The National Fantasy Fan

85 Years

Fandom's Second Oldest Print Publication

Cras ad Stellas — Tomorrow to the Stars

Volume 85 Number 9 September 2026

Elections

Once again, we have reached the start of our yearly election cycle. The voting members of the club, the dues-paying members and the life members, will nominate and elect the new officers, the President and the members of the Directorate.

In the coming month, members should nominate candidates. Candidates must be dues-paying or life members. Self nominations are allowed. If someone else nominates you, you need to say that you will accept the nomination. Send your nominations to President George Phillies phillies@4liberty.net and Election Teller Jon Swartz judgeswartz@gmail.com before October 15. The October TNFF will appear soon thereafter.

The October issue of this zine will announce a list of nominees. The list is not final. Additional nominations and withdrawals are allowed until the November issue appears. In the November issue, candidates may make statements saying what they propose to do over the next year if elected. Candidates should send their statements to George Phillies.

The November issue will include the ballot. Write-in votes are allowed. Send your signed ballots to the Official Teller, Jon Swartz judgeswartz@gmail.com by December 15. Vote totals will be announced promptly thereafter.

Who are the dues-paying members? They are the Regular members, who receive TNFF by papermail, the electronic members, sent TNFF as a PDF by email, and the Household members, who receive TNFF via other members in their household.

Zines and Books

Editorial by George Phillies

What are the foundations from which all fandom arose? They are the magazines and books that made science fiction, fantasy, horror, and occult tales available to the general public, the people who became first readers and then the fen who are the people of our hobby. In 1941, fen communicated by papermail fanzines, fanzines such as this zine (then under the title Bonfire), and letters to the editor of science fiction prozines, notably Amazing.

Yes, fandom now includes many other interests. The first science fiction films were made before World War 1. Popular magazines with some scientifictional content, such as the Frank Reade magazine, appeared in the 19th century. The first magazine of which I am aware with purely science-fictional content, science fiction by period technical standards, was perhaps *Kapitan Mors, Luftkorsair der Stratosphaer* (Captain Death, Air Pirate of the Stratosphere, with his armoured dirigible, complete with interplanetary voyages).

More recently, we have science fiction hobby clubs such as ours, comic books and graphic novels, radio and television shows, science fiction conventions, manga and anime, cosplay, paper and computer science fiction games, and roleplaying games, among others.

Nonetheless the foundation of our hobby are the science fiction books, science fiction short stories, and professional and fan zines. In recent years, the number of new SF novels has gone through the roof.

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Join or Renew

We offer four different memberships. Memberships with TNFF via paper mail are $18; memberships with TNFF via email are $6. All other zines are email only. Additional memberships at the address of a current member are $4. Public memberships are free. Send payments to Kevin Trainor, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049. Pay online at N3F.org. Our PayPal contact is treasurer@n3f.org Send phillies@4liberty.net your email address for a public membership.

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Some years ago, TNFF rana monthly list of SF/F books published in the last month on Smashwords. We would have done the same for Amazon, but weren't clever enough to be able to extract a list of new SF books from their web page format. The Smashwords list typically ran a hundred or so books per month.

At one time, we were seeing so many book reviews available for reprinting that we were able to launch a new zine, The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono. The N3F Review's objective was to publish a review of every SF/F book published. We hit an obstacle: the supply of book reviews has largely dried up.

I am creating a solution. First, the N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono is going on hiatus until someone else wants to take up producing it. Mindy and Jason Hunt are doing an excellent job with the N3F Fan Gazette, which currently publishes a largely complete list and short description for all SF books from a series of major publishers. Gazette also publishes a remarkable list of SF and other conventions.

We do see some book reviews, both novels and short story collections. Subject to space limitations, those will be appearing in The National Fantasy Fan and Tightbeam. These zines both have length limitations, at least in the short term. so I can't promise that we will be publishing every review that we find.

Letter

Editors:

Thank you both for The National Fantasy Fan, Vol. 85, No. 8 for August. It's Labour Day!, and as you might expect, it's pretty quiet, so there's time to get caught up with correspondence.

I think we've all learned over the years that tech can be our friends if we apply it properly, and programme it to give us what we want. Like anything else, it's the wise application that gives us the results we want to see or get. Life does get in the way of fannish endeavours. More and more, so many social media platforms, hundreds, if not thousands. I figured social media was supposed to bring us all together, but the myriad of platforms seems determined to keep us apart.

My loc…to go with the article on 100 years of Amazing Stories in the 2026 First Fandom Annual, a similar article appeared in The Pulpster 35, the regular magazine for those who enjoy the pulp era of magazines. The article was an interview between me and old friend and former Pulpster editor Tony Davis. Also, a new project that Yvonne and I are working on…Mythcon. This annual convention, sponsored by The Mythopoeic Society, was held in Oklahoma this year, and will be Toronto in 2027, Mythcon 55. We are assisting Society convention Steward Tim Lenz (who happens to currently live in Toronto) with getting a convention hotel, and Yvonne will work with Tim on Canadian accounting practices. On site, Yvonne and I may be in charge of the Vendors' Room. Mythcon usually gets anywhere between 100 and 300 people, but I can see 300 or more next year, for there are lots of Canadian fans who have been starved for any kind of convention that is fan-run, rather than pro-run. More Mythcon 55 information to come.

Hmmm…not a lot to go on this time around, but with time, there is always something more. We are doing the preliminary plans for a get-together in Toronto, and more will come about when we figure out what we can do. Take care, stay well, and enjoy the rest of the summer. Kids go back to school tomorrow, so there's bonus for those of us retired.

Yours, Lloyd Penney

Club Business

Treasurer's Report

Paypal balance: $208.26
In: $12 for memberships (less fees)

NSB balance: $2558.34

4 life members +
24 electronic + 9 regular = 37 voting members

6 archive members + 261 public members = 267 non-voting members

Thanks to Mark Nelson for renewing!

Voting memberships expiring this month: Allegra Gulino, Jose Sanchez, Thera Watson, Sandy Lender, Katrina Templeton, and Derek Reeve.

Our Recent Zines

Eldritch Science

Eldritch Science Editor Steve Condrey writes:
A preview video on Eldritch Science Online has been posted! (and yes, I fixed the QR code!)
https://youtu.be/8835uwE81wI?si=gl4EtnQvbnvhIeF9

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EngineMasters: Retribution by Gus Harris-Reids
Book Review by Jim McCoy

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dawn herself leans heavily on the fiery side. She is definitely a take no crap type and I love that about her. She sometimes uses language that I wouldn't necessarily want to use in front of my pastor but I may have indulged once or twice (or ten million times) myself. She has some serious doubts, many of which are well deserved, about the people around her, but she never doubts herself. I like Dawn. Then again, I've always loved a strong female protagonist and she is one.

The action sequences in the book are highly detailed and a lot of fun. I got a shade of the old VR-041 Sa-

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

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

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

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Exploding Transports

Web Novels

Selected Web Novels
Review by Dani Zweig

I've been reading a lot of web novels recently. The problems with reviewing web novels are shared by other forms of serial fiction - e.g. what is the point of reviewing book seventeen in a series? - but the chapter-at-a-time format amplifies them. Web novels are prone to stop in the middle of the story when the author loses patience or heart or time. They are prone to losing their way, so an enthusiastic review of chapters 1-50 doesn't mean a novel will be worth reading at chapter 200. Many of the better web novels are republished under Kindle Unlimited, which requires the original postings to be taken down aside from a teaser, so it's often harder to test-drive older web novels.

This review covers a few web novels I've particularly enjoyed, and which are either completed or have had a good and long run.

The novels in this review originally came from Royal Road - a publication site that leans heavily towards LitRPG. Sometimes the lean is so heavy that you can't see the story for the tropes. I've tried to select web novels that favor the story and do it very well. You can still see the RPG influences, but they don't crowd out the story-telling.

"The Butcher of Gadobhra", by Walrus King (the author uses that name for both the web and book publications) is still in progress. As I write this, the story is up to 500+ chapters, the first half of which have been republished as three novels. This web novel is closer to classic LitRPG than the others reviewed here.

'LitRPG' often refers to books that explicitly use mechanics popularized in role-playing games (RPGs) such and Dungeons and Dragons and spinoff online games. That is, characters explicitly have classes (e.g. 'wizard') and numeric personal attributes (e.g. a character with a strength of 10 is stronger than a character with a strength of 5, a fighter of level 6 probably has better skills than a fighter of level 2).

A genre convention some readers find distracting is that characters may spend a lot of time interacting with their 'builds' - their chosen or acquired skills and attributes. This lessens the appeal of the genre for readers that don't have at least a dash of gamenerd. A book is weaker if this interaction interferes too much with the story - and stronger if it fits smoothly and even adds to the story, as is the case in

'Butcher'.

BoG is rooted in two worlds. The 'real' world is a near-future dystopia. There are few limits to corporate excess, and most of the population barely scrapes by. The 'game' world is a virtual-reality fantasy world funded by corporations, in hopes that it will attract online business and real-world money. Most of the main characters are Contract Workers - effectively NPCs. They join the game world as workers, and their contracts are rigged so as to make it difficult-to-impossible to succeed in the game world as anything but workers. But the AI that runs this world has a plan to use this game to improve the world (both worlds). And the contract workers immediately start looking for loopholes in their contracts.

An interesting brains-in-a-bottle theme is being developed quietly in the background. The virtual world's inhabitants aren't just small software procedures; the host 'server' has given them about the same computing power and storage as a typical human being, and left them to develop. Some of the contract workers are going to spend the rest of their lives embedded in this reality. And some people commute.

"Super Supportive", by Sleyca is closing on three hundred chapters and has not been republished. (It is all available in its online format.) There are elements of super-hero and litRPG tropes, but they don't get in the way of the story.

In the early 1960s, we seemed to be headed for a nuclear World War Three. Fortunately, friendly aliens arrived and defused the crisis. As part of the exchange that followed, Earth agreed that a small fraction of its population would be gifted with powers, and would be liable to be summoned for service. (This is less ominous than it sounds. Summoners don't often have a use for people with super-strength and flight, but super-competent cooks or administrative assistants are very useful - and the pay for being summoned is very good.)

It is now the twenty-first century, and the existence of a powered minority has become part of the new normal. There are also powered heroes and villains - but a lot more of the former than the latter: Large cities care about having local super heroes for many of the same reasons that they care about having sports teams.

Alden is orphaned, as a child, when his home becomes collateral damage in a powered fight. He is inspired by a Hero who rescued him, and wishes to become a supportive super hero - one who makes others more effective. This last part of the review is sure to mislead readers, so some clarifications might be useful: "Super Supportive" is not about super heroes; super heroes are not-very-important part of the cultural background. Alden is not going to become a super hero. He does in fact gain powers, but his life then takes several unexpected turns.

Alden's power initially seems to be something of a joke. It enables him to protect an object that is entrusted to him and he is informed that its name is "Let Me Take Your Luggage". It emerges over time that the name is a bad translation, and that the ability is subtly flexible. The power does grow over time, but so does Alden, and the novel is primarily about Alden's growth.

Deadly Forest by Mikko Vill
Review by Jim McCoy

Some books go in a somewhat orderly manner. First we meet our hero. Then we find out why his/her/its life sucks. Then we follow along while the main character figures out the stuff or does the stuff or, ya know, whatever. There are usually obstacles along they way, but we can feel things moving toward an eventual ending.

But then there are other stories. Stories where basically nothing even thinks about going right. Where our hero goes from mishap to mishap and at the end of the story, we're still trying to figure out how we got here. Stories where every time something goes right it makes things worse. Sometimes we get to the end of the story with a smile on our faces and a feeling of "Wait. What just happened?" in our hearts, followed by a strong desire to immediately re-read the book to figure out what we just missed. That was very much the feeling I had upon finishing Mikko Vill's Deadly Forest: The Chronicles of Ivar Book One.

Main character Ivar is a good man. He has a job to do. He is going to do it come Hell or high water. In a manner of speaking he kinda, sorta encounters both. He keeps going anyway. I like Ivar. I respect Ivar. I'm not too sure I'd want to run into Ivar in a dark alley, but that's a separate issue.

It's weird thinking of this but, many millions of years ago when I was a wee little Jimbo, I used to take Tae Kwon Do classes. One of the Tenets of Tae Kwon Do classes we were taught was "Indomitable Spirit." Ivar may be the best example of how Indomitable Spirit works that I've seen in the nearly four decades since. Dude just does not know how to give up. That's what makes Deadly Forest so crazy. There are so many times when it would make sense for Ivar to stop or at least slow down and he just ducks his head and keeps bulling forward.

He has a sense of what works and what doesn't. It seems to be much stronger than his sense of what's right and what's wrong. Don't get me wrong. He has a very strong dedication to his duty. He just seems to be a little more open to using alternative methods than some others might be. Honestly, that might be his most endearing characteristic though. Whatever happens, Ivar is going to accomplish his mission. And it doesn't appear that his bosses are going to mind, given what his job is. And no, I'm not going to say exactly who he works for. That's for you to find out when you read the book.

There aren't a whole lot of fights in Deadly Forest but what fights do occur are well written and entertaining. I don't do spoilers, except when I do, so I'll just say that one of the fights leads to Ivar achieving a dream of many men. I mean, most of those guys have stories about how they actually did the thing, but Ivar does it for real. Well, for fictionally real. This is a novel after all.

Ivar's companion is unique enough that I don't want to say a whole lot about them. Let's just say that I liked what I read and I hope they will be around next book. That stands regardless of what they smell like. Anyway, the companion was one of the highlights of the story for me. I'm sure you'll like them. I know I did. Regardless of what they smelled like.

Deadly Forest is, at heart, a mystery story. Ivar gets sent out to find some men who went missing after a bachelor party. They got drunk and went off into the forest without dogs, which they've been told they must never do, and then disappeared. It's up to Ivar to find the guys.

And that's probably the most believable part of the book. A bunch of drunken men next to a forest decide to go for a hike and no one knows what happens to them. Listen folks, I've been to bachelor parties. Being dead drunk is kind of the starting point for any bachelor party story I've ever heard and/or told. I remember going through multiple kegs at one of my buddy's bachelor party.

Many men plus too much alcohol equals massive potential for trouble. If you don't believe me, call an active duty NCO of pretty much any branch of service and ask him. I'm not one and I never have been but their stories make mine look weak. I've read enough of them to know. The good news is that none of the revelers marry strippers or buy a new buggy at twenty-five percent interest.

The craziest part about Deadly Forest is that all of the random insanity adds up nicely and that the ending actually makes sense given what's come before. I never would have thought that Vill could pull it off. Things were going off the rails so frequently that I fully expected something weird to have to happen to get this thing to where it needed to be. I'm not saying I expected a deus ex machina. I'm just saying that I kept expecting Zeus to show up. It didn't happen. Vills is a good author. He didn't need that crutch. My apologies. Now I've got to go back and figure out how he made it work.

Seeing as the subtitle of Deadly Forest is The Chronicles of Ivar Book One, I'm assuming I'll be seeing a sequel soon. I'm looking forward to it. I need to find out if Ivar has reached the maximum level of craziness that he can overcome. I'm guessing he hasn't. And the cool thing is that the next book could very well have a bigger problem. Ivar has the feeling of a guy who is solving smaller problems because it's the beginning of his career, but who could adapt to saving the world once he's gotten a little further along in his career. We'll see if I'm right.

Rogue Star by Pohl and Williamson — Review by Thomas E. Simmons

Rogue Star (1969) is the culmination of The Starchild Trilogy, published in the year men landed on the moon when its coauthors Pohl and Williamson were, respectively, age 50 and 61.

The coauthors' pulp-roots are in evidence; the 1930s feel of the adventures and the tendency to objectify women is evident.

At the end of the second part of the trilogy, the totalitarian super-computer-tyrant, The Plan of Man, was overthrown by the Starchild by linking up with sentient stars in the local galaxies, aided by microorganism symbiotes known as fusorians. This novel explores the post-totalitarian world of sentient stars.

The hero is an unlikely one, a squat upper-level civil servant: Monitor Andreas Quamodian (a/k/a 'Little Andy Quam'). Andy is impatient and unattractive, though his courage is genuine.

The love of Andy's life, the beautiful but vapid Molly Zaldivar, has fallen for the muscular scientist, Cliff Hawk. Cliff has partnered with a Viking wannabe (a "reefer") to do the unthinkable – create a "rogue star" – a Frankensteinian competitor to the host of other sentient stars ruling the galaxies.

(Their solar-rule utilizes a light touch; not utopian, exactly, but a lot less fascist than The Plan of Man had been.)

From Cliff's laboratory in folksy Wisdom Creek back on Earth, Molly sees the danger of Cliff's experiments and radios for Andy for help. Andy is more than happy to respond, hoping he can win his girl back. After a brief detour round a rather grumpy sentient star system, Andy touches down on Earth.

Like our hero, Earth itself is a bit of a disappointment, rather dull and undeveloped, except for its churches.

Andy is an interesting choice for a protagonist. Most authors would have selected the dashing Cliff for this role. Andy is often cross and ineffective, a very non-pulp-like hero in a rather pulp-like world. In one exchange with a pair of teenagers, Andy confirms his unheroic personage, emphasizing, "Young man, my task has been mostly supervisory and statistical. I have had no adventures of any kind. Except this one."

Critic James Nicoll asserts that Andy might just as well have stayed home as far as the plot is concerned. Indeed, when we meet him, Andy, asleep and dreaming of Molly, would prefer to stay asleep rather than answer her distress call. Yet Andy gives the story some charm. He does not lack for agency.

Besides, any nerdy heterosexual male (presumably the target audience) will naturally root for Andy. He's no John Carter, but maybe, despite his shortcomings, he's got a chance with princess Molly. Indeed, Molly, too, will have something to say about the outcome of the story.

Moreover, not casting Cliff as protagonist allows him to be picked off by the rebellious rogue star he animates. He's devoured by his creation, the fate of all workaholics.

The artificial rogue star promptly gobbles Cliff up, partially incorporating his psyche into its own, and thereby becoming a reconfigured competitor to Andy. It's a bit Oedipal, to be sure.

The religion in his quasi-utopia – Almalik – isn't mystical, just a matter-of-fact acknowledgement that sentient stars rule things; it's described as "a symbiotic association of stars and men and robots and fusorians."

Still, the Alalikians are rule-bound simpletons. Even more mindless are those who elect to mind-meld with fusorians; they take on a golden youthful immortality and a painless, drug-like complacency. (Did George Lucas get the idea of midi-chlorians from fusorians?)

Pohl and Williamson seem to be suggesting that even in a post-tyrant society, individual freedoms are all too easily discarded in favor of mindlessness.



Elections

Zines and Books - Editorial by George Phillies

Letter - Lloyd Penney

Club Business: Treasurer’s Report, Eldritch Science
Our Recent Zines: Eldritch Science, N'APA 284, N3F Fan Gazette, Origins, Tightbeam

Reviews

EngineMasters: Retribution by Gus Harris-Reids - Review by Jim McCoy
Selected Web Novels - Review by Dani Zweig
Deadly Forest by Mikko Vill - Review by Jim McCoy
Rogue Star by Pohl and Williamson - Review by Thomas E. Simmons

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