

The N3f
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
July 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 of places that publish reviews of science fiction books. We collect them, regardless of the philosophical tastes of the reviewers, and publish them all in one place.

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 and is rather overworked, so therefore expect that in the future the N3F Review will be appearing less frequently, not necessarily on a regular schedule.

Publisher's Notes

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Fiction

A Journey of Black and Red by Alex Gilbert Review by Dani Zweig

A Journey of Black and Red by Alex Gilbert (writing as Mechanimus) was republished as a series of eleven novels. (Yeah, that's a lot. It's one story, and it took that many chapters to tell.)

Ariane is a young vampire (young by human standards, very young by vampire standards) in the America of the early 1800s. Gilbert's vampires are typical for the genre: They are dangerous apex predators, and they while away their potential eternities forming alliances that compete for power.

Ariane had the misfortune to be turned into a vampire by Nirari, who is too old and powerful to play those games. He wanders the world, a one-vampire calamity, and leaves any vampires he makes to fend for themselves. They tend to have short life expectancies - not least because they have no allies looking out for them when they are starting out and vulnerable. The very few of Nirari's children who survive are formidable - and Ariane may become one of them.

The story takes us through the early 1800s, with Ariane struggling to survive, later 1800s, with Ariane building enough of a power base that the truly powerful start taking notice, and into the 1900s, and a race to keep Nirari from alleviating his boredom by destroying the world.

The story is told in the first person. Ariane is engaging, capable - and somewhat accident-prone.

As the Earth Dreams: Black Canadian Speculative Stories Edited by Terese Mason Pierre Review by Robert Runté

Editor Terese Mason Pierre has collected ten fabulous (in both senses of the word) stories by Black Canadians into what has instantly become one of my all-time favourite anthologies.

The opening story, Chimedum Ohaegbu's, "Ravenous, Called Iffy", sets the tone. There is a dream-like quality to the writing: each individual moment is clear and meaningful and relatable, but subject to absurdist segues: "After my mother's third death . . .". Wait, what? But of course, the purpose of such intrusions is to shake the reader loose from the literal context to connect the reader to the universal experience of family. The story is ostensibly about the ambivalent identities and life experiences of second-generation immigrants, but using magic realism as the canvas, Ohaegbu is able to integrate those specific understandings into the broader human condition. This story may not be about you or your family—even though it very much feels like that time your cousin explained to you, yet again, how they were related; or that time your bestie got married and you couldn't just go over all the time anymore; or when your mom made you feel like she was disappointed in you because she did something perfectly reasonable, but unexpected—but Ohaegbu makes you feel all the feels as if it were your life and your family. That sort of specific representation and universal relatability is a lot to ask of a short story, but Ohaegbu pulls it off perfectly.

Several other stories use speculative elements to deeply explore this theme of family. Whitney French's "Deh Ah Market" invokes the rhythms of language, culture, and genetics to reveal how the family's origins in the islands of the 1840s connect with their relations in contemporary island-like neighbourhoods in Toronto, cousins entangled across time and space. Instead of going backwards to explore roots, Francesca Ekwuyas, "Hallelujah Here and Elsewhere" goes sideways into a parallel world. Ekwuyas posits that even when the details differ across timelines, the fundamentals of one's relationships don't change. Trynne Delaney's "Playing Dead" takes the opposite approach, depicting what happens when families become disconnected from their histories and each other. In a future shaped by billionaires and pandemics, Delaney's nanny observes how her employers' narcissistic obsession with immortality has literally drained the life out of their family. (Given the current news cycle, this story feels less like futuristic SF and more like exposé.) Lue Palmer's interrogates the shadows that actively haunt a family dynamic in "Mother, Father, Baby".

Chinelo Onwualu's "The Hole in the Middle of the World" widens the lens to explore the historical experience of vulnerable populations by projecting them into the future. The viewpoint character is a refugee finding ways to endure while her application for status winds its way through the bureaucracy. The SF element is subtle and chilling, but the moment you realize what's actually happening is the moment you think, "that's what it must have been like for the Indigenous". It is a moment of sudden clarity, because stripped of its original eugenics and 60s Scoop background, the story bypasses the reader's automatic defensiveness to tap directly into empathy. As a bonus, Onwualu provides an optimistic ending that suggests it is not too late to do better.

The rest of the anthology is balanced by somewhat lighter fare. Suyi Davies Okungbowa's "Peak Day" is a wincingly funny satire of Prime Day, consumerism, and worker exploitation. Zalika Reid-Benta's "Paroxysm" may have been inspired by the Covid pandemic, but takes a sharp left turn into the surreal to illustrate the psychological costs of lockdown. "Just say Garuka" by Aline-mwezi NiyonSenga is an absolute delight, as queer teens develop a friendship over . . . let's say, driving lessons. Editor Terese Mason Pierre's own entry, "A Fair Assessment" starts from the intriguing premise of summoning the ghosts of the former owners of various antiques so their stories can be added to the sales pitch. Pierre then throws in the additional curve ball of accidentally calling up one's own ancestor.

As the Earth Dreams: Black Canadian Speculative Stories, then, is a brilliant example of how modern Canadian speculative fiction can be used as a canvas to interrogate identity, culture, and the meaning of life from formerly excluded perspectives. The infusion of these diverse voices also demonstrates how different sound, diction, cadence, grammar, syntax, metaphor, allusion, and so on allows authors to explore the structure and implications of language and culture—without resorting to Klingon. As the Earth Dreams is published by Anansi Press.

Bowl of Red by Sarah Hoyt
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Every once in awhile it occurs to me that, despite the fact that I get elebenty bajillion newsletters via both Substack and other places, I don't read enough of the stuff that I should. I say that because I've been waiting for Sarah Hoyt to release the fourth book in her Shifter series, entitled Bowl of Red, since what seems like the day before England's Glorious Revolution kicked off, even if my logical side says it's been less than half that long, but she released it over three years ago and I didn't realize it till a couple of weeks ago. I'm sure she mentioned something about it on her blog but I err...

Haven't been reading it as much as I used to. That's a bad move on my part too, because it's a good blog full of facts, opinions, and fun.

Of course, it was only common sense and propriety that kept Hoyt from getting in her car and driving hundreds of miles to my house to place a copy of *Bowl of Red* in my hand. I'm not sure that's a good excuse though, as I've never allowed common sense or propriety to stop me from doing anything I wanted to. And, let's face it, an ego as large as mine needs to be stroked every so often. Still and all though, I stumbled across the book in my Kindle recommendations and picked it up. I'm glad I did, too.

Of course, I've already read the first three books. That was so long ago that I was still reading things in Dead Tree Format (better known as paper). They were awesome and they tie in with Hoyt's work as Elise Hyatt, where she writes cozy mysteries. Those are good books too. It just occurred to me to wonder whether I should be checking to see if she's released any more of those too.

But about the book I'm actually reviewing:

Bowl of Red was worth the wait, even if I didn't have to wait as long as I did. Seriously reading a book like this is like having a couple of old friends over for coffee. It's low key. It doesn't last long enough. But, still and all, it's a good time and it's one that you hope to repeat soon.

There is a lot going on in *Bowl of Red*. Hoyt has done an amazing job of gradually expanding the world of the story while leaving her main characters in Goldport. Once upon a time I thought that there were very few shifters in Hoyt's Shifter universe. And I guess they still are a vanishingly small percentage of the world's population. The fact remains that a vanishingly small percentage of eight billion is a whole bunch. There are a lot of shifters in a small town in Colorado right now and it would appear that something big is coming.

No, I'm not going to tell you what that something is. I don't do spoilers except when I do but now is not one of those times. You're really going to need to read the book to find out what the big thing is. And it's totally worth it BUT:

Bowl of Red is the fourth book in a series. Hoyt's *The Shifter Series* really, really needs to be read in order. That doesn't mean I'm telling you not to read *BoR*. It does mean that I think you should read the first three books first. They're every bit as good. As a matter of fact, it was the first time that I read *Draw One in the Dark*, the first book in the series, that I became a fan of Sarah Hoyt. The other books in the series, *Gentleman Takes a Chance* and *Noah's Boy* are really good too. It's not a very long series yet (looks at Hoyt in "More, please") although there is also a fifth book that I just found out about.

I'll be reading that soon.

The fact remains that every book of *The Shifter Series* after the first builds on what came before. This is not a series built of standalone novels. If you want to understand what you're reading you need to know what has happened already. That's the only way this works. Trust me on this one. Don't end up like pre-teen Jimbo, buying the sixth book in a series and then having to go back in the series to find out what happened previously. That sucks.

There is something about an author that writes family well. Not all of them do. Families aren't always happy and peaceful. I loved the family in *ST:VOY* episode "Real Life" but they weren't realistic. Hoyt has a gift for writing families and making them work. The only other author I've seen that can do them as well as Hoyt would be DT Read and I'm a huge fan of hers as well. They way the related people in

Bowl of Red related to each other made sense in a real-world sort of way. These people aren't the Cleavers, but they're not the Simpsons either.

Oh, and I loved the reverse Loki reference, but that's all I have to say about that.

Except maybe I'll mention that I'm not sure it was intended that way. Then again, what do I know? I just work here.

While Bowl of Red largely ignores real world politics, Hoyt sets up a pretty amazing political world for the shifters in her The Shifters Series. There is a lot going on here with the way the various species of shifters relate to each other and how they interact in their own individual factions. It's something I had never given a thought to, but Hoyt obviously has.

All in all, I'm really glad I found out that Bowl of Red was finally here, even if 'finally' was actually three years ago. Tom and Kyrie (the main characters of the book, shifters of the dragon and cat varieties respectively) need to stop by more often. And now, I'm off to download the next one.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Exploding Fryers

The Covenant of the Forge by Dan Parkinson

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

When one accepts free books in exchange for reviews, the expectation is that they will read only those books and review them. I mean, I got it for free, right? And people have a right to expect that I'll hold up my end of the bargain. It makes sense on a purely logical level, right?

The problem being that I'm a human being and human beings aren't necessarily "purely logical." I wish I could be sometimes, but real life doesn't work that way.

So, having gotten an Amazon gift card for Christmas, I decided to buy some comfort food for my brain. I picked up all three of the books from the Dragonlance Dwarven Nations Trilogy. I started with The Covenant of the Forge by Dan Parkinson because, well, it's the first book in the series. And it's definitely comforting. I was thinking that I had originally read it thirty years ago, but a quick Google search shows that it's only been twenty-seven years since it was published. I guess it was less than that.

Still though, I love this book.

I'll be honest in stating that part of the reason I picked up these novels is because I'm writing a novel with a dwarf main character that starts in a dwarven town and I've been thinking about these books a lot. I'll also be honest in admitting that a lot of the genesis of my book (and it needs a better title than Dwarf Story, but I'm not so good at titles.) comes from the Dwarven Nations Trilogy. The concept of a dwarven society fascinates me and, if the society I'm creating looks different than this one, at least I won't get sued.

Parkinson does a really good job of making dwarves people that aren't human (because DUH, they're dwarves) but still have recognizable and understandable motivations. The humans in the book aren't necessarily portrayed in a super positive manner, but that makes sense. Humans, to a dwarf's eyes, are short-lived and therefore in too big a rush for everything and kind of flighty. When viewed from a dwarf's eyes, some positive traits (to humans) don't look so positive. And if you've never been told to

“look to the left side of your tools” well, it’s a concept we could all benefit from and one that’s easy to understand. It’s also a concept I’d like to incorporate in my own work, but uhh...

Yeah, not sure how I can manage to mention this one and not get sued. Seriously. I don’t have the right kind of file to eliminate the serial numbers on this axiom, but it’s so useful and so intelligent..

Yeah, it’s dwarven and I’M WRITING ABOUT DWARVES!

AHHHH!!!!

But the thing is that these dwarves are not alien to the point where we can’t identify with them. They love. They hate. They marry. They have children. They’re people just like you and I only they’re different. They’re not monolithic though, and that makes sense as well. Handil the Drum is a musician. He plays the Call to Balladine, the opening of the autumn trade festival. He ends up as a major hero. Cale Greeneye reminds many dwarves of an elf. Colin Stonetooth leads the Calnar clan with honor and distinction...for awhile.

And I guess that’s what interests me more than anything: These are characters I care about. When a child is born at a moment that is precisely perfect and terrible (read the book, you’ll get it) you want to cheer for the new father as he runs pell-mell to where his wife is giving birth. When your hero, and the guy you figured would end up running things dies heroically it hurts, but you’re proud of him for doing the right thing even if it ends badly for him personally. He honestly kind of reminds me of a dude named Sturm Brightblade in the Dragonlance Chronicles and that’s saying a lot. If you’re not familiar with the Chronicles you need to be. You should read them right after you read the Dwarven Nations Trilogy. Of course, Sturm was human, but no one is perfect I suppose...

The Covenant of the Forge has a little bit of everything. There is some extremely light romance. There is some combat. There are politics and scheming. There are loyal followers and treacherous enemies. There are even treacherous allies. You won’t find anything missing from your favorite fantasy works, with the possible exception of horror. The Covenant of the Forge is not Ravenloft, even if Ravenloft does feature a death knight from Krynn, which is the planet Covenant takes place on.

It doesn’t need to be though. And the Dwarven Nations Trilogy takes place before the Cataclysm and Soth’s descent into Death Knighthood anyway...

Err.. Never mind. Nerd moment. Those happen.

The point is that this is a damn fine book and an awesome series. Looking back over twenty-five years after I read Covenant for the first time, I find myself amazed that it starts off as quickly as it does. I guess I didn’t think about it at the time, but trilogies, and longer series, often start off pretty slowly. Not so much here. Don’t get me wrong. There is a lot of worldbuilding that takes place, but it’s so well done that I didn’t really notice that it was happening. I just kind of understood things and moved on. There’s no navel gazing, and no long-winded explanations of things. Parkinson somehow managed to get what needs to be there stuffed in without making it feel like a chore to wade through it.

I... will... not...

Who am I kidding? Of course I will.

Remember that feeling you got when you were a kid and you saw Star Wars for the first time? Remem-

ber how cool it was? Do you know how frustrating it can be to watch the prequels and the sequels because they don't make you feel the same way?

Yeah, I hate it too.

The thing is that I got that feeling reading The Covenant of the Forge again. I love these books for a reason. Read them. You will too.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Vibrar Drums

Escaping Fate by Henry Brown

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

I've been harping on the need for good literature for boys and young men for quite awhile now. I don't want to see the men in our society reduced to a bunch of hacks who can't read because their teachers gave them stuff that sucks to read. It is my mission to bring to you, from time to time, books that would be of interest to young men. I am therefore very happy to bring before you today's review of Henry Brown's Escaping Fate (Paradox Book 1). It is exactly the type of thing I'm talking about.

Our hero, one Pete Bedauern, starts out the book in a horrible situation. His mom is broke, her man doesn't do anything for the family, and they treat Pete like crap. They talk to him like he's trash and he has zero self-confidence. Seriously, Pete has problems whose problems have problems. He needs a way out so badly he doesn't even know it. It never even occurs to him that there might be something out there for him.

Enter Uncle Si. He shows up out of nowhere and takes an interest in Pete. Uncle Si has a budget, a martial arts school and time for a kid that has done nothing wrong and deserves better than what he gets. Uncle Si is also happy to teach Pete about what it means to be a man, to have confidence in himself, and to take responsibility for the direction of his life. Uncle Si also has a time machine and that helps.

I don't think it's spoiling too much to say that Pete's life starts to get better soon after. That makes sense. A young man who takes charge of his life and starts to exercise his own agency is a young man that has potential. I really love that about Escaping Fate. Its title and its plot are both very superversive. If you're not familiar with the Superversive Movement, you should be. It's all about people taking charge of their own fate and making their lives better. Maybe someday I'll blog about it. For now, just know that Henry Brown, whether knowingly or not, goes on the list of authors that support another one of the most important movements in fiction in the twenty-first century.

That much having been said, I promise you that Escaping Fate is not some movement driven boil of the type you were forced to lance off of your butt after some tenth-grade Literature teacher forced it on you. I promise you. What we have here is good, clean, wholesome fun. And yes, I said wholesome. There is a bit of violence but not a whole lot. Pete makes his first forays into flirting with a girl, but he doesn't go much further than that. Uncle Si drinks a bit and that gets mentioned, and maybe he has a girlfriend or two but nothing untoward happens "on screen." This is the kind of book that you can hand to a twelve or thirteen year old kid in front of his mother and his pastor in good conscience.

The time travel in Escaping Fate is pretty cool, if a bit chaotic. Uncle Si can go basically anywhere in time that he wants to go to. That's the fun way to do it. It can also make things a bit unpredictable to

the reader. I like that feeling too. There's a reason I don't do spoilers if I can help it. This makes keeping up with their travels interesting. Pete mentions in the book that Si has to take notes to keep things straight and that was probably the easiest part of the book to keep track of.

Time travel weirdness can also promote a bit of a sense of paranoia. There are a couple scenes in *Escaping Fate* that make me kind of wonder what happened when and why and whether someone actually does know. That doesn't make sense right now but read the book and it will. I mean and it runs through everything from sporting events to that one conspiracy theory and back again. Brown also toys with multiverse theory/alternate timelines. I like that. That means there's a universe out there where I'm rich and famous. I wouldn't mind that so much.

To be fair, there is also a lot of what I would consider to be political speech in *Escaping Fate*. I'm okay with that because it mainly agrees with all of the things that I believe in. Any book about a boy working to better himself through hard work is going to have at least a little bit of a rightist/libertarian bent to it. This is not the story a boy who succeeds by oppressing women or because of some government program. He betters himself through hard work and confidence. I approve. If you find those ideas offensive, you may be better off reading *Das Kapital* or *Wages and Profit*. I'm pretty sure you can get those at any bookstore in a capitalist country where you will find products available for purchase. The irony is not lost on me, but it's probably lost on you.

Escaping Fate is the first in a series. This is a good thing. The only thing better than a good book to encourage a young man to read is a series of good books that he will continue wanting to read. The feeling of "Wow, that was awesome. When can I read the next one?" is the key to really hooking a reader. It doesn't have to be a complicated series full of insanity. My first run on a series was *The Hardy Boys* back in like nineteen eighty something. I seriously don't remember the exact year. I just remember that they were all available at the library at my school.

For what it's worth, I'm a book reviewer who very seldom pays for books. I don't have to. I have over three hundred books awaiting review in my inbox and a Kindle Unlimited Membership. I paid cash for a physical copy of *Escaping Fate* at BasedCon last fall. I'm glad I did. It was worth it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Won Bets

Hemo Sapiens
by Emily A. Weedon
Reviewed by Robert Runté

Occasionally, one should judge a book by its cover. The cover of *Hemo Sapiens* is a sophisticated, modern take on art nouveau that tells us this is from a sophisticated literary press (Dundurn) with refined tastes one can trust. I fully confess that when I first came across *Hemo Sapiens*, I wasn't that interested, but the cover reveal intrigued me. The novel behind that cover did not disappoint.

Vampires. It's a vampire novel!

But oh, it is so much better than I had initially assumed. This is no mere *Dracula* reboot, no Stephenie Meyer sparkling pedophiles, no bats or dark and stormy nights. This is a completely fresh, feminist, anthropological take, brilliant in every detail.

I am reluctant to give away too many of those details because drilling down through the many layers

here is a big part of what makes the book so enjoyable. Weedon skilfully balances the character arcs of her five POV characters against the background narrative of a trainee detective chasing down a serial killer, our POV vampire. But while there are glimpses of a police procedural here, much of our detective's time and energy is preoccupied with the demands of his pregnant wife. I can't decide if this should be required reading for couples adjusting to pregnancy—or carry a warning label.

Who am I kidding? I'm a fan; you should totally get this book.

Weedon has this unique ability to make the portrayals of her POV characters both compelling and mundane. Weedon's depiction of a narcissistic grad student, for example, will be wincingly familiar to any academic. Even the vampires are realistic and relatable because they are recognizable as personalities we've all encountered. The result is a novel that skewers absolutely everyone because at the exact moment we recognize ourselves, our neighbours, or our bosses, we realize Weedon's characters are largely unreliable narrators, preoccupied with rationalizing their own behaviour while dismissing everyone around them as unreasonable, mean, or irrelevant. There is an underlying, self-deprecating humour running through the novel that asks the reader to take a long, hard look at their own motivations.

If I had to nitpick a minor flaw, it would be the scene where the hero overhears the villain monologuing. That was just a little bit too convenient. But hey, it's more than compensated for by the multitude of scenes where Weedon's touch is just right: the primal cravings of pregnancy; the bone-deep horror of people reassuring you everything is fine, when it most assuredly is not; the attempt to calm oneself through the simple act of cooking but failing utterly. There are some really memorable lines and exchanges here, and the basic premise elevates the vampire trope to an entirely new level.

Recommended fall reading, whether you are a regular fan of vampire stories or never thought to read one before.

Hemo Sapiens is published by Dundurn Press.

Mother of Learning by Domagoj Kurmaic Review by Dani Zweig

Mother of Learning by Domagoj Kurmaic (writing as nobody103) was republished as a series of four novels. It's a time-loop novel, with the author making excellent use of that trope.

Zorion is starting his third year at the mage academy. He is an engaging-but-nothing-special character, and the first few chapters take him through his first month. The month ends with a completely unexpected disaster: An army appears out of nowhere and attacks the city. Zorion is killed - and wakes up at the start of the month. He will replay that month dozens of times.

What can you do with a month that keeps repeating - if you retain memories across repeats? In many ways it's a test of character: Nobody will stop you from spending all your time and all your funds in taverns. (It takes more than a month for a school to take official notice of a bad attendance record. And long-term consequences no longer exist for you.) Or you can keep learning: If you make good use of the repeats, you can learn a lot.

Zorion makes excellent use of the repeats. He's motivated, because the attack at the end of the month is starting to look like a prelude to the end of the world. He's not the only repeater - and at least one of the others is on the side of the attackers.

Pilgrim by M. R. Leonard
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Now THAT's a debut novel. Seriously. When I got an email from M.R. Leonard asking me to review his novel Pilgrims it sounded awesome. I mean, we've all consumed some type of Alien Invasion story at some point in our lives. It's somewhat cliché when left to its own devices. I was just watching Will Smith's Independence Day over the weekend. We all know the trope. But what I had never seen done before was an alien committed by Catholic aliens. How did that work?

Of course I'm not going to answer that questions. This is Jimbo's. We never do spoilers except when we do. That's official JOP. (Jimbo Operating Procedure) Usually, it's an accident. Sometimes we're just being buttfaces. It depends on our mood. But we're not violating policy this time. It makes sense if you read the book. But if you really wanna know how, then reading Pilgrims is going to be necessary for your edification. (TWO POINTS FOR EDIFICATION!!!)

I also want to say this for the record: Pilgrims starts off with a prologue. (Stop whining. It's actually entertaining and we do see the characters again later in the book.) It adds a lot of excitement to the beginning. All may not exactly be what it appears to be in the first three sentences of the book, however. Be patient. It's not 1532 anymore.

That much having been said:

I love books that start off with a countdown to the thing. I'm not going to say what thing it is this time, but it is THE thing. At any rate, the countdown adds a lot of suspense, and it provides the information that we need to get things started. And once Pilgrims starts, it doesn't stop. There is no point where things just slow down and get boring. If you're into navel gazing, there are other books to read.

If you're into character arcs, however, this is the place to be. I won't say who. I won't say what. I will say WOW. It all makes sense and it's well earned, but the change is huge. I was happy to see it. It kinda made my day.

There isn't a whole lot of violence in the book and the vast majority of what happens takes place off-screen. What fighting does occur onscreen is fairly graphic, however. It hits hard and then it's gone. Leonard seems to want to make things as easy to deal with as possible, but some of it hits hard nonetheless. It's all believable. Some of it left me a bit shook and that's not easy to do.

There was something that felt unique about Pilgrims and it wasn't until I was almost finished with the book that I figured out what it was: I've read a ton of Catholic fiction - I am a Declan Finn fan after all - and this is the only book I've ever read that falls into that character that doesn't have a main character who belongs to the One True Faith. There is a whole lot of Catholic theology and symbology to the tome, but Austin DeSantis is an atheist who gets picked to talk to the Pilgrims simply because he teaches a spoken Latin class and that's what they show up speaking. It's an interesting take but it wasn't what I expected when I went going in. That's not to say it didn't work. I loved it. DeSantis sees things in a way that most Catholics wouldn't and misses things that most Catholics would catch. It's just who he is.

The rest of the cast of character in Pilgrims is a mixed bag. There are devout Catholics. There are people who worship God in other manners than Catholics do. And there is no shortage of people that don't

believe in anything. That works because it's realistic. Leonard is working with a whole planet full of people. There are going to be differences because that's the way the real world works. I should know. I live here.

Most of the time anyway. There was that one time, with the angry woman and the frying pan, where I spent most of the week convinced that I was an alien from the planet Zargon, but that all squared itself away once my concussion started to fade. I'm normal now. Totes.

Stop laughing. We're talking about a book, here.

At any rate...

The weirdest thing about Pilgrims might be the world building. Not because it wasn't done right. It was done terrifically. It's just that so much seems so familiar, and more seems like the type of thing I expect to see happen in my lifetime, that it almost feels like home. But then, it doesn't. It's like putting on last year's winter coat and realizing that you've gained a few points. You can get the jacket zipped up, but it's not comfortable anymore. That's Leonard's world. You recognize it, but it's just a little too far off to really settle into.

There's really no need to settle into anything though. I started this bad boy on Friday, Saturday was the Fourth of July, so I was busy most of the day, and I finished it on Sunday. I went through four hundred and six pages like it was a magazine article. Actually, there were articles I read in college that it probably took me longer to get through. Pilgrims was that good. I mean, I don't feel as incredibly educated as I did after reading a thirty plus page article about the historical inaccuracies in The Last Samurai, but I had a lot more fun. That counts for something as long as you're not a college professor.

Thirty seconds or so after finishing Pilgrims, I bounced over to Amazon to see what else Leonard has for sale. I came up with a big, fat zero. I find this to be distressing. At first I thought I was hallucinating. Then I thought my Amazon app was broken. I actually turned my phone upside down and shook it to see if I could get another book to pop out. That didn't work. But I guess I'll live. For the record though, if you read this and want to read another book by Leonard you don't get to blame me because there's not one. I warned you. Hopefully, he'll fix that problem soon.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Exploding Ambos

Reluctant Emissary by Fred Hughes

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

If you're looking for a good introduction to LitRPG, I found it for you. Fred Hughes wrote it, and it's called Reluctant Emissary: A Science Fiction LitRPG Novel (Humanity's Janissaries Book 1). That's not to say that it's not a good book for longtime LitRPG fans. I've read more LitRPG than basically anyone I know and I loved it. It's just that the mechanics are pretty easy to follow and, since the main character is new to the whole concept, there is a pretty decent amount of explanation for what's going on as far as the RPG aspect of the story. It's easy to learn, easy to follow and easy to enjoy. And listen, I love stories like He Who Fights With Monsters, but try explaining how progression works for Jason Asano to someone who hasn't read LitRPG. I dare you.

Our hero is Tammy Escobar and she is a Marine worthy of the title. Like, she takes on her enemy, being alien spiders that she didn't know existed yesterday and wins. She teaches an entire alien species

how to fight a war and win. And she figures out things that members of that same alien species haven't been able to decode despite decades of trying. Oh, and she likes to shoot and blow things up. I can't forget those. Shooting and blowing things up is what Marines are for.

I've gotta respect Tammy. She ends up in a situation that she has no prior experience in or knowledge of and manages to come out on top and in control. She cuts herself no slack and I love that about her. She's always thinking about how to get through what she needs to get through and she finds new methods of making herself, and her comrades, prosper. And she really has some things to deal with to make it all work.

The alien races in *Reluctant Emissary* seem to accept Tammy fairly well as well as pretty quickly, but that's because she's earned it. There are two primary races of aliens that Tammy works with, and they have a warrior history. They recognize her ability to raise a ruckus in a combat zone and create corpses the way fellow warriors would. She actually reminds me of Captain Kirk in some ways, even if her tactical style is more Commander Riker.

The action scenes in *Reluctant Emissary* are well written and exciting. There is a lot of fighting in the book, and it is fast paced, believable, and entertaining. Tammy gets through things with a little help from her friends and an absolute bunch of firepower and chaos. Bullets fly, things die. Tammy is trying to develop a true combined arms approach for a military that doesn't have one. It has the effect that she wants: Lots of dead spiders.

That's not to say that it's always all good. Bad things happen. *Reluctant Emissary* ends up being a LitRPG book precisely because some bad stuff happened. But as the reader that was part of the fun. There's a real sense of danger here. I'd almost call it a sense of foreboding in some places. Sometimes characters are pushed to do things that they would normally never consider doing simply because they don't have a choice. This is not a happy-go-lucky feel-good story. It's not quite grimdark either, but there's definitely a sense that Tammy and friends are one wrong move from disaster throughout the book.

Hughes built a universe for all of us that actually feels lived in. There is very obviously a lot more out there than what we get to see in the first book (There are three at the moment. I'm not sure if he plans on stopping there or not and I'm too lazy to ask.) but it all holds together internally and it's easy to understand. I got enough idea of what existed to follow what was going on without too much exposition that got in the way. I'm also excited to see what comes next and how some of the peoples that Hughes mentions but doesn't actually introduce in the novel might influence what comes next. He's got me wondering. I would say thinking, but my mama told me never to do that because it always gets me in trouble.

Reluctant Emissary kind of had me fooled for a second. The enemies, alien spiders named the Drizzt (and I have to talk to Hughes and find out if he's a *Forgotten Realms*/R.A. Salvatore fan or if it's just a coincidence that Hughes named his villains after one of the most beloved protagonists in all of Fantasy fiction.) looked like they were going to be the kind of cardboard cutouts that appeared in *Battle Los Angeles* back in the day. They weren't. I didn't really get a good look into their heads to find out what they thought about what they were doing, but Hughes gave them the ability to adapt and a plausible motivation for attacking.

Hughes also left things open enough that Tammy and company could be wrong. I'm not saying they are. I'm just saying that the *Humanities Janissaries* series has more to it than it initially appeared to. No one knows for sure what's going on. I know what we're being led to believe. It even makes sense if

it's right. But a truly sneaky author could stand this whole thing on its head. This is my first time reading Hughes, so I'm not sure how sneaky he is, but I'll be watching.

All in all, Reluctant Emissary is a great opening salvo. I'm waiting to see how the rest of the battle develops. Tammy has a lot of work to do and so do a lot of other people in the book. She's going to have to learn a few things along the way if she wants to succeed, but since was LitRPG not about a character who can learn new skills and improve old ones? Tammy isn't some OP monster yet, but she could become one. I'm going along for the ride to see if she does.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Lead Slugs

Starship Librarians Edited by Shannon Allen and JR Campbell Reviewed by Robert Runté

When I first selected this collection for review, I had assumed it would be an example of cozy SF. I imagined quiet little stories about the library of the future: massive collections of all knowledge like in ancient Alexandria, or a compact, one-room, repurposed kitchenette storing the space colony's tiny stack of pioneer journals and memoirs. Starship librarians would be these approachable, all-knowing guides to lead seekers to the one precise volume they needed to continue their quest. Such cozy fiction would offer a respite and refuge from life in our increasingly worrying real world.

Yeah, well no.

Two-thirds of the collection are stories of resistance: librarians stubbornly facing off against the forces of oppression, with seven stories focused specifically on the stand against censorship. Donna JW Monroe's "Words of Power", for example, is a nice retelling of Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, and Mackensie Baker's "What They Don't Tell You", follows the transformation of a meek librarian into someone willing to sacrifice her career and freedom to oppose censorship. Shannon Allen's "Between the Heavens and the Embers" and Lisa Timpf's "The Space Librarians' Code" are both about finding ways to hide books from those intent on deleting them. Overwater's gritty "Fifth Book from the Sun" follows a mercenary smuggling a library data bank past the custom officials trying to intercept it. Given the abrupt increase in book banning in the US, and Alberta's nonsense banning of books from school libraries even here in Canada, these are timely tales of courage and resilience.

Similarly, Kara Race-Moore's upbeat story of whisking the colony's book collection to safety in the face of an approaching enemy in "The Librarian of Mars" reflects the all too common need to do so in the real world: ISIS's destruction of ancient scrolls at Timbuktu, Russia's deliberate destruction of Ukraine's libraries and cultural centres, and the recent, only partially successful attempt to evacuate artifacts from the al-Kawthar archaeological collection in Gaza.

"Is There Anybody Out There?" by Rhonda Parrish and E.C. Bell is about the last librarian on Earth, preserving her bunker full of books. I can't tell if that is optimistic because the books are saved and life goes on, or darkly pessimistic because of the assumption of the inevitability of the collapse of human civilization.

There are even two stories of librarians as pirates: Aggie Novak's "Pirate Librarian Wanted" which addresses the very real issues of who owns your personal data, and Jennifer Rahn's "Synapses", in which our librarian heroine is shanghaied.

The theme of how stories are essential to our mental health is implicit in all of these entries, but Wheaton's "How to Save a Life" and Lauderdale's "Librarian's Assistant" focus specifically on the need for interpersonal connection through the sharing of stories.

There are, nevertheless, a few unrelated and cozy stories. Liz Westbrook-Trenholm's "All that Glitters" is an engaging glimpse of future archaeologists searching for ancient libraries from our time. Her world-building is fun, clever, and believable. Nocito's flash piece "Through Time and Calamity" gets to the heart of what makes 'librarian' a crucial profession. Trisha Jenn Loehr's "Tetrominoes and Seekers" is a cute romance about a librarian helping to solve a math problem.

My favourite story in the collection was JR Campbell's ingenious "Inscription". It, too, is an upbeat romance, but taking into account the time dilation of faster-than-light travel. Brilliant! I teared up a bit at the story within the story.

My least favourite story is Leslie Moody's retelling of sleeping beauty in "Archived". I have the same beef with it as with the original: it's not that romantic when the protagonist kisses the sleeper when they cannot consent. It was also a bit slow, predictable. Hinton's "Retrofit" was similarly meh, though the ending was good.

Finally, there are two stories about gardening. Kayla Whittle's "The Thriving Green" was a delightfully cozy story about a colonist on a generation ship looking for gardening advice.

In contrast, "The Revolution Will Not Be Fertilized", follows a group of guerilla gardeners led by a rebel librarian. I dreaded reading this one! First, it's written in the second person, which rarely works. Second, it's by horror writer, J. W. Schnarr. Schnarr is one of the gentlest people I've ever met, but his writing . . . Years after first discovering his stories, I'm still trying to excise a couple of the nightmares he's given me. So, throughout this story, I found myself reluctant to turn the next page as things got progressively darker. But . . . it's wonderful! Inspired! A rare example of the perfect use of second person, and a truly unique take on resistance to dystopia.

Overall, *Starship Librarians* is a first-rate collection with some standout stories. I'm willing to bet at least some of these turn up again in 'best-of-year' collections. Kudos to editors Allan and Campbell. I hope we can look forward to more themed anthologies from them.

The Ten Realms Books by Michael Chatfield Series Review by Jim McCoy Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

Long about the beginning of May, I picked up a book called *The Two-Week Curse* by Michael Chatfield. It was LitRPG and I love LitRPG so that made sense. I was also a bit frustrated because there were several titles coming that I wanted to read and they weren't out yet. I'd kill a few days reading *The Two-Week Curse* and I'd get to the stuff I was waiting for. But then a funny thing happened on my way to the forum:

I read the entire series, all twelve books, in one fell swoop. I hadn't intended to. I just clicked on a link that popped up on my Facebook feed and invoked the Power of the Kindle that's Unlimited. What not? What did I have to lose?

It turns out that I lost my mind. Or at least I would have, had I still been in possession of it at that point. It took me about two pages before I was fully locked in. That's good for me. For a new book, in a new series, written by an author I haven't read before, it's usually close to fifty to a hundred pages before I really get wrapped up in things. I was all in and holding a fist full of aces much faster than I ordinarily would have been.

The story starts with a group of mercenaries in Africa, two of which are former US Army Medic Erik West and former Marine Scout Sniper Jimmy "Rugrat" Rodriguez. I love these guys. Their journey through The Ten Realms is not just captivating, it's amazing. These two men start out the journey as people you can definitely respect and end up as something far more than that. I don't want to spoil too much, but the whole series is a pair of character arcs for the ages. I don't want to spoil too much but trust me, the guys you start out with are not the guys you finish with.

And it's weird, because I'm an aspiring author myself and this series was very obviously not written the way I write, but it works because of that. Here's what I mean: I'm a pantsner. I sit down in front of my keyboard. I place my fingers on the keys. They move in a manner consistent with making words and creating a story. I don't know a whole lot more about how that particular chapter is going to go than the average reader does, at least not before I write it. Chatfield obviously doesn't work that way.

The Ten Realms is a story that has to have been planned from the very beginning. There's too much that works too well for it to have been any other way. It's not just Erik and Rugrat's character arcs. There are a whole bunch of other arcs going on here at the same time. This series is a massively complicated narrative with a lot of pieces that have to work together for things to move along the way they do. Seriously, the whole story works in stages.

In the first stage, Erik and Rugrat are transferred from Earth to The Ten Realms via The Two-Week Curse, which is also the title of the first book. There they proceed to go full n00b. They are totally n00bish n00bies of n00ballistic n00bishness. They're so bad they could star in a TV series called N00bily N00bs. Like, do any of my gamers out there remember their first time playing an MMORPG? Yeah, Erik and Rugrat are that bad, except for the part where they might be worse. Really, guys. You're in an MMO. If you don't want to play a tank, find one.

But they learn quickly. And they advance quickly. And this is a cultivation series on a level like I've never seen before. And so I'd say the next phase is Erik and Rugrat learning how to level up and improve themselves in the new world they've found. It's a thread that continues throughout the books, but it all starts here. These guys are maniacs for self-improvement.

Right around the time they learn to cultivate they start picking up crafting skills. I've always loved crafting in MMOs, and The Ten Realms provides an absolutely believable game based crafting system. It's a huge focus for both Erik and Rugrat in the beginning of the series. While building things to use and increase their crafting skills, they build themselves as well. And the building things analogy works well heading into the next phase of the story as well.

The next phase of The Ten Realms is basically Sim City with Medieval politics mixed with some old school fighting and more crafting. There is a lot of trade and economy building here. Massive amounts of money are made, and it is put into the places where the city needs to grow: Education, infrastructure and the military. Interestingly, there is no welfare and, while there is no discrimination, this isn't a "woke" series. Those that work hard achieve and there is no lecture delivered with it. And everyone is expected to contribute. Those that won't work are expelled. I enjoyed that about it.

The next phase is, as you would expect from a LitRPG, the war phase. We get to see everything Erik and Rugrat have done so far come to fruition. Some things work. Others don't. This is another spot where lack of knowledge (this time of their opponents' capabilities) haunts the two guys from another world. And that's another spot where *The Ten Realms* shines.

Each realm is a separate planet. Erik and Rugrat start out in the First Realm. In order to make it to the Second Realm, they have to reach tenth level. And then they have to reach twentieth level to get to the Third Realm, and so on. The hard part here being that most people never rise above the realm they're born on and so the fellas don't really know what they're dealing with half the time. This works as a storytelling element because the reader learns things as the characters do, but it makes life interesting for them when they run across threats that they had no way to anticipate. The war phase is a huge part of the series and takes up four whole books. That's okay though, because Chatfield can write an amazing battle.

The last phase of *The Ten Realms* starts in the tenth book, ironically enough entitled *The Eighth Realm*. (This makes sense if you consider that the Sixth and Seventh Realms got two books each.) I don't want to talk too much about it here because spoilers, but it almost feels like the first nine books comprise a series and the sequel series is the last three books. They're a lot shorter than the first nine books as well. They're all excellent books but it's not really until the end of the final tome that we get to really get a stronger tie-in with earlier books than just the fact that it's the same character. I loved these books nonetheless, but things definitely took an unexpected turn.

I don't want to spoil the ending, but I will say that I approve of what happened. I wasn't sure that it was going to end up that way.

At any rate, read the thing. You'll love it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Earth Grade Dungeon Cores

The Universe Box by Michael Swanwick
Review by Cory Doctorow of pluralistic.net
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No one writes short stories like Michael Swanwick, the five-time Hugo-winning master of science fiction. To prove it, you need only pick up *The Universe Box*, Swanwick's just-published short story collection, a book representing one of the field's greatest writers at the absolute pinnacle of his game: <https://tachyonpublications.com/product/the-universe-box/>

Science fiction has a long and honorable history with the short story. Sf is a pulp literature that was born in the pages of magazines specializing in short fiction and serials, and long after other genres had given up the ghost, sf remained steadfastly rooted in short form fiction. There are still, to this day, multiple sf magazines that publish short stories every month, on paper, and pay for it. I started my career as a short story writer, and continue to dabble in the form, but I have mostly moved onto novels.

That's a pretty common trajectory in sf, where – notwithstanding the field's status as a haven for the short story – the reach (and money) come from novels. But sf has always had a cohort of short fiction writers who are staunchly committed to the form: Harlan Ellison, Martha Soukup, Martha Wells, Ray Bradbury, Ted Chiang, James Tiptree Jr, Theodore Sturgeon, and, of course, Michael Swanwick.

It's a little weird, how sf serves as a powerful redoubt for short fiction. After all, sf is a genre in which everything is up for grabs: the reader can't assume anything about the story's setting, its era, the species of its characters. Time can run forwards, backwards, or in a loop. There can be gods and teleporters, faster-than-light drives and superintelligent machines. There can be aliens and space colonies.

All of that has to be established in the story. The most straightforward way to do this is, of course, through exposition. There's a commonplace (and wrong) notion that exposition is bad ("show, don't tell"). It's fairer to say that exposition is hard – dramatization is, well, dramatic, which makes it easier to engage the reader's attention. But great exposition is great and sf is a genre that celebrates exposition, done well: <https://maryrobinettekowal.com/journal/my-favorite-bit/my-favorite-bit-cory-doctorow-talks-about-the-bezzle/>

The opposite of exposition is what Jo Walton calls "including," "the process of scattering information seamlessly through the text, as opposed to stopping the story to impart the information": <https://web.archive.org/web/20111119145140/http://papersky.livejournal.com/324603.html>

Including is a beautiful prose technique, but it makes the reader work. You have to pay close attention to all these subtle clues and build a web of inferences about the kind of world you've been plunged into. Including turns a story into a (wonderful and engaging) puzzle. It makes the aesthetic effect of short sf into something that's not so much a reverie as a high-engagement activity, a mystery whose solution is totally unbounded.

This is a terrific experience, but it is also work. Doing that kind of work as part of the process of consuming a 300-page novel is one thing, but trying to get the reader up to speed in a 7,000-word story and still have room left over for the story part is a big lift, and even the best writers end up asking a lot of the reader in their short stories. Sf shorts can be the "difficult jazz" of literature, a form and genre that requires – and rewards – very active attention.

(Incidentally, my favorite including example is Mark Twain's classic comedic short, "The Petrified Man"): <https://americanliterature.com/author/mark-twain/short-story/the-petrified-man/>

But here's the thing. None of this applies to Swanwick. His stories use a mix of (impeccable) exposition and (subtle) including, and yet, there's never a moment in reading a Swanwick story where it feels like work. It's not merely that he's a gorgeous prose-smith whose sentences are each more surpassingly lovely than the last (though he is). Nor does he lack ambition: each of these stories has a more embroidered and outlandish premise than the last.

Somehow, though, he just slides these stories into your brain.

And what stories they are! They are, by turns, individually and in combination, slapstick, grave, horny, hilarious, surreal, disturbing and heartwarming. They have surprise endings and surprise middles and sometimes surprise beginnings (Swanwick does an opening paragraph like no one else).

This is what it means to read a short story collection from an absolute master at the absolute peak of his powers. He can slide you frictionlessly between Icelandic troll tragedies to lethal drone-leopard romantic agonies to battles of the gods and the cigar box that has the universe inside of it. All with the lyricism of Bradbury, the madcap wit of Sturgeon, the unrelenting weirdness of Dick, the heart of Tiptree and the precision of Chiang.

This is a book of worlds that each exist for just a handful of pages but occupy more space than those

pages could possibly contain. It's a series of cigar boxes, each with the universe inside of it.

War Demons by Russell Newquist

Review by Jim McCoy

Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

So what would you do if you were a combat veteran who got stuck fighting something you didn't recognize? What if it killed your buddy? What if it followed you home? How badly would that suck? Yeah, I'm not really sure how that would feel either, but if you wanted to ask Sergeant Michael Alexander, main character of Russell Newquist's War Demons I bet he could tell you. I mean, I'm not sure the answer would be all that pleasant, but that's kind of beside the point, right? I mean, not if you were asking for the truth.

I'm going to start this thing at the beginning though: War Demons had a prologue that I actually enjoyed and found relevant. There aren't too many books that can say that. Of course, explosions do help here but I still think that this was well written. It's also indicative of a wider world than the one we see throughout the rest of the book and I notice that Russell has a sequel planned (this is, after all, The Prodigal Son, Book One.) This is good. Most of War Demons takes place in a southern college town and it might be fun to see it go worldwide if that's what Mr. Newquist wishes to do. He may or may not. I'm just saying I'd read it if he did.

I really enjoyed Newquist's portrayal of Alexander. The good sergeant is a complicated man. He's been there, done that and got the t-shirt. Dude has been places that most people have and done things that most people never will. He's faced things that have others who have similar experiences doubting that they actually happened. He truly is on the outside of just about everything. He also suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but it doesn't rule his life. He's a good guy with some stuff to work through and a good heart. I like this character. I'd have a drink with this dude.

The rest of the heroes are pretty cool as well. I kind of got the feeling that maybe Newquist has seen and/or read some post-apocalyptic fiction featuring some weird weapons, but that's okay. It makes for some interesting reading and it's not like every random townie is going to have a huge stockpile of firearms and the knowledge to use them effectively while being attacked by a massive wave of enemies.

Of course, there are also the villains. Let's start out with the mooks. There are lots and lots and lots of mooks in War Demons. They fight, they die and then there are more. I'm glad I'm not in charge of Newquist's Magic Mook Generator because if I were, I'd be overworked. The thing is, the use of so many mooks works. Why? Because A.) They present a palpable threat to our heroes and B.) they keep the good guys from getting to where they're going too quickly. War Demons is a book that generates a lot of suspense, and a lot of it comes from the little guys getting in the way.

Oh, and by the way...

If I admitted that part of my love of the mooks comes from a desire to screen shot a few of these pages and email them to the D+D group I DM with a caption like, "I wonder how you guys would handle this. I'll see you Thursday!" then, well...

I mean...

It's true. How could I be a Dungeon Master if I didn't have a bit of a sadistic streak? Honestly? How?

Of course where there are mooks, there needs to be a Big Bad of some type. I'm not going to say who, what or how, but there is definitely someone worth hating here. That's good. I like hating bad guys. It makes it more fun to cheer for the good guys. I have a strong dislike of the big bad in this one for a very particular reason, but I'm not going to say what it was here. If you really want to know, feel free to buy the book (as you should anyway) and find out what it was for yourself. I kind of feel like it should be fairly obvious to anyone who pays attention.

Something Newquist does get into a bit here is religion. I'm okay with that. The religion he's espousing is the one that both of my daughters were baptized into. I find that it works well within the story. I think that it really does add a dimension to what's going on. I just know that there are those of you out there who style yourselves as atheists and would be repelled by the thought of a book that includes religion. That is your right. I think it's a good story, but I'm telling you now so that you can't say I didn't warn you.

Overall though, this isn't a truly religious work and if some of the framework of Catholic belief seeps in, I'm alright with that. If you've read my reviews of Declan Finn's work, you shouldn't be surprised about that anyway. As long as it fits the internal logic of the story and moves things along then it belongs there. I once read something similar in a book by Leonard Nimoy and I agree. He was speaking about the use of characters and why he wouldn't do Star Trek: Generations but the gist is the same. If it works, use it. If it doesn't, don't. In this case, it does.

As a complete work, I really enjoyed this book. The characters are believable. The action sequences are fun. If I wanted my shift at work to end earlier so that I could read War Demons, I suppose I'll have to forgive the author. That just means he did his job well. I'm looking forward to the sequel and I'm wondering when I'll see it. That's also a good thing. When the audience wants more, you know they loved what you've already done. We'll see when it hits. I'll make sure you see something here.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Yellow Noses

The World Ender by Saengard
Review by Jim McCoy
Jimbossffreviews.substack.com

All of you: "So, Jimbo, what advice would you offer to someone who was about to read Saengard's The World Ender?"

Jimbo: "The same advice I offer to people who get into my car. Get in, sit down, hold on, shut up."

Emphasis on the shut up part, because I don't want to hear any of you whining about how easy it is to get caught in The World Ender or how hard it can be to keep up with it. Seriously, this is a novel that could have been a series. It takes place in less than three hundred pages. It covers well over a decade in elapsed time. There are some time jumps and every chapter starts with a date/countdown to the world ending asteroid that is coming to destroy the Earth if our plucky heroes can't manage to either knock it off course or build the habitats that humanity will need to have to survive the collision.

Yeah, The World Ender wasn't a randomly selected title. It sounded a little generic when I first heard it but, looking back on it, Saengard probably put a lot of thought into the title he gave his novel and that I may not have been one hundred percent in my assumptions. It's also possible that I'm a turd for reacting like I did, but I think it only fair that we table that suggestion for future consideration.

There's a lot of science in this Science Fiction, and I don't have the technical or scientific background to evaluate it all. The World Ender has everything from orbital mechanics to advanced physics and engineering and some high-level medical stuff that would be really cool. I'm not sure how much of all of that would make sense to the guys who make the actual real-world advances, but I loved all of it. The story only makes sense with the advances in the book, so it also doesn't feel like the author was only showing off. He made things make sense. Or maybe he made things that make sense, but either way it works.

Speaking of which, if you're a fan of near future Science Fiction, The World Ender is definitely the book you're looking for. The world at the beginning of TWE is easily identifiable as our own. The world at the end of the book, not so much. A lot happens over the course of the decade plus of the story. But the tech that they develop in the book is insane. The speed of technological progression in TWE is probably faster than the one that took humanity from its first flight in 1903 to the moon in 1969. Things move quickly but they make sense and the pressure to invent is immense.

George Guess, protagonist of The World Ender goes through a pretty amazing character arc. I don't want to spoil too much but let's just say that George starts off the book leaning heavily on the naive side, but he doesn't finish it that way. One might even be tempted to believe that he ends up the teensiest touch bitter. I mention this because I facepalmed a few pages into the book when I first picked it up. I thought perhaps the author had a bit of a naive attitude toward an organization which I am not really a fan of. It turns out that I was mistaking the character's attitudes for the author's, but George figured things out soon enough.

George has a truly indomitable spirit. Even in the face of an asteroid strike that has the ability to pretty much wipe out all life on Earth, he manages to get married, have a child and basically live the closest thing to a normal life that he possibly can given the circumstances. He does a good job of trying to make his life work under duress. I'm impressed by this guy.

Keep your head on a swivel while reading The World Ender. The twists and turns come fast and furiously. In a way, this book reminds me of the fourth season of Babylon 5. It has the feeling of a story that doesn't quite fit comfortably within its bounds. The author (whether JMS or Saengard) therefore decided to make things fit by making events happen at a pace that is not comfortable either. In both cases, it works. I'd rather have things come at me at a breakneck pace than be bored. And you won't get bored.

I will warn you about this much though: If you are a conspiracy theorist, take some Benadryl before reading The World Ender. Your nerves might just make you break out in hives if you don't. I have a cousin who's always talking about the Illuminati, and the Rosicrucians, and I forget what other stuff and I'm afraid to let him get his hands on my Kindle because there's a good chance he'll lose his mind if he ever does. Don't get me wrong, neither one of those organizations is actually in the book, but there's enough conspiratorial weirdness in here to make your hair stand up if that's the way you're predisposed.

The World Ender is a book crying out for a sequel. You've heard of Post-Apocalyptic fiction, right? TWE is closer to Pre-Apocalyptic fiction. I've already gone further than I'm comfortable going down Spoiler Road by revealing that much, so I'm not going to give the details as to why I'd say that. Suffice it to say that there is a new world a-borning and a hero that is capable of adventuring within it. George's first few goals should be fairly obvious to anyone who has read the book, and a good author (and Saengard is one) could easily find a way to add a few more along the way. I really hope that we haven't heard the last of George Guess, regardless of what he happens to call himself at any particular

moment. I'm following Saengard on Amazon now. I'll be keeping an eye on my email to find out when the next one drops. Hopefully.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Crooked Politicians

Prose Bono

Analysis Paralysis by Cedar Sanderson

I was watching a video on making linocut prints the other day, and the cheeky fellow presenting was talking about analysis paralysis and then he grinned and said something like 'I abbreviate it as Anal. P.' which also flashed in text on the screen. It made me laugh. It made me pay attention (I'm often streaming videos in the background as random noise while I'm working on something else) so he achieved his goal.

That moment came back to me while I was struggling to come up with what to write about here today. The problem is not a lack of ideas. The problem is too many. Some of them require far more time, energy, and research than I can manage (even if I were so inclined) at this time. Others feel like cheating because I've talked about them before here.

So. I'm paralyzed.

Which leads me to back off and take another tack at it. Who am I writing this for? Nominally, you, my Dear Reader. I have a rough idea of who you are: a writer or an author (what's the difference? Well, one has finished something with the intent of publishing, the other may or may not have finished anything and likely doesn't plan to publish) who is Indie-oriented. There are not a lot of you relatively speaking for whatever reason. We try to put good stuff up here at MGC but the audience is small and dwindling.

So, who am I really writing this for? Me. Same as with my fiction, really. Yes, I try to understand my market and accommodate their expectations (doesn't always work, see my latest two-star review where the reader was disappointed in a cosy romance that didn't pay off for them. No idea what they thought was going to happen aside from the main characters getting together, but I let that person down badly) but mostly I write what I want to write. Why?

If I didn't write what made me happy, I'd stop doing this. Bluntly, it doesn't make sense to continue beating your head against the wall (and yes, I know that when you stop it feels better but you see, I'm not stopping!) unless you are getting something out of it. In the indie world, that wall is discoverability, algorithms, and shrinking attention spans. Writing for yourself first keeps the flame alive long enough for the business side to matter. With my fiction that gets published I get money which pays bills and buys me more books, to be reductive. With the non-fiction what am I getting?

I get a chance to take a look at what's inside my head.

You read that right. If I put what's a mess in there — inchoate, tangled, un-examined — onto the page where I have to sort it out and make sense of it? Then I know better what I'm thinking, and why, and if

it doesn't make sense I can attempt to figure out what I need to correct in my assumptions. I'm making myself a little bit better every time I write an essay where I'm truly thinking and not just dialing it in.

What can you, Dear Reader, take away from this exercise?

First of all, when you are paralyzed about what to write, stop worrying about who you might be writing for, and just write. Give yourself permission to be bad, however you define 'bad' and write something down. Write for you and you alone.

Secondly, writing non-fiction can help with the fiction writing by helping you examine your underlying thought processes. Writing about why you are structuring a story like that, what is going on with your world (also, world-building essays do not belong in the story, I said what I said! Come at me...) and what's motivating your characters from an external-to-the-story point can help you figure out what you're doing wrong with the story and help you kickstart the storytelling.

Finally, the act of writing engenders more writing. Doesn't matter the 'flavor.' By writing something down, you've started a cascade in your brain you can then channel into the directions you deem useful. Along the way, you may find that you have something which can be used for other things. Like posting on the blog.

Reverse Outlining a Pantsed Series: How I'm Keeping the Groundskeeper Books from Falling Apart Cedar Sanderson

AI as Assistant, Outlining, Pantsing, reverse outlining, series continuity, story structure, writing a series, writing tools

As we saw last week, I'm a pantsner whose characters don't always mind my stage instructions loudly whispered from just behind the curtains. In a standalone book? This can work. In the first couple of books of a series, when it's loosely constructed? Still manageable. Third or fourth book in the series? The bill comes due, and you need to know what you're doing, or risk the whole thing spinning out of control into sheer chaos. Now is the time to apply an analytical eye to what came before and reverse the outline. I can't write an outline and work from it. I can look at a book I've already written and figure out what I've done.

Right now, I'm working on the sixth installment in the Groundskeeper series, and over the previous two books I've deepened Chloe's involvement in the shadowy liminal world between the living and the dead. She's gained a new role in life, far more responsibilities, and I'm about to write the story of her first 'solo flight' into the work she's been training for. Chloe is one of the more tight-lipped characters I've ever written, a true stoic, which is part of why she works so well in this setting where horror meets cozy. I need to keep in mind what she's likely to react to – or not, as the case may be. Which means I really have to understand what I've built into this series.

When I started writing these stories, the first three were loosely connected, a thread of the main character, the cemetery, I hadn't really considered building out the world and a big series arc at that point. I still, by the way, don't intend a big series arc. I'd like each book to have its own standalone mystery plot, with recurring characters and settings cropping up. That makes it a little easier on the author. There is still a lot of weight resting on those early slender threads, and if I drop threads, I create inconsistencies, pacing problems, missing side characters, and risk breaking my characters. Any of those,

much less more than one, will aggravate readers and you'll lose them. Get it right, and they will tell a friend and you'll gain new readers. There's motivation for you.

There are a number of different ways you can go about preparing a reverse outline. Notecards for each chapter, which I have done, will work. Most recently I've been using my friendly "Skynet secretary" as Mel Dunay dubbed it and asking Grok to generate a reverse outline from a book. You'll always want to check the work of an AI, particularly with a longer work, because they can and will hallucinate stuff you didn't write in there. However, they can also pick out stuff you did write into the book, even unconsciously if you are a pantsner like I am, which is kind of cool to look at and say "oh! That's what I did!"

Here's part of the output from The Groundskeeper: Deadhead, which was book 4 in the series, and is a longer novella. I attached it as a txt file to the simple prompt "Can you prepare a reverse outline for these two books? The Groundskeeper: Deadhead comes before The Groundskeeper: Have a Dead Night."

The Groundskeeper: Deadhead

Overall Structure:

A character-driven origin/promotion story that transitions Chloe from groundskeeper to apprentice Mediator in the Fraternitas Mortis. It uses a slow-burn introduction to the supernatural world, interpersonal relationships, and world-building through dialogue and small mysteries rather than high action. The book focuses on acceptance, training, and ritual commitment.

Prologue

Chloe clears invasive honeysuckle in the cemetery and disturbs a mysterious black, oily, sentient substance that swallows her pickaxe.

She flees, tries to alert her boss (Mr. Cruor, who is absent), consults the ghoul Benny (who refuses to go near the area), then returns to retrieve tools.

Mr. Cruor returns with Detective Murray; Chloe is drawn into a conversation about prior cemetery mysteries (bodies outside the grounds). She withholds supernatural details.

Ends with Chloe forgetting to mention the black goo.

Chapter 1

Rainy day; Chloe is bored with grounds work.

Mr. Cruor announces her promotion to apprentice Mediator/psychopomp role in the secret Fraternitas Mortis.

Extensive explanation of the organization, her unique gifts (seeing/interacting with the dead/elementals), and the dangers involved.

Chloe signs paperwork and takes an oath of secrecy.

Introduction to supporting cast (skeleton housekeeper Della Dear, etc.).

...

Chapter 12 (Oath Ceremony)

Morning of the ceremony: Chloe works in the garden to manage nerves.

John Smith (another member) gives her an encouraging pep talk.

Formal oath in the old auditorium with the chapter members present.

Simple celebration with cake; Chloe reflects on how life-changing events feel anticlimactic.

Epilogue

Chloe receives the battered “Abomination” Land Rover from the Orban property. John offers driving lessons; Chloe jokes about haunting him if she dies. Light, humorous close showing integration of new role with old groundskeeping life and garden gnomes.

Key Themes & Arc: Chloe’s reluctant acceptance of greater responsibility; building found family within the Brotherhood; blending mundane cemetery work with supernatural mediation.

You can see how useful this is if you are making a series bible, need to have highlights you can pick up for the next book(s), find a plot point to reference quickly... And you can further query in the same conversation string if you want to see what else the machine can pull out of the tangled web you wove. Something like “What are the dangling plot threads I could pick up in the next book of the series as I’m working on that now?” and with Grok, at least, I get lists of major threads (and here’s where checking its work is important, because it missed that I had tied off one of these) as well as Character Arc and Personal Threads that can be extended and woven into the next works. It even has suggestions for world-building and minor or atmospheric threads. You can ignore any or all of those – and likely should never use them directly as the AI is by design highly derivative – but they can be useful in identifying elements to work into the book. Reading reviews on previous books is also a way to confirm what might work in the next book in the series. I’ve had a review point out something I missed, which I was able to pick up and stitch right into a book as a major plot point just as though I’d meant to do that!

Leaving aside the high-tech rubber ducky I’ve been bouncing stuff off of, if you are a pantsner you may feel reluctant to transition from creative flow to analysis. There’s something magical about those days when the story just pours out of your soul. There’s nothing magic about cold analytical outlining. What I suspect you’re going to find, based on my experience, is that you’re better at this than you think you are. There’s going to be work to be done, sure, but the reverse outline is likely to show that you have subconsciously ‘got it’ and the story is strong. Also, the joy in finding just the right threads that spark off the idea for the next story? The “Oh, that will work!” moment? That’s worth the work you have to put into looking back at where you’ve been to start forward again.

Try this out yourself! There are software tools for it (Scrivener and Plottr, although I have not used either of them in spite of owning both), you can go full analogue with notecards and a corkboard or magnets on the fridge to organize, or you can try out a Skynet Secretary (it helps to imagine her looking over her glasses at me with that faintly skeptical look, but obediently doing what I ask. Then I know I’m off track!) to accomplish the same reverse outline. You may discover something about your story while you’re at it. Heck, it’s probably useful to do this before you finish writing something. Um. I should try that...

The various LLMs and other related programs seem to do very well if you set very strict parameters and have a constrained task (“Given this income, these tax categories, and that list of deductions, calculate the correct withholding for a self-employed computer programmer, or “Using this set of stylistic rules, and this voicing, arrange [tune] as a Renaissance motet.”)

It is when they go free-ranging that things seem to become interesting, strange, or flat out wrong.

The Sky is Falling by Cedar Sanderson

Now, things have changed since I wrote this, as it was published originally at Mad Genius Club on July 21, 2018. Draft 2 Digital is no longer recommended for distribution due to their decision to charge fees. Other things? Including the motive behind D2D's decision? The more things change, the more they stay the same. The big ebook sellers are still trying to stay one step ahead of the scammers, only the pace is slightly more quick-step with the advent of AI. Amazon is, after all these years, still the best place to sell ebooks. Will that continue? Who knows?

It's been a while since I read it - my kids are all teenagers now! All four of them! (Ok, shutting the existential crisis up for a few) - but as I recall, Chicken Little was not a precautionary tale. It didn't end with 'the sky was really falling down, and as the world ended in fire and ashes, Chicken Little danced on the bones of his barnyard pals, finally vindicated in his unheeded prophecy.'

Instead, Chicken Little was about a small hen who panicked at the smallest provocation, like a ripe apple falling from a tree, and learned through wise guidance to keep her chill. My kids say something like this all the time to each other. "Keep your chill! Keep it!" and the other one will wail back "I can't! I can't keep it!" Because teens, and hormones, and all the feels, y'know, man? I can dig it.

I can also understand the desire to panic. After all, if Amazon turns against us Indie Authors, we'll all be crushed like bugs. And it's only human nature to depend on rumors and whispers of dire events befalling those like us - because after all, the internet in the form we know it has existed for what, thirty years? That's an eyeblink to the panorama of human history. We're still adapting to having all of this largesse of information at our fingertips. While it means that suddenly we can know more than we ever dreamed of a mere decade ago, it also makes it more difficult to wade through the stream of garbage and find the islands of fact that stand solid in an ever-changing landscape. We authors are trying to navigate our small businesses among this flood, and while it gives us boundless opportunities, there are also a lot of ways we can capsize.

I'm not going to reiterate everything Amanda wrote the other day in her post about how to contact Amazon if funny things happen to your author account. I am going to say that proceeding with caution when Chicken Little starts running screaming along her floating garbage rafts, begging you all to abandon ships! The Great and Mighty 'Zon is Falling! You might not want to just flip out and over. Sure, there's the equivalent of life jackets out there. You might not drown and never sell another copy of another book. There's always Draft 2 Digital, which is an excellent broad-platform distributor. No, I will not recommend Smashwords, they suck. Sorry, but they do. You don't want to be 'rescued' by a sinking ship that hasn't been updated or repaired in lo, these many years. So, if you really do feel like staying exclusive to the 'Zon is going to drag you under, check out D2D. Scatter your bread on the waters. Who knows? I haven't had the greatest return from doing that, but then again, it's been a while.

Because I'm sort of on the bank watching. I like my writing income, don't get me wrong. I love writing, and I have made it my business: and I'm not about to produce sub-par products just because my livelihood doesn't depend on this. But because I have limited time, I do like money (yes, yes, I am a mercenary wench), and I have done enough research and time-in-markets to know where the bulk of my sales/monetized reads come from, I've hitched my little coracle to the 'Zon Barge (if we're going to keep the Internet as information river metaphor going). I might choose to unmoor and kick off in the future. I have that freedom. There's nothing keeping me here other than it's what works for me right now. Let me expand this mental image I have for you: the 'Zon is like a big floating bazaar. All the Indies are little watercraft of all shapes and sizes who come alongside and offer their wares through the auspices of the big ship. See, the villagers on the banks of the online river are a bit distrusting-like of

this online shopping thingy. It's newfangled. But the 'Zon has earned their trust, and the little boating community is hitching onto that trust and going along for a share of the profits and ride. In order to keep the trust of the villagers, the 'Zon has to police that community, and any shady scummy types, they need to cut loose and disassociate with. So that's what is getting Chicken Little all in a tizzy. I don't see any sign of the 'Zon shelling my fellow authors and sinking them... I do see that some in the Indie community have indulged in unwise practices to promote their business, and the 'Zon has cut their tow ropes. Now, they are adrift in the stream and panicking.

I'm not saying that everyone who has issues with 'Zon has brought it on themselves. In their efforts to cut the dead weight, some innocent ropes get chopped. But there are ways, as Amanda detailed in her post, to get those repaired. And it's all part of doing business. Not everything is going to go smoothly. But when the crisis comes?

Chill, dude. Chill. It's all going to be okay. Running around screaming about the sky falling doesn't make you Cassandra, it makes you look like you don't know what you're talking about. Relax, because if you have done your research and due diligence early, you can adjust to the new currents without any danger of turning turtle. It takes a calm hand on the rudder, but businesses, like ships, can endure through the storm.

When Your Characters Stage a Mutiny: Dealing with Rebellious Imaginary People by Cedar Sanderson

So what do you do when a character takes on a life of their own and starts hijacking your carefully planned story? Or when a side character suddenly elbows the protagonist aside and announces they're the main attraction now? Worst of all is when a character crosses their arms, glares at you, and then refuses to speak or even make eye contact.

I'm a near-pure pantsier, so this happens to me constantly. Plotters with detailed outlines may dodge some of it, but from what I hear in the comments and elsewhere, even the most disciplined outliners get ambushed by rebellious characters now and then.

Why does this happen?

Logically, I know these people are figments of my imagination. They can't actually think for themselves. In practice, though, what appears on the page often surprises me, and that surprise is part of the fun. It keeps me from getting bored, which (hopefully) keeps readers turning pages.

Characters behaving like real people is really just the author's deep observation and subconscious integration of human behavior leaking onto the page. You've absorbed thousands of tiny details about how people move, speak, and react under pressure. Your brain hands them to the character at exactly the right (or wrong) moment.

How do you handle a character who's gone off script?

You probably can't fully control them, and you shouldn't always try. But you can pay close attention. One technique I've seen work well (though I admit I don't always do it) is the character interview. Skip the favorite-color nonsense. Ask hard questions: What are you most afraid of right now? What do you want that you're ashamed to admit? What would you never do, and why?

When a character stonewalls you, stop and ask: Am I breaking this character by forcing them down this path? Sometimes the resistance is your brain telling you the plot is wrong.

I wrote years ago about using Maslow's hierarchy of needs for characters, and it still holds up. A person fighting for survival isn't going to obsess over social status or self-actualization. If your character is acting "out of character," check what need level they're really operating from. Are you forcing them into a motivation that doesn't match their current state?

When you're blocked, open a fresh document and let the character break the fourth wall. Let them complain directly:

"Who do you think you are, making me do this?"

"Why are you ruining my life for your stupid plot?"

Answering the basic reporter questions — Who? What? Why? When? How? — from their point of view often reveals plot holes and unlocks the story again.

Side characters who demand their own book are a special kind of chaos. My advice: tell them to sit down and wait their turn. Open a new file, jot notes, maybe write a couple of scenes or a short story outline. Then close it and return to the main project. Keep the promise to yourself to write that story, even if it's only a newsletter exclusive or blog bonus later. Your subconscious might be spotting something valuable that your conscious mind hasn't caught yet.

When I was writing *Tomato Wurm*, I realized I couldn't tell the story properly from just one point of view if I wanted a full cast who weren't simply dancing to Cecilia's whims. I started writing from only Cecilia's point of view, then after a conversation with Dorothy Grant realized I should add Grieg's perspective, but then Jock the gamekeeper and even Arinto the wurm insisted on having their say. By allowing that ensemble cast to pitch in and tell parts of the story in their own voices, the whole book became far richer and more deeply told than it ever could have been if I'd stubbornly stuck to simply Cecilia's viewpoint.

Bottom line:

Meaningful dialogue with your characters even when they're being difficult produces living, breathing people on the page. Cardboard cutouts never captured anyone's heart. When a character balks, they're usually trying to tell you something important. Sometimes the best move is to trust them and see where they lead.

What about you? What's the best (or worst) thing a character of yours ever did to derail your plans? How did you handle it and did the story end up better for it? Drop your stories in the comments. I read every one even if I'm terrible at replying to them.

You Are What You Read by Cedar Sanderson

This was originally published at the Mad Genius Club on March 17, 2018. My son keeps better company these days as he's serving in the Navy and his unit seems to be a solid one with men who mentor their young shipmate. I'm honored to help in my small way by supplying books to their library. And my own books are shaped by what I read, and have read, and will read...

You are shaped by the company you keep, I was trying to explain to my son recently. He'd been watching a Youtuber known for vulgarity and disrespect. Find someone more wholesome, I told my boy, because even though you think he won't, this guy will live in your head and that's not who I want you to be.

My son doesn't really know it yet, but whether you absorb the 'person' through reading, watching, or just hanging out, you are influenced by those you keep company with. I know that happens to me when I'm writing - my voice on paper changes if I have been reading someone with a strong voice. Unconsciously, I choose words and sentence structures more like what's been in my head most recently. Since I'm aware of this, I can control it by not reading, say, Mickey Spillane while I'm trying to write something that isn't gritty and noir.

The company you keep extends far deeper than your writing, of course. Whether it is books, people, or even, yes, the television and videos you watch, they mold you into something different. I love to watch cooking shows like Chopped and Iron Chef, and find that they inspire me to make different decisions when meal preparation times come along. My interest in cooking also extends to cookbooks, and after being given some of the cookbooks my grandmother and great-grandmother had used, I started to collect more antique cookbooks and started a series of blog posts cooking recipes from a Vintage Kitchen. That even filters into my books, where readers tell me I mention food often, although it wasn't entirely my intent to do so - it's just that I love to cook (and eat!) and it goes into my stories.

I've seen this from the outside, too. It's not only children who are malleable enough to be led astray by their companions. I watched a creative who I had once admired and respected morph into a different person because of the company he chose to keep, until the day came I had to walk away from my ongoing support and consuming his work, because he started advocating against basic human rights. I couldn't risk keeping on taking his work into me, because just like a disease, this is how it spreads. I'm not likely to ever advocate for the removal of anyone's right to self-defense, but there are other ways it could seep into my life and besides, there are things you just don't support. You tell them what they did, and you walk away. Then you grieve a little.

I got in trouble (hah!) a few years back for being open about not wanting my then barely-teen daughters to be reading YA books that advocated for incest, rape, and other abuses. Torture porn is, sadly, prevalent in a lot of the YA fic and I wasn't going to let my daughters read it. Censorship! evil controlling mother, forbidding her children from reading. Um, no. What I was doing, and stated then, was protecting young minds from influences that they didn't need to have. To somewhat self-consciously quote myself: "The vast majority of teens will never experience something that terrible. But we hold up all these examples and say "here, this could happen to you!" Is this a healthy thing to do to teen girls? And most especially if they are given no choice, and required to read them, for a true victim it could cause them to have to relive horrors. For an innocent bystander, it gives them a thrill at the expense of those who are not in need of fiction to help them cope. It does not teach them to avoid those behaviors, they are teenagers, they need parental guidance, strong, mature role models, and the education to defend themselves. Teen boys don't need to think that all boys do is harm girls. They need to know that galantry and chivalry need not die out.

This is why when Thirteen Reasons hit Netflix, I asked my daughters not to watch it. I knew it was going to add glamour to a terribly, cowardly act. I knew that my girls didn't need that narrative in their head. And I wasn't alone in my reservations about the show, either. Movies, and books, tap into the emotions we already have - that's part of the way we connect to a particularly compelling narrative. We have feelings about something already, and the media amplifies those feelings, until we start to feel like we have facts. As Mark Henick comments in the above blog post, feelings are not facts. It's hard

enough for adults to make that connection, it's that much more difficult for teens to do it.

So evaluate what you are influenced by. The books you read, the Youtubers you let into your brain (ok, ok, most of us reading this are old fuddy-duddies who barely know who those strange creatures are... at least that's what my daughters tell me), and even the people you hang out with. Not that you want to form an echo chamber but... do you want to be known for keeping company with the bitter, the liars, the vile 666s of the world? Or do you want to surround yourself with people who challenge you to do better, write more, explore new information and keep learning and growing? I know what I want for my kids, and I try to model that for them. They don't get a choice about being around me!

Announcing CoverFixer!

By Rob Kroese

<https://coverfixer.com/>

The first in a series of AI-enabled publishing tools

The short version: I'm developing a suite of AI-enabled publishing tools that will be offered under the SodaBadger.com umbrella. The first of these tools is CoverFixer. It's free to try.

The long version:

Like most novelists and other creators, I've had mixed feelings about AI.

When it first became clear that AI was going to intrude into creative work, I felt both fear and excitement. Fear, because writing fiction is already a hard way to make a living, and just when I finally felt like I had a handle on the process, along came something that seemed likely to upend everything. Excitement, because before I was a novelist, I was a programmer—and part of me wanted to know what this technology could actually do.

I wasn't convinced AI could ever write a Rex Nihilo novel. I'm still not. But I knew one thing: if AI was going to become part of the creative process, I wanted to be the one controlling it. I wanted to ride the wave, not get drowned underneath it. So I started experimenting.

After a bit of dabbling, both my fear and excitement faded a bit. The limitations became obvious quickly. AI could be impressive, but it could also forget basic facts, misunderstand instructions, hallucinate answers, or confidently promise things it couldn't actually do.

But over the next couple of years, two things happened. First, the tools got dramatically better. Second, I started to see that the real opportunity wasn't in asking AI to "be creative" in some vague, magical way. The opportunity was in understanding what AI is good at, what it is bad at, and how a person with a clear vision can use it to improve specific parts of the creative process.

About two months ago, while working on my Ransom's Law series, I had something of an epiphany: the main reason people struggle to get good results from AI is that they treat it like a human being. Then they get frustrated when it forgets something obvious, loses track of the project, misunderstands the task, or says it can do something it can't. The problem is scope.

Give ChatGPT comprehensive instructions and a focused job, and it can write a decent scene. Give it a different set of comprehensive instructions, and it can produce a useful outline. But trying to make the

same instance do both at once—and then jump to a different novel, and then remember your branding strategy, and then critique a cover—is where things start to fall apart.

Humans are not as fast as computers at processing information, but we are much better at switching scopes. We know when we are talking about this chapter versus the whole novel, this book versus the series, this character's motivation versus the author's marketing problem. AI needs help with that.

That realization led me to start building a set of focused AI tools for writers and creators under the Soda Badger umbrella (why Soda Badger?). The idea is not to replace the writer. It's to build tools with clear boundaries, clear context, and specific jobs.

(The next step in this process is building apps that act as scope-management tools, so you can take advantage of AI's speed and power while seamlessly switching from narrow tasks to broad planning, and from one project to another—but that phase is still a few weeks out....)

The first of the focused tools is now live.

CoverFixer is a practical AI tool for authors who want feedback on a book cover. You upload a cover, add a little context about the genre or audience, and it gives you a critique focused on things like readability, composition, title treatment, genre clarity, and overall market fit.

Right now CoverFixer can:

- Review uploaded cover images
- Give practical, market-oriented feedback
- Generate revised cover concepts for logged-in users
- Save recent jobs so you can return to earlier reviews

A pro version with more features and fewer limitations is under development. You can sign up to be notified when it's released. If you'd like early access to the pro version and other Soda Badger tools, you can also request to be a beta tester.

CoverFixer is not meant to be a replacement for a human cover designer. It's intended as a quick make-over with an eye toward making the cover more visually striking, legible at a small size, and genre-appropriate. And because the generation feature depends on external AI services, occasional delays or failed generations can happen.

But even with those limitations, I think CoverFixer solves a real problem. Authors often know something about a cover feels off, but they don't always know what. CoverFixer gives you a fast first pass: not the final answer, but a clearer diagnosis and a direction to explore.

You can try it here: <https://coverfixer.com/>

More tools are coming. Some will focus on writing. Some on planning and organizing. Some on marketing. The common thread is that they will all be built around the same idea: AI works best when it has a specific job, clear context, and a human being firmly in charge.

Stay tuned!