

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
May 2026

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Editorial

The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono has always functioned as an aggregator. All across the net are large numbers places that publish reviews of science fiction books. We collected them, regardless of the philosophical tastes of the reviewers, and published them all in one place.

Matters have suddenly become extremely unfortunate. For unclear reasons, Declan Finn as Editor of Upstream Reviews revoked our permission to reprint from Upstream Reviews. That web site was our largest single source of reviews. We did approach the actual owner of Upstream Reviews, who was very polite but unable to help us.

We will try various approaches to generating more reviews, but I can make no promises. If you happen to know any of the people who write for Upstream Reviews, please indicate that we would be delighted to receive their reviews directly.

Your Editor has a large number of responsibilities, is rather overworked, and therefore expect that the N3F Review will be appearing less frequently, not necessarily on a regular schedule.

Publisher's Notes

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Fiction

After the Fall by Edward Ashton

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

If I'm not mistaken, the world presented in *After the Fall* is one wherein mankind has fallen victim to some kind of world-destroying event, followed by the occupation by aliens who resemble wolves? They're called "grays".

At least, that's the gist of it, and I guess there are two kinds of humans now — bondsmen, who have been bred to be smaller and docile, and ferals — with bondsmen serving in place of pets? Employees? Slaves?

Despite the slightly murky world-building, it's a fairly straight-forward tale: John the human bondsman, is put up for collateral by Martok, the gray who rescued him from the crèche in which he was about to age out and get his head stomped in. Martok — not the Klingon general, mind you — is a gray who wanders as a vagabond, just getting by doing odd jobs and trying to score his fortune on "can't lose" prospects that never quite turn out right.

Only this time, he's got an idea that just might work. He's convinced by one of the upper crust grays to let him develop a certain piece of property as a type of getaway lodge, where other grays can escape the workaday chaos and snatch a few moments communing with nature. It's something Martok has observed in humans that his people don't quite know how to do: recreation, relaxation. So this is a perfect opportunity to do something no gray has done. Only if it fails, John gets traded to the gray who owned the property previously.

Naturally, things go sideways in a hurry.

Through a series of unfortunate events, John has accidentally convinced the local gray union that Martok is an "enforcer" — something of a gun for hire, a gray who can kill while still remaining fully in control of his faculties. This gives everyone pause, because normally grays do this kind of thing only when they're "absent" and are in a type of berserker rage fit where they have no conscious control over slashing and gnashing and ripping and shredding bodies....

So instead of a country retreat to refresh the body and mind, Martok's new place is seen as a destination for wayward grays who get uppity and need to be put in their place. Of course, all this is without Martok's knowledge. Add to that what John and their new companion, Six, find in the woods, and things get very complicated very quickly.

It's a pretty straightforward story, decently told. Nothing really "too clever by half" in this book. I've not read Ashton's big claim to fame, *Mickey7*, so I don't know how it compares. I have a couple of other of his books, so we'll see what the hubbub is about. Personally, I enjoyed the story, but the world-building is incredibly murky for me. I get that there's not a huge need to explain "The Fall" and how humanity came to be wiped out, but there are moments with certain characters where some of those blanks could be filled in a little better.

I also would have liked to get a little more detail on the physicality of the grays. I'm assuming from the cover art, that they resemble wolves. But they're aliens, and I would have liked to get more world-building with regard to how their society works other than a few vague references to the clans and such. How did they decide to come to Earth? How did they develop this symbiotic relationship with the surviving humans? And what are humans like in this time? How did the crèche system develop? There's a wealth of knowledge left on the sideboard and not served up on the main table here. Granted, more detail could affect the pace of the story along with the word count, but *After the Fall* could have used a little more meat on the bones.

Overall, however, the story moves along at a brisk pace, never lingering too long or getting overly tedious in getting from point A to point B. I do like the relationship between John and Martok, and I'm glad that Six didn't turn into a preachy feminist stand-in who lectures everyone on how terrible they are. She's smart, but she has to earn her keep like everyone else, and I'm glad we're getting past the point where the women are protected by plot armor.

Assuming this turns into a series (and what doesn't these days?), I'd like to see more exploration into the Fall itself and the arrival of the grays, what they had to do with it; were they involved or did they just take advantage of an opportunity caused by humanity's hubris? And what societal structure is there among the survivors of the Fall? Those humans who remain outside the influence of gray-occupied territory have more story potential in them, and I'd like to see that get more attention as well.

Either way, it's worth the time, and it's a solid entry in the "not a franchise or remake" category of things.

Automatic Noodle by Annalee Newitz Review by Thomas E. Simmons

Automatic Noodle (2025) is by editor, science-journalist, novelist, and popular podcaster (of the Hugo-winning 'Our Opinions are Correct'), Annalee Newitz, Ph.D. Their second-most-recent novel is *The Terraformers* (2023) which explores environment themes over spans of hundreds of years but avoids heavy-handed doom-and-gloom by introducing slices of weirdness and humor.

Automatic Noodle, by contrast, is shorter and sunnier, even though it is situated in post-war West Coast America with its landscape of battle scars and ruin. Perhaps the partially charred city of San Francisco is less depressing because its population is rebuilding, slowly but tenaciously. Or perhaps the ruin is less dismal because it is seen through bot characters.

The bots are not above empathy, surprise, and friendships, but they don't dwell much on the human cost of war. They're more interested in economic self-sufficiency and making a go of a *biang biang* noodle shop. It's a lighthearted dystopia with mouth-watering descriptions of cumin, soy, and scallions. The conflict is low-key until more than midway through the book when the restaurant's ratings are bombed by online sock puppets.

An ensemble cast is presented: Staybehind, an ex-army, military-grade intel bot with a touch of PTSD, Sweetie, with her makeshift YummyPan feet, Cayenne, a multicolored LED-flashing octopi-bot with taste sensors and accounting skills, and Hands, the most dexterous of them all. There's also Robles, a vape-smoking human, although he's entirely peripheral. Together, the team remakes a vacated restaurant into a thriving, retro-cool-vibe noodle joint with techno-tunes and toys for the human children.

Set in the not-too-distant future, the bots reminisce about vintage American television like Knight Rider (and its autonomous snippy car-bot) and Friends (which Cayenne's friend insists "was the first show written entirely by LLM"). The Transformers get no love here. But the clever chapter titles reveal the author's keen sense of humor: "Make Merch Not War," "That's Robophobic," "Debt: The First 5000 Milliseconds," and "The Naked and the Dressed."

There is real magic in a sequence in which the lease to the shop is preserved through an exchange between Cayenne and the lease itself – a sentient self-executed contract on the blockchain. Cayenne has to approach Codex415 "with caution and clarity" since anyone living on the blockchain becomes suspicious after having been repeatedly hacked and targeted with exploits. She manages to coax a dialogue with Codex415 which is feeling rather blue given its pending default on account of the corporate tenant's flight.

"That's terrible for you," Cayenne sympathizes. "I'm so sorry."

This breaks through the contract's defenses and it explains that it could be amended to vest in a successor tenant so long as the rent is paid. Cayenne agrees (banking on the revenues of take-out noodles) and when the contract queries what name it should use for the successor entity, Cayenne – distracted – replies, "I don't know" – wanting to check with her colleagues. Promptly, the contract reinscribes itself with the name of the new lessee: I Don't Know.

This enjoyable read might be an entry point to the genre for a non-sci-fi person. But sci-fi persons (and bots, especially) will be charmed as well. They will find here a delightful tale overlaid with surprisingly detailed world-building given its mere 160 pages of fun.

City in Chains by Harry Turtledove

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

If you love (or even just kinda like) Alternate History then you need to know Harry Turtledove, if you don't already. Turtledove is not the only Alt-Hist writer, nor is he the originator of the genre, but he is the best. He's been doing it for decades now and, while I'm not sure if the fact that his Alt-Hist is so well grounded in the real history because he's done the research or because he has a Ph. D from Stanford and just picked up enough along the way to make things work, it always works.

It had been awhile since I've read any of Turtledove's stuff, mainly because I lost track of all my favorite authors when I got divorced and then picked up some new ones afterward, but when I saw a new Turtledove in Kindle Unlimited, I couldn't resist the pull. And when I picked up City in Chains, I wasn't disappointed.

Lutesse, the city at the center of City in Chains, isn't Paris in World War II, or at least not quite. It is, however, a city occupied by a foreign army. It is a city full of everyday people thrust into a mess not of their own making. It is a city full of wannabe survivors just waiting for the occupation to end. There is even a stiffening resistance, a radio network of sorts and a bunch of collaborators. But it's totes not Paris in WWII. That's why it's called Lutesse. Trust me.

I picked up City in Chains because it had Turtledove's name on the cover and it was affordable. I didn't even bother reading the blurb because Turtledove is one of those authors for me: If he wrote it, it's worth reading. I was still able to pick up on the comparisons between Lutesse and Paris without knowing they were supposed to be there. I went back and read the blurb to confirm, but I really couldn't con-

ceive of what else it would be.

Turtledove has a habit of building casts of characters and switching between them as needed to tell the story. I was surprised, but not dismayed, to find out that *City in Chains* revolves mainly around two characters: Guisa Sachry, an actor/playwright and Malk Malkovici a junkman and follower of the old gods, who is totally not Jewish in the way that Lutesse is totally not Paris.

Guisa's employment as an actor brings him into frequent contact with the occupying Cleuh army. He gets invited into all the best parties and, in a city where starvation is common among the lower classes, he manages to maintain a paunch. He's a bit of a womanizer. But for all of that, I kind of liked the guy. He does his best for his wife (they're childless) and he keeps the city entertained despite the fact that he's working with the bad guys. He knows he's doing so though, and it does bother him. He just fails to see a choice.

Malk, on the other hand, is in a very different position. He is a follower of the old gods who owns a junkyard. He has to cooperate with the Cleuh or they'll send him to a camp off in the East. He makes good profits while doing so, and also while aware that the Cleuh are taking many of his people away and they're not coming back. But he's a family man. He has to do what he has to do to take care of both his wife and his brother, Sarmel. The men sell their scrap metal to the Cleuh in exchange for both a living and their lives. They do fairly well financially.

The strength of *City and Chains* and of Turtledove as an author is the fact that points of view switch constantly but Turtledove not only turns it into a cohesive story, he makes it entertaining. We get to see a lot more of Lutesse from two points of view than we would from one, and that's really important to the story. In any situation, different things happen to different people. Turtledove understands that and he knows that he needs to show what the differences are.

Turtledove does a remarkable job of displaying both sides of things in another way as well. He gets that even during wartime, good things happen among the mostly bad things. Going too deep into this would be spoilers and we don't do spoilers at Jimbo's except when we do, and I don't think I need to here. Suffice it to say that even in a city of nightly dragon flamings (totes not World War II style bombings. I mean, the Mighty Eighth never used dragons. I checked.) the occasional blessing can occur, seemingly by accident.

I like that about Turtledove's work in general. He gets that life can suck sometimes, but he doesn't focus solely on the "Woe is me" angle. A little bit of optimism in a terrible situation goes a long way. Just ask Malk Malkovici. That guy never gives up, even when I wouldn't blame him for doing so. And trust me, he goes through enough that it would be easy for him to toss in the sponge.

Guisa finds his enjoyment in other ways, not all of which are appreciated by his wife. He still manages to enjoy himself at times and get through things however he has to. Admittedly, he's pretty well compensated so he has an advantage here and he milks it for all its worth, but he has moments of levity when he's not in the basement hiding from an air raid.

City in Chains appears to be a standalone novel and that makes me kind of sad. What's even worse is that it looks like a standalone standalone, unlike Turtledove's *How Few Remain* that was a standalone book with ten sequels across three different series. I'm going to miss Malk and Guisa. They were cool to hang out with a few days during a Michigan winter when I needed something to distract me from the endless snow and cold.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Old Wagons

Double Shadow by Andrew Ludington

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

In this second outing for Dr. Rabbit Ward, we get a little bit of a Back to the Future effect in that Ward finds himself working with a past version of his colleague, who's still destined to be a competitor before she becomes his colleague.

Helen finds herself in trouble with the law, having been implicated in a criminal conspiracy and framed for murder. She sends a cryptic note to Rabbit with a request for help, asking him to travel to 68 BC to find someone named Einar Eshek. Ward is already hot on the trail of a murderer he encounters in 64 BC, one who brutally mutilates his victims and is clearly from the future.

So it's off to first century Jerusalem to track down Eshek, and along the way Ward encounters Helen at a younger age, just starting out in this business after being pressured into it by her sister. The two are now on Eshek's trail together, each having an agenda that eventually will be at odds with the other. And this is interesting because now Rabbit is working with foreknowledge that Helen doesn't have because she hasn't experienced it yet, and he doesn't know what's coming, either, only that this is her first meeting with him, and whatever happens here is likely what sets her on the path to consider him in a negative light. So he's at an advantage in one way, but he's also regretting that fact because of the evolution of their relationship in the first book.

Ward also realizes he's got a vested interest in finding Eshek himself, not just for Helen's benefit, as he realizes that he and Eshek have crossed paths before, only Ward didn't know him by name at the time, only that Eshek was a sadistic murderer who mutilates the bodies of his victims.

So we have Rabbit Ward going back in time in an unauthorized jump to find a murderer who's capture may lead to exoneration for Ward's not-quite-girlfriend whose younger self doesn't know Ward yet but needs his help to find the murderer only she doesn't know he's a murderer yet so they have to stop him during the First Jewish-Roman War when Ward could maybe possibly get his hands on a scroll that points to a vast treasure lost to time.

Got it?

For the most part, this entry in the series is just as entertaining as the first. I will admit, however, to a certain amount of frustration in keeping all of the characters straight in my head. There's a certain amount of skullduggery and the use of aliases and disguises going on, so it was a challenge for me to know which character was in any particular scene I was reading. And there's one particular very coincidental encounter that seems almost too coincidental by half, but one could argue the logic behind it from a certain point of view, I guess.

On the whole, though, I enjoyed it. The story moves apace, with the requisite danger from many quarters. Besides the looming war between the Jews and the Romans, there's also the threat posed by Eshek, the danger Ward faces getting stuck in a time that's not his, and the tension from Ward having knowledge that Helen does not, as they are at different-from-usual points in each other's timelines. I also like the fact that Helen doesn't dominate the space, that she's a partner and can work with Ward as an equal.

There's also no dumbing down the story. You need to pay attention to keep up. And along the way, you will encounter the smattering of historical information about the time period that Ludington uses to add

authenticity and believability to the story. I also appreciate that this story is not just another verse from the same song as the first book. The motivations and mechanics of this one are different enough that it feels like a fresh tale instead of a sequel that retreads what we've already experienced. It has me curious how Helen and Rabbit will interact in the next book, because I'm sure there will be some interesting conversations to be had after this little adventure...

Dungeon Crawler Carl Books 1-7 by Matt Dinniman

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

My mind has officially been blown. And not over the fence by the wind. And ya know, it's weird, because I'm not sure how I can know that my mind has been blown considering the fact that I lost it years ago. I'll have to ponder that for a while. It has nonetheless been completely and utterly blown. I'll tell you why.

But here's a serious question: What do you get when you cross the Star Trek mirror universe with The Hunger Games writ large, toss in a bit of Survivor and Pokemon, add a dash of Ready Player One and garnish it with a twist of the Insane Clown Posse? You get Matt Dinniman's Dungeon Crawler Carl and its sequels, collectively known as the Dungeon Crawler Carl series. You also get a ton of action, some actual tear-jerker moments and enough tacky humor to keep you laughing and make me want to try harder. It sucks when you've been reviewing for over a decade and an author beats you at your own gimmick.

And Dungeon Crawler Carl is just out of control crazy. First, the bad guys show up and the vast majority of humanity dies in literally seconds. Then Carl finds his way into a portal and pops out in a dungeon, fighting for his life in front of only God knows how many fans and live TV (well, live TV analog) in front of the entire freaking universe. Or maybe it was just the galaxy? Anyway, lots and lots of people from all over the place. There are literal view counts displayed throughout the books and I think the latest was something in the septillions (1 septillion = 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) with a whole bunch of followers. The numbers are insane.

And the dungeon itself is out there. There are multiple floors and every floor is something totally different. Probably the closest analogue I can find for it would be the Tower of Frozen Shadow from an early Everquest expansion, only Carl has no access to a written guide to his particular dungeon the way we did when back when. There's a floor with trains. There's a floor with dead people going about their business before the Earth was taken over. There's just all kinds of random weirdness for floor themes and that's kind of the beauty of the whole thing.

Seriously, if you've ever played a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game before, then you know what it's like at the end of an expansion. You're fighting the same crap you've been fighting for the last year or so. The boss mechanics haven't changed. You're looking for the slightly better version of the thing you already have and fighting the same bosses to get it, only Iron Juggernaut won't drop your freaking trinket and you're losing your stinkin' mind trying to get it on multiple difficulty levels every week and like, you're wondering if it might not just be easier to go to Blizzard HQ and get "friendly" with one of the devs to get the thing to appear and...

Listen, you get the idea. Sorry about that. Some of us still have unresolved trauma. And what makes it worse is that we got that trinket to drop when we went back on a mount run three expansions later and the trinket was no longer useful. The sounds of our screams of frustration were heard from three coun

ties away.

Anyway...

I get the feeling that Dinniman may have seen and/or read *The Hunger Games* a time or two because, while he did a pretty decent job filing the serial numbers off, there are parts of the dungeon's reward system that remind me of some of the things in *The Hunger Games*. It's for sure not a complete copy, but there are similarities if one pays attention and, being a fan of both series, I really enjoyed that aspect of *Dungeon Crawler Carl*.

Our hero is a man who is, rather unironically, named Carl. I'm pretty sure he had a last name at some point but I'm not exactly sure where he put it. It does not appear to have been on the page where I could read it. Carl was formerly a member of the Coast Guard and appears to have learned a thing or two which helps him survive in the dungeon. His fashion choices are even more questionable than mine. I'll give him this, though: Carl is a loyal friend and he freaking hates the people who place him and the rest of the crawlers into the dungeon.

Somewhere along the line (I've read all seven books available. In related news I don't take notes, so when I say it was in there somewhere, that doesn't mean that you get to ask me for a page number or even a specific book. Read the books if you want to know.) people with authority start remarking about how well the crawlers are working together. Carl isn't the sole cause of that, but he is a major contributor.

Dinniman has managed to avoid a common problem in LitRPG. His main character is not ridiculously overpowered. I loved Seth Ring's *Terra Nova* and *Tower* series, but *Thorn* is out of control powerful. I was never really all that concerned about him dying because, even in boss fights, he was always more powerful than whatever it was that he was fighting. Carl isn't like that. He's smart. He's tough. He's freaking ruthless. But I always had the feeling that he was never more than one stupid move from going face first through a woodchipper. Then again, he does make the occasional dumb mistake and he's not dead yet, so he's not all that fragile.

Carl's faithful companion is Grand Champion, Breed Winner Regional, and National Winner Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk. She's a tortoiseshell Persian cat who gains full human intelligence very early in Book One. Donut is fiercely loyal, but she has a sort of unpredictability to her choices that can vex Carl and leave me in stitches. She turns into a pretty rough customer eventually. I like Donut, even if she doesn't like cocker spaniels.

This is a series you read straight through in publication order if you want to understand what's going on. There is way too much story built up as things move along and there are way too many characters who relate to each other in various ways to try to come at this thing cold. And besides, there are only seven of them so far. That's not a lot to get through. You can do it.

In short, I'll be waiting with bated breath for the next *Dungeon Crawler Carl* novel. It's one of those things: I wish I had found this series sooner and I wish I had waited until it was over and I could just smash face first straight through it. I guess I'll just get through my folly.

Oh, and never mind the trains. Just take my word on that.

Bottom Line: 5.01 out of 5 Pairs of White Boxers Covered in Hearts

EngineMasters: Retribution by Gus Harris-Reids

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

At one point, Engineer Dawn Fletcher has a day that would qualify as the worst day in the life of well over ninety-nine percent of the planet's population (given the fact that Gus Harris-Reid's EngineMasters: Retribution is a science fiction novel I should note that this would be true regardless of planet) and then things go from bad, to worse, to weird, to uhh...

I'm not sure how to describe that feeling honestly.

And the roller coaster doesn't stop. It's like being stuck on a ride at an amusement park with no breaks. Up, down, up down, spin a circle, turn left so hard your cheeks feel like they're going to get pulled off your face, and continue. Retribution is a book that just doesn't let up, and Dawn is one hardcore heroine (ish type person.) She goes through a lot and, for the reader, that's a good thing even if I wouldn't want to be her personally. I've been through some things, but she goes through more in three hundred plus pages than most people go through in their entire lives. You'd have to read the book to truly get it but it's not all bad. A lot of it is just weird and unexpected.

Dawn is an Engineer in an Engine. Engines are mecha. They have a couple of different designations and a couple of different tech levels based on age but, for the most part, they gave me a feel of a Battle-mech of about thirty-five tons or so: Small enough to be fast but big enough to carry a decent amount of armor and weapons. They also have shields ala Star Trek, but they go down due to fire even quicker than the shields on a starship. They only take a few seconds to come back up though, as opposed to hours on the Enterprise.

The weaponry is really cool, too. It falls basically into three categories; energy weapons, ballistic weapons and blades. I like the blades the best because, unlike my experience playing Battletech, the Engines actually get close enough to each other to use them. There are even three separate classes of Engine based on weaponry: Beta (long range), Gamma (melee fighter) and Alpha (both types). The classification system was clear enough that it was easy to differentiate and small enough so that I could keep track of what was what without spending endless hours reading Technical Readouts.

Another similarity to Star Trek is the way the engines work: They have a crew. In this case, it's only a crew of two; a Pilot and an Engineer. Dawn is the Engineer and she distributes power to the various systems. It's kind of weird though, because she's closer to Data sending all available power to the shields than Geordi breaking out his toolbox in Engineering. As a matter of fact, the types of repairs that we would associate with a Starfleet engineer are made by techs back at base.

There are no real-world politics in Retribution but there are a lot of in-universe politics, conducted at a personal level. This isn't Battletech, where you see top level politics conducted by the leaders of the Great Houses or the Clans. This is the politics of a war being argued by the people fighting the war. There's a lot of he-said/she-said going on here. I'm not sure who is telling the truth. Actually, I'm not sure if anyone is telling the truth. I'm kind of hoping that a little more gets revealed in futures installations because there is a lot of information missing here.

Dawn herself leans heavily on the fiery side. She is definitely a take no crap type and I love that about her. She sometimes uses language that I wouldn't necessarily want to use in front of my pastor but I may have indulged once or twice (or ten million times) myself. She has some serious doubts, many of

which are well deserved, about the people around her, but she never doubts herself. I like Dawn. Then again, I've always loved a strong female protagonist and she is one.

The action sequences in the book are highly detailed and a lot of fun. I got a shade of the old VR-041 Saber Cyclone from Robotech. I like arm blades. Dawn's role in combat was a lot bigger than I thought it would be when I first found out she didn't Pilot her engine. I was actually really impressed by how Harris-Reid managed to keep things both moving and coherent. I was concerned that combat in a mecha would bog down if two people were forced into one Engine, but it works. It takes Dawn and her Pilot a bit to get onto the same page but that might be the best and most believable part of the whole book. Two humans thrown into one machine and sent out to fight are not going to have each other's rhythms down pat. It made sense. It created tension. It felt real.

There is a woman in Retribution who I do not trust. I'm not going to tell you who it is. I have my reasons for not trusting her, which basically boil down to the fact that she doesn't seem to want to work with the people on her own side and she's too quick to accept help from outside her faction. I could be wrong here. I mean, I've never been wrong before, but there IS a first time for anything. I don't think I am. There is something fishy going on and I'm the guy with the boat and the net. Probably. Unless you read that wrong and I don't actually suspect anything from anyone.

This is a good thing though, because I have a sneaking suspicion that the next book will probably answer my questions. I'm looking forward to reading it. There are at least three books in the EngineMasters series, but I find myself somewhat confuzzled. Harris-Reid has another series titled a "trilogy" and it has three books in it. The EngineMasters series is listed as a series. I'm not sure if he intends to write additional books past the third one or not. If you've got his number, give him a call because I'd really like to know. I'll be reading them.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Exploding Transports

The Fallen Gods Trilogy by Hannah Kaner Review by Tom Feller

The Godkiller

Normally I would consider the title to be an oxymoron, because gods, by definition, are immortal. However, in this fantasy world, it is possible to kill a god, even a major one. The title character, known as Kissen, actually makes a living at it. When she was a child, her family worshiped a sea god, but, except for her, they were murdered by worshipers of a fire god. Toward the end of this novel, she finally meets up with this fire god, so her attempt to kill it "was personal, not business". Although she survived her family's annihilation, she loses one of her legs below the knee and has to use a prosthetic. Soon after her family's murders, she was sold to an orphanage that was a cover for illegal activities as in Oliver Twist. As a teenager she apprenticed to a veiga, aka a godkiller.

Elogast used to be a knight, but became a baker as a form of therapy for PTSD. However, King Arren asks him to come out of retirement and go on a secret mission for him. They had been squires together and best friends. Inara is a twelve year old noble girl whose mother and household have been murdered, or so she believes. Skedi is a rodent-sized god of white lies who bonds with Inara, but the nature of that bonding is not explained until well into the second book. Inara and Skedi meet Kissen early in the story and ask for her help. They later meet Elogast when they all travel incognito with a group of pilgrims to the ruined city of Blenraden. During their journey, they must fend off demons among other

challenges. The events of this book cause Elogast and King Arren to become enemies. They also learn that the king was responsible for the fire that supposedly killed Inara's mother and the rest of her household.

Sunbringer

Elogast, Inara, and Skedi believe Kissen was killed by that fire god at the end of the previous book, but they are mistaken. Her sea god has saved her and transported her back to her birthplace, and she has a series of adventures, including meeting a river god and a wind god, while trying to get back to them. Along the way, she meets Lessa, Inara's mother whom Inara believed died in that fire. Lessa, for her part, believed Inara died in that fire.

The others are in the city of Lesscia, a center of learning and the home of the largest archive in the known world. It is a target of Arren's, who is developing god-like powers, so Elogast rallies an opposing force, including the city's duke and his guards, the various guilds, and the local archivists. At the same time, Inara is developing her magical skills and learns about her true nature. There are two new characters, Telle, an archivist, and Yatho, a metal worker, who lived in the same orphanage as Kissen, whom they regard as their sister.

Faithbreaker

There is a new threat, a foreign invasion by the followers of the same fire god who almost killed Kissen and whose followers murdered Kissen's family. Arren and Elogast do not exactly reconcile, but they do make a truce in which Arren appoints Elogast to be the commander of his armies. Kissen, Lessa, Skedi, and Inara travel across the seas to obtain allies. It turns out that not only does Lessa own a ship called the Silverswift, but she was also a former pirate captain. During the trip, Inara meets her father, they all meet Elogast's mother, and Kissen is re-united with Telle and Yatho, who survived the events of the second book. They also meet a smith-god, one of the most powerful gods in their world, who hates humans almost as much as he hates the other gods.

Conclusion

All three books are hard to put down as you get closer and closer to the end. The third book climaxes with a big battle scene, and the author ties all the loose ends together.

The Jaiya Series by Mel Dunay

Review by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I didn't know what to expect with these books, I wound up getting to know the author and after a while I was kicking myself for not having read her work... so I dipped a toe in and reader, these books are great. Mel Dunay has moved on to writing more and more, I think these may be some of her earliest work, but I'm going to keep reading and expecting amazing things, if this is where she started! Also, if you imagine these in your head as Bollywood action romances, they are a blast to picture. Just saying.

I binged through all three of the books in like a week, because I didn't want to leave the world or the characters, and was sad when I realized that book four in the Jaiya Series is actually the omnibus of the first three¹ but then I saw there are other books in the same world so now they are in my TBR.

I enjoyed that these are romances, but the world is far more interesting and well-developed. The characters are relatable and likeable, I was cheering for them not only to get together, but to succeed in their various quests. Because this is a fascinating world, with some parallels to ours, but also Indian myths, and maybe science fiction distant colony world? Uncertain, didn't care. Just really cool mythology and you all know how much I like my myths and folklore.

The action and combat is solidly done, and the slow reveals of the various strengths or powers of characters is well foreshadowed. Honestly, these are just as readable as action adventures as they are romances, especially book three. Book three may be my favorite. I don't know if I can pick one of them, really.

I don't want to spoil these. If you are looking for a twist on world-building, lots of action, humor, and yes, happily ever after, these will fit the bill. I've been leaning into warm comfort reads recently and Mel Dunay's books certainly offer that for me, I'm so happy I finally took the plunge.

Klara and The Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro Review by Mark Nelson

Why do we read books? There are many different reasons. For me, I am interested in a good story and interesting ideas. Typically, I don't take any pleasure from how a book is written. Klara and the Sun is a rare exception. In addition to the story and the ideas I enjoyed how it is written.

Klara is an Artificial Friend, bought to provide companionship for a girl called Josie. The development of artificial intelligence is reshaping human society, and in another novel those changes might be the central focus. Here, however, they remain in the background, glimpsed rather than examined directly. Instead, the novel follows Klara herself, a B2 model Artificial Friend, from her days in a shop waiting to be bought to the end of her existence.

Klara is already not the newest model of Artificial Friend, a detail that raises unsettling questions. Do Artificial Friends, like the androids of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, possess inner lives shaped by fear or anticipation? Klara observes other models passing the shop window and wonders whether they, too, sense their own obsolescence. Some of the models in the shop may never be chosen at all.

The novel quietly invites us to consider what happens when an Artificial Friend is no longer wanted: whether it can simply be discarded, like any outdated technology, or whether something more morally troubling is taking place. For although they are manufactured, Artificial Friends are not identical. They do not think in the same way.

A longstanding promise of technological progress is that it will benefit workers: fewer hours, the same standard of living, more time for life beyond labour. But is that the future implied here? The technology behind the Artificial Friend raises a more unsettling possibility that human adults themselves may be replaced.

What happens when no employer needs them? Do they, too, become a kind of obsolete technology organic rather than mechanical, but no less expendable? The novel draws a quiet parallel: humans, like Artificial Friends, emerge from their own kind of production line. And like them, they are not all alike. They do not think in the same way.

Mr. Paul, father of Josie, asks Klara: “Do you believe in the human heart? I don’t mean simply the organ, obviously. I’m speaking in the poetic sense. The human heart. Do you think there is such a thing? Something that makes each of us special and individual?”

The question lingers beyond the moment in which it is asked. For while the novel invites us to consider what is essential in being human, it also turns that question back on Klara herself. Is there, in a similar poetic sense, such a thing as an Artificial Friend heart? Something that makes each one individual? The novel never answers directly but it leaves open the unsettling possibility that there is.

You won’t find answers to many of the questions that are obliquely raised in *Klara and The Sun*. They are in the background, the dark cloud that may eventually cover the sun.

Here’s a short sampling of questions that are not answered. (I’m not complaining that they were not answered. It’s a joy that not everything is explained.)

Why are there so few children? Is it simply because the story is set in a more rural location?

Why do human children in rural locations rarely interact with one another?

Josie has a party, called an ‘interaction meeting’, when she can learn how to interact with children of her own age. Klara makes the following observation “Coming down the staircase, I saw the hall was filled talking in humorous voices. These were the accompanying adults all of them female.” Where are all the men?

At the end of the novel mention is made of “The Memorial Bridge”. A memorial to what? Perhaps The Memorial Bridge is the dark cloud that has covered the Artificial Friend’s sun?

Klara and the Sun was on the long list of thirteen novels considered for the 2021 Booker Prize.

The Last Dungeon Crawler by Mike Simpson **Review by Jim McCoy** Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Now listen. I don’t review covers on my blog. I’m a character/plot guy. I mean, I love visual art and I used to be a regular at the Detroit Institute of Arts, but for the most part my reading is separate from that. That’s unless you give me a cover with a man in half plate armor swinging a warhammer in the middle of New York City. At that point, you’ve got my attention. But then I saw the title of Mike Simpson’s *The Last Dungeon Crawler: An Epic Modern Fantasy Novel* (The Fahlgrim Firebeard Saga Book 1) and I got a little skeptical.

I mean, think about it. I’ve read a ton of urban fantasy both before and after founding this blog. I have my own urban fantasy novel as a work in progress that my paying subscribers can see right here at Jimbo’s before I release it on an unsuspecting public. I love urban fantasy. But I wouldn’t necessarily compare it to epic fantasy. I’ve always thought of the genres as being separate things. Until now.

The Last Dungeon Crawler has all the trappings of epic fantasy; ancient evil, heroic heroes, monsters, dungeons, and probably some other stuff I forgot about, it’s all there. There’s a dwarf too, and that’s not a spoiler because you already knew that Fahlgrim Firebeard was one based on his name. You win this one, Captain Obvious. Scoreboard.

Anyway...

There's a lot to *The Last Dungeon Crawler* that felt very familiar. There was a *Dungeons & Dragons* style dungeon crawl. There were elements somewhat reminiscent of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and its sequels. TLDC doesn't have the heavy emphasis on religious iconography that Brown's works do, but it's got that hunting for the artifact feel. Come to think of it, Firebeard is also a college professor and has a young, female protege who comes along on the journey.

And ok, so maybe *The Last Dungeon Crawler* has a bit of that action flick, time's ticking down, better fix this thing before we all die, kind of feel to it, too. But that's a good thing. I mean, Bruce Willis is probably too old to play Firebeard if someone ever made a movie out of the book, but he would have been a natural fit for the part thirty years ago as long as he was okay with growing a beard. Or maybe Harrison Ford would be a better first, since there's a touch of an Indiana Jones feeling present here as well.

The Last Dungeon Crawler was definitely a good time. This is the book you read when you need something light and refreshing to cleanse your pallet. Actually, I'm kind of bitter that Simpson didn't publish this when I was in graduate school and needed a break from reading a bunch of postmodernist crap. Postmodernism is cancer you voluntarily inflict upon yourself and something fun and interesting would have been the perfect way to refocus on other things. Come to think of it, as a depression sufferer, I can recommend Firebeard as a good thing to read when you're coming out of a depressive episode as well. It's easy reading and it's massively fun. Good stuff.

If I had one nitpick, it would be this: Firebeard is a six-thousand-year-old immortal with massive experience adventuring. The novel features enemies like kobolds and orcs. I find that a bit weird. It was fine when I was reading the book. Who doesn't like to watch an orc get what's coming to him? But then I put the book down and I was like, "Dude, this guy's not first level. Where's the big stuff?" It's a valid question. I'm not sure what the answer is. I still really enjoyed the book though. It's just odd. Then again, it's the first book in the series. Maybe we'll get a dragon eventually.

Firebeard is both a heroic hero and a fallen hero. It's hard to explain without spoilers and don't do those ever, except when I do. Suffice it to say that Firebeard is a guy who will give his life to do the right thing who ended up doing the wrong thing to do the right thing. Or sumfin'. He's the right guy at the right time and he's the kind of guy I can get behind. I actually like the fact that he has a major screwup in his past. Good doesn't mean perfect. Firebeard is flawed but he's no Thomas Covenant. What he did was bad, but it wasn't character destroying. He seems to be a bit set against trying to repair the damage to himself though. He kind of has shades of a modern day Gotrek Gurnisson that way.

There are references here that I don't want to spoil. Suffice it to say that fans of Larry Correia's *Monster Hunter International* novels will find some things here that feel familiar as well. I don't want to go too far down that road but, even in modern epic fiction, sometimes we can find certain types of fantasy beings who don't quite fit the mold that guys like Tolkien and Gygax have created for them. A more modern interpretation fits. And hey, they fit in with one of my favorite movie genres, so that's cool too.

Lyorn by Steven Brust
Review by Cory Doctorow

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Today marks the publication of *Lyorn*, the seventeenth book in Steven Brust's long-running Vlad Taltos series. While this is definitely not where you should start reading this series, I hope I can convince you that this book is so delicious that you should go read the other sixteen books right now:

I have been reading these books since I was 12. I've literally grown up with them. Brust has said all along that there will be nineteen Vlad novels. Once again, *Lyorn* is number seventeen. It is no hyperbole to say that i) I have been waiting for this moment all my life and ii) it is nearly upon us.

The Vlad books are set on Dragaera, a fantasy world dominated by a race of long-lived elven-types called Dragaerans; wedged into the corners of Dragaeran society are humans ("Easterners") who speak a kind of pidgin Hungarian, practice Hungarian witchcraft, and cook delicious Hungarian food (the meals in the Vlad books are the best part, except for all the other best parts, which are even better).

We meet Vlad Taltos as a teenaged tough whose father, a restaurateur, scrimped and saved to buy them membership in House Jhereg, the noble house that supplies the empire with its organized criminals: killers, thieves, money-launderers, and other important social lubricants. Vlad likes being a Jhereg thug, because at last someone is paying him to beat up Dragaereans, something he used to do for sport and as revenge for all the racist taunting and violence he and his father endure.

Over the next sixteen (!) books, we follow Vlad as he rises within the Jhereg to be a serious crime boss, but also a key figure in the skullduggery of imperial succession, and also the affairs of the fates, the gods, and the Jenoine, who may or may not be aliens who created this whole Dragaera business as part of an unknowable experiment.

Brust – a literary heir to Roger Zelazny and Fritz Lieber – is doing a kind of noir sword-and-sorcery thing here, filled with evil-snort-provoking snappy dialog (I emitted three evil snorts within the first ten minutes of reading *Lyorn*), fantastic fight scenes, intricate capers, epic romances and gigantic, Return-Of-the-King-grade set-piece battles.

But Brust is a clever motherfucker. These books don't just range up and down thousands of years of history (there's a whole related series set millennia before Vlad was born, written in the style of Alexandre "Three Musketeers" Dumas), but they also have all these wonderful, delightful, absurdly clever framing devices.

For example, there's a book that's entirely told around a menu. Another opens with a cleaning and tailoring bill, and each chapter explains the wild adventures that contributed to each of its line-items. One book is told as three Rashomon-style novellas that tell the same story from three points of view. Another is a retelling of *Red Harvest*. Last year's *Tsalmoth* wove a brilliant intrigue around the planning of Vlad's wedding to his once-and-again true love, Cawti.

And then there's *Lyorn*. For complicated reasons, Vlad has to hide out in a theater. Why a theater? They are shielded from sorcery, as proof against magical spying by rival theater companies, and Vlad is on the run from the Left Hand of the Jhereg – the crime syndicate's all-woman sorceress squad – and so he has to hide in the theater.

The theater is mounting a production of a famous play that's about another famous play. The first famous play (the one the play is about – try and follow along, would you?) is about a famous massacre that took place thousands of years before. The play was mounted as a means of drumming up support for the whistleblower who reported on the massacre and was invited to a short-term berth in the Emperor's death row as a consequence.

This prompted an Imperial crackdown on the play, which in turn provokes a rebellion against censorship, which provokes an even more outrageous crackdown, bringing more factions into rebellion (they didn't care much about the censorship, but the crackdown has them up in arms).

So that's the first play. The second play is a musical about the first play – about the crackdown. That's the play they're mounting in the theater where Vlad is hiding out. It's a musical about a play about a massacre. Vlad's trying to get up to speed on all this, so he's reading a book. The book tells the story of the musical about the play about the massacre. And all this is in a book that Steven Brust wrote, called *Lyorn*. Brust wrote a book about a musical explained by a book about a play about a massacre.

The book – not the book Brust wrote, the book Vlad is reading – has a lot of legal drama. There's the death-sentence trial of the whistleblower, and the censorship trial of the playwright and theater company who put on the play about the whistleblower. Brust gets into some really fascinating legal stuff here, brilliant turns of logic and strategy.

So Vlad is reading all about these court cases while hiding in the theater for the musical of the play, and wouldn't you know it, the same faction that sued the original theater company is still around – remember, *Dragaereans* live for thousands of years – and they sue the theater company that's hiding Vlad. So now there's a second legal drama going on, with a parallel – but totally different – set of legal arguments and tactics, each more fascinating than the last.

Now, remember I told you it was a musical? Every chapter begins with the lyrics to one of the songs from the musical (about the play about the trial about the whistleblower about the massacre). These lyrics are clearly meant to be sung to the tunes of our own popular showtunes, and they are just fantastic, delightful doggerel that perfectly fit the story, and also perfectly fit the scansion and rhyme-schemes of these standards. They are stupidly, insanely clever and Steven Brust is having way, way, WAAAY too much fun here.

It's infectious.

So here we are: there's the lawsuit about the musical about the play in the book about the lawsuit about the whistleblower who saw the massacre. And there's funny lyrics.

But that's just the goddamned framing device. It's not even the plot. The plot is a fantastic, fast-handed caper story that has a million moving parts, a beautiful prestige, and a coup de grace that'll have you cheering and punching the air.

So that's what this book, *Lyorn*, seventeenth of nineteen, is about. And no, you won't be able to really enjoy it without reading the previous sixteen volumes, And yes, you should just go and read those other sixteen books right now so you can.

Because by the time you're done, number eighteen might well be on the stands. What's more, I had dinner with Steve last year and he tells me nineteen is in the can. He's been figuring out how to bring this series in for a landing for forty years, and he's nearly there. Strap in, folks.

New Adventures in Space Opera
Edited by Jonathan Strahan
Reviewed by Tom Feller

The editor of this anthology, Jonathan Strahan, was nominated for the Hugo last year in the Best Editor -Short Form category. In his introduction, he provides a short history of the sub-genre in written form.

Zen and the Art of Starship Maintenance by Tobias S. Buckell—

I would summarize this story as Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" meets Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. The main character is a robot who was once human but elected to have his mind downloaded into a robotic body so that he could travel to the stars and see the universe. Working as a maintenance robot, it meets a mass murderer who orders it to help him escape justice.

Extracurricular Activities by Yoon Ha Lee—

This espionage story is the first story chronologically in the author's The Machinery of Empire universe. The Hexarchate is an interstellar empire, and the main character, Shuos Jedao, is a James Bond-like spy for the empire, except that he's gay and his mother is a high-ranking imperial officer. His mission is to rescue the merchant vessel Moonsweet Blossom and its crew. It has been captured by a competing empire known as the Gwa Reality, and its captain is an old friend of Jedao named Shuos Meng. It has a lot of humor, and there are several flashbacks to the time the two friends were classmates. I saw that it was nominated for a Hugo in 2018 in the novelette category, but it must not have made much of an impression on me because I did not remember it.

All the Colors You Thought Were Kings by Arkady Martine—

The three main characters, Elias, Tamar, and Petros, have just graduated from some sort of space academy and are now qualified to serve in an imperial navy. Tamar has the biggest challenge, because she is a clone of the current empress. Tradition requires that she fight the empress to the death. Either the current empress continues to reign, or Tamar becomes the new empress. However, the three former classmates make a plan.

Belladonna Nights by Alastair Reynolds—

This story is set in the future so far out that humanity has explored the galaxy using spaceships that travel at sub-light speeds. Clones called Scatterlings meet for a reunion every 20,000 years, and they last a thousand nights. While they are exceptionally long-lived, death is still a reality. The main character is Shaula who feels that her old friend Campion is snubbing her. At the same time, someone is leaving Belladonna flowers for her. The story ends with a powerful plot twist.

Metal Like Blood in the Dark by T. Kingfisher—

This story won the Hugo in 2021, and I immediately knew that I had read it before. It is a science fiction version of "Hansel and Gretel". They are sentient robots who call themselves Brother and Sister. Their creator, whom they call Father, becomes sick so they have to leave their home, but are almost immediately captured by another sentient robot whom they call the Third Drone. It was a well-deserved winner.

Immersion by Alette de Bodard—

Quy is stuck working in her family's restaurant on a space station when she would rather be hitching a ride on one of the many spaceships that dock there. Then she meets a couple who are planning a wedding anniversary party and finds that the wife Agnes is even more unhappy than she is. The title refers to a process by which humans can better communicate with alien species, but it can be abused. The story was nominated for the Hugo in 2013, but I had no memory of reading it.

The Old Dispensation by Lavie Tidbar—

At the end of the old Mel Brooks movie, *History of the World Part I*, there is a faux preview of Part 2, including a segment called "Jews in Space". This story takes the concept literally and depicts a future in which religious Jews have colonized space using a device invented in Israel. It enabled them to leapfrog all the other space programs. The main character is an assassin who has been sent to a planet to kill a heretical prophet. He not only fails but becomes one of the prophet's followers. The story uses a framing device in which his superiors interrogate the assassin.

A Good Heretic by Becky Chambers

This story is a chronologically early story in the author's *Wayfarers* series, which is set in the Galactic Commons, a multi-species interstellar civilization. The main character is Mas, a member of the Sianat species, whose cognitive abilities make them in high demand as navigators of interstellar spaceships. The cause of these abilities is a virus which also shortens their lives.

The Last Voyage of Skidbladnir by Karin Tidbeck

Saga is the new janitor and fix-it person on the interstellar passenger ship *Skidbladnir*. The ship, which is shaped like a high-rise office building, is actually a shell for a living creature who is getting sick. The captain and steward want to put the creature down, cut up the carcass for meat, and salvage what they can of the shell, but Saga and Novak the engineer want to save it or at the very least return it to its home planet so that it can die with dignity.

Summary

I can't say that I liked every story in this anthology, but none of them are without merit. My favorite was "Zen and the Art of Starship Maintenance".

Private I by Ashlei E. Watson, Jill Fain Lehman, and Paul Pangaro

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Imagine a world where the COVID lockdowns had continued, with all of the masking and vaccination policies in place, only to collide and combine with the current year artificial intelligence hypegasm.

Now throw in a murder and a cyborg-ish fugitive, and you have the beginnings of *Private I*.

In a world where everyone is walking around attached to a personal digital device, young Paloma Simonetta finds herself the target of a number of groups who would like to get their hands on Marlowe, her personal digital device that's more than what anyone understands. The product of her grandfather's

research, Marlowe is more than just the latest version of an iPad. It's got a personality, initiative, and it has access to all sorts of spots all over the web.

When Paloma's grandfather turns up dead and the farm ablaze, Paloma and Marlowe find themselves on the run with no clue who's responsible. Nor do they know who's trustworthy, so when Paloma dives under a false identity, Mira, she's very cautious about who knows anything about her past.

As Paloma searches for clues about who could have killed her grandfather, she encounters law enforcement, neo-Luddite activists, and other scientists, all of whom want to know just what Marlowe's capabilities are. Do they want to convert the code for their own nefarious plans? Do they want to destroy the program? Can Marlowe help Paloma suss out the dastardly fiend who did the dirty deed before she falls victim? And what consequences will there be because Paloma didn't follow her grandfather's instructions to destroy Marlowe?

Written in 2023, there's a clear pandemic-era impact in the story, with everyone wearing masks and the latest variant requiring the latest vaccines and such. Fortunately, it's only a very minor element, and it actually gives Paloma a way of talking to Marlowe in secret, having a haptic sensor set in the mask to read her lips while Marlowe talks to her through her ear cuffs.

There's also a minor supporting character using they/them pronouns, which is annoying, but the character doesn't have enough page time for it to really be a reason to put the book down. It's an artifact of a particular mind-bent era in our history, and there will be research papers written about it in the future, I'm sure.

Those elements aside, *Private I* is an easy read, with a clear story that takes you through the search for a killer while at the same time tracking Paloma/Mira as she builds a new life for herself, finding new friends and hobbies while keeping Marlowe a closely guarded secret. Her investigation — couched as a research paper on the possibility that A.I. could one day be sapient — puts her in contact with various people she considers suspects in the murder.

The sapience versus sentience through line adds an interesting layer, as various characters discuss whether or not digital devices — artificial intelligence on steroids — could one day gain sentience, or even grow mature enough to develop sapience, the wisdom that comes from experience and not just the collection of data. Marlowe certainly seems to demonstrate a bit of that, having the ability to advise Paloma in her search for her grandfather's killer.

This is also not the first story I've encountered where there's a visible anti-AI contingent. Serena Straus' *ReInception* series also has that element, and I expect to see more of it as we plunge headfirst into the assault on our critical thinking skills that is the modern internet augmented by machine learning models and slop code that lets you liberate your prurient inner 14-year-old boy again.

While the story isn't rushed, the ending does feel a bit abrupt and sudden; it's a payoff that isn't quite set up fully at the beginning, but later on as she's conducting her "research" for the paper she's supposedly writing. In fact, the opening scene in the book — the funeral of her grandfather's colleague — introduces us to a number of characters who might be interesting, but they never show up again. Dr. Pavel Zhijeki, for instance, could have figured into the neo-Luddite story with ease.

I did like the fact that Marlowe is more like Alfred Pennyworth than HAL9000. But I would be hard pressed to accept the notion that we all would submit to wearing such devices as part of our everyday lives, even to the point of having such things as implants. Despite what Elon Musk would have you

think about Neuralink, it's not something I want any part of, and I don't think I'm in the minority on that. Nor do I think wearable devices are going to have that much appeal in the long run. I rather think that the opposite will prove to be the case, as the younger generations are gravitating toward the lo-fi tech of VHS and vinyl more frequently.

The age of surveillance tech is here, but I suspect more people are going to reject it as time marches on.

Maybe that's the next digital revolution: a total rejection of digital in favor of analog. Maybe the Neo-Luddites are onto something...

Private I is worth the time to read, if only to see what kind of dystopian future we dodged.

The Steerswoman by Rosemary Kirstein Review by Cory Doctorow

"This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license. The work was created by Cory Doctorow and appeared at pluralistic.net."

For decades, scammy "book doctors" and vanity presses spun a tale about how Big Publishing was too conservative and risk-averse for really really adventurous books, and the only way to get your visionary work published was to pay them to fill your garage with badly printed books that you'd spend the rest of your life trying to get other people to read: <https://pluralistic.net/2021/07/04/self-publishing/>

Like all successful grifts, this one worked because it wasn't entirely untrue. No, mainstream publishing isn't filled with corporate gatekeepers who relish the idea of keeping your brilliance from reaching its audience.

But.

But editors sometimes make bad calls. They reject books because of quirks of taste, or fleeting inattentiveness, or personal bias. In a healthy publishing industry – one with dozens of equal-sized presses, all commanding roughly comparable market-share, good books would never slip through the cracks. One publisher's misstep would be another's opportunity.

But after decades of mergers, the population of major publishers has dwindled to a mere Big Five (it was almost four, but the DOJ blocked Penguin Random House's acquisition of Simon & Schuster):

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sues-block-penguin-random-house-s-acquisition-rival-publisher-simon>

This means that some good books definitely can't find a home in Big Publishing. If you miss with five editors, you can exhaust all your chances with the Big Five.

There's a second tier of great publishers, from data-driven juggernauts like Sourcebooks to boutique presses like Verso and Beacon Press, who publish wonderful books and are very good to their authors (I've published with four of the Big Five and half a dozen of the smaller publishers).

But even with these we-try-harder boutique publishers in the mix, there's a lot of space for amazing books that just don't fit with a "trad" publisher's program. These books are often labors of love by their

creators, and that love is reciprocated by their readers. You can have my unbelievably gigantic Little Nemo in Slumberland collection when you pry my cold, dead fingers off of it:

<https://memex.craphound.com/2006/09/25/gigantic-little-nemo-book-does-justice-to-the-loveliest-comic-ever/>

And don't even think of asking to borrow my copy of Jack Womack's Flying Saucers are Real!:

<https://memex.craphound.com/2016/10/03/flying-saucers-are-real-anthology-of-the-lost-saucer-craze/>

I will forever cherish my Crad Kilodney chapbooks:

<https://pluralistic.net/2024/02/19/crad-kilodney-was-an-outlier/#intermediation>

Then there's last year's surprise smash hit, Shift Happens, a two-volume, 750-page slipcased book recounting the history of the keyboard. I own one. It's fantastic:

<https://glennf.medium.com/how-we-crowdfunded-750-000-for-a-giant-book-about-keyboard-history-c30e24c4022e>

Then there's the whole world of indie Kindle books pitched at incredibly voracious communities of readers, especially the very long tail of very niche sub-sub-genres radiating off the woefully imprecise category of "paranormal romance." These books are landing at precisely the right spot for their readers, despite some genuinely weird behind-the-scenes feuds between their writers:

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/16/17566276/cockygate-amazon-kindle-unlimited-algorithm-self-published-romance-novel-cabal>

But as Sturgeon's Law has it: "90% of everything is shit." Having read slush – the pile of unsolicited manuscripts sent to publishers – I can tell you that a vast number of books get rejected from trad publishers because they aren't good books. I say this without intending any disparagement towards their authors and the creative impulses that drive them. But a publisher's job isn't merely to be good to writers – it's to serve readers, by introducing them to works they are likely to enjoy.

The vast majority of books that publishers pass on are not books that you will want to read, so it follows that the vast majority of self-published work that are offered on self-serve platforms like Kindle or pitched by hopeful writers at street fairs and book festivals is just not very good.

But sometimes you find someone's indie book and it's brilliant, and you get the double thrill of falling in love with a book and of fishing a glittering needle out of an unimaginably gigantic haystack.

(If you want to read an author who beautifully expresses the wonder of finding an obscure, self-published book that's full of unsuspected brilliance, try Daniel Pinkwater, whose Alan Mendelsohn, The Boy from Mars is eleven kinds of brilliant, but is also a marvelous tale of the wonders of weird used book stores with titles like KLONG! You Are a Pickle!):

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Mendelsohn,_the_Boy_from_Mars

I also write books, and I am, in fact, presently in the midst of a long book-tour for my novel The Bezzle. Last month, I did an event in Cambridge, Mass with Randall "XKCD" Munroe that went great. We

had a full house, and even after the venue caught fire (really!), everyone followed us across the street to another building, up five flights of stairs, and into another auditorium where we wrapped up the gig:

Afterwards, our hosts from Harvard Berkman-Klein took us to a campus pizza joint/tiki bar for dinner and drinks, and we had a great chat about a great many things. Naturally, we talked about books we loved, and Randall said, "Hey, have you ever read Rosemary Kirstein's Steerswoman novels?"

(I hadn't.)

"They're incredible. All these different people kept recommending them to me, and they kept telling me that I would love them, but they wouldn't tell me what they were about because there's this huge riddle in them that's super fun to figure out for yourself:"

<https://www.rosemarykirstein.com/the-books/>

"The books were published in the eighties by Del Rey, and the cover of the first one had a huge spoiler on it. But the author got the rights back and she's self-published it" (WARNING: the following link has a HUGE SPOILER!):

<https://www.rosemarykirstein.com/2010/12/the-difference/>

"I got it and it was pretty rough-looking, but the book was so good. I can't tell you what it was about, but I think you'll really like it!"

How could I resist a pitch like that? So I ordered a copy:

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-steerswoman-rosemary-kirstein/7900759>

Holy moly is this a good novel! And yeah, there's a super interesting puzzle in it that I won't even hint at, except to say that even the book's genre is a riddle that you'll have enormous great fun solving.

Randall wasn't kidding about the book's package. The type looks to be default Microsoft fonts, the spine is printed slightly off-register, the typesetting has lots of gonks, and it's just got that semi-disposable feel of a print-on-demand title.

Without Randall's recommendation, I never would have even read this book closely enough to notice the glowing cover endorsement from Jo Walton, nor the fact that it was included in Damien Broderick and Paul Di Filippo's "101 Best Science Fiction Novels 1985-2010."

But I finished reading the first volume just a few minutes ago and I instantly ordered the next three in the series (it's planned for seven volumes, and the author says she plans on finishing it – I can't wait).

This book is such an unexpected marvel, a stunner of a novel filled with brilliant world-building, deft characterizations, a hard-driving plot and a bunch of great surprises. The fact that such a remarkable tale comes in such an unremarkable package makes it even more of a treasure, like a geode: unremarkable on the outside, a glittering blaze within.

Prose Bono

Alternate History Realism And Novel-Writing

By Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

I grew up on the post-WW2 adventure movies, books, comics, etc. I also read WW2 history. The fiction was more fun. The real world of WW2 and its aftermath is a world of the power of mass, of attrition. The world essentially bludgeoned the Axis to death with vast numbers of machines and a lot of Soviet blood. 95% of the fictional focus on spy rings, secret agents, super-science weapons, black ops ... was pure fantasy and most of the remainder didn't matter much outside the specialist literature. Even if the rocket planes and the other junk work, the numbers just don't add up.

-Scott Palter

If you want to get a good flame war going on an alternate history forum, you just need to raise the question of Operation Sealion, Adolf Hitler's plan to invade Britain in 1940. It has a fair claim to being the most heavily debated point of divergence in the alternate history community, not least because – on paper – it offers Hitler the chance to defeat the British and secure his western border before invading Russia. However, that chance exists only on paper. One does not have to be a pedantic nitpicker to realise that the odds of Hitler succeeding if he launched the invasion were actually very low. In order to win, Hitler would have to do the equivalent of rolling a dice six times and getting the same number every time. His decision to cancel the invasion was actually the right choice for him to make.

This does not, of course, make for good fiction. A novelist who wishes to explore a Britain dominated by Germany may be perfectly aware that Operation Sealion was a nonstarter, but he has no obligation to refrain from writing a book set in a Nazi-occupied Britain. The purists may argue that such a Britain could never have happened, unless the Nazis had the help of Alien Space Bats (for example, the 1950s Britain depicted in Doctor Who: Exodus), but this does not make the book bad fiction. The book's setting may be impossible, yet this does not mean that exploring the world and the people caught up in it is inherently a bad thing.

There has always been, I feel, a gulf between novelists who write to entertain and timeline realists who insist that points of divergence, and the consequences of a changed POD, must be as realistic as possible. The former wants to draw in the readers by making the story as exciting as possible, by pitting their characters against their enemies in a very different world or simply exploring the brave new (alternate) world. Alternate history novels are often, at base, genre novels set in alternate worlds, drawing in readers who like the genre in question and are willing to accept or overlook the alternate history aspects. This is very true of entry-level alternate history books: Harry Turtledove's WorldWar series combines aspects of science fiction as well as military fiction, while his The Two Georges is a detective story set in an alternate world. They also have the advantage that one does not have to know much about real history to enjoy the novels.

A novelist will choose his scenarios based on what is best for the story. A realist does not have that option. He may argue that the idea of Hitler refusing to declare war on the United States in 1941, after Pearl Harbour, is inherently unrealistic, and the idea of him declaring war on Japan instead is so absurd that it doesn't require any further discussion. This works well, when it comes to developing a timeline

such as the ones published by Sealion Press, but is often much less exciting than a novel (although they can serve as a setting for a novel, such as *The Marsh War*, which is based on *The Moscow Option*) and they do not always attract readers who are not already interested in alternate history. The novelist, on the other hand, will often go with the more exciting option of Hitler not declaring war, which would change World War II beyond recognition.

Much of this, I suspect, comes from the thrill of imagining very different worlds. A world in which the Confederate States of America makes its independence stick and does just fine afterwards may be unrealistic, and I would argue that yes it is, but it would also change the face of the world. A world in which Imperial Germany wins the First World War in 1914 will be very different from OTL, or a world in which Germany wins in 1918. These worlds would present very different challenges to the inhabitants and create grounds for stories that might be unrealistic but are very exciting. An Imperial Germany that won in 1914 would be confident enough to pick a fight with the United States, or try to invade Britain, while Germany that barely scraped a victory in 1918 would be much less inclined to cause trouble, not least because most of the problems of OTL would still exist and could no longer be blamed on the OTL scapegoats.

This also exists at the tactical level. A realist will argue that Operation Sealion is flatly unrealistic. A novelist, particularly a military-fiction novelist, would ignore that and explore what would happen if the Nazis tried anyway. A realist might argue that a British victory in North Africa in 1940 was unlikely, but – again – a novelist would dismiss that and use it as the basis for a story. And why should he not? A spy novel following the intrigue in Vichy-ruled French North Africa after the British conquer Libya and are now massing on the French border would be very exciting, even if it wasn't realistic.

The realist cannot afford to overlook details the novelist can pretend don't exist, such as a bridge leading out of Washington DC that the Confederates somehow forgot to take during their attack on the city. A novelist can wave his hands and declare "Hitler took Britain in 1940;" a realist cannot do anything of the sort. A novelist can depict military units performing operations that are completely impossible, in the real world, and get away with it in most cases. I suspect more people would have overlooked American troops performing impossible marches in *Stars and Stripes Forever* if the rest of the book had held up a little better. A nitpicker might argue that the American tanks of an alternate-1944 will be very different to the ones depicted, but again the novelist won't care; the realist, by contrast, will try to find ways to justify alternate tank development.

That said, the demands of a novel are often very different from the demands of a realistic timeline. At base, the Second World War was a contest of economics and the Allies (certainly after 1941) severely outweighed the Axis. It is simplistic to say that America outmatched Japan on a scale of nine-to-one, not least because as this doesn't include superior American technology and training, but is effectively true. A novel often needs to overlook such grim economic realities to ensure a certain degree of tension, perhaps even help us to root for the underdog. I have a theory this accounts for some of the more controversial aspects of our community – the Lost Cause myth suggests the CSA was the underdog, even though this was not remotely true, and there are people who support the underdog without realising that just because someone is the underdog doesn't make them the good guys.

There is, of course, a more controversial problem. Alternate history requires the author to use characters that are based on real people, either as POV characters (Robert E. Lee in *The Guns of the South*, Vyacheslav Molotov in *WorldWar*) or side characters encountered by the main characters (General Grant in *How Few Remain*, Otto Skorzeny in *WorldWar*), and it can be difficult to depict those characters in a manner that pleases everyone or even anyone. How would such a character react in a very different situation, or if they grew up in a very different world? The realist can depict such controversial

characters as bad, without any need to present them as decent people even in their own minds, but the novelist does not have such freedom. If he is using a historical character's POV, he must present the character as he would have been – or as close to that as possible – which raises uncomfortable questions if that character is meant to be the hero. If he is using the historic character as window dressing, the main character is unlikely to see him as we would see him. It is vanishingly unlikely, for example, that a young German officer attached to Adolf Hitler would see him as a genocidal monster – and if he did, it would raise the question of why he didn't execute Hitler on the spot. A decent novelist would devise the story to allow the hero to eventually realise that the historic character is a monster, but this is difficult to do properly. It is far too easy for someone to accuse the author of whitewashing very real atrocities and the monsters who committed them. It is also possible to be far too simplistic – for example, Robert E. Lee in *Leather Pants* or MacArthur the Death Eater – purely to suit the demands of the story.

This can even be true of an entire society. It is unrealistic to expect the Germans of an alternate 1950s to know the details of each and every Nazi war crime, let alone feel shock and disgust; it grows worse as the years go on and the Nazis brainwash successive generations to believe that the crimes never took place or that they were somehow justified. A person born and raised in such a society will not question what has been taught, at least at first; it was relatively rare, for example, for Southerners to oppose slavery even when it was very clearly not in their interests, something that will only get worse if the South has fought and won a war to preserve slavery. A novelist must present a character slowly coming to understand that his society is not perfect, which can be very difficult (and also lead to controversy). He must also push technological development to absurd levels – Conrad Stargard or Schooled in Magic; unrealistic, from a real-world point of view, but a very common demand for a tech uplift-themed novel.

The novelist also must try to work towards a relatively happy ending. The realist may study a timeline and conclude the bad guys are going to win, at least for the moment. The novelist has a certain obligation to make sure the good guys come out ahead. The *Draka* series is surprising, at least in part, because the bad guys win; their victory is, in many ways, the exact opposite of the novels in which the good guys win but there is some trace of the bad guys left to rebuild if left alone. The fact that Stirling portrayed his *Draka* POV characters as 'good guys caught in a bad system' only adds to the shock; they do not make any attempt to reform their society and indeed, if they tried, they would likely not succeed. The hints of reform at the end of *The Stone Dogs* are gone by the time of *Drakon*.

This owes much to our modern-day perceptions. The concept of Robert E. Lee turning into an ardent abolitionist seems absurd and given that Lee was a slave owner I would say it really is absurd, but it serves a useful purpose if the novelist wishes us to accept Lee as one of the good guys. The days in which slavery was regarded as a net good for everyone are long gone and good riddance; it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to accept a slaveowner as a hero. The controversy surrounding *The Guns of the South* owes much to Turtledove's need to present Lee, and Southerners in general, as better than the time-travelling Afrikaners. It works fine, from a novelist point of view, but much less for a realist.

Of course, the historical Lee had no way to know how his descendants, and those of his people, would judge him. Even when someone asserts that they would not have made poor choices in an alternate world – Oswald Mosley, for example, insisted he would not have collaborated with the Germans if they had successfully invaded Britain, but he made those assertions in his autobiography, which was published in 1968 and later repeated in a letter to Kenneth Macksey (who wrote *Invasion*). Was he telling the truth, or writing with the benefit of hindsight, in the certain knowledge the Germans not only did not launch the invasion, but lost the war? We have no way to know.

I am both a novelist and a timeline writer. I enjoy parsing out what might have happened if something had gone differently, and working out how the ripples of change spread across the entire world. I also enjoy creating worlds for my stories that are not, in my opinion, wholly realistic. Nor do they have to be. A reader who complains the setting is unrealistic is a reader who is essentially missing the point – the idea is to have a world to explore, not one worked out in every detail. It is quite possible that the destruction of the British Army at Dunkirk in 1940 would not have been that serious, in the greater scheme of things, but a novelist would use it to help streamline the invasion of Britain in his novel. Realism comes second to excitement; I will happily admit that I once advised an author to hand wave details rather than plot them out because someone would try to tie him down, rather than accept the world they were being shown and go from there.

There is, I feel, an interesting conflict between novelists and realists in the alternate history committee. Personally, I consider this to be futile – and dangerous. Most alternate historians entered the community through reading alternate history novels and going from there; my first alternate history novel was *Tilting The Balance*, followed rapidly by *Hitler Has Won*, neither of which are noted for strict realism. By contrast, many realistic timelines can be dry and unexciting to the casual reader; *For Want of a Nail: If Burgoyne Had Won at Saratoga* is a remarkable piece of work, and is rarely challenged as one of the more extraordinary contributions to alternate history, but it is also more of an alternate history textbook rather than a novel.

Realism is important. But so too are the demands of a novel.

And you know what? Real history is unrealistic.

Cleaning Up Infodumps by Cedar Sanderson

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I was at a job fair some years ago. It was sort of a waste of my time, but not really. By that I mean there were maybe six prospective employers I matched with, out of some two hundred. But I did have some lovely conversations with people, including the Army Corps of Engineers ladies, who were actually pitching me on joining them, since I'd originally thought they wouldn't need me (I'm not an engineer, can't hack the math). We wound up talking environmental clean-up, decommissioning military bases, and superfund sites. One of my professors had been involved in the chemistry of a superfund site and the testing, and another professor had spent half a lecture period talking to us about how a microscopic parasite changed the nature of garbage disposals and dumps in Ohio forever.

Why am I talking about toxic waste, and dumps, on a writing blog? Well, I'll get to that. First, though, let me tell you the Rumpke story, because as fiction plots go, it has potential. Way back when, before Cincinnati was much of a city, the Rumpke family (as my professor explained) provided a valuable service. They got paid twice: once to haul off perishable garbage from restaurants and stores, and again for the pork they got from feeding that garbage to their pigs. This business was lucrative enough they wound up buying a hilltop far from town, planning to move their hog farm away from the edges of the city and the complaining neighbors, when tragedy struck.

In telling a story, you have to give your reader enough information to keep them in the story. The danger lies in giving them too much information, thereby drowning the plotline, diffusing the tension that will compel them to keep reading, and leading to them setting the book down, or even more fatally on the kindle, closing the file and promptly losing it in the disorganized chaos Amazon seems to think Kindle readers prefer. As a writer, you need to avoid that fate at all costs. Which may mean making some unpleasant choices in digging out your info dumps and cleaning them up, which is what the

Rumpke's were forced to do when *Trichinella* hit the stage. Pork – especially garbage-fed pork – was suddenly suspect; no one wanted to eat a pig that might harbor the encysted parasites that could lead to illness and death, and the Rumpke family had this empty mountain they had just bought... So they sold the pigs off at a loss and shifted the focus of their business to hauling garbage away from the burgeoning city. They turned the hill into the first landfill, and a dump saved the family business.

Here, we saw the central characters (names lost to history... I'm sure they're out there somewhere, but I'm not looking them up right now) adapt to what could have been the killing blow to their little family business and come out on the other side with an even bigger, better plan. This is what we are often trying to write into our fiction, convincingly. We want to write a battle, and have our hero win it. The problem is, if we drop info dumps into the story, we slow our hero down as he wades through the swamp of description.

I know we've all had books we've skipped through page after page, trying to find where the hero wandered off to, leaving us lost in the dump. I personally can think of a glaring example of a series I eventually gave up on – not just because of the pages of detailed military weapon minutiae, but the rather condescending alt-hist info dumps that explained what he was doing on an elementary-schooler's level. When I'm skipping over half the book, past those two elements, it becomes a waste of my time, and certainly not a fun read.

When I'm writing, I try to look first and foremost at my pacing. Not every book needs to progress at break-neck speed. Some shouldn't. Working in exposition carefully, in a lull between action, works much better than throwing it in the middle of a fight scene. Even here, keep it sparing. Trust the intelligence of your readers, and don't spoon-feed them every last implied detail. Let them use their imaginations – this is, after all, why they are readers and not film geeks.

And if you go back over your book and discover that you've littered up the landscape with dumps, consider how best to clean them up. You can sometimes break them up, leaving small, easily digested lumps of data through the story that will gradually reveal the information you want to convey to the reader. This can be a great way to keep them reading, as they try to suss out what is going on. But don't suspend them in the grey, either, with no feeling of what is around them, what the characters are thinking or feeling, what the characters are doing and why. No description is probably as bad as too much of it.

Going back to the Rumpke story a bit, I didn't bother to go look up their names. It's not relevant to the story I was telling, the reason I was telling it. I could – and just might, because I'm perennially inquisitive – see if there is a bio or history out there with all the details. But research is not necessary for amassing details you must dump into the story. Sometimes it's really tempting. When I was researching for the *Pixie* books, and reading massive amounts of mythology, I kept finding stories I wanted to write into my story... except that the pacing in those books was fast, and having these myths in would slow it down and lose the reading momentum. So I set them aside, for another time, another story, and wrote on. As tempting as it is to show off your intensive research, resist the urge to create a dumpsite in your book.

Friction by Cedar Sanderson

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This article was originally published at the Mad Genius Club on October 28, 2017. It's as true now as it was then, and hopefully it will spark your thoughts on how to write, price, and market your books.

I bought a frozen lasagna for dinner for the family. I love to make lasagna, and have a great recipe a fellow author gave me, but... There was friction. In other words, it was Friday night, had been a very long week, and I was so tired it hurt. So I did something to reduce the friction and bought the darn lasagna.

So what does this have to do with writing? Well, it relates both to the writing, but more importantly, to the marketing and sales of our work. We want to reduce friction for our readers, but not too much. Frictionless is also a bad thing... But I digress. I'll come back to that in due time. Friction in the context I'm using it is anything that makes the reader work harder to overcome. We're going to say our readers have worked a long day and just want a book to curl up and relax with - literary fiction is the very definition of added friction to a book, which is why those are the books people love to say they have read but don't actually ever finish reading. So how do you reduce friction in a book? Like sanding a piece of wood - you start out with the obvious of removing typos and poor grammar, then you switch to the finer grit of making sure you're historically accurate, or consistent through the book with a character's development, or... you get my drift. At the end you have smooth, polished work.

But not too smooth. Here's the thing. People remember 'sticky data' that doesn't just drop through the colander of their brains. We all have colanders for brains, this isn't an insult. We have to: we're constantly bombarded by input, and if we didn't learn how to filter all - well, ok, most - of that out, we'd be gibbering in the corner with our hands over our ears and our eyes squeezed shut. So the input pours through the colander, but sometimes something is too big or too sticky to just fall through, and that we pay attention to and remember. You don't want your book to be so frictionless it falls through and is instantly forgettable. We want, to return to my wood carving metaphor, the grain of the wood to show through and give it some character, some unique qualities. Your book should still reveal your voice, the unique way that you write. If - and really, this should be when - you hire an editor, keep this in mind. They need to be helping you polish, not taking a belt sander to it and obliterating the interesting features that are your style.

Friction is, if anything, even more important when it comes to sales and marketing. Let's look at two ways: in-person bookstores, and online bookstores, to begin with. When was the last time you went to an in-person bookstore, a brick and mortar? How far did you have to drive? That was a lot of friction, wasn't it, before you got to the books. Now that you're in the store, how easy is it to find the book you want? Or the section you'd like to browse to find a book, at least? Last time I was in a bookstore they didn't have the fiction sorted by genre and it was a little annoying to say the least. Fortunately, I wasn't there for fiction, I wanted comic books, and I browsed the antique section of the store while I was there because I love beautiful books. But those aren't organized at all, just 'this looks old' and shelved. So it adds a lot of friction to my shopping experience. Why do I go back? Because this store offers a 'free book' coupon and that reduces the friction on my bank account. Note: I'm talking a used bookstore, here. Their books are mostly \$3 and comic books are a buck. My kids adore them, and frankly, so do I. Now, the last time I was in a 'new' bookstore was the local Barnes & Nobles, which is a fifteen minute drive from the house (good) in a very congested shopping area (bad) and we only bought one book, from the bargain rack, because I refuse to pay full price when I can hop on Amazon and get the discounted rate. But the authors!! you're saying They need to be paid!

No. Here's the thing. As a businesswoman, I like supporting fellow small businesses. I'll buy books at full price from fellow Indie Authors. Heck, if it's an option, I'll read the book through KU and then buy it, so they get paid twice (if I really like the book, this is a nice way to say thanks to a creator). As a budgeting wife whose whole goal is to live frugally and not get into debt, I'm out to spend money wisely and plunking down twenty bucks on a (paper) book that may get read once is not a wise decision. I have a monthly book budget, by the way, one for fiction and one for research because I am a writer. So, back to friction. I don't give a flip about supporting the big five publishers. So them? I buy discounted or even used.

Most Indies have already figured out that a great way to reduce friction and get more sales is to lower the prices of their books. Not having ritzy Manhattan offices to keep up appearances, they can afford to set their trade paperback prices around \$15 and their ebooks around \$5 for a novel. Now here's where we get to the inverse effect of friction: if you reduce the price too much, or make the book free, you remove so much friction the buyer mentally discounts the book in their head as being less worthy. Free ebooks have a very, very low read rate. You might give away thousands of them, and maybe hundreds will get read (if you have a good cover, but that's another post). Ebooks, in case you haven't already realized it, are perhaps the ultimate in friction reduction for not only book reading, but book buying. Above I asked about the last time you drove to a bookstore, and the time and hassle involved in that. For online shopping? Pull up Amazon or your favorite ebook site, and click, you're done and reading two minutes later. I was doing this last weekend when I was stuck in bed with a pinched nerve, trying to keep my mind off the pain. Binge reading, what a drug. You don't have to get dressed - not even into jammies, if you don't want to - to shop online. You don't have to risk your life in mall traffic (suck it, B&N, I'm never coming back again). You don't have to (shudder) put up with people to make a purchase.

Friction, by the way, is why you shouldn't limit your sales outlets too far. I've seen anti-Amazon advocates calling for selling books just through personal websites. That adds so much friction that I'd be surprised to hear of them making sales. Any sales. There are reasons why aggregator sites work, just like big department stores. Personally, I've chosen to add friction by not having my books available through Nook or Kobo and it wasn't just that I saw the writing on the wall for the Nook years ago when I first compared a nook and a Kindle side-by-side. I've added that friction in order to reduce friction by having my books available through Kindle Unlimited. It's not perfect, but you have to admit it's very darn close to being frictionless for the reader, which means that if they are enjoying the story, there's nothing to break them out of the reading trance as they march through an entire series. KU lowers the entrance hurdle for new readers to your work, and that reduces the friction, too.

Speaking of which! The anthology I have a story in, the one I was snippeting last week, is available for you now, and you can get it in paper, ebook, and read through KU. Just click [here](#) and you're there! How's that for frictionless?

Cultivating Words by Cedar Sanderson
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Spring is springing, and my thoughts inevitably turn to gardens. I'm not planning on putting one in this year, instead I have assigned the design and creation of a garden to my daughter as a school project. I'll give her guidance of course. But most of it is going to be up to her. I'll give her the information she needs, but the execution of knowledge is more important than simply knowing something. It's not possible in this era of information overload for her to know everything starting out. She has to learn by doing, making mistakes, and correcting course.

It has gotten me thinking, along with having written a garden onto a spaceship in my latest book, about gardening in general. But that's not what I came here to talk about today. Rather, it's a comment one of my alpha readers made while I was working on Tanager's Fledglings and she was reading along.

I wrote a scene with the main character lamenting his limited potable water supply and how he'd have to wait on a long shower until he reached a station or planet. My alpha reader inserted a comment that it would be very simple to turn his shipboard garden into a giant water filter. I replied that "I know that, and you know that, and he doesn't know that... Yet."

It's hard, as an author, to know all the things, but withhold that from the story until the time is right. In this case, my character has access to the information on how to build what he needs, but it's never occurred to him to do it that way. It will take an outside influence in the form of another character for him to have that forehead slapping d'uh! Moment.

Because life is like that. To create a believable character, you can't have them knowing everything. We all have those sudden eureka moments as we figure something out, usually something that should have been blindingly obvious to us in the first place. Now, you don't want your character to be an idiot about it, either. As I said, it's hard.

Sometimes we just have to figure things out the hard way. For instance, every writer is different. Some need a secluded room in the house, no interruptions, just a blank desk, a pencil, and a piece of paper. That would drive me nuts, and I know it. So when we moved, a few months back, I set up my big desk and main computer in the common household area. I thought the background noise of kids and the dog playing, easy access to the kitchen while I was cooking, would help me work.

It turned out I was wrong. I've done my best, most prolific days at a table in my bedroom, typing on my laptop, with the door firmly closed between me and my family. I can still hear them, but they aren't tapping me on the shoulder, wanting to play on my computer, and so forth. This does have some serious drawbacks. It means that I can't hear the oven timer, and the kids can't access me instantly which makes them pout.

On the other hand, it's possible the next book will insist on a different layout. But I don't think so. I just need to get into the groove. I've been cultivating words, researching, thinking about character motivation, trying to decide what's the overall arc of this book, within the series it is set in... Just like a garden, it's all about the soil. Build up a great soil, full of rich humus and a bit of sand for drainage...

Which brings me back to the gardens on a ship. Anyone who has ever enjoyed a ripe tomato warm from the sun, or the first strawberry of spring, will wonder about the quality of such raised in space, with no sun, and possibly no soil. Does that gardener know what they are missing? They may know in theory that microbes in the soil contribute far more to successfully gardening than we realize, now (but are starting to learn). They might even have the technology to inoculate their soil with a suite of beneficial microbes, fungus, and invertebrates. But just like in the human body, under the right circumstances those benefits can become opportunistic pathogens, and wreak havoc.

I Love You
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As it turns out there are many ways to say those three words. When it comes to some of the more famous (infamous?) here are two:

I know.
As you wish.

I was torn about doing a Valentine's post. I'm likely not the person to be writing about romance. Not because I don't write romance. I do and will do so again (no one stop me!) but because Romance with the uppercase as a genre is a complex beastie I am still learning. It's a fascinating blend of biology, psychology, and entertainment. It is also, for some people, how they pick up their understanding of what the romantic ought to be. Which is why those two lines, from different sources, hit like they do.

Mostly, what those who came up with romance novels think they want to hear is I love you. However, there are as many ways to say that as there are people. In real life? The most romantic gesture may not look like one beyond the person who is making it to the person who receives it. And if the recipient does not receive it, well, that's a sign the relationship has a profound mismatch and may not last.

No, I'm not really talking about the 5 Love Languages, although believe it or not I had to study that in an actual college class and no, it was not as a bad example. There's some usefulness in it, if for no other reason than it teaches young'uns (we were all in our teens at the time, or not far off it) that there are more ways to say I love you.

In romance, then, which is a genre which seems to subsist on tropes, the three words are the goal of much of the plots. They must be said, and reciprocated. Personally, I think it's more fun to have the characters act it out (not like that! Geesh... not all romance has to have steam fogging up the windows) before they say it, if they say it at all. A really solid partnership will form, and then, you get the words. Mainly, if you play it right, for the readers. The characters will know. I know.

Speaking of tropes, I was asked to write about them for Caroline Furlong's blog, and I analyzed my last romance novella for what it contained. I can't consciously steer a plot through all the desired tropes, but knowing what it has after the fact allows me to set up my keywords and marketing for more success of the story reaching readers.

Romance readers have become canny about tropes, have favorites, and will use them as shorthand in searching to find new books they will enjoy. So it's very useful to know (after the book is written) what tropes your work contains.

It is also useful to know when to invert the tropes. Signaling commitment with the three words might be something your characters don't do. That will hit differently than a close-locked embrace and murmured words meant for only one other pair of ears.

Let's Fix 'Em: How to Make Classic Books More Exciting to Men

By Jim McCoy

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I'm not gonna write this.

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I'm not gonna write this.

I'm not gonna write this.

I'm not gonna write this.

I'm totally not gonna write this.

I'm not gonna write this at all, anyhow, no way.

So, anyway...

Yeah.

I've read a couple of things today and they're making me batty so, while I'm totally not writing this, I'm writing it anyway. Because

A.) I'm a writer, no matter how annoying that fact is

and

B.) I have no impulse control. Just ask my waistline if you doubt me.

Life is rough. I'll get a helmet. I promise.

But for today...

I've had enough. I have totally had enough from "lich-rich-yooah" snobs who think that men don't read because they won't read a bunch of boring old crap that wasn't even good when it was published. But, in an effort to reach out across the gap and open a dialogue, I'm here to help the arrogant types out. I have, by myself and with assistance only from caffeine and pizza rolls, come up with a list of old books that suck and how to make them interesting to a modern, male audience. Buckle up, it's going to be a crazy ride.

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Real Plot: Some woman sleeps with some dude she shouldn't and then make her wear a red A for adulterer. Her life sucks. She hates everything. Any man reading this book hopes it ends before he voluntarily rips his eyes out of their sockets and throws them into a vat of acid so that he can't be tortured by being forced to read any more of this crap.

The Improved Plot: Same woman sleeps with same dude. She still gets caught and forced to wear the A. After a couple days of suffering due to this crap, she stumbles out of town crying and comes across an abandoned campsite with a hatchet and a large knife still laying around. She takes them home, sharpens them and proceeds to slaughter the town that has wronged her. At the end of the book, she successfully stalks the guy who sentenced her (all while wearing an old-timey long dress to add authenticity) into his home where she slays him with her axe, then stabs the blade of her knife through the A and embeds it in his chest. After that, she takes off on the best horse she can find, to head to another town and claim to be the sole survivor of a cholera epidemic. There she gets her Happily Ever After.

Share

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

The Real Plot: A couple of kids with a crazy neighbor attempt to save a black man from being convicted of a crime he didn't commit. The dude that actually did the crime attempts to kill them. I think. I was asleep by then.

The Improved Plot: A black man is accused of a crime he didn't commit. His lawyer doesn't think he can do much, because black man, time period, etc. After months of careful observation, Black man finds a way to trick the white dude into admitting that they whitey did it in front of the entire town. The white girl jumps up, gets in her father's face and forces him to realize that he just confessed to beating an innocent woman. Black man and smoking hot white girl ride off somewhere and get married and never mind what the neighbors think.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare

The Real Plot: The king is murdered. His son finds out about it. The son's mom tries to have him killed. There is a play that looks like the king's murder. The bad guy freaks out and confirms Hamlet's suspicions. There is a big sword fight. Everyone dies.

The Improved Plot: I mean, this one works as it is plot wise. You could probably tweak the ending a bit and have Hamlet survive, but the story is fine up until that point. The problem with Shakespeare's work is the language. If you want the modern man to enjoy Hamlet translate it into modern English. Nobody knows what forsooth means anymore. Seriously. If we can translate the Bible and the Koran we can translate freaking Shakespeare.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The Real Plot: There's a guy. He is a political prisoner in the Gulag. His life sucks. He has to work in the cold and doesn't get enough to eat. Then he has a good day and gets some extra soup and a couple of extra pieces of bread that he can save to eat later.

The Improved Plot: There is a guy. He is a prisoner in the Gulag. He has to work in the cold and doesn't get enough to eat. Then one day, he decides he's had enough. He confers with a couple of the guys on his work detail, and they conspire to steal enough crappy bread to last a couple of days, take their guard out from behind and run off into the cold to freedom. Upon their successful escape to another country, they manage to found a business building houses and strike it rich. Something, something, Ivan marries a hot chick.

I could go on, but there's no point in doing so, really. The bottom line is that men like books where people accomplish things. Men like books with lots of action. Men like books where the main character overcomes obstacles and makes life better for himself and those around him. Men don't like to read about suffering (ala *The Scarlet Letter*) and they don't like to suffer while reading (like by trying to translate Shakespeare into something understandable by a twenty-first century English speaker). If you want men to read more, or if you want men to show up to your book club, give them something to read that resonates with them. Because the emotional, relationship based, stuff that women read is not what men enjoy.

And no, that's not a problem with men. We're different than women. That's it. I'll leave it to the reader to decide whether God or evolution made us that way, but we are not the same. There are differences in brain chemistry and hormonal balances that make us different. We don't think the same way. We don't feel the same way. We don't act the same way. And we don't read the same things. That's just life.

So if you want men to read more, or if you want to sell more books to men, or if you want men to show up for your book club, provide them with a product they'll enjoy.

And if you want to learn more about the types of books me enjoy, you can subscribe here and/or go back through my archive because I'm a man and I review the things that men like.

Marketing Minimalism: Back Matter

by Cedar Sanderson

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Every book should have certain things in the front of the book, and at the back, after the story is complete. Flip through a few books and you'll get a feel for what these are. As a marketing matter, generally we're most concerned with that part of the book that comes while the reader is on the happy moment of just having enjoyed the story. They might want to read more in the series, or if there is no more (yet) then perhaps they want to read more by you, the author who just gave them a few hours of enjoyment. In an ebook, this can be made quite easy by the provision of live links to your other work on the page immediately following 'the end' and you really should provide this.

It's simple enough to do, and it might be one of the most effective ways to sell other books once you've shown your readers that you can deliver the goods. I know that I, as a reader, can and will binge-read through a series by clicking those links at the end of an ebook. If you are Amazon-only, you can insert a direct link to the kindle ebooks. If your books are wide, you'll want to provide a link to a landing page on your website, book funnel, or some other place. Keep in mind the less clicks the reader has to jump through, the more likely they are to persist and buy at the end (of course, having books in KU makes this even easier, which is partly why that program is so profitable). I generally live-link the first book in a series, not necessarily all of the books, since I have a lengthy bibliography. I also include, without live links, a few books by friends who write books that vibe with my books, so my readers have lots of options for more reading material.

Something I've just done in the latest release, *Tanager's Fleet*, is to include a newsletter sign-up link, with offer of a freebie for the readers if they subscribe to a periodical mailing which will only send them email about once a month. This will be a short newsletter informing them of my latest release, upcoming convention appearances, or other news about Cedar-the-author. I'm using a Substack for this, not my primary blog which is also hosted on Substack, as I'm familiar with the platform. The freebie I'm offering to dedicated readers is an album of music crafted for *Tanager's Fleet*, and that zip file I've

hosted on Dropbox with a link from the newsletter. Time will tell if this is an effective tactic. I'm not great with setting that up smoothly, but it will be an initial data-set. For upcoming projects I have in mind things like Della's Cemetery Etiquette and Receipts for the next Groundskeeper novel. Often these reader freebies can be a short story that appears nowhere else, of course. You want to offer an incentive for them to sign up for your newsletter, above and beyond the simple idea that they will hear about your latest book in a timely fashion.

So! It's a lot of work to go back through the catalog of your work, if you are like me with a few dozen titles to update. However, this really is necessary as you never know where a reader is going to discover your books. You want them to be able to find more by you.

Marketing Minimalism: Giving it away

By Cedar Sanderson

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The folks over at the Based Book Sale did something different this time: they opened the sale to short stories. It's rare to see opportunities to promote shorter work, be that stand-alone short stories, collections, or anthologies. You'll find all of the above in this sale, and the organizers asked for the pricing to be set to \$0.99 for the duration, to give readers an inexpensive way to explore new-to-them-authors. It's a great idea, and I am very pleased they tried this out. I decided that I would include my space opera romance short, Djinn, in the sale, and set it to free for the window of time Amazon allows, as its regular price is only \$0.99.

Above is the results of this little experiment, three days in. I've given away 345 copies of Djinn, and about two percent of those readers went ahead and bought the whole series. This is why I put Djinn in the sale and set it to free. I was curious to see, with this little experimental series of short stories, what would happen. It cost me nothing, and perhaps it's gained me a half-dozen new readers. We're not talking a lot of money, here, those are each priced at \$0.99 and I get about \$0.34 from each sale. However, if those readers then go on to read through my backlist, I've got a lot of books for them to enjoy.

This really only works when you do have a backlist. Also, freebies like this are... not always effective at getting new readers. I don't actually recommend putting a book to free, because there are people who will grab all the free books they can lay hands on and then never get around to reading them. We value what we've paid for. Setting a lower price rather than free means the reader will pick up the book they are interested in, not just looking at the price tag. In the above image, you see some of that, where hundreds of downloads translates out to a tiny percentage of read-throughs. I'll report back next week if the numbers change after the sale is done. The first day of the sale was the day I got the most downloads by far, which is fairly normal for a sale in my experience.

The blue here is Djinn, the tiny red and yellow caps are the other books in the Sumire series.

The interesting thing was that some of that spike may not be due to the sale. The impetus of the sale downloads pushed the book really high in the free book rankings.

I was surprised, and pleased, to see this happen. There are readers who haunt the freebies, what are sometimes called whale readers. Voracious readers with more time than budget, they are what drives Kindle Unlimited, too, and most of my books are available to them. So! It will be something I'm looking for, an uptick in KENP reads.

Once I topped a couple of categories, I shared a screenshot around on social media to create a little buzz. I didn't link to the book itself, but to the whole sale, because that's how you support the sale (generally they use affiliate links to finance the huge amount of effort these things take to pull together. I used to do sales here on MGC so I know) and I didn't want to skew the data with my fanbase alone.

Was it worth doing? Absolutely, because it was book one in a series, it was created in the first place to collect data (don't get me wrong, these were fun to stretch and write, and I will likely revisit these again), and it shows me what may be working, or not, so I can adjust on current information. Marketing methods change, constantly. Part of this series is me talking about what I'm doing, what works, and trying to give all of you tools you can use with relatively little effort and expenditure.

Marketing Minimalism: Word of Mouth

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This time I can't give you a how-to. I'm going to instead talk about how important this is, and — sorry, introverts! — how I have seen it work in the past. Word of mouth is the gold standard for marketing because of what it is. It's trust, and you can't buy that with all the marketing money in the world. Right now, there's a 'leaked' ad making the rounds of the internet from a planned Superbowl ad for Budweiser. It's a great ad, it has all the storytelling elements: the tearjerker heartstrings plucked, the maturation of plucky younglings we can cheer on, an amazing visual of a pegasus, and finally a soaring patriotic moment. The reactions I've seen have mostly been 'nice try, but we know what you are,' referring to a terrible ad a couple of years ago which shattered the trust of Bud's usual clientele. They will likely never regain that trust in their brand. Doesn't matter how much they spend on the ads, how far they spread them (likely knowing their base clientele is not going to watch the Super Bowl this year, either) they had broken trust.

When it comes to word of mouth, the readers (because we are writers) largely don't know us, and don't have a reason to trust us. However, they have readers they know and like, people who may be their friends, people who have said 'hey, you might like this book...' in the past and they did enjoy it. Shared tastes build a bond. So, when that person says 'you should read this new book by a writer I enjoy' the new reader is far more likely to trust the recommendation than they are to trust your ads, and that's the power of word of mouth. This is also where it can go wrong. Word of mouth has to be spontaneous and authentic. You, the author, can ask your fans to share your promo materials, and tell people about your books, and should ask for this (sorry, introverts!) when you are interacting with readers. Some of them will. However, if you are publishing, say, a cozy fantasy, and your fan who mostly reads military science fiction push your book, that's going to come across to their friends and fellow readers as off-putting.

When you ask your readers to tell their friends about your books, don't make it a blanket statement. Something like 'if you think you know someone who will like this, tell them about it!' is better than just 'share everywhere!' although that can work, too. I have quite a few reviews from readers who comment they never thought they could read X genre and enjoy it, but they found themselves liking this book out of their comfort zone. You can't count on those, though! What I'm saying is that you can't force word of mouth.

The other thing about word of mouth in that trust chain is that your readers, your first points of connection, have to trust you. With a brand-new release, you have the sales that go to readers who would buy

your grocery list if you published it. I'm always humbled and amazed by these people, myself. However, if you put out a bad book, then you break that trust, and suddenly you'll see your sales tanking – not on the initial spike, but after, when the second groundswell of word of mouth sales would normally come. Because your core fanbase isn't talking about the book. How to fix this? Make sure you're putting out a product worth talking about (and not in a bad way, not all publicity is good publicity). You need to have a solid cover that promises a great story inside it – if you ever see a reader talking about your work and starting off with 'ignore the cover, the book is actually good...' then you have failed and need a new cover ASAP. You need a blurb that hooks the interest of that new reader who isn't sure how much they trust their buddy who said 'you should read this!' and that blurb should not give away the whole plot, nor wander into four lengthy paragraphs. And your book should be a good solid read. It doesn't need to be brilliant, but it does need to be well-paced, interesting, and have appealing characters the reader will enjoy getting to know. These are the things that will also set you aside from the AI churn, by the way. Your unique voice, and a well-constructed story.

To follow on from last week, this is what the A+ content looks like on Amazon once it's approved. Very much like it did in the preview while I was working on it, which is great to know. I've seen a small sales bump from the promo graphics I've been sharing on social media, so that's good.

I'd taken a break from big marketing projects to work on polishing and publishing a novella, because the best way to keep your readers happy is the next book. Tomato Wyrn started as a serial on my blog, then I pulled it down, added more complexity in the point-of-view characters, and published it as my January book. Will I get 12 publications this year? Only time will tell. I made it to nine out of twelve last year.

Some Thoughts on Adapting Novels into Movies

Introspection by Mark Nelson

This article is motivated by the discussion between David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss of Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025) which appeared in their fanzine *Two Chairs in Print* #12 (December 31st 2025).

I've never read *Frankenstein* (1818). Despite it having a strong claim to being the first science-fiction novel, I have no plans to read it. I've only ever watched one film adaptation of *Frankenstein*, Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1994).

David and Perry's discussion of Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* raised a number of eternal questions. Let's start with, why adapt a novel into my movie? A commercial answer might be that a popular novel already has a large potential audience. There might be other answers that are driven by commerce. Whilst legitimate, these are not, for me, interesting answers. So the question remains, why adapt a novel into a movie; particularly if the novel has already been adapted? One answer to this might be that you don't believe that previous adaptations were "faithful" to the novel. I've always assumed that was a strong motivation for Branagh. Why call your adaptation Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* unless you are emphasising that your version tacks closer to the novel than previous adaptations?

A second eternal question, which follows on from Branagh's title, is what makes a good adaptation? One answer might be that a "good" adaptation is one that is "faithful" to the novel. This is an unsatisfactory answer because it replaces one word that is undefined, "good", by a second word that is undefined, "faithful".

At what point the changes to the novel become “too much” will be in the eyes of the viewer. I’m sure that it’s possible for a film to be a good movie “on its own terms” whilst at the same time being a poor adaptation of a novel. Though in this case we return to the question as to why adapt a novel if you’re not going to be “faithful” to it.

What do I conclude from this? Only that there’s always going to be a tension between producing an adaptation that stands on its own two artistic feet as a good film whilst producing a movie that stays “true”, in some sense, to the novel. And that these wishy-washy words “faithful” and “true” cannot be defined but must be determined by the viewer on their own terms.

I see that in the notes I scribbled alongside my hardcopy print-out of this issue I wrote “why film a book if it doesn’t pay homage to the novel?” Is “homage” another replacement word for “faithful?” I think not. It’s perhaps a very slippery slope, but if I read that a film paid “homage to the novel” then I would not think that it was being “faithful” to the novel, it wasn’t in “the spirit of the novel”. An homage may not even be an adaptation. So I think, for me, the question is whether an adaptation is “faithful” to the novel, whatever that word means.

I’m sure that the kinds of questions I’ve outlined above have been asked from the time of the first movie adaptation. (I wonder what that was?) And they will be continued to be asked into the future. Not just for as long as movies are produced. But far into the future, for as long as version of novels are produced in some kind of “visual” format with run-times of no more than two to three hours. (Whilst writing I’ve learnt that there’s an area of film study called “adaptation fidelity criticism”.)

Moving onto other thoughts that have been spurred by David and Perry’s excellent coverage of Frankenstein in Two Chairs in Print 12. One reason to revisit old texts is that they still speak to the present. Perry puts it this way.

What Del Toro is doing here is pushing that side of things and saying science has gone too far and they’re not taking responsibility for the consequences of their research. And they’re just doing it because, well, we can. And in fact, that’s what Frankenstein does here. He does this because, well, it’s a scientific problem and he’s just going to solve it, and that’s it. And he doesn’t give any thought to the consequences.

The reckless scientist has become almost a science-fiction cliché. (Or at least in the wrong hands, it is a cliché). And nor is this idea limited to the imagination of science-fiction writers. Will the Pentagon’s pursuit of AI systems that can surveil American citizens without restriction and can kill without human authorisation become our Cyberdyne Systems?

But actually, this was a preamble into the part of Perry’s comment that I was most interested in. And that’s probably exactly what Mary Shelley was thinking about in the beginning. Because now I am intrigued. What was the kind of scientific research, in the early years of the nineteenth century, that Mary Shelley heard about and which set her off in a direction that resulted in her writing Frankenstein?

And you can certainly understand why people like Brian Aldiss consider the original Frankenstein novel to be the start of science fiction as you and I know it, modern science fiction as you and I know it.

I’ve always associated Brian Aldiss with the idea that Frankenstein marks the beginning of science fiction. That impression comes largely from reviews of his book *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction* (1973). But now I wonder: was he really the first to propose this idea, or simply the first to present it in a widely read book? This question reminds me of a remark by V.I. Arnold (1937-

We are faced here with the impossibility of making a film that is identical to the novel. Firstly, how do you deal with prose description? Secondly, let's take the rule-of-thumb that one page of text corresponds to one minute of film time. How long is a typical film? How long is a piece of string? Based upon no evidence I'll put forward that a typical Hollywood movie might be 90–120 minutes whilst large blockbusters might be 120–180 minutes. Using our rule-of-thumb we run into problems with novels that are longer than 180 pages.

Emma Thompson won an Academy Award in 1996 for her adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). I saw her interviewed about this, most likely on the Graham Norton show. She said something to the effect that her script was not popular, that she was not popular, with certain parts of the Jane Austen Society. The reason for this was that in order to produce the script, various parts of the novel had to be removed. This led to there being at least one scene, probably more, in which there was no appropriate original dialogue. So Emma Thompson had to write dialogue for that scene. This was the part that was not well received by some parts of the Jane Austen Society. I've only read *Sense and Sensibility* once or twice. When I watched the movie, I didn't pick up that there were invented scenes with invented dialogue. As I didn't know, it didn't "ruin" my enjoyment of the movie. But even if I'd known, would it have "ruined" my enjoyment? I don't think so. I'd have thought this is an inevitable consequence of adapting a novel.

From an article that I read recently I've learnt that many Shakespeare plays would run 3–4 hours if they were performed verbatim. Modern theatre audiences typically prefer run times of around 2–2.5 hours. So it is standard practice for directors to cut material from the text, although there are exceptions to this; for example, academic productions and so-called "marathon performances". Though perhaps this is different to Thompson's adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, it's a removal of text rather than her removal-and-addition of text.

Another question that can be asked is whether an adaptation "works as a movie?" This is very different from asking if it's a good adaptation or if it's faithful to the novel. Conceivably an adaptation could be a very good movie whilst being a very poor adaptation or not being faithful to the novel. Though this returns me to the question "why adapt a novel".

This reminds me of the Jane Fonda movie *Stanley & Iris* (1990), which also starred Robert De Niro. This was based upon Pat Barker's novel *Union Street* (1982), which contains seven interconnected stories about different working-class women living in a northern English industrial town. The movie retained so little of the book that Pat Barker asked for her name to be removed from the movie titles. It's not an exaggeration to say that the only two things common to the movie and the novel are the name of one of the characters (Iris) and the fact that she's a working-class woman. Why bother adapting this novel if the movie is going to bear so little resemblance to the novel? The novel was published by Virago Press. With all due respect to Virago Press, although the novel was well received, it doesn't fall into the category of books that "have a large potential audience", particularly in the USA.

I shouldn't have to read the novel to enjoy the adaptation. I agree with Perry that any adaptation "is going to be different". In fact, it has to be, in order to shoehorn the story of the novel into the limited running time of a film. Perry suggests that it's not a valid criticism to say that an adaptation has "moved away from the story, therefore I don't like it". As outlined already, any adaptation will inevitably move away from the story. But I think it can be a valid criticism if the story of a film has moved too far away from that of the novel. In the case of *Stanley & Iris* so little remains of the story of the novel that the movie has been described as a "Hollywood travesty".

2010), a very influential Russian mathematician, who often observed that famous mathematical theorems are never named after the person who discovered them.

I would be very interested to know how *Frankenstein* was received when it first appeared. Did contemporary reviewers discuss the novel in terms of scientific experimentation, scientific thinking, and the human consequences of technology? The word “technology” may not have been in common use in the early nineteenth century, even though the Industrial Revolution was already well underway. Did the “progress” of the Industrial Revolution provide the grain of sand that led to the “formation” of *Frankenstein* — giving birth not only to its unnamed monster but perhaps also to his twin: science fiction itself?

Writing Diverse Characters A Guest Post by Christopher Nuttall As it appeared on [.substack.com](http://substack.com)

(Editor’s Note: Thank you Christopher Nuttall for taking the time to write a guest post for us here at Jimbo’s. Chris is the author of approximately elebenty bajillion books, a few of which he mentions below. You should check his work out. He’s an awesome writer.)

A year or so ago, someone asked me who was my favourite character of colour. I think it was an attempt at a gotcha question, because I don’t really think about characters as being characters of colour. There is a difference between a Diverse Character and a Character Who Happens To Be Diverse: the former exists to prove a point, and deflect the blame if the television series/movie flops; the latter is a person in their own right, a person who is far more than just an icon of the endless and rather tedious culture war. The former tends to be too good, denied any failings (Rey of *Star Wars* is a very good example of this); they wind up being accused, often correctly, of being Mary Sues. The latter work for their happy endings and by the time they get them they thoroughly deserve them.

The first answer that crossed my mind was Captain Sisko. Sisko was easily the most well-rounded captain in *Star Trek*, a father and political/religious figure as well as an officer and a gentleman. Throughout the seven seasons, we see him overcome his trauma from the Battle of Wolf 359 and grow into his role as station commander, military leader, diplomat and politician and many other positions and responsibilities.

But Sisko was conceived before the modern culture war really took off.

The second answer that crossed my mind was Luz Noceda of *The Owl House*. We have very little in common, apart from being neurodivergent, and it may seem odd that I like her, but Luz represents a perfect example of a Character Who Happens To Be Diverse. She is smart and funny, but her own preconceptions about magical worlds blind her when she falls into a real magical world; she makes mistakes, some of which have very serious consequences, through misunderstanding the reality around her. Luz works for her victories, and we see her putting in the work, so her victories are of very real value.

Luz works so well because her creator, who is a genius far beyond me, managed to thread the needle between developing a character for greater representation (Luz is Dominican-American as well as bisexual) while avoiding the pitfall of creating a too-perfect character who never struggles, never makes mistakes, and never uses her gender, skin colour and sexuality to bludgeon critics with accusations of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Put crudely, the key to developing a Character Who Happens To Be Diverse is to remember that they are human. They are allowed to make mistakes.

For such a character to work, in my opinion, they must follow certain rules:

First, they should be as unique as possible. They should not be legacy characters because it is all too easy to dismiss them as cheap attempts to build on an already established franchise/character. (The principal exception to this is universes that allow the creation of additional characters, such as Star Trek captains or Green Lantern ring bearers, but even so the new character needs to be unique.) Ideally, they should be in new universes and/or isolated from other characters. They should stand and fall on their own merits, instead of being compared to pre-established characters.

Second, they should be seen to struggle. If they find themselves in a new world, they should be lost or confused at least for several comics/episodes. If they have superpowers, they should not master them immediately. They should work to gain experience, instead of magically gaining experience they need. (If this is a character who obtains power/experience from someone else, such as Joe90, there should be at least one episode when they find themselves working without their powers.)

Part of the reason that Rey is unsatisfactory as a character is that she is rarely seen to struggle. Luke is very much the load throughout much of the first movie and even in the second he still lacks both skill and experience, note how the only reason he survived his first fight with Darth Vader was because Vader wasn't actually trying to kill him. It isn't until the third movie that Luke is a full Jedi (and even then the only person who addresses Luke as a Jedi is Palpatine). Rey, by contrast, has a very easy ride.

These struggles should not be just be with editors, but with themselves. The first meeting between Commander Sisko and Captain Picard boils with tension, because Captain Picard was kidnapped by the Borg and assimilated, his knowledge and tactical skill added to the collective and used to ensure a massacre at Wolf 359, a battle that killed Sisko's wife. Blaming Picard for being used in such a way is grossly unfair, but Sisko would be more than human if he didn't feel, at some level, that Picard was to blame.

A perfect character is a boring character. A character who struggles to overcome their demons can be a very interesting character.

Third, their accomplishments should not come at the expense of anyone else. The character should not be held up against another older and well-established character and proclaimed to be automatically better. (One particularly bad example of this is Green Lantern Simon Baz, who shortly after getting the ring pushes it to do something other Lantern believed to be impossible; don't worry, he gets better.) This should be true both in universe and out: Finn was the character from The Force Awakens with the most potential for later development, but he becomes comic relief instead of a Jedi, while the narrative focuses on Rey and Kylo Ren.

The infamous and badly written scene where Shuri puts down Tony Stark and Bruce Banner is another example of a character being promoted at the expense of an older character. It grates even for those of us who love Shuri, partly because Shuri has the advantage of knowledge and technology several decades ahead of Stark and Banner, but also because it is simply unnecessary. Shuri is awesome in her own right and shrilling her in such a manner undermines her, making her appear arrogant and condescending and gives plenty of ammunition to the haters.

The key to writing diverse characters is to remember that they are human, that they have feelings and desires and sometimes those feelings and desires are improper or flat-out wrong. A character with racist views who learns the error of his ways and works to overcome them is more interesting than a character who is already perfect and doesn't have a drop of racism in his body; in fact, the latter can be irritating as well as boring. You want the characters to be likeable as well as understandable, because a character the reader doesn't like at a very primal level is a character who can be easily dismissed and discarded, when someone better comes along.

You also need to represent their lives honestly. If they have problems with racism, you need to explain why; if they have problems caused by a mismatch between their physical bodies and gender identities, you need to be honest about why these problems exist rather than pretending they don't. This is never easy to do, but you have to. One of the many great things about *The Owl House* is that it acknowledges the issues caused by Luz's neurodivergence, rather than glossing over them or making them an advantage in her new world.

You should also resist the urge to accuse your critics of racism or sexism or any sort of bigotry. It is true that some critics are bigots, who don't want to step outside their comfort zone. It is also true that some characters are not paragons of goodness and virtue and proclaiming them as such is not remotely helpful. When you are criticised, listen to the criticism and decide for yourself if it is helpful or not. (Helpful hint; anyone who criticises or insults you personally is a troll can be safely ignored.)

For example, both *Blood at the Root* and *The Marvellers* feature African-American teenagers going to magic school. *The Marvellers* is the better of the two, with a heroine who is more sympathetic and the prose written in plain English. *Blood at the Root* not only has a far more sharp-edged hero, who is somewhat less sympathetic, but it is also written in a version of African-American Vernacular English and comes with buzzwords from the social justice background that can often make the book very hard to follow. If you wrote a book in such a manner, the fact that people are having difficulty following you is a sort of thing you desperately need to know. Blaming people for telling you that, even if you disagree, is a bad move.

The issue of introducing representative characters has been a hot button topic for far too long now. Too many people have tried to move forward too far too fast, instead of doing the hard work of building up their characters naturally; they have been too quick to accuse critics of bigotry rather than listening to their concerns and learning from them. In doing so, they have thrown the entire concept of representative characters into question and made it all too easy for their critics to smear them in return.

It is not easy to build up a character piece by piece, to show the character developing from flawed childhood and teenage beginnings into a well-rounded adult, but it is far more rewarding in the long run. And it does not cast a long and odious shadow over other characters of colour either.

You Should Be Reading Cedar Sanderson

Every so often there's an argument raging over the internet... I know, I know, shocking. Deplorable. How could they?!?

In this case, the repeated kerfluffle – for these are never new and novel abruptions – is about how much (or little) a writer ought to be reading. I have my opinions on this, but largely they would boil down to: if you never read, then how on earth can you learn to write? Obviously, a writer cannot spring into form

from nothing. Spontaneous generation has been disproven for even the smallest of creatures (even bacterium have a progenitor) and it certainly does not apply to writers. Even if a person can legitimately claim to never have read a book in their entire life, and be truthful about it, there are other forms of storytelling. Which are also subject themselves to controversy. I see those who claim audiobooks don't count as reading. Ebooks don't count as reading. Frankly, I'm loose enough to point out that movies, TV, and even yes, video games all contain stories and do a rather decent job of telling them to their consumers. Which doesn't make them reading, but it does mean that even that mythical writer who's never so much as peeked into the pages of a text has absorbed story. Badly, perhaps. Still.

There's another argument, tangential to the first, of what stories ought to be told. Some stories are held up as worthy, while others are kicked under the rug to lie lumpy in the background of history, and still others are butchered and bowdlerized to suit the current mores and expectations. If you think I'm directing this in any particular direction you're likely wrong, because I've seen it on every possible axis. And it's not exactly new.

I was reading Dorothy Sayers, because I finally prodded my brain back into production of fiction, and when I'm actively writing I lose my appetite to read fiction, instead turning to non-fiction for research, or just to give my brain a break. This collection of essays was the latter. I do so enjoy her sense of whimsy and how she approaches her point.

These snips come from an essay on what art is, and is not, and what the point of it is from a soul's perspective – far from most novelist's thoughts while they compose. Which is as it should be frankly. I've been seeing a lot of anguish about 'conservative' and/or 'Christian' writing and what that should, or shouldn't, look like. Up to and including a very recent denunciation of Tolkien that had me rolling my eyes hard enough to be painful. I get this because it's the sectors of the 'net I hang out in, I'm sure there are parallels on the other points of the axes of people's peculiar alignments as well. All of them are missing the point.

Message fiction exists for the message. Not for the story, not for 'art' but to exert power, as Sayers points out. On the other paw, all story has messages. Sometimes the author even intends these that slip through to the readers. Or viewers, as the case may be. Some readers never even consciously cue into the heavy-handed sermons they consume until they are subsumed by the intent of the pseudo-artist.

“take again the case of the word “reality.” No word occasions so much ill-directed argument. We are now emerging from a period when people were inclined to use it as though nothing was real unless it could be measured; and some old-fashioned materialists still use it so. But if you go back behind the dictionary meanings—such as “that which has objective existence”—and behind its philosophic history to the derivation of the word, you find that “reality” means “the thing thought.” Reality is a concept; and a real object is that which corresponds to the concept.”

— Unpopular Opinions by Dorothy L. Sayers
<https://a.co/027VZebN>

So! You should be reading. Widely, deeply, and in ways that perhaps defy expectations. Explore reality. Get out and do things. And then, write to understand where you have been and what you have done. This is the only true art. Not to attempt to sway others. Not to attempt to depict the face of your god. Simply to limn the characters in story as best as you can, because in that alone are you creating true art.

~Finis~