while to read through. At home, I prefer "dead tree" books, and I tend to read the Kindle when I am waiting for doctors' appointments and such. That may account for my flagging interest as the middle of the novel approached. It seemed to me, though, that as the novel progressed, Joe devolved more and more into whining about his misfortune and all the problems it had caused him. This got kind of tedious after a while, though, I suppose, it may be reflective of the real moods that would dominate someone in Joe's position.

Toward the end of the book, the action picked up with a threat to Joe's existence that needed to be resolved, and ultimately, Joe appears to accept his undead status and to deal with it. I found the book to be less humorous as the story progressed (though there are a few gems scattered throughout) and somewhat uneven in its pacing. But it does provide an interesting take on the usual vampire legend, and might just be worth your time. The book was free when I got it, but as of this writing, I see that it's priced at $2.99 for Kindle or $11.95 for the paperback on Amazon. I note that there are also two sequels to the novel and you can get the entire three-book set for Kindle for only $4.99.

We All Float
Review by Tom McGovern

Some time back, I reviewed *The Stand* by **Stephen King**, a true classic of a novel if ever there was one. After getting through that 1150+ page monster, I decided to start into another King novel of equal length, in this case, one that featured an actual monster known only as ***It***.

I may be stretching a bit to call It a monster; It's more of a massively powerful trans-dimensional entity that has somehow become inextricably linked to the small town of Derry, Maine and wakes up every 27 years or so to wreak havoc, much of which consists of murdering children. The book opens in 1958 with the iconic scene of little Georgie sailing his paper boat down the gutters of the street during a rainstorm, only to have it fall into a storm drain. Inside the drain is a "friendly" clown named Pennywise who chats with Georgie only long enough to draw him close for the kill. Pennywise is only one of the manifestations of It; It can apparently appear in any form It wishes, and It draws those forms from the individual fears of the person It is approaching.

After Georgie's death, a group of kids, several boys and one girl all

in the 11-12 year old range, led by Georgie's older brother come to understand that something supernatural is at work in Derry, and they unite as a club called the "Losers" in order to confront threats both paranormal and mundane. Ultimately they drive It into inactivity, but when 1985 comes, the now-adult Losers learn that It has become active once again, and they must reunite in Derry to oppose It once again.

What I've just told you is a bare-bones outline of the story, and it's not at all linear with the way King develops the plot. The timelines are masterfully interwoven; the action shifts seamlessly from 1958 to 1985 and back over and over again, with a number of fascinating interludes that build the background of It's activity in Derry.

That's more or less what happens in the book. And all of that is secondary to the real intent of the story, which is to develop the Losers as richly drawn characters and to explore the depth and the love that are inherent to childhood friendships. King has created a set of characters who are real, with whom the reader can identify and who are completely believable. They are the real stars of the story; It is merely the catalyst that drives them together. This is a powerful story centered on a powerful cast of characters; it may be the best novel that Stephen King has ever written (though there's still plenty of his stuff that I've yet to read). It might even be one of the best novels that *anyone* has ever written.

A couple of cautions: You may have heard about the "sex scene" describing an orgy that occurs among the Losers toward the end of the book (obviously, a scene that was left out of both movie adaptations). Often this scene is described in such a way as to make it sound prurient, but I did not find it to be such. There's nothing erotic in the description of the event. King seems to be using this sexual incident as a way of uniting the Losers and sharing as a community the power that each of them has as individuals. I think this is one of the weaker parts of the book, but it's certainly not the pornographic material that some people seem to think.

Another caution is this: If you've seen the movies, whether the 1990 TV miniseries or the 2017 "Part 1" theatrical film, don't feel as if you know this story. King has woven this novel so richly and intricately that no visual adaptation could possibly explore all the detail and nuance that make this story great. As much as I enjoyed both adaptations (and hope to see the "Part 2" theatrical film in 2019), they do not and, in my opinion cannot, depict the real heart of this tale. Take the time and read the book. You'll be glad you did.

The Expanse—The Novels
Review by Bob Jennings

I have avoided watching any of the "Expanse" TV series. Friend Gary Robe waxed enthusiastic about this series several times in his fanzine Tennessee Trash, but he also mentioned that some characters were cut from the program, and that a lot of events were telescoped together with entire story segments being cut out completely. That bothered me, so I decided to read the books first, and I'm glad I did. The Expanse series of novels is now up to seven books (with a eighth projected to come out in the spring of 2019). I started the first one, "Leviathan Wakes", with a lot of curiosity—after all it was nominated for a Hugo when it first appeared in 2012, but lost. Also the book was well over five hundred pages long.

I got the books thru my local library's interlibrary loan service, and I have to say this has been one of the most enjoyable series of novels I've read in a long time. I zipped thru the first book in three days. I ordered the next two and arranged to order

the next title whenever I brought back the latest one I had checked out.

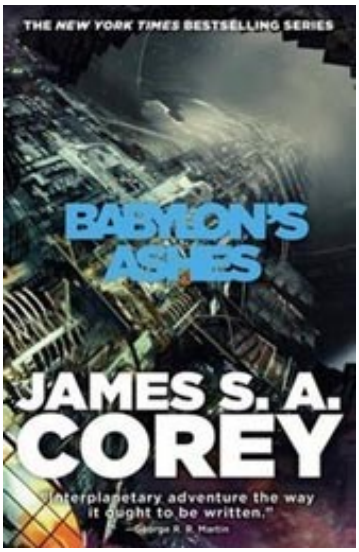
I found the story plot really interesting, with taut pacing. Each novel has been filled with unexpected twists and turns, so it was impossible for me to figure out what was going to happen even within each novel, let alone predict what was going to happen in the next volume. All the characters are well developed with solid believable personalities, plus while some of the science was well beyond the edge speculatively, quite a lot of the potential problems and solutions of traveling/living/interacting in a free space environment with a complex political-economic web linking everything together is well thot out and is more than believable. It all seems relentless realistic to me, which, of course, contributes to some of the crisis points and plot twists as the series develops.

All of the books are over five hundred pages each, and I managed to read every one of them in three or four days time, right up until I got to "Babylon's Ashes", book 6 in the series, the one I am currently reading. Things slowed down considerably with this entry in the series. I have been working my way thru that one for over a week now and it's rough going. For one thing there seems to be quite a lot of wordage spent on social situations, including how multiple person marriages might work out, with a lot more interpersonal musing and fretting and not so much action.

Some of that is uncharacteristically unrealistic. The primary protagonist, Holden, is suddenly shocked & upset & horrified & crushed that some of his family and friends use (gasp!) racist comments in conversation, or appear to be selfish, self centered, egotistical and casually unfeeling of their fellow associates. This from a guy who has to be in this early thirties at least, a person who has been living in the rough and tumble environment of the space belter society for most of his adult life, a guy who has encountered first hand the bizarre developments and havoc that human contact with the alien technology of the ProtoMolecule has caused.

It doesn't ring true, and neither does a lot of the other musings about gender bending/society expanding/freakishly unusual human interactions. Maybe all this has some relevance to the story plot, but I'm half way in and so far it doesn't. It does clutter up the landscape a lot tho, at least for me it does.

These books cover such a wide range of events that it is difficult to provide an overview of the whole series. In the future Mars has been colonized and partially terra-formed. Luna is inhabited by the Earth planetary government, there is a loose Outer Planets Association linking together the people who have migrated out beyond the orbit of Mars to mine the asteroid belt. Space ships of all sizes and shapes are common and apparently affordable, with atomic reactors providing the power. These people have build large space stations and also settled on moons and large asteroids like Ceres.The political situation is very uneasy. Mars is an independent nation-planet with the system's largest, most modern, and best equipped fleet of space battle ships. Earth and Mars need the minerals and material produced in the Belt, but they treat the belters with even less consideration than oppressive empires from Earth's past history might have treated their most backward colonies.



In space everything is recycled, endlessly. Humans have slowly adapted to living in zero gravity or very low gravity fields, and the people in the belt deeply resent being dependent economically and technologically on Earth and Mars for such essentials a medicines, special foods, and new technology. It is a political situation that is extremely tense. Space piracy, free-style terrorists, and repressive economic policies roil the tensions ever higher.

Then, an alien product of some kind has been discovered on the moon Phoebe. It appears to be organic, but has mechanical extensions. It turns

out the object was launched millions of years ago by a completely alien civilization who were originally targeting planet Earth with the intention of bio-forming life there to their own specifications. This alien technology, termed the ProtoMolecule, becomes the focus of the entire series. It turns out the ProtoMolecule has a lot more things it can do besides bio-form Earth organic matter into something completely different.

In the first novel, a water hauling space carrier heeds a distress signal. The vessel that originated the distress signal is floating powerless and empty, not a soul on board. All the crew and passengers have been taken away, by slavers, or by something unknown. Suddenly the water hauler itself is attacked, by a space ship that is completely cloaked, virtually undetectable even close up, a ship also armed with highly advanced new weapons. There are only a few survivors from this new attack, and they have to run for their lives on an ill equipped emergency flitter. And that's just the beginning.

Things spin way out of control as plots develop, counter measures turn up unusual twists, and more personalities are introduced. New groups and factions all with their own special interests and secrets become involved, creating an ongoing, complicated, and fascinated story line filled with lots of action and plenty of believable science fiction backdrop.

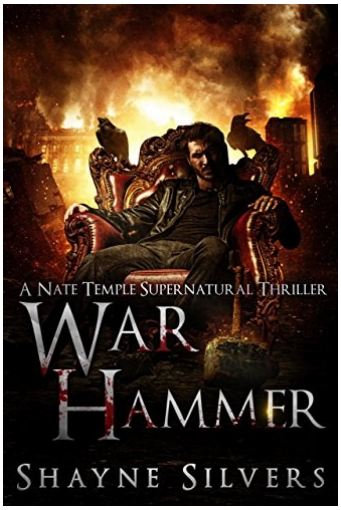
Saying more would spoil the story line, which interlinks thru each of the volumes of this series in a logical progression that provides a future-history of what might well happen in the coming century.

Again, this has been one of the most enjoyable reading experiences I've had in a long time. Even if book six doesn't improve (but I have every expectation that it will), the first five books have been exceptional. Book seven, "Persepolis Rising" came out this past fall, and the eighth volume will be published in March of 2019.

Having read these books I am now determined more than ever not to watch the Expanse TV series. There is no way that all the events and people that make these novels so interesting could be crammed into a TV series unless the producer had an unlimited budget and about twenty years of weekly episodes to tell the story. Which they do not, and which will never happen. Great books are hard to translate into television scripts, and in my opinion the Expanse series of novels is impossible to adapt.

Read the books. Even if you've started watching the TV series, read the books anyway. Once you start reading the books you will not be tempted to return to the video series again.

Dragon Award Finalist Warhammer Review by Pat Patterson



Preliminaries. If my count is right, this is the tenth book in the series of reviews I am writing for the finalists for the 2018 Dragon Awards. It's the NINTH blog post, because I reviewed Christopher Woods' Legend before the finalists were announced, and I haven't gotten around to writing the blog post on it yet (but I will). This is the fourth post for a contender in the category 'Best Fantasy Novel (Including Paranormal).'

Disclaimers. I don't read a lot of fantasy, unless my betters compel me. Thus, I was previously unaware of the author or his books. Two things to say about that:

1. It appears that I may have to abandon this prejudice without remorse, as there are some really excellent things being written in the field.
2. Somehow, the craft of the author allowed me to pick up the EIGHTH book

in a series, and dive right into the world, without wandering around for hours being lost. Kind of amazing to me, really.

A word about the cover art. At the intersection of (whenever possible) and (when I remember it), I like to give credit to the artist behind well-executed cover art. I would do that here, except that I can't find an attribution. It's a nicely done portrait of a hero-type sitting in a throne/chair with two birds perched by his shoulders, gloomily illuminated by a burning city. I used this cover art to show my first-born son the quality and theme of some of the books I'm reviewing... (prepare for a segue into the review)...

A brief-ish review....so, imagine my surprise when I start reading this anticipated grim, Road-Warrior/Conan volume, and discover that it opens with a paintball fight, ambushing a werewolf and assorted friends with explosions of paint, leaving them as angry, garishly-colored clown animals, out for revenge.

With a daylight-loving vampire at the controls of the getaway ATV.

Yeah. I wasn't expecting THAT, either.

This was looking like it was going to be a FUN book!

And that turned out to be the case. Note: I MIGHT have expected the opening if I had been familiar with the story, but, as mentioned above, that isn't the case.

Nate Temple is the lead character, and he has a posse of strange creatures who follow him around. That includes, among others, the aforementioned vampire, who feasts on sun, instead of blood; the werewolf, accidentally attacked by paintballs; a sort of were-cat; three dragons; another man-sized reptile with a fondness for stiletto heels; and other significantly strange characters, including a sentient house as well as a sentient tree. Nate himself is enabled/afflicted with an indeterminate number of magical powers, and has some serious influence over others. For example, in this book, both Van Helsing and Baba Yaga are semi-employees.

He also has supernatural enemies as well, two of whom figure prominently in this adventure. Both are out to kill him, albeit for different reasons. One is angry because Nate diverted his gang from following him; the other is Nate's multi-great grandfather, who (mistakenly) believes Nate to be guilty of a variation of the Grandfather paradox.

The core of the story is a rescue mission into the Land of the Fae, where prior action left a wounded ally and intended bride of one of the company. There are additional storylines about connections to King Arthur, and the confrontations that take place with the enemies. Essential questions for Nate about his parentage are asked, and mostly answered, and there is plenty of Deus, without ANY Machina.

Sufficient plot elements are resolved to make this NOT a cliff-hanger, although there are significant threads left for the next books in the series.

Commentary. There is plenty of fighting, explosions, and warfare to be had here, which I find to be very gratifying. There is also a bodacious portion of snarky dialogue, which fits in very well with the personalities of the characters. It's ALMOST appropriate material for middle school boys, a comment I make in light of raising one now, with some previous parenting experience under my belt. Let me put it this way: I wouldn't give the book to Kenneth, my 13 year old. However, if I discovered he had found it on his own, and read it, I wouldn't be disturbed. Any bedroom action takes place behind a closed door, between bonded pairs, and I just don't recall any language issues, although the MC is referred to as 'foul-mouthed' in one of the blurbs about the book.

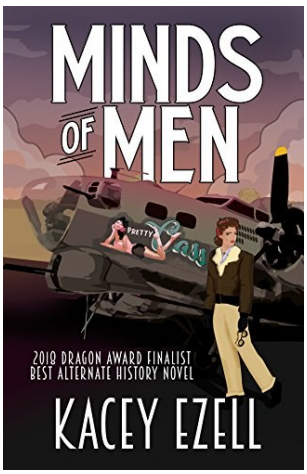
Another unexpected aspect to the book for me (aside from the slapstick humor elements) is the attention paid to the emotional well-being of the characters. All of us who live into maturity have had plenty of opportunities to see relationships go south because of unintended consequences of words and actions; why should supernatural characters be exempt? Most of us have had the benefit of having our earliest conflicts supervised by parents and grandparents, who of-

fer sage advice about the consequences of our words; while that might not have been the good fortune of Nate, he does have the opportunity to have sudden appearances of rabid-reindeer-tending archetypes drop in and visit him in his private chambers, cryptically encouraging him to play well with others. In all seriousness, I found this aspect of relationship maintenance to be very well done.

There are only two more entries in the 'Best Fantasy Novel (Including Paranormal)' category, and I doubt very seriously that one of them is going to be reviewed, due to the length and so-far unavailability of the book. Has the fat lady sung yet?

Peace be on your household.

Dragon Award Finalist: Minds of Men
Review by Pat Patterson



Preliminary comments. This is the 8th book and the 11th blog post about the finalists for the 2018 Dragon Award; it's also the second book in the category "Best Alternate History Novel." I read reviewed, and blogged this book way, way back in November of 2017, when snow had fallen and the ground was as hard as stone, or something. What you are reading is an edited version of that November blog post, deconstructed, rehabilitated, and semi-defenestrated in my attempt to give the same signal strength to THIS finalist novel as I have to the others in the series.

A much reduced bit of fan-boy praise for the author. When she is not otherwise occupied, she flew helicopters in places where it mattered, and that speaks to my medic bones. My first company commander was a First Lieutenant who flew medevacs in Viet Nam, and drove a white Corvette, and had a gorgeous wife, and that sort of sets the stage for the way I feel about chopper pilots. (Umm...on the other hand, I also knew a staff sergeant, a former warrant officer chopper pilot in Viet Nam, who had more rows of medals than I could count; he was as ugly and as pleasant as my next-to-last dog, so even MY mileage may vary.)

Her stories grasp the nature of being, and service, and I guess all that comes natural; and what doesn't is something you learn when you are driving a truck through the air with the tracers reaching up for you, looking for the green smoke at the LZ and yelling for your crew chief to turn off those ***ing alarms because you are only going to bounce once, and we'll fix it when we get home.

I first met her as a character in John Ringo's series 'Paladin of Shadows,' only later discovering THAT person was based on a REAL one. Then, I read her work.

She writes stories of cheerleaders who carry guns, and are determined to have a life that matters.

She writes stories of terrifying choices, where there is NO good outcome, and it just doesn't seem clear where your path vanished. She writes with co-authors, which I think must be more than twice as hard as writing by yourself. I have NOT been able to determine who wrote what, in any of her co-written works.

A review, of sorts. And then, she writes BOOKS, and this is her first one. "Minds of Men" is Book One in the series 'The Psyche of War,' and it addresses the role played in warfare by women who have the ability to communicate telepathically. It's set in World War II, at a time when bombers launching from England to strike military and industrial targets had to manage their own defense, since there was no long-range fighter support available.

As a result, they took some terrible losses. Imagine flying straight and level during a bomb

run, while flak and German fighters swarm the flight path: that's the sort of thing that the WWII B-17 crews experienced at this stage of the war. The first mission in the book reports the loss of 17 out of 30 B-17 bombers on a single mission.

And then a miracle happened.

Y'all ain't gonna BELIEVE this, but: General Durant, the United States Army Air Force commander, is personally acquainted with the as-yet-not-public ability of certain women to communicate via telepathy. His wife is one of the ladies with that ability. The amount of institutional resistance that is thus avoided, is enough to permit the introduction of selected women with psychic abilities into the crews of many of the bombers still targeting the German war effort.

Evelyn Adamsen (Evie) is one of those women.

The story follows her through her introduction to the crew, and their immediate mission the next day. Her ability to reach into the thoughts of the crew is instrumental in gaining their acceptance, as is the practical value of her efforts while in the air. Bombing accuracy is increased, and she is able to to act as a sort of psychic medic when a crewman is wounded. (Speaking as a former medic: the FIRST thing you tell a wounded person is that they are going to be okay. Say that directly into someone's head? Any medic would give a body part to be able to do that.)

And the crew continues to fight the war, with Evie a full member of the team.

The bad guys have psychic women, too, although they use them differently. Not having read the book, they are unaware that they ARE the bad guys, a valuable trait when fighting a war.

German psychic Adalina Sucherin (Lina) serves as an interrogator, and is usually able to gain necessary information without resorting to the more brutal techniques advocated by her superiors. Driven to seek revenge on Allied forces by the loss of her family during a bombing raid, she welcomes the opportunity to serve alongside soldiers with a similar history. They form a specialized hunter-killer team, seeking out downed Allied airmen.

Evie and Lina's paths cross.

The book does NOT end with a cliffhanger; HOWEVER, it does include the promise of more to come, and some bits of that are even now in the process of being delivered.

One of those bits is the short story "Wicked Angel." You've heard, perhaps, of the story of the Angel of Mons, aka Angel of the Marne? This one is better. Note: if you get confused a bit after reading it, google "The Patron Saint of Happy Passing."

I've read quite a few 'first novels,' and most of them are flawed in most respects. For whatever reason, that is not the case with "Minds of Men." Even though it is in a TOUGH category, with some pretty incredible competition, nobody is gonna yell "THE FIX IS IN" if it wins the Dragon for 'Best Alternate History.' Ummm....two reasons for that: mostly, it's just that good; secondly, there is no way to fix the Dragon vote.

Peace be on your household.

PS: if you read the original November 17 post for this book, you may have some idea of how hard it was for me to trim away the extraneous material. I want a cookie for that.

Dragon Award Finalist: Shoot the Messenger
Review by Pat Patterson

Preliminaries. I picked this book because it is a finalist for the 2018 Dragon Award for 'Best Fantasy Novel (including Paranormal).' This is the ninth book I have reviewed in this series, and the third finalist in this category.

Disclaimers. I believe I try to avoid reading books with the 'Fantasy' label, because all too often I have found them to be overblown and pretentious, and unsubtle, badly executed imita-

tors of either 'The Lord of the Rings' or the 'Harry Potter' series. Therefore, I probably miss out on a great deal of really very good books; and, when I am dragged by my betters, kicking and screaming all the way, and FORCED to read a fantasy work, I find that I enjoy what I am reading.

Nonetheless, I prefer science fiction. I like exploding spaceships.

What is Magnificent About This Book. First, to address my lowbrow prejudices, this book is neither a Tolkien nor a Rowling knock-off. It has plenty of action, and while I read nothing which is TECHNICALLY an exploding spaceship, science fiction themes are central to the plot.

In fact, the CORE of the book is about the tension between science fiction and fantasy, expressed here as the tension between 'tek' and magic. I think it is lovely when writers take Clarke's Third Law (Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic), and bend, fold, spindle, and mutilate it, or even apply it directly, and come up with a nice work.

A near-criminally brief, and totally unfair, review of the novel. This, by the way, is strictly the Amazon review that I submitted a little while ago. If they have published it before I finish the blog post, I'll link it HERE. If they haven't, I'll put the link in the comments section. That way, the comments section will get used for SOMETHING, anyway, since none of you seem engaged enough to share your opinion. I mean, really. (last edit: well, it published. So much for the comments section of THIS post...)

Kesh LaSota is a Messenger. With her sidekick, an upgraded former war drone named Sota, she delivers high-value, high-priority messages across the world of Calicto. She has a special talent for the work, being invisible to the ubiquitous surveillance that covers the entire population.

Her crisis unfolds after she delivers a message to a gangster-type, telling him he has 18 seconds to live, followed 18 seconds later by a bullet to his head.

And thus we enter the fantasy part of the novel, because the actions described in that interval would take a HECK of a lot longer than 18 seconds to transpire in Mundane Land.

Everything that happen after that is a fantasy function as well. Every commodity is available to the population, except ...water. There is a synthetic form of water, though, but good old dihydrogen monoxide costs a bundle.

Lots of action. Lots of hunky men. A few gorgeous women. And plot convolutions you won't believe, even after you see them, If you are a fan of the genre, this is going to blow you away. It's going to make the author a lot of money.

As for me, I couldn't wait for the book to be over. Umm,,,, I mean that literally. I read the first half, realized I still had to post about it, and skipped chapters until I got to the end. I am utterly fine with that, as I am with the fact that this book outsells almost every single book I really like.

Quite possibly will win the Dragon Award.

Closing commentary on the review, and whatever else comes into my head. It was the scarcity and incredibly high monetary value of water that really kicked me out of the novel. Synthetic water? REALLY? Honestly, my reaction to that was to go check on the author's background. She CLEARLY was writing at an adult level, but synthetic water is a concept I would have expected to see in a story written by a sixth grader. And, by the way, the author has an astounding number of published novels, and she's publishing in a field that I understand to bring in carloads of cash for those who write it, so, sure. I guess she gets to write about synthetic water if she wants to.

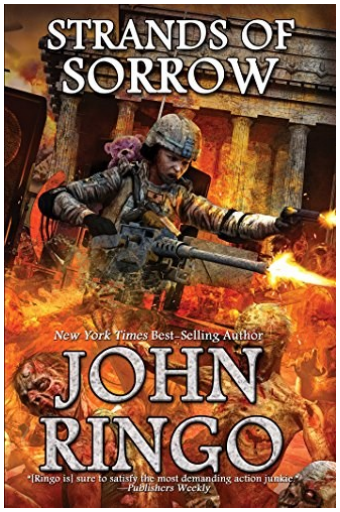
Personally, though, once I was knocked out of the narrative, I stayed out.

This is the opening volume in a 'slow burn Reverse Harem' series, and the author is careful

to point that out to us. I do not know what a 'slow burn Reverse Harem' is, and my 'Freakishly Aversive Reaction To Reading Even Soft Porn' warning light started flashing when I came across the word 'harem.' As I disclosed in the review, I skipped a LOT of the last half of the book, but from what I DID read, it's obvious that there is some magically-induced non-consensual sex action I missed, for which I am grateful. I accept that it is a rule of certain genres that there MUST be incorporated some explicit sex, and that bedroom doors are a fiction. This will likely garner votes for this book, as it has garnered cash for the author.

Peace be on your household.

Review: Black Tide Rising
Review by Cedar Sanderson



I've been reading John Ringo's tales for well over a decade now, and I always look forward to them… except I wasn't sure about this series. Although I've written a bit about zombies, most of what I have seen or read was, well, more humorous than anything. Human physiology just doesn't work that way.

But this is Ringo. So I tried it out, and was sold. His usual fare: fast-paced storytelling, well-developed characters, real-feeling world. As a long-time fan, I was amused by the number of people I 'know' in the books, other fans who were redshirted or tuckerized into the books. But above that, it reminded me of something I had been unconsciously missing in my recent reading.

I've been reading a lot of newbie authors (and one aspiring to lit-ew-ary status), and while with them I have to work to stay in the story, reading Islands of Rage and Hope was an immersive process. I didn't read it all in one sitting – physically impossible with my schedule – but I will go back and re-read it. Which is rare for me, these days. He does a superb job of making the reading easy. I'm still trying to analyze what it is, and why it works for me.

It might not work for everyone. If you prefer things like the literary tome I'm struggling with, you probably won't appreciate the taut plotting of Ringo's work. I like to have forward momentum, rather than pages droning on about the moles on a demon's back (yes, really… no, I'm not giving the name of the other book). But if you enjoy character development, rather than navel gazing, this book (which wouldn't stand alone, you do need to start with Under a Graveyard Sky) is an excellent example, as we have two young women finally coming of age, and to grips with their new role in a new world.

I'm looking forward to the next one already.

<— Battling
Art by Angela K Scott

Anime Girl —>
Art by Angela K Scott

Short Fiction

Reviews by Greg Hullender and Eric Wong

Greg Hullender and Eric Wong publish vast numbers of reviews of short fiction. All their reviews may be seen at Rocket Stack Rank http://www.rocketstackrank.com

How Sere Looked for a Pair of Boots, by Alexander Jablokov

Cover illustration by Michael Whelan
[Asimov's]
4-Star: Intricate Plot in a Complex Setting

Sere takes a case for her niece, who's sure her boyfriend was wrongly imprisoned for violating security at an alien incubator. (21,887 words; Time: 1h:12m)

Although this follows the previous story, "How Sere Picked up her Laundry," there's no strong need to read that story before this one.

"How Sere Looked for a Pair of Boots," by Alexander Jablokov [bio] (edited by Sheila Williams), appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction issue 01-02|19, published on December 15, 2018 by Penny Publications.

Pro: Most of the fun of the story is the exotic locale and the complex plot that brings together so many different characters from different parts of the city. There are plenty of laughs too, including the running joke of Sere carrying those old Bik eyeballs everywhere.

By the end, Sere has figured out everything that was actually going on, rescued Dothanial, and finally put her relationship with Lemuel behind her.

Con: There's so much to the background that its confusing, and at the end of it all, Sere really hasn't got much out of it personally.

The Book of Magic, edited by Gardner Dozois

Cover illustration by Stephen Youll
[Anthology]
Four-Star: A Magical Experience

The Magic Goes Away

Gardner Dozois might be best known for his annual Year's Best Science Fiction anthologies, or possibly for his tenure as editor of Asimov's Magazine of Science Fiction, but he also produced excellent original anthologies, both by himself and with collaborators like George R.R. Martin. He passed away on May 27 of this year, so this volume will be his last. He will be sorely missed by everyone who loves short science fiction.

Gardner Dozois's last original anthology explores all types of magic in all sorts of settings. (175,649 words)

"The Book of Magic," edited by Gardner Dozois, published on October 16, 2018 by Bantam Books.

The Whole World of Magic

The stated goal of the anthology is to cover the whole world of magic, and it definitely delivers. We have High Fantasy, Historical Fantasy, Alternate History Fantasy, Folktales, Modern Fantasy, and Fantasy Thrillers, and every one of them has a focus on magic and magic users.

In an anthology of this size (sixteen original stories), average would be to recommend three stories (4 or 5 stars) and to recommend against three stories (1 or 2 stars). We do recommend against three, but we recommend six, which is double the expected number, so this is a magical anthology indeed.

Recommended

The Friends of Masquelayne the Incomparable, by Matthew Hughes, introduces us to an evil magician who can't accept the fact that someone he never heard of before beat him in a competition.

The Governor, by Tim Powers, tells the story of a secret family of wizards who live in Los Angeles, and what happens to them when their patriarch dies and everyone scrambles to try to take advantage before he can figure out how to resurrect himself.

The Staff in the Stone, by Garth Nix, features a very brave man trying to protect three villages from a magical risk only he can see, but it's not at all clear that he has the strength to survive it.

In The Fall and Rise of the House of the Wizard Malkuril, by Scott Lynch, a very powerful wizard dies, and his house AI attempts to take his place.

Specially Recommended

The Wolf and the Manticore, by Greg van Eekhout, tells an unlikely love story set in a world where Northern and Southern California are separate kingdoms that fight each other with magic that's almost as bad as nuclear weapons.

Bloom, by Kate Elliott, takes us to a fascinating alternate Europe where a traditional-minded middle-aged magician tries to help his house survive by recruiting young magicians with the help of a very nontraditional young woman.

A Bonus

We did not review, "A Night at the Tarn House," by George R.R. Martin, because it's a reprint of a 2009 story, but it's an excellent tale and would have easily been 4 stars if it were original to this volume.

Flint and Mirror, by John Crowley
Cover illustration by Stephen Youll
[Anthology]
Three-Star: Average

(Historical Fantasy) Ten-year-old Hugh O'Neill leaves Ireland for England to get support to overthrow his usurping uncle, but the Sidhe have a parting gift for him. (11,495 words)

The story begins around 1560, when Hugh O'Neill was ten years old. It will help to read a bit of Hugh's history in our world before reading this story, although it's not essential.

"Flint and Mirror," by John Crowley (edited by Gardner Dozois), appeared in The Book of Magic (RSR review), published on October 16, 2018 by Bantam Books.

Pro: It's a nice tale of 16th-Century Ireland. Hugh is in a difficult position, as the conflicting magical elements symbolize.

Con: It just ends without resolving anything. Is Hugh's fate going to be same as it was in our world, or will be become a king who unifies Ireland? We'll never know.

The Lady of Butterflies, by Y.M. Pang
Cover illustration by Alan M. Clark
[F&SF]
Four-Star: Captivating

(High Fantasy) A beautiful northern lady appears mysteriously in a southern Emperor's garden, and Lady Rikara takes care of her while trying to learn who she is and how she got there. (8,952 words)

"The Lady of Butterflies," by Y.M. Pang [bio] (edited by C.C. Finlay), appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction issue 11-12|18, published on October 27, 2018 by Spilogale Inc.

Pro: There's something about this story that just sucked me into it. Lady Rikara's attempts to figure out who Lady Morieth was and how she got there quickly turn into her simply wanting to know Lady Morieth better, but in the process we learn all about the various palace intrigues and many of the southern customs, such as what it means for a Sword to wear red. In the process, all the later events are nicely foreshadowed.

Morieth's memory of her brother trying to strangle her makes us very apprehensive when we learn the emperor will receive a delegation from Jillenes and that she'll attend that. The full story, that she really is a lady of butterflies, makes complete sense.

The resolution, Rikara finding Morieth alone in the forest, unable to remember her, is sad but it completes the story in a satisfying way, albeit not a happy one.

Con: We never find out how she ended up like this. Did she really replace a human child?

SerCon

Dragons and Hugos
Discussion from Bob Jennings

The times they are a changing, and it seems to me that as more and more of the old guard who came into fandom in the 50s, 60s, 70s die off or go completely FAFIA, that the traditional Hugos will continue to have less relevance for the newer generation of fans.

The sniping and complaints ongoing for a few years now about how the fanzine category doesn't really represent fanzines, or how the fan art category should not have been allowed to expand to jewelry or statues offered for sale over the internet, or how easy it was to vote-pack the Hugos, are just examples of how muddled up things have become.

And here's the other side of the coin, most of the younger fans who came to the literature/video/games/podcasts from the mid 1980s onward don't particularly give a damn either. They will vote for the Dragon Awards, but most don't vote for the Hugos. The fact that Hugo ballots only go out to people who have purchased some kind of membership in the WorldCon is a determent because the memberships at any level are expensive.

Toward that end I really welcome the policy the recent WorldCons have initiated of providing e-book downloads of every single print story nominated for a Hugo, from novel thru short story, for free to anybody who buys any kind of WorldCon membership, including non-attending supporting memberships. That perk alone is worth the current price of a supporting membership, and I would expect to see this option used by a lot more fans in the next few years, especially for people who can't afford to travel to far distant parts of the planet to attend an upcoming WorldCon event.

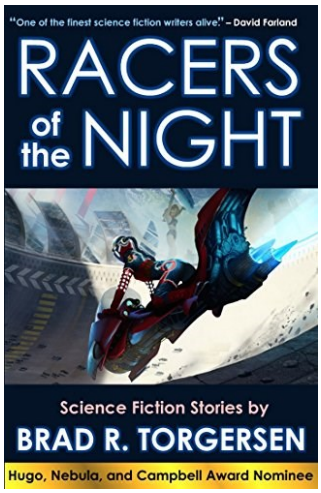
That would certainly include me. These days the Hugo nominations come from such a wide variety of different publishers and magazines that it is almost impossible to have encountered them all, let alone purchased the flood of novels, anthologies, and mags (some print, some pixel format only) where all those novelettes and short stories were originally published.

Meanwhile, DragonCon continues to operate as a strictly profit making enterprise, and they are succeeding by providing the new generation of fans what they want. The fossil generation of fandom deplores the emphasis on media, or flashy fluff, or video, or games, or personalities, or TV/Hollywood hype, but and yet again, the newer generation of fans don't care. This is what they like, this is what they expect in a convention, this is the kind of convention they are willing to attend, and those DragonCon Awards are the kind of award recognition that they are willing to support and vote for.

Like it or not, this is a clear indication of where the fields of the fantastic are going in this new century. What was the name of that story? "Adapt Or Die!" It's something to think about anyway.

Food of Famous Authors

Torgersens' Poor Boy Beef Soup
Recipes and Photographs by Cedar Sanderson and Brad Torgerson



I've enjoyed Brad's work for some time now, before I'd read his fiction. His puckish sense of humor and reasoned approach to the world, I discovered, hold true in his fictional works as well as his blog. I highly recommend The Chaplain's War for science fiction with that rare element, faith. But the book you really ought to pick up and read with this meal is Racers of the Night, a collection of his short stories. Why? Well, for one thing, it's the one Brad asked me to feature. Secondly, this is the rare recipe for beef stew that doesn't take all day to create, you can have this one on the table in less than an hour.

Beef stew is a staple at our house, during the cold months, and even sometimes on a rainy day in summer. For us, as I am sure for you, it's constantly changing. I don't go and shop for special ingredients: I use what I have on hand. If that means the veg changes from pot to pot, then it just keeps the meal interesting. I tackled this pot of stew with that in mind, and made a few changes. I've been asking my author acquaintances and friends simply for the name of a dish, and most generously take the time to give me a recipe, Brad was no exception. He started out by telling me this is an old family recipe…

Torgersens' Poor Boy Beef Soup
Beef stew recipe

Beef Soup ala Torgerson

Ingredients:
- Beef stew starter packet (1 for small batch, 2 for large)
- Lean ground beef (1.5 lbs for small batch, 3 lbs for large)

Frozen mixed veggies (small bag, or large bag)
Onion (yellow or white, small or large)
Beef bullion cube (1 or 2)
Potatoes (3 to 5 small, or 2 to 3 large russet)
Ordinary table salt and table pepper
Extras if you feel like it:
Red, yellow, or green bell peppers
Whole carrots

Directions:
1 – Dice or julienne onion into a bowl.
2 – Wash potatoes, dice; with skins left on.
3 – Dice or slice extras into bowls.
4 – Brown & turn he ground beef; rinse off fat in hot water.
5 – Throw browned ground beef into large cook pot.
6 – Throw diced potatoes on top of the beef.
7 – Throw frozen mixed veggies on top of potatoes.
8 – Throw on onions and extras.
9 – Pour in tap water until contents adequately submerged.
10 – Slowly stir in beef stew packet(s).
11 – Ensure contents are well-mixed and homogeneous.
12 – Bring soup to a boil on stove top.
13 – Set simmering for 30 minutes.
14 – Salt and pepper to taste; add bullion if you want.
15 – Simmer for additional 30 minutes.
16 – Turn off burner; let cool for 20 minutes.
17 – SERVE! Ideally suited to a side of french bread, sliced, with butter. Multi-grain also works well.
Stew and biscuits

Cedar's Notes: I realized about the time I started cooking that I hadn't picked up potatoes (we don't eat them often) but I did have a nice large parsnip, so I did a straight substitution. I also used up some ground beef, rather than stew beef. I had to ask my First Reader what a beef stew packet was, I'd never heard of it. Seems they are a handy way to thicken the stew, the main ingredient on the packet I got was cornstarch, followed by brown sugar.

I prepared this on the stovetop, my slowcooker hasn't got a 'high' setting. I did sauté the onions and add some garlic to the recipe, as we're fond of it.

Sautéing onions and garlic releases a lot of flavor for the meal.
I do think that the French Bread would be a nice accompaniment for this meal, but I started too late in the day for proper rising and baking. So I had this recipe I wanted to try, and it seemed to be a good pairing for this meal. The First Reader took one look at what I'd made and informed me I'd re-invented cheese biscuits. In cooking, as in fiction, there are no original ideas, only new twists on old plots.

Cheese Biscuits
4 oz shredded or powdered Parmesan Cheese

4 oz finely shredded cheddar
1 c flour
1 egg
1 c milk
1/2 c oil
1/4 tsp baking powder
1 tsp salt

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Whisk together the wet ingredients, then fold in the cheese. Slowly whisk in the flour. Spoon into mini muffin tin, makes about 24. Bake for about 10 min, until tops bounce back when pressed. They are very rich and dense.

Toni Weisskopf's Christmas Buckeyes
Recipe and Photographs from Cedar Sanderson and Toni Weisskopf

Now, those of you who know Toni Weisskopf are wondering why she was included in this series. She is not commonly known as an author. Because I could, that's why. As a reader, Baen Publishing has been pretty important to my book habit for 15 years and going strong. I think that Toni, as the Head Honcho over there, should absolutely be included in this. That, and I like her, she's a nice lady, and one I look up to with a lot of respect. So I asked her for a recipe. And she gave me one.

Right there, I looked at it, and said 'Oh, Toni, no…'

Just looking at it went right to my hips. I knew that with only two of us in the house, and me trying to lose weight… well, I figured there was a book, a treadmill, and some walking in my future to burn this off. But then I had another idea… More on that after the recipe.

Christmas Buckeyes

Makes 180 balls, give or take.
Insides:
1 tsp. vanilla
1 pound butter, softened
2 pounds creamy pb—use Skippy
3 pounds powdered sugar

Mix above ingredients thoroughly until mixture is uniform. Can use a heavy duty mixer, but dough will be very stiff, so probably will need to end with hands. It will take a while. Roll into small balls, about cocktail meatball size, and place on wax or parchment paper to await dipping.

Very stiff filling. I didn't do much hand-work to it, trying to preserve the 'fluffy' texture.

Usually at this point there's a break in the action, and I recommend a book to you for reading while you wait on a timer to go off. That's not going to happen this time, you'll have your hands full all the way through this recipe. But wait! There is an option, Baen is not just for paper and e-books. There are some award-winning audiobooks availa-

ble from them. Perfect for whiling away time during the rolling of many, many, many little peanut butter balls.

A small army of peanut butter balls. Which would be tasty at this stage. But the chocolate completes them.

Dip in:

12 oz. Nestles semi-sweet chocolate chips + 1/2 bar paraffin (yes, this is just wax—you'll find it in stores that have canning supplies or larger grocery stores)

* or *

a couple of packages of chocolate bark (option I've used in the past few years and nobody seems to object; found in baking section of store)

Over a double boiler, melt chocolate. (My double boiler is a regular pot with a metal mixing bowl plopped over it.) Once water is boiling, lower heat so a gentle steam is maintained so chocolate stays melted while you are dipping.

They do resemble the nuts of the Horse Chestnut tree. Only more edible.

Taking a wooden toothpick (plastic ones okay, but buckeyes slip off more easily on them), inserted about 1/3 to 1/2 way into the ball, dip into chocolate and swirl around, coating most of the ball, but leaving the top open. (Hence "buckeye": they look like chestnuts called "buckeyes." Ohio is the "Buckeye" State, btw, which is why Ohio State's football team is nicknamed "Buckeyes." Who says cookbooks aren't educational?) Place on waxed cookie sheet. Let sit until chocolate is set. Store in tightly covered container. Will last weeks. If you don't eat them. Can be frozen.

Cedar here again. The recipe came out delightfully, as I expected it to. I cut the recipe in half, and made 75 buckeyes. The First Reader sampled one, declared that they taste like buckeyes, to my relief since I'd never made them before. I tasted one, liked it a lot, and then we packed the rest of them up. Most of them went with me to classes on a Monday (my long day). College students, as I anticipated, love your recipe, Toni! Lots of compliments, and wonderings of 'will Cedar bring snacks again?' which was funny. No, probably not. But it was a great way to make sure they didn't go to waist. Mine, that is.

Maybe I should make up little cards with the link to the Baen Free Library on them to give out with the snacks… food and free books. Hook 'em in good! For more book recommendations and recipes, check out the Eat This While You Read That! index page.

buckeyes

A plateful of bon-bons (well, sort of) and books to read. Heaven!

Last Page Image
Courtesy Bob Jennings

Once upon a time, the image on the next page would have been science fiction.

Once upon a time,
this cover would have been science fiction.
(cover courtesy Bob Jennings)