

Tightbeam 382

July 2026



On Mars by Jose Sanchez

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What is Tightbeam? We are the N3F literary fanzine, not the novel and anthology fanzine, but the fanzine that tries to cover all tastes in fandom, such as anime, comics, cosplay, films, novels, biographies, poetry, music, short stories, food, ...

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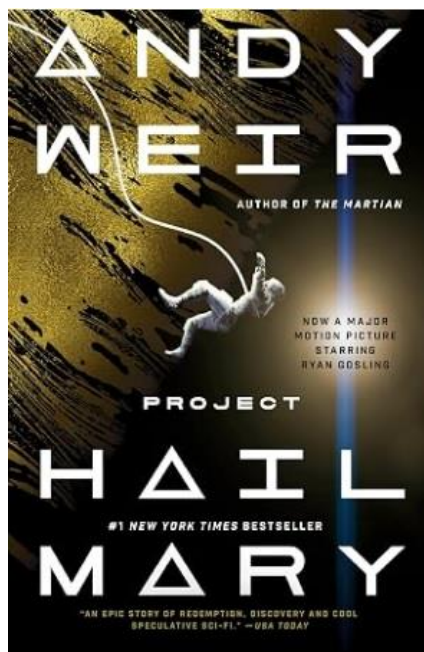
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Books

Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir Review by Jason P. Hunt



Earlier this year, I reviewed the movie adaptation of Project Hail Mary, noting that I hadn't yet read the book. Well, now I have, and I get to let you know what I thought about the source material. And probably to no one's surprise, I enjoyed the book as much as I enjoyed the movie.

In fact, there's a small chance I might have enjoyed the book a little better, because there's more detail in how Ryland Grace gets from point A to point B, and the flashbacks deliver more information on how the crisis evolved and how Eva Stratt moved Heaven and Earth to save humanity.

The story in the book is the same as in the movie, of course, with a few slightly different details. For one, there is no character named Carl in the book. He appears to have been constructed for the film in order to facilitate exposition as Ryland figured things out on how the astrophage worked. Talking with Carl in the movie replaces the on-going internal monologue in

the book, wherein Grace goes through step-by-step in his research, noting the various scientific aspects of the work along the way. And those scientific details are important in that they pave the way for us to understand how Grace can use the knowledge he has to work with Rocky and develop a solution to save both planets.

Recruited from his classroom by Stratt, Grace is one of many scientists trying to find a solution to the Petrova Line, a sequence of particles moving between Venus and the Sun while draining the Sun of its energy. After a certain number of years, it's determined, Earth will cool to the point where humanity will likely die off due to the loss of solar energy and the impact that will have on the planet's ecosystem. After scanning nearby stars, they discover that while Tau Ceti has its own Petrova Line, it does not appear to be affecting the star. So a team of astronauts will be tasked with travelling the distance on a one-way trip to discover just what makes Tau Ceti immune in the hopes of getting that information back to Earth in time to make a difference.

One thing I don't remember being in the movie, but it could be just because it's been a while since I watched it: the genetic marker that allows some people to tolerate long-term induced coma. Grace has it, which is why he becomes the replacement science specialist on the mission after the accident that kills both the primary and the backup specialists just weeks before the launch. Another difference: there is no comedic-ish running from the needle in the book. It plays out much more as a straightforward betrayal by Stratt, regrets notwithstanding.

And after reading the book, I have to agree with screenwriter Drew Goddard and would have liked to see the nuclear bombardment of Antarctica.

Also of note: I thoroughly enjoyed the fact that Andy Weir is not one of those “trying to be Joss Whedon” writers. Yes, his story has humor, but it’s not snarky over-the-top twentysomething slang that no one should be using ever, and the humor comes in the midst of circumstances that need humor to let everyone breathe.

Rocky is pretty much in the book the same as he is in the film, only with more elaborate explanations as to how Grace puts together his translation program on the laptop. It’s not glossed over in the film so much, but the book has more detail as to how Grace figures out Rocky’s method of communication uses musical frequencies in layers to convey concepts and ideas. It’s an intriguing notion, and I’m glad the book explores this a bit more. Would have taken up too much time in the film, of course, but then everything does when you’re adapting book to movie.

This is also one of those rare exceptions to my “present tense bad” rule. It’s not something that an author can get right very often (looking at you, Wendig...), but in this case it absolutely works because Weir uses it to separate what Grace experiences on the ship with his memories of how he got there. Not only does it serve up some narrative separation between events, but it also acts as a visual cue to the reader as to where we are in the story. Grace’s memories bubble up to the surface as he encounters different aspects of the ship, the mission, the fact that he’s on a one-way mission to Tau Ceti, with two corpses aboard. Weir weaves the flashbacks into the narrative in a natural organic way that doesn’t jar the reader with the jump from past to present, and the shift from past tense to present tense aids in that transition to make it smoother. I almost didn’t notice it until I did.

Honestly, as much as I enjoyed the movie, I think I like the book just a tad bit more for its additional detail and scientific elements. I have no doubt this one will be on my “read again” pile, and I’m now primed to read *The Martian* and *Artemis*.

Movies

The Mandalorian and Grogu: Fun To Be Had (If You Let Yourself) Review by Jason P. Hunt



This is a Star Wars movie, and it’s a Mandalorian movie, and sometimes those two things are separate and apart from each other.

So, this film is the big screen continuation of *The Mandalorian*, the series that the Walt Disney Company used to sell subscriptions to the Disney+ streaming service. Would the show exist otherwise? Who’s to say? But in any event, the show delivered two out of three really good seasons following a Mandalorian bounty hunter who isn’t Boba Fett but probably started out as Boba Fett before they changed it because how do you explain Boba Fett’s return? (And then they did...)

The less said about the third season, the better, because the stories have it that Disney and Lucasfilm suits interfered creatively — firing Gina Carano and leaving only Baby Yoda to sell

toys will do that — and with the return of Baby Yoda, rumor had it that Jon Favreau was effectively done playing in the Star Wars sandbox.

That proves to not be the case, as Favreau and Filoni return for this flawed, somewhat entertaining entry in the Mandoverse. Flawed, yes, but one must also consider that this particular film is not doing a lot of narrative heavy lifting likely for a reason. This movie serves to get Star Wars back on the big screen with a modest success, something the brand has been missing for a long while. (And no, numbers presented as “profit” aren’t always “profit” in the long run.)

So, anyway, the plot (without spoilers): after seeming to retire on Nevarro, in a nice little two-bedroom ranch with a nice kitchen, Mandalorian Din Djarin (Brendan Wayne, Lateef Crowder, and briefly Pedro Pascal) is currently working for the New Republic. His job is to hunt down and capture officers of the Imperial Remnant — no, they’re not called that, but they should be — who are listed in a deck of cards very reminiscent of the Gulf War deck (Saddam Hussein was number 168 in the Topps set) managed by Colonel Ward (Sigourney Weaver).

The opening action set has Mando hunting a particular nameless Imperial Warlord (Hemky Madera; see our interview with him here) who has set himself up as a regional governor of sorts, working a protection racket and opining that “the people” will eventually realize that they’ve lost important bureaucracy with the downfall of the Empire, and it’s only a matter of time before they want that superior logistical structure back in place. (Who made the trains run on time?) This hearkens back to the Extended Universe, when many former Imperials set themselves up as regional warlords and governors in the attempt to consolidate personal power in the wake of the Empire’s defeat. Because let’s face it: the Deep State bureaucracy is a thing even in fiction, right?

The bulk of the narrative turns toward Djarin’s mission to locate the “Ace of Staves” in the deck, Commander Coin — whereabouts unknown, appearance unknown — and he’s got to do a favor for the Hutt Twins (why do we never get their names?), who need him to head to planet Shakari and retrieve their nephew Rotta (Jeremy Allen White), the son of Jabba the Hutt, notorious villain and gangster thug who was defeated in the Star Wars movies that actually really matter.

I’m convinced that Weaver was brought in to replace the late Carl Weathers, as she performs essentially the same function he had during his run in the first season of the show: give Mando a target, pay him when the job’s done. The added layer that Djarin is now working for the New Republic allows for the addition of Rebels alumnus Zeb Orellos (Steve Blum) along with Carson Teva (Paul Sun-Hyung Lee), Trapper Wolf (Dave Filoni in a Favreau-induced funny bit that has now gone too far), and the New Republic’s Adelphi Base. Which bugs me a little, because on the one hand we get camera shots out of *Apocalypse Now* and *Top Gun*, but if Zeb is there, Chopper should be with him. And where’s the rest of the Ghost crew?

For that matter, where is Hondo Ohnaka? And if we’re dealing with the Hutts, where is the guy who took over Jabba’s operation on Tatooine? You know that guy. Boba something... and his side chick partner, Fennic Shand. Where are they in all of this?

Things quickly go sideways, as they do, and I won’t get into spoilers. But suffice to say that Rotta doesn’t want to cooperate, and what follows is the thematic crux of the entire movie: the

relationship between fathers and sons. Rotta lives in the shadow of his father's legacy, while Groggu is slowly learning to embrace his own. It's a theme we've seen elsewhere in *Superman*: the son becomes the father, the father becomes the son. And here Groggu actually starts to take initiative and hold his own against his circumstances, even though it's a sequence that I would have completely cut because it makes the entire film drag like it was stuck in molasses.

And I mean it draaagggggs.

The film is about fifteen to twenty minutes too long, and all of the Groggu stuff is what does it. I get why it's there, especially in light of analysis elsewhere that puts a spotlight on "what do I do when you're gone?" sentimentality that some kids are experiencing with their parents after seeing this story. But it bogs down the entire narrative, and while it accomplishes a neat little character arc for the puppet, it does absolutely nothing for the story itself. In fact, with a few judicious cuts in the script, I could arrive at the same destination with just a little more exposition and some much better interaction with Gatori (Stephen McKinley Henderson), who just happens to be in the right place at the right time and just happens to have that one thing that Groggu just happens to need...

And to be honest, you could probably do away with the Hutt Twins, too, for all that they drive the plot (they don't, really). They're a functional plot device to get Djarin from one place to another and drop him into the crux of a dilemma, but you could take them completely out and still tell the same story. Ward mentions an arrangement with them, and she hints that there are other forces at play with that arrangement, which Djarin short-circuits, but there's never any development of that line of plot outside the scene where Ward upbraids Djarin. If it really, really matters that Djarin has to go through the Hutts in order to maintain some kind of pact or understanding with the New Republic, that idea needs more development than what we got.

And to address the 800-pound slug in the room: most of the dialogue from the Twins is in Huttese. The amount of Basic they speak is pretty much what we've seen in trailers and clips. I'd say about 90-95% of their dialogue is in their native language. You can't say that for Rotta, however. He's speaking Basic throughout the film, and however you may feel about it, there's precedent. Jabba's uncle Ziro the Hutt spoke Basic just fine back in *The Clone Wars*, so one can assume Jabba could as well, just arrogantly chose not to debase himself with such.

Regardless of how you feel about Hutts speaking Basic, the fact of the matter is that it doesn't sound like Jeremy Allen White affected any changes to his own voice and speech patterns. Aside from the standard audio mixing to give his voice the traditional Hutt rumble in the bass frequencies, he sounds just like a regular schmoe off the streets, and that's more distracting than his speaking Basic. That voice does not sound like it's coming out of that slug, especially that particularly ripped and shredded slug. Having said that, White delivers an OK performance, but I think the casting is off. Not everyone has watched *The Bear*, and it feels like a bit of stunt casting or throwing a net over the current flavor-of-the-month actor making wine box soccer moms weak in the knees. I would have gone with someone like Christopher Judge or Lance Henriksen. Someone with some weight in the vocal chords.

Kudos to cinematographer David Klein, who not only evokes *Apocalypse Now* and *Top Gun*, but also gives us the planet Shakari wrapped in the style of *Star Wars: Underground*, the cancelled video game 1313, and a dash of *Blade Runner* thrown in for good measure.

Ludwig Göransson's musical choices are ... interesting. I'm not sure I would have made the same choices, even though I was initially impressed with his distinctive style in the beginnings of the series. But here, it feels like he's using instrumentation for the sake of doing it, not because it's the best option to support what's on the screen. I know he has multiple Oscars at this point, but the techno tracks could have been used inside buildings in the 1313 Underground Shakari, but not as the film's musical score. Best to keep the original idea that this is a Space Western, and Din Djarin in another reality is played by Clint Eastwood. Yes, in this reality he's played most of the time by John Wayne's grandson, Brendan, but the music doesn't support the Cowboy. I won't even talk about the final track that plays during the end credits, other than to say it was done before and better by Alan Silvestri and ZZ Top.

Most notable is the inclusion of Phil Tippett's stop-motion work. The giant droids standing guard outside the Hutt enclave: watch them closely and you'll see that those are not CGI, but physical stop-motion models. That plus the Dejarik creatures in one combat arena scene is almost worth the price of admission.

At the end of it all, I found that I was entertained, and I can recommend that you watch it, IMAX or no. Not so much for Mindy or James, but as a filmmaker and commentator, I can see what Favreau is trying to do with this film. He's got to get Star Wars back on the big screen in such a way as to appeal to a broad audience, and that audience doesn't necessarily have to include the die-hard Star Wars fans who are going around the internet saying "Star Wars is dead." It's a fun movie — yes, it drags in Act II — that doesn't require homework to watch it, doesn't end in a cliffhanger to force people to see the next one, and it will play well to families in that same four-quadrant space so successfully conquered by Project Hail Mary (which stars Ryan Gosling, who's about to have his own Star Wars movie).

The film will also play well on Disney+, where it will lead people back to watch the series — at least the first two seasons. Like it or not, that's going to be part of the calculus for every film moving forward. Because not every movie will be about selling Baby Yoda toys.

Who knows? Maybe one of them will sell Cara Dune merch...

Pastime Pictures's *Monster Summer* Review by Jim McCoy

I seem to be developing a taste for nostalgia. I'm not sure exactly why that might be. It certainly can't be the amount of decades that have passed since my birth since we all know I stopped aging at twenty-nine. The facts remain that I've loved every moment of *Stranger Things* that I've seen and that *Fossil Force* was my book of the year for 2025. So it should come as no surprise that I recently watched and loved a movie known as *Monster Summer*.

Monster Summer is a tale set in 1997, two years after I graduated from high school. The kids in the movie still have what I would recognize as a childhood: The go to school (although not during the movie because it's summertime) they play sports and they use their bikes as their main form of transportation. By the time I graduated, I had a car but prior to that I put literally thousands of miles on first an old BMX and then an eighteen speed racing bike just going back and forth to my friends houses and riding in circles around the neighborhood and if felt good to see kids doing that. They played Little League too, and it was fun to see that a couple of days after I



drove past the field where I used to play and saw that the backstop was still there, but that grass had grown over the infield.

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All the people that were born the same year I was are getting old except me. Right?

RIGHT?!?!?!?!?

Anyway...

Monster Summer is set in a semi-normal setting. I say that because it's set on Martha's Vineyard, which is a neighborhood that's a little bit more upscale than the industrial town where I grew up. It's never going to feel quite like home to me for that reason, even if the time period the movie's set in does. That much having been said, it seems to work

well as a hometown for the main characters in the movie, most of which are teenagers.

And that works well. I don't know why (possibly because I'm not aging) but I've kind of become a fan of the Young Adult genre the last few years. And Monster Summer is definitely a YA type of movie. The main character is a kid, as are most of his friends. The exception seems to be Noah's mom and his mentor, both of which are adults. He learns a lot from them though.

Speaking of mentors, I do have one complaint. The mentor character is a retired police detective who is played by Mel Gibson and is NOT NAMED MARTIN RIGGS!!! HOW DO YOU HAVE A POLICE DETECTIVE PLAYED BY MEL GIBSON AND NOT CHANGE THE NAME TO MARTIN RIGGS? I mean, I get the fact that Monster Summer isn't exactly Lethal Weapon, and Gene Carruthers isn't a bad name for a retired detective, but come on here. We're going for nostalgia, right?

Okay, maybe I'm off base here. I still thumbed my nose at it.

But it's a good thing that Noah and friends have an adult mentor with some sleuthing skills, because they don't and it shows. Seriously, I laughed my tail off. My mama tells me I shouldn't laugh in these types of situations, but what does she know? That was funny.

Monster Summer is a horror movie that's an actual horror movie. Things start off normal and get progressively weirder. This isn't Friday the Thirteenth or A Nightmare on Elm Street where we know who the bad guy is and, even if we didn't, the villain is shown covered in gore and stacks bodies like cordwood. This is a psychological thriller type movie.

Things start off more or less the way I remember them from having grown up in the time period. They then get progressively weirder. Nothing seems quite right, but you're not sure why.

Noah and his friends make themselves look dumb and then Noah makes himself look dumber but we, the audience, know that things aren't quite right. Try convincing the adults of that though. Noah slowly figures out what's going on with the help of Gene and the more they figure out the less that makes sense from a real world perspective.

I need to point something out here: I've seen a lot of movies lately with a special effects budget on par with the Gross Domestic Product of some Third World countries and scripts that feel like they were written in crayon by kindergartners. *Monster Summer* is the opposite of that. This script was written by people who knew what a story was and the special effects budget was probably less than my last paycheck. It's still an awesome movie. The silver screen is definitely a visual medium and things do need to look good. But it's more important to have a good story than a big explosion and director David Henrie seems to appreciate that.

It's kind of off topic, but I sometimes lament the fact that you couldn't make a movie like this about kids in 2026. It just wouldn't work. Kids today don't have the freedom to act the way we did when we were their ages. I belong to a bunch of Generation-X groups on a couple of different social media sites and we joke about running wild and drinking from hoses, but it's not just joking. I've done it. Heck, I went to school one day, got a lecture about why I wasn't supposed to drink from hoses, and went out and drank from a hose the next day because it hadn't killed me yet so it probably wasn't going to.

Think about it this way: Could you make a movie set in 2026 and make your audience believe that kids were out, away from their parents and with no cell phone to call home the exact second something goes wrong and with no adult supervision? Would your audience believe it for one single second? I wouldn't. It would probably freak both of my daughters out. That's sad.

At any rate, I had a lot of fun with *Monster Summer*. I'm guessing you would, too. It's a pretty decent movie to watch with kids starting around their pre-teen years if you have any of those in your life as well; some suspense, a few jump scares and an ending that's a little intense but with no real blood or gore. Seriously, check it out.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Ambushed Authors

SerCon

Thomas N. Scortia Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

N3F Historian

Thomas Nicholas Scortia (August 29, 1926 – April 29, 1986) was a science fiction (s-f) author, known primarily today for his novels written with Frank M. Robinson.

Scortia was born in Alton, Illinois. He attended Washington University in St Louis, where he earned a degree in chemistry in 1949. He worked for a number of aerospace companies during the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, and held a patent for the fuel used by one of the Jupiter fly-



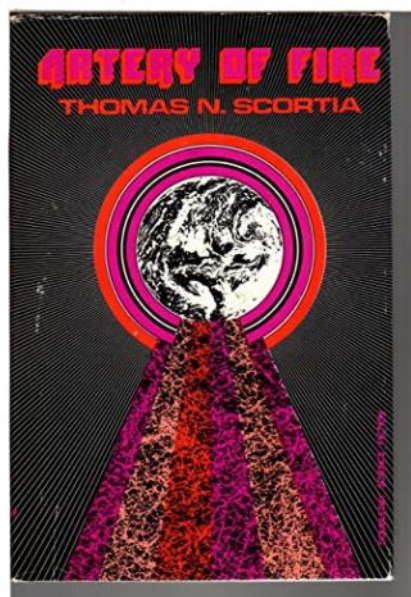
by missions.

He was married to s-f fan Irene Baron. They were wed in May, 1960 and stayed together for eight years before divorcing in 1968.

He had been writing part-time for several years, publishing many genre stories in the 1950s-1960s, before he became a full-time writer in the 1970s.

Publications

Novels:

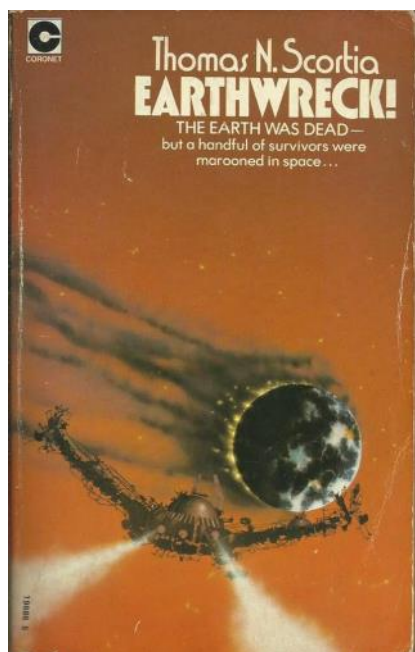


Artery of Fire (1972)
 Earthwreck! (1974)
 The Glass Inferno (1974) [with Frank M. Robinson]
 The Prometheus Crisis (1975) [with Robinson]
 The Nightmare Factor (1978) [with Robinson]
 The Gold Crew (1980) [with Robinson]
 Blowout! (1987) [with Robinson]

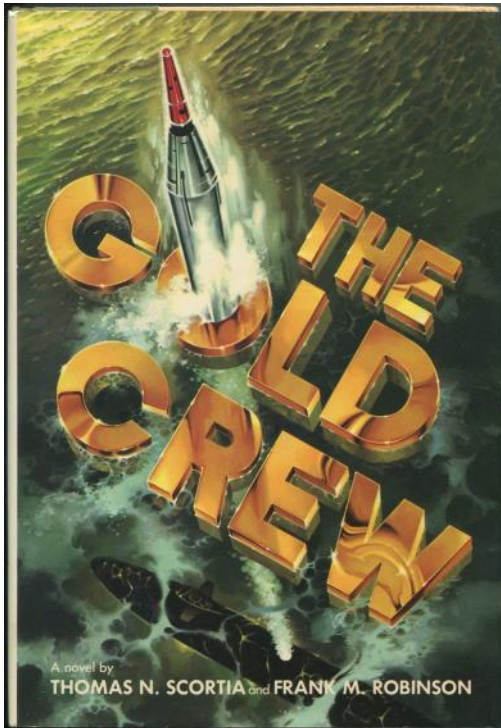
Collections:

Caution! Inflammable! (1975)
 The Best of Thomas N. Scortia (1981)

Short Fiction:

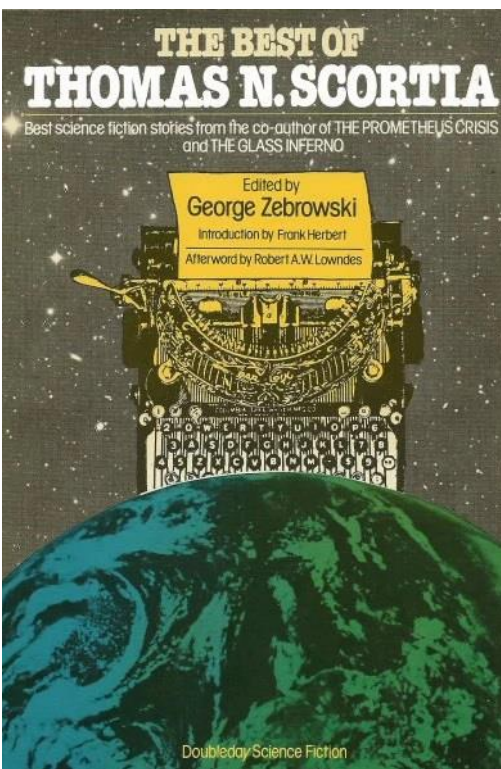


The Prodigy (1954)
 Caution! Inflammable! (1955)
 The Shores of Night (1956)
 Sea Change (1956)
 One Small Room (1956)
 The Lonely Stars (1957) [as by Scott Nichols]
 The Bomb in the Bathtub (1957)
 Fulfillment (1957)
 The Stunning Science Fiction Caper (1957) [as by Gerald Mac-dow]
 Cat O' Nine Tales (1957)
 Gag Rule (1957)
 A Walk in the Snow (1957)
 Alien Night (1957)
 Cassandra (1957) [as by Nichols]
 John Robert and the Egg (1957)
 Genius Loci (1957) (1957)
 Last Meeting Place (1957)
 Insane Planet (1958)
 The Avengers (1958)



The Renegade (1959)
 The Icebox Blonde (1959)
 Artery of Fire (1960) 16 pt
 Caliban (1960) [with Jim Harmon]
 Through a Sparrow Fall (1965) [as by Nichols]
 The Destroyer (1965)
 Broken Image (1966)
 Morality (1969)
 Superiority Complex (1969)
 Judas Fish (1970)
 When You Hear the Tone (1971)
 Gee, Wurlitzer! It's a Dad (1971)
 Fall Out One (1972)
 The Worm in the Rose (1972)
 Woman's Rib (1972)
 By the Time I Get to Phoenix (1972)
 Final Exam (1973)
 Following Narcissus (1973)
 Tarrying (1973)
 The Goddess of the Cats (1973)

The Tower (1973)
 The Weariest River (1973)
 Thou Good and Faithful (1973)
 Blood Brother (1974)
 Who Is Sylvia? (1974) [with Cheasea Quinn Yarbro]
 The Worm (1975)
 Old, Old Death in New, New Venice (1975)



The Last War (1975)
 The Premier's Lady (1975)
 Someday I'll Find You (1976)

These short stories appeared in the popular prozines of the day, including Astounding, Fantastic, F&SF, Future Science Fiction, and Galaxy.

Edited Anthologies

Scortia also edited three genre anthologies in the 1970s, one that he co-edited with Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Two Views of Wonder, published in 1973.

Pseudonyms

He used several pen names during his writing career, including Scott Nichols, Gerald Macdow, and Arthur R. Kurtz.

Some Concluding Comments

He once said that his interests included painting and art collecting.

Harlan Ellison credited Scortia with saving him from being court-martialed in 1958.

Death

Scortia died in 1986 at the Pomona Valley Community Hospital in La Verne, California, on April 29, 1986, while being treated for leukemia.

It has been speculated that his leukemia was induced by his exposure to nuclear tests.

He was survived by his adopted son Nicholas.

Sources

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Note: In addition to the above sources, several Internet sites were consulted, including Fancyclopedia 3, ISFDB, and Wikipedia.

Television

Hulu's Paradise Review by Jim McCoy

What if there were a super volcano explosion in Antarctica which resulted in an extinction level event? What if the American government had known it was coming and prepared a bunker for its highest ranking officials and others who were useful? What could possibly go wrong for the people inside the bunker after the dust settled? Hulu's show Paradise asks those very questions. The answers will shock you.

Paradise starts off weird, slowly gets weirder and then goes straight off the deep end. The truly crazy part is how much all of the weird makes sense. The audience is introduced to the world of Paradise slowly, but the further we get drawn in and the crazier it gets the more sense it makes.



I'd like to meet the people that write for Paradise. They've found a way to tell a story that's partially in the present, partially in flashback and is always engaging. I want to pick their brains about how they did it. This story is amazing. It's layered. It's immediate. The characters quickly become people that you respect and care about. They took approximately elebenty bajillion different factors, threw them in the blender, and came out with a concoc-tion that has me craving more.

Keep your heads on a swivel while you're watching Paradise, folks. Everything changes all the time. Go ahead and think you've got it all figured out. I dare you. Just know that you're wrong. I almost feel like the aforementioned writers of the show get together

to write scripts like "Okay, things are bad. How do we make them worse?" Then everybody comes up with the most terrible thing that can happen to the characters and they go "Okay, now how do we get there?" and that's how they write the scripts. It was like watching the world's most awesome train wreck. Like, I knew something terrible was about to happen and I just couldn't wait to find out what the next disaster was going to be.

Unfortunately, they've only released two seasons to date and I just finished the last episode but that falls under the Jimbo Rule: If I don't write it, produce it, or act in it, and I'm not a member of the crew for it, it ain't my fault if it don't come out faster.

Or sumfin'

Anyway, blame Hulu because there's not more Paradise. I'm innocent this time. Google says no more episodes till February of next year. Oof.

The main character is Secret Service member Xavier Collins, played by Sterling K. Brown. Xavier is the guy you want in your corner. He's loyal. He's smart and he is freaking unstoppable. Xavier is the guy who won't be deterred by the other side's deterrents, won't stop at the stop sign and won't break when pressure is applied.

Xavier is a bodyguard. He is a family man. He is the guy who will do whatever he needs to for his family. He's been through hell and he's come out stronger. Watching Paradise, you get to see Xavier take care of his own family. I'm here to tell you that if the worst happened, this is the guy I would want watching over my family. He's that good.

Xavier also seems to be the only character in all of Paradise who is who he actually is. You'll get that once you've seen it. There are a lot of people doing a lot of things and it's not always obvious what they want or how they're planning to get it. At least not until it's too late. It seems like everyone has an agenda. I didn't start off knowing what any of them were, with the exception of Xavier's agenda to protect the president.

There is a lot more action in Paradise than I expected to see in an isolated community living underground. That sounded like the recipe for some vanilla flavored pap. It wasn't. There is al-

ways something going on. There is always a scheme unfolding. There's even a bit of old school violence to spice things up. It's like fresh blood on the wall in Chicago. That's the old saying, right? Something like that. Well, I mean, except that it's not Chicago and I don't remember any blood on the actual wall.

Look, it's called a simile, okay? You don't have to take everything so literally all the time.

At any rate...

I know I had a lot to say about Xavier but he's not the only Paradise character worth watching. Samantha "Sinatra" Redmond is another favorite. She cuts an extremely interesting figure. I don't want to spoil too much, but she's definitely worth keeping an eye on. You'll figure out why eventually. Julianne Nicholson does an amazing job of presenting this complex character. As much as I hate the Sinatra character, I love the Sinatra character. I really don't know what to do with this woman. One minute she's acting like a loyal follower, the next minute she's trying to take over. We'll see where the character goes next, but there's something going on there. I can tell.

I'm both disappointed and relieved to state that I only found Paradise a couple of weeks ago. Disappointed because I really wish I had been on the Paradise train when it pulled out. Relieved because waiting for the second season would have sucked. I mean it. This is the kind of show that gets in your head and won't let go. It's not fun having to twiddle my thumbs while I'm waiting for the next season to start. It's like going to your crack dealer's house and finding a line six blocks long.

And now I'm stuck waiting for Season Three. I have a feeling that the totally awesome massively exciting thing is going to happen. I have no idea what that might be, but I feel pretty confident that it will be something. I haven't exactly found myself bored up to this point. I can't wait for the journey to continue.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Broken Elevators

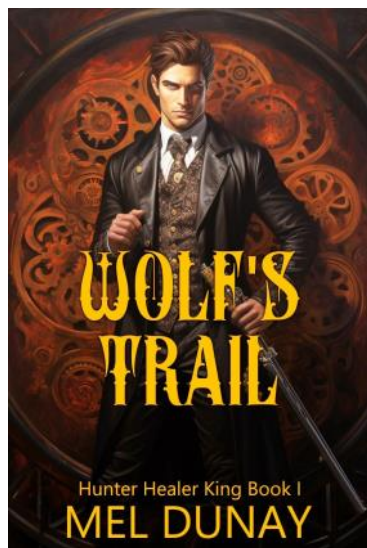
Gourmet Bureau

Eat This While You Read That: Mel Dunay Cooking by Cedar Sanderson

Plum Cake

When I decided to restart this series promoting authors, I was very pleased to get a book and a dish from Mel. I've really been enjoying reading her work over the last couple of years, and I think you might like it as well. You can find the whole list of authors and dishes here at my website.

She suggested plum cake and cider from her book *Wolf's Trail*, where they appear served at a festival. While I don't expect an author to give me a direct tie-in to the book, it's always fun



when they do! So grab your copy of Wolf's Trail, and prepare for some relaxed reading time while this cake is in the oven!

Plum Cake

Preheat oven to 350F.

Prepare a 9" round springform pan by lining it with a parchment paper round covering the bottom. Grease the walls of the pan.

Roughly chop 7-8 dried plums¹ and rehydrate in 2 tbsp brandy for 13-30 minutes.

Slice and pit 1 lb ripe plums (about 5-6 plums depending on the type and their size).

In a large mixing bowl, sift:

- 1 3/4 c cake flour
- 1 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt²

Cream together:

- 1/2 c room temperature butter
- 1 c sugar
- 1 egg

Add in spices:

- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp cardamom

Alternate adding in the dry ingredients with:

- 1 c milk



When batter comes together, pour into a 9" round springform pan which has been prepared as above.

Arrange plums on top of the batter, they will sink so don't worry too much about making it pretty!

Sprinkle 2 tbsp raw or demerara sugar over top of the plums and cake.

Bake for 55-6 minutes until firm in the center (tester may not come out clean due to the plums).

Makes a very moist, dense cake which holds together well for eating while wandering around a festival!

You could easily pour a sauce over this cake. I wound up not making one. It's so moist you don't need it! This is a very plummy cake, indeed.

Happy Reading while you snack!

1 Yes, I know dried plums are prunes. That word scares some people. Also, if you've dried some plums you grew, they may not technically be prunes as those are a specific kind of plum. And now you know!

2 Unless using salted butter, in which case reduce to 1/4 tsp.

Anime

Mononoke Week 4: Noppera-bou (Faceless Monster) Review by Jessi Silver



Part 1

Ochou is in prison, awaiting the execution of her sentence for brutally murdering her husband and his family. Coincidentally, the Medicine Seller is sharing a cell with her (he had a run-in with a dissatisfied customer that ended poorly for him). In speaking with Ochou, the truth of her guilt begins to come into question. She

doesn't appear as though she'd be able to murder a group of people on her own, and she doesn't recall exactly what actions she took to kill them. But she confessed her responsibility to the authorities, resulting in her death sentence. The Medicine Seller's instincts prove to be sound, however; soon a mononoke with a roughly human appearance reveals himself and claims Ochou's act as his own. He wipes away the Medicine Seller's identity and takes Ochou to another realm.

The mononoke begins to court Ochou and reveals that he's kept watch over her. He then asks her to marry him. The celebration is filled with the faces of other spiritual beings who are also said to have watched over Ochou. She feels as though a new path has opened up to her. But the Medicine Seller reappears and through his presence, information about Ochou's relationship with her mother is revealed. This destroys the mononoke's illusion. As the Medicine Seller and



mononoke fight with one another, the Medicine Seller's mirror breaks through the illusory masked faces of the mononoke. What is the true form of the creature who has taken root in Ochou's heart?

Part 2

The Medicine Seller seals away the masked mononoke under its extreme protest, and pre-



sents Ochou's life to her in four acts, through which he hopes to come to a conclusion about the actual mononoke's truth and reason. All the while the sword of exorcism is chomping at the bit, teetering at the threshold of its release. Ochou relives memories of her childhood, learning to play the koto as her mother looked on. Ochou loved her mother, but her mother seemed more content to groom Ochou to marry into wealth than to nurture her with

kindness. Her love only went so far as Ochou was obedient and accomplished at her studies. Her mother's greatest joy seemed to manifest when Ochou was married into a samurai family at last; now her mother could go to the family grave without the shame that came along with losing everything.



The Medicine Seller continues to prod Ochou, asking her who she really killed, as it appears that this was anything but a straightforward murder. Because her love for her mother runs so deep, she's loathe to admit the fact that in working to please her, she gave up every last one of her own desires. The fact is that the only person Ochou ever killed was herself, over and over and over again, as she molded herself to others' desires. This reveals that the

mononoke is actually the life she never lived, the choices she never made, and the prison she constructed out of her own situation. She is the mononoke. Having finally made peace with that, Ochou opens herself to the sword of exorcism. Suddenly, she's back in her home's kitchen, listening as her husband and his family demand more sake and berate her. This time, she looks out the window at the sky that gave her a small bit of joy so many times. Then, she's gone.



Thoughts and Reactions

As I've mentioned before, for a long time I've related deeply to this story arc (and it's likely the bulk of this reaction section will elaborate on that – not sorry!). While I luckily never experienced the burden of living beneath a parent's selfish expectations, I was for a long time in a situation where I felt fundamentally trapped. As the Medicine Seller repeats multiple times throughout the story, if you feel trapped in a place it becomes a prison, but if you don't want to leave it becomes a palace. For a long time I was in a relationship that I chose to believe was the latter. I wore the mask of the happy lover, throwing my energy into being an enthusiastic host and playing into the role of the self-sacrificing woman, leaving myself little time to understand my own self and desires. I came into the relationship feeling as though it was an escape from loneliness, and it took me a long time to realize "loneliness" and comfort with being alone were two dramatically different things.



As the masked mononoke interacts with Ochou, it offers her an array of kind words and eventually welcomes her into marriage with him. The wedding has all the luscious trimmings and Ochou is hypnotically drawn in by the festivities. In the whirlwind of sake and dancing she seems ill-equipped to realize that all of it is nothing more than a distraction from the core of her predicament. A marriage makes a good comparison with a prison or a palace; though it's just a pact between two people there are many aspects of the legal and emotional binding together of individuals that make leaving it a non-trivial act. The mononoke is better served keeping Ochou happy on the surface and allowing her to wear her mask, because if she begins to question anything within herself or becomes more focused on self-acknowledgement it will likely demolish the darkness in her heart that keeps him sustained. Letting herself be distracted by the bright colors and the mononoke's proclamations of love helps her hold onto a brief (but ultimately false) sense of well-being. She believes this marriage to be an escape from her prison, just as many of us believe that marrying might be an escape from financial hardship, loneliness, or familial pressure.



A successful, meaningful marriage requires so much more than that from the people involved, though – mutual respect, honoring one-another's boundaries and choices, a belief in the other's fundamental human dignity and a respect for the person that they are. If these things are missing and the act is just a move to escape from something else, then it becomes a trap.

The Medicine Seller references human faces as the facades or “masks” that we put in place to present only what we want the world to see (or what we want to convince ourselves is the truth). The faces we share with the world might be the ones that make us feel safe and protected, or they may be what we believe to be true about ourselves; it's a dubious skill of human beings to be able to choose the persona that serves them. I have social anxiety and people are often surprised to learn that because I give off the impression of being relatively unruffled; that's my mask. In this story arc this concept is represented well by the use of Noh masks. If you're unfamiliar with Noh theater, it has deep ties with Japanese spirituality, and the characterization is conveyed exclusively through strictly-codified dance movements and traditional masks worn by the main performer. The masks each represent either a character archetype (child, young woman, spirit etc.) or even specific characters in some cases. The masks are constructed of one type of wood and painted by hand. An incredible amount of effort goes into creating these visual facades that provide almost all the information that one would need to know about the person being portrayed. Human beings spend years constructing their own personal masks; Ochou's mask began to manifest in childhood and became so much a part of her that it was eventually indistinguishable from her own face.

Ochou has the Medicine Seller's play to help her realize the truth of her situation; it allows her

to come to the correct conclusion since the truth becomes obvious as it's laid out for her. I don't necessarily think there was one thing in particular that helped me; nobody sat me down and said "this is what's going on and we're worried." I was very good at hiding it all and it doesn't surprise me that nobody noticed or felt the need to hold some kind of intervention. Sometimes all it takes is something small – the outstretched hand of a genuine friend or an opportunity to grow outside the bad situation itself (I had both). In any case, I thankfully came to the realization that I was acting as my own worst enemy and compounding my own treatment by not allowing myself to recognize it. Sometimes the mononoke really is oneself.

One of my favorite things about this story arc is that it's never stated outright how real (or not) the fox-masked mononoke's form is. Just as the entire episode walks the line between staged fantasy and reality, his actual existence is called into question throughout. He resembles the Medicine Seller's alternate form enough that the common interpretation is that he's either a spirit conjured by the Medicine Seller for the purposes of interacting with Ochou, or his other form itself. Because this episode is so focused on the rift that formed between Ochou the "mask" and Ochou the person, I find the thought that the Medicine Seller may have split his own aspects apart in some sort of solidarity with her to be comforting. The pipe he smokes is kind of the big tip-off for me; I don't believe we see him use it in other story arcs (he does carry it in the cool figurine I have, however), but it's prominently featured as a tool of the mononoke and the Medicine Seller takes a long draw from it at the end of the episode before leaving. There are tantalizing clues to support several theories, but as a general fan of the show and someone who's intrigued by the Medicine Seller as a character, what I've always liked to believe is that the mononoke is some aspect of himself, and that he came to know of Ochou somehow and through his knowledge of her situation really did fall in love with her. I can't help it – I'm a sucker for romance, even bittersweet romantic tragedy.

There's also a lot of imagery that references split existences. I don't usually talk all that much about film-making techniques here, but this series actually utilizes the frame in interesting ways to emphasize (even before we realize it) that Ochou has been of two minds (and perhaps two existences) throughout her ordeal and beyond. The quick cuts where half of her face is on the left side and the other half on the right side of the screen are just long enough to leave a striking impression on the viewer. They don't linger, but their presence is enough to be disorienting. It's a good compliment to the ghostly images of Ochou that represent her true self and unfulfilled desires. To me, there's something powerful about the belief that, if we don't honor ourselves to some extent, or even go so far as to deny our desires in pursuit of goals that aren't our own, some piece of our psyche breaks away to make itself happy in our absence. Perhaps its why years of self denial (and even depression) feel more like emptiness than sadness.

Lastly, I'd like to mention Ochou's (お蝶) name, which simply means "butterfly." While I believe a lot of the character names in this series have some kind of meaning that can be interpreted from how they're written, I think this one is a good example since it's so short and to the point. I find it telling that her name references a creature who can fly; the one mental escape Ochou has from her abusive husband's family is the sight of the sky through kitchen window. Only a small creature like a bird or butterfly could fly out through its wooden slats. She looks a bit like a butterfly too, with her large obi and brightly-colored clothing. Butterflies are usually short-lived creatures, their lifespans averaging something like a month in good circumstances. This may serve as a reminder to us – life is so short already, so why choose to spend it enclosed and suffering? In the final scene Ochou disappears from the room, seemingly without going through a door. There is something poetic about imagining her taking wing and leaving.



Dragon Chase
by Tiffanie Gray