

Tightbeam 385

October 2026



Visitors by José Sánchez

Tightbeam 385

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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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Tightbeam is published approximately monthly by the National Fantasy Fan Federation and distributed electronically to the membership. The N3F offers four different memberships. Memberships with TNFF via email are \$6; memberships with The National Fantasy Fan (TNFF) via paper mail are \$18. Zines other than TNFF are email only. Additional memberships at the address of a current dues-paying member are \$4. **Public (non-voting) memberships are free.**

To Join or Renew, send your name, papermail address, and email address to the N3F Treasurer: Kevin Trainor, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049.

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Editorial

As discussed in the most recent issue of *The National Fantasy Fan*, novels, short stories, and SF magazines form the foundation of science fiction fandom. For some years, we had been publishing our aggregation of book reviews in *The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono*. The objective of *The N3F Review* was to review every science fiction book. As readers will have noted, *The N3F Review* was falling behind *The N3F Fan Gazette*, which has reviews, albeit short, of far more SF novels than the *Review* regularly covered.

The world changed, and our supply of high-quality book reviews fell markedly. After some consideration, I put *The N3F Review* on hiatus. It is not discontinued, but it needs a new Editor. The fine book reviews I am still able to find will be appearing in the pages of *The National Fantasy Fan* and *Tightbeam*, both of which have in recent months suffered from a shortage of articles.

Tightbeam still welcomes articles on all branches of fandom: movies, videos, television shows, comic books, cosplay, radio, fanzines, fan productions, music, writing,...

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Letter

Dear George and Jon:

Tightbeam 384 is here, and in my travels lately, I was able to write down some notes. The notes are here, now to see if any of it makes any sense. Oh, yeah...

The local... In pre-internet times, we would drop off convention flyers to over a hundred shops in town, and many of them were used book shops. I think they were happy to see us, and we did take the time to buy a few books while we were there. Today...I'd need to look up used book shops online to see where the few remaining shops are. Meanwhile, online ads for recycling almost urge you to drop off your books into the blue recycle bins, and be done with something no one wants. Sigh...

Not many magazines, no more paperbacks, not much of anything vaguely SF/F left on the magazine racks of stories. Where I am, the big box book chain stores have a huge selection of mags from Canada, the US, Europe and elsewhere. It's become a specialty the big stores can handle, even if the interest in them isn't there as much as it was. Some local variety stores have done away with their magazine racks entirely. Perhaps all they were truly selling was gossip mags and porn. Streaming services seem to be providing some popular stories in movie or TV series format. (I wish I could find sales figures for the Amazing Stories books, especially my Best of series, but I just don't know how to get them.)

My loc... Word on the Street is coming shortly, just over two weeks from now. Soon, I start publicizing my shared table online. Also, more Toronto Mythcon info as it arises. Did Blasted Heath Row change his name to Blasted Lloyd Penney, or is he trying to tell me something?

I think the only J.F. Bone book I have on my shelves is Confederation Matador. Still good to have his information, and remember another favourite author.

Time to wrap, it's getting late. Thank you for this issue, and I always look forward to the next one.

Yours, Lloyd Penney

Novels

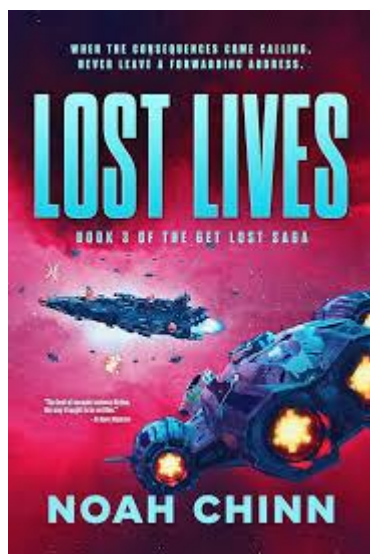
Lost Lives

by Noah Chinn

Review by Robert Runté

Lost Lives is the third book in the Get Lost Saga, currently a trilogy. Chinn has hinted he might write more books in the Get Lost universe, albeit with different characters and a completely new mystery/storyline. I, for one, would love that. My job, then, is to convince you to read the current Get Lost books to ensure Chinn keeps at it.

I love these books. I previously reviewed Lost Souls (Feb 2023) and Lost Cargo (Dec, 2023). (In the latter, I also mention And Then Things Got Worse by Maurice Foot —the free Get Lost



novelette, apparently written by the main character of the Get Lost Saga.) As with almost any trilogy, you have to start with the first book, rather than starting here with Lost Lives. Unlike many trilogies, the third book is not a let-down.

In Book 1, Lost Souls, Moss is a down-on-his-luck adventurer; Hel is a stowaway on his spaceship; and Violet is Moss' deceased partner, now installed on the ship's computer. The initial challenge is to trace Hel's origins, but the deeper they delve, the more confusing and dangerous the situation becomes. The first book sets up the large cast of characters (even minor characters have their own arcs in this series) and the initial layers of the mystery. The second book complicates the mystery and accelerates the action to the point where I actually fist-pumped at the ending of Book 2; and Lost Lives winds up the mystery, the derring-do adventure, and the myriad character arcs.

Lost Lives is the most 'serious' of the books, posing moral issues pertinent to any dystopian hellscape. There is still plenty of humour and fast action to keep one turning pages, but underneath it all is a story about humanity's fundamental tendency to divide people into groups and then get genocidal on each other. It is a story about choosing to remain hopeful in the face of a seemingly impossible situation and choosing to do the right thing, even when it's hard. It is about the universal need for transparency, for the rule of law, and for heroes.

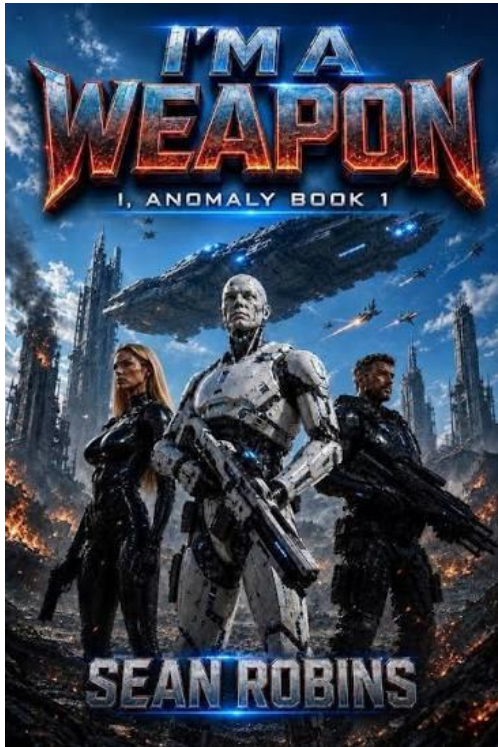
The setting is a multispecies civilization in the best tradition of Star Trek or Star Wars, with pirates, space rangers, cyborgs, clones, a secret society of scientists, and adorable droids. The Get Lost Saga is everything space opera is supposed to be: optimistic, positive role models for dark times, and ultimately, immense fun.

The Get Lost Saga is the far-future hopepunk series for our times.

I'm a Weapon by Sean Robins Review by Jim McCoy

I've been trying to pin something down. That's not to say that I've been thinking about it, because it's like my mama always said: "You need to stop that thinkin'. It always gets you in trouble." So noodling, maybe, or possibly considering. Definitely not thinking though. I don't want to get in trouble. But if I were to mull the situation over, I might be tempted to believe that the last time I read about a robot as human as Jack, main character of Sean Robins's *I'm a Weapon: A Combat Robot Military Sci-Fi Adventure* (I, Anomaly Book 1), it may very well have been R. Daneel Olivaw from Isaac Asimov's Robot series.

I mean that seriously. *I'm a Weapon* starts off in a firefight. Jack is a robot who is a member of a platoon of infantry that is primarily composed of humans. Jack's platoon leader orders him to charge out into no-man's land in order to draw fire so the people can escape. Jack takes one look, sees that he won't survive and that the rest of the platoon will still be pinned down and tells the officer in charge no. His programming is supposed to prevent that. It doesn't. From that



point (and this is in like the first two or three pages) Jack's whole life goes off the rails. Did I mention that he was less than an hour old at this point?

It gets crazier from there. I don't want to spoil anything (if it happens in the first two chapters it's not a spoiler) but trust me, *I'm a Weapon* is a study in real life, consequences, and (possibly) controlled chaos. Jack makes decisions that make sense in his setting but that wouldn't make sense outside of the book. Sometimes it's common sense. Sometimes, it's surprising. Sometimes the surprise is that Robins has thought through this thing enough to have identified the problems with being a robot on the run and he displays them openly. That adds a level of realism that other works don't have.

Maybe the craziest thing about *I'm a Weapon* is that Jack is first activated in combat at the beginning of the book. He literally becomes aware and begins to function out of nowhere, at least from his point of view. Throughout the work, Jack is discovering what his own capabilities are

and how his body works. The thing that sets him apart from a human baby is that Jack is fully capable of doing things like walking, talking, reasoning and blowing things to smithereens as soon as he opens his eyes. It's wild.

But there are hyper realistic scenes as well. More than once while reading *I'm a Weapon*, I felt myself drawing back just a bit and shaking something off. I wasn't kidding when I said that Jack was a robot that felt human. Sometimes he does the right thing just because it's the right thing. He's like Data in a way, because some of his choices are made based on emotional premises but both characters are supposedly without emotion. It makes sense because it doesn't make sense. They're human but they're not.

There is plenty of fighting in *I'm a Weapon* if you're into bullets and blowup situations. Jack was literally built for war and it's what he's good at. Very good at, as a matter of fact. He can see things and calculate odds. He can plan. He carries a weapon that is not man portable and it hits hard. He doesn't hesitate when it becomes necessary to take action to protect his own life or the lives of his comrades. Sometimes things get a little crazy. The violence in the book is always believable and it never fails to entertain.

The humor in *I'm a Weapon* is great. I almost fell off my chair a couple of times. It's well timed and effective. Robins has a gift for knowing when a story needs a joke and delivering one that works in context. Jack is a bit on the sarcastic side, but I respect that. Seriously, Robins's humor is a lot like mine, except that it's funny. It's cool because the book gives something that both my high school literature teacher and Hermione Granger would refer to as "emotional range." (No teaspoons were harmed in the making of this post.) Seriously, Jack is not a one note character and that's a little surprising considering the fact that he's basically a walking combat drone. Who happens to act like a human. Even though he shouldn't.

Dear Lord, I'm about to have a philosophical meltdown in public on the internet. Somebody call Bill and Ted. Ask them if I can borrow Socrates. I mean, I can use the help and I know how to make his favorite drink. Nobody will ever know.

Share

Or Sumfin...

When you read *I'm a Weapon* (and you've obviously already decided to do so, based on my amazing recommendation) you will go through many different sections in the text where you think you have Jack figured out. You don't. I'm not convinced you ever will. Up to the end of the book, Jack hasn't figured out who Jack is. Truth be told, I'm not completely convinced that Robins had a final definition of who Jack was when he wrote this. And no, "rogue killer robot" is not who Jack is. That's what Jack is and that's a totally different thing. What I'm tell you is that this is a complicated character. There's a lot more about this guy that we need to discover and even he doesn't know what it is.

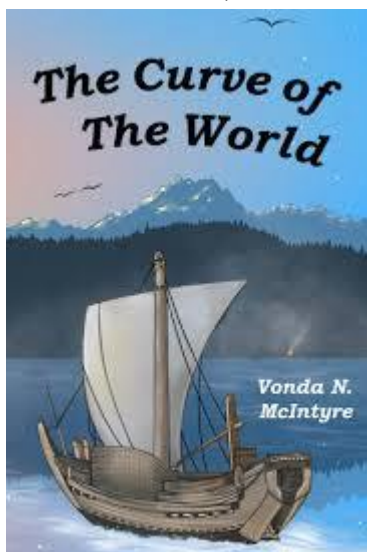
That's okay though. There are at least five books after this. Four of them are currently available. I'm not sure if that's it for the *I, Anomaly* series or if there will be more after that. Either way, we've got a minute to figure Jack out. I'm looking forward to doing so. If the sequels are as good as the original, it's gonna be a wild ride. I can't wait.

The Curve of the World by Vonda N. McIntyre

Review by Dani Zweig

I bought "The Curve of the World" because McIntyre wrote a science-fiction/fantasy blend I admired. The book was well crafted, but it was more guided tour than story.

The setting is an alternate history, not in the common sense of the world being different because some events turned out differently, but in the sense that it's a different history inspired by ours. There is no way to 'date' the story coherently, but it is basically iron age - call it 500 BC - with some elements from a millennium earlier and some from a millennium later. (The blurb says 'bronze age', but iron knives, iron nails, and what may have been a Thera eruption about a millennium earlier.)



The main characters are from Crete. (We are never told that they are from Crete, but Mediterranean, double-headed axes, dancing with bulls...) Crete has, or is part of, a significant trade network, and it has a custom of exchanging fosterlings with other lands. When fosterlings grow up, they decide which land to call home. 'Curve' is the story of a voyage to return a fosterling (he is actually a rescued child, but he has the status of a fosterling) to his home. He only barely remembers his home but, from what he remembers, the reader will recognize it as being in the Pacific Northwest. So it's an extremely-ambitious voyage.

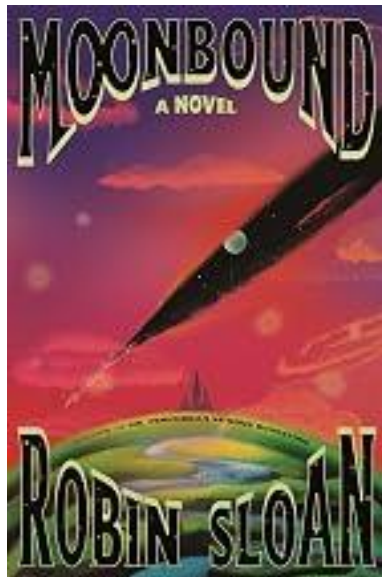
The voyage is a guided tour of sexual politics and politics, more than of other civilizations. Crete is matriarchal to the point where it is considered bad manners to speak of children's fathers. We never

see Egypt, but we are told that the Pharaoh is female. 'The People' are mostly female, and foster out most of their boy children. The northern pirates are at the far end of the women-are-chattel spectrum.

Robin Sloan's "Moonbound"

Review by Cory Doctorow

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



Robin Sloan has a well-deserved reputation as a sparkly, fizzy writer, the kind of person who can tell a smart/smartass story infused with fantasy-genre whimsy but grounded in high-tech, contemporary settings (think here of Charlie Jane Anders' gorgeous *All the Birds In the Sky*):

<https://memex.craphound.com/2016/01/26/charlie-jane-anderss-all-the-birds-in-the-sky-smartass-soulful-novel/>

In *Moonbound*, a new, wildly ambitious solarpunk novel published today by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Sloan moves out of his usual, daffy, high-tech/high-weird Bay Area milieu and catapults us 11,000 years into the future, to a world utterly transformed and utterly fascinating.

Moonbound's protagonist is a "chronicler," a symbiotic fungus engineered to nestle in a human's nervous system, where it serves as a kind of recording angel, storing up the memories, experiences and personalities of its host. When we meet the chronicler, it has just made a successful leap from its old host – a 10,000-years-dead warrior who had been preserved in an anaerobic crashpod ever since her ship was shot out of the sky – into the body of Ariel, a 12-year-old boy who had just invaded the long-lost tomb.

This is quite a move. This long-dormant, intelligent fungus originates a thousand years into our own future, long after the climate emergency had been (miraculously, joyously) averted and has arrived in a world ten millennia years even further down the line. It must orient itself from its position inside the nervous system of a 12-year-old, and we have to orient ourselves to having an 11,000-year-distant future explained by an intelligent fungus from 1,000 years into our own future.

This is doing fiction in hard mode, and Sloan nails it. The unraveling strangeness of Ariel's world is counterpointed with the amazing tale of the world the chronicler hails from, even as the chronicler consults with the preserved personalities of the heroes and warriors it had previously resided in and recorded.

And in this curious way, we learn of the history of the chronicler's world, and of the strange world so far into the future that Ariel lives in – and becomes incredibly consequential to.

Start with the chronicler's world: on the way to solving the climate emergency, the human race figured out how to cooperate on unimaginably massive projects (for example, addressing the world's runaway carbon problem). This pays huge dividends, ushering in a period of thrilling

innovation, as humans and the nonhuman intelligences they have constructed collaborate to explore our planet, our solar system, and – thanks to a faster-than-light breakthrough – our galaxy.

A crew of seven are dispatched to the ends of space with great fanfare – but when they return, they are terrified and full of grim purpose. Something they met out there in the galaxy has convinced them that humanity must never look to the stars again. They blanket the planet in a cloak of dust and establish a garrison on the moon from which they destroy any attempts to leave the Earth.

This triggers a savage war against these seven "dragons" and their moon base. The chronicler's warrior – the one who was entombed for 10,000 years before being discovered by Ariel – was shot down on a last-ditch attempt to destroy the dragons and their base on the moon.

Flash forward 10,000 years. Ariel lives in a weird, medieval-type village, albeit one in which the peasant-types all wear high-tech performance all-weather gear...and the animals all talk. It's a very strange place – there's a sword in a stone, a wizard in a tower...and an airstrip.

Even as the chronicler is trying to make sense of this anachronistic muddle, Ariel is marching towards his destiny. In short order, he finds himself in fear for his life, and then – for the first time in his life or the life of any other villager – Ariel leaves the village.

This kicks off the road-trip part of the novel, a real bildungsroman that sees Ariel, the chronicler, and a whole Wizard-of-Oz's worth of road pals (including a rusty tin-man type robot who is part of a hive mind of thousands of other robots all over the world; oh and a talking beaver) (oh, and a dead guy) (and there's an elk with a symbiotic beehive in its antlers that dribbles a steady stream of honey down its muzzle).

My editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden once articulated a theory of how science fiction works: you have the world, which is a kind of grand thought experiment, and you have a protagonist, who is a kind of microcosm of that world. Think of the world as this big, heavy gear, and the character as a much-faster-spinning gear that meshes with the world, spinning and spinning, pushing the world inchingly around a full revolution: pluralistic.net/2022/07/26/aislands/#dead-ringers.

The chronicler is a perfect microcosm of this strange world, where dozens of great civilizations have arisen and fallen – the ruins of a great society of hyperintelligent rats turns out to be very useful on one part of Ariel's quest – and where the dragons brood overall, a menace in the sky that the Earth's inhabitants have all but forgotten, but whom the chronicler can't ignore.

Sloan is really having a lot of fun with his talking animals; his transdimensional gods; his space-maddened, murderous lunar AIs. On the way, he's doing all kinds of really cool tricks – like asking us to really sit with the idea of giving moral consideration to the nonhuman world, including "beings" we currently think of as inanimate objects. This is a great riff: pluralistic.net/2022/06/07/more-than-human/#umwelt.

Sloan's debut novel, *Mr Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, mixed the tropes and sensibilities of tech culture with a beautiful, escapist fantasy, a "curious little magic shop" tale that was absolutely delightful: memex.craphound.com/2012/11/16/mr-penumbras-24-hour-bookstore-the-perfect-nerdish-fantasy/

And with *Sourdough*, Sloan's second book, he took that same fascination with the numinous (and with nerdy, obsessive hobbies) to the microscopic plane, with a tale of microorganisms and *mystery*: memex.craphound.com/2017/09/05/sourdough-a-delicious-story-about-nerdism-and-the-flesh-by-robin-mr-penumbra-sloan/

Moonbound delivers Sloan's third – and best! – fusion of fantasy and science fiction, delving deep into the meaning of personhood, language and moral agency with a road-trip story that visits a dazzling collection of wildly imaginative settings and societies in an epic quest to slay the dragons on the moon.

Short Stories

Borderlanz: Tales from the Edges by Douglas Smith Review by Robert Runté



A four-time winner of the Aurora Award (for Canadian speculative fiction and fantasy) and shortlisted for the Sunburst Award (a more literary, juried Canadian Speculative Fiction Award), Douglas Smith is one of Canada's most successful speculative fiction writers. I've given rave reviews for his *Dream Rider Saga*, and his stories have been widely reprinted, including internationally in dozens of other languages. Smith has literally written the book on marketing short stories: *Playing the Short Game: How to Market & Sell Short Fiction*. If you're a writer, it's a must have guide.

This is Smith's third short fiction collection and gives a good cross section not merely of his career, but of the range of speculative fiction. Zombies, werewolves, wizards, ghosts, dragons, spacebar-tall-tales, alien encounters, parallel universes, hard-boiled detectives, and straight-up horror are all represented in one or more of the 15 stories included. With the possible exception of the spacebar story, however, none of them is what you might expect from those labels. Smith always has an original take that elevates his stories above the regular clichés of any of those subgenres. I have almost no interest in zombies, for example, but damn if Smith didn't come up something completely new, timely, and genuinely disturbing in "Gypsy Bikers Coming Home".

I had read several of these stories before, when they originally appeared in *F&SF Magazine*, *On Spec*, *Pulp Literature*, *Tesseract6*, and so on, and I was surprised how well they have stood up over time and re-reading. It's not unusual for different readers to each take something different from a story, but only a truly brilliant author can write something where the same reader can discover a new level or a new relevance when re-reading it at different points in their life.

My least favourite story is probably the title story, "Walker of the Shifting Borderland", in which a god-like being keeps shifting realities. It's a solid enough short, just not my particular taste—and I am clearly in the minority because it won that year's Aurora for short fiction.

My favourite story is . . . a tough call. “If I Should Fall Behind”, about a couple of kids escaping across parallel universes, is filled with inventive word play and emotional depth, even if it left me totally creeped out. Similarly, “Radio Nowhere” is an eerie masterpiece of setting and a haunting story of love and obsession. “Doorways” is a chilling tale of a house controlled by a deceased madman. “Fiddleheads” is about a young boy’s longing for his missing brother and is the most disturbing of them all. I usually stay away from horror, but Smith’s stories are deeply memorable because they always have something more to say about life and love.

“The Stopover” is a short-short everyone can relate to. That’s all I can say because: no spoilers. But it’s perfect.

“The Balance” is the one story in the collection that is not SF, Smith’s personal story of the terror of becoming a new father. That’s probably the story to which I related the most, so another favourite.

It’s not all dark or moody fiction, though. “Murphy’s Law”, the spacebar story, is an explicitly comic piece; “What’s in a Name?” is essentially a satire of the Sword & Sorcery genre; and “Oregon Shooters” is a similarly entertaining mixture of detective noir and alien abduction. These lighter pieces provide a nice break between the more intense stories, while the three shapeshifter stories (parts of a series) provide engaging adventures while still retaining the best of Smith’s lyrical style.

Each story comes with an individual afterword, which adds a nice element. I strongly dislike collections where the author introduces each story, prejudicing one’s perceptions when the story should speak for itself. Afterwords are great, though. I would not have gotten the many musical (Springfield) references, for example, without Smith telling us, and it’s often fascinating knowing where a story comes from.

Novels tend to be an easier sell than short fiction collections, but I’ve never really understood why. The short, sharp punch of a perfectly constructed piece seems like something perfect for a commute, a waiting room, or before bed. Smith’s collection is a good one, guaranteed to take your mind off things while still saying something important about life, the world, and our place in it.

SerCon

Rog Phillips Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

N3F Historian

Roger Phillip Graham (February 20, 1909 – March 2, 1966) was a science fiction (s-f) writer and fan who published most of his s-f stories under the pseudonym of Rog Phillips, but who also used other pen names in his work.

Phillips was associated for the most part with the Ziff-Davis s-f magazines, principally *Amazing Stories*, and was known for his short fiction. He was nominated for the genre’s Hugo



Award in 1959 for his novelette “Rat in the Skull,” originally published in *If* magazine.

In fandom, he was known for conducting an influential fan column, “The Club House,” that ran in *Amazing* during 1948 – 1953. This column reviewed fanzines and covered other fan affairs – and was later revived in *Universe Science Fiction* (1954 – 1955), and still later in *Other Worlds Science Stories* (1955 -- 1956). The column was credited by editor Ray Palmer with bringing many new fans into s-f fandom. Palmer was editor of all the magazines in which *The Club House* appeared.

Other Pseudonyms



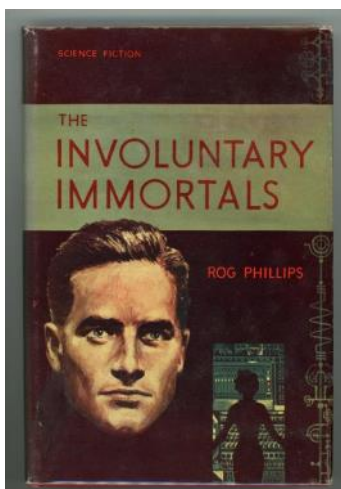
In addition to Rog Phillips, Graham used many other pseudonyms in his writing. The principal additional ones used in his s-f writing were Craig Browning and Melva Rogers.

Personal Life

He was married in 1938 to Eleanor Cora Smith. They divorced, and in 1950 he married fellow fan Mari Wolf, who ran a column similar to *The Club House* in the s-f magazine, *Imagination*. Her column was called *Fandora's Box*. After he and Mari divorced, he married Honey Wood, in 1956. Wood was also a s-f fan, and at one time all three - Rog, Mari, and Honey - were members of *The Outlanders*, a Los Angeles s-f fan club for members of LASFS who lived in the

“outlands” of LA.

Major Science Fiction Publications



His s-f books included *Time Trap* (1949), *Worlds Within* (1950), *World of If* (1951), and *The Involuntary Immortals* (1959).

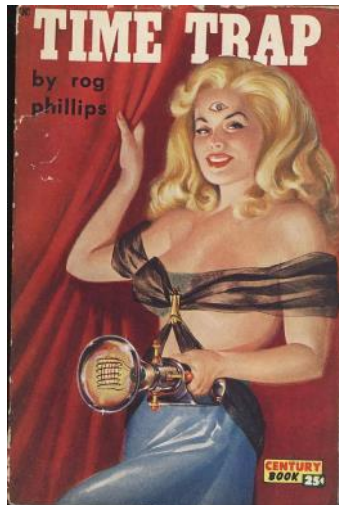
Some of his best remembered short stories were “Rat in the Skull,” “Game Preserve,” and “The Yellow Pill.”

His popular “Lefty Baker” series of s-f stories appeared in three different magazines and across nearly 15 years (1947 - 1961): *Amazing Stories* (“Squeeze Play” and “The Immortal Menace”), *Fantastic Adventures* (“The Insane Robot”), and *Fantastic* (“But Who Knows Huer or Huen”).

Armchair Fiction reprinted several of his s-f stories in paperback editions during 2011 – 2016.

Concluding Comments

He was a strong supporter of s-f fandom and the fanzines produced by its members, once stating: “A fanzine, to me, is an important symbol of thought and unlimited mental horizons.”



A math wizard, Amazing editor Palmer reported that Phillips once worked out a new math that “explained the universe.”

Palmer at one time tried to get his two most prolific and popular authors, Richard Shaver (famous - and infamous - for the Shaver Mystery) and Phillips, to collaborate on some stories. Unfortunately for Palmer, the two men couldn’t stand each other.

Phillips was good friends with fellow s-f author, Chad Oliver, and served as Oliver’s best man when Oliver was married in 1952. The marriage reception was held at the Ackermansion, and was hosted by Forry Ackerman.

Ray Bradbury was a member of the wedding party.

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Writing

Writing Diverse Characters by Chris Nuttall

<https://chrisnuttall.substack.com/>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

established characters.

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

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

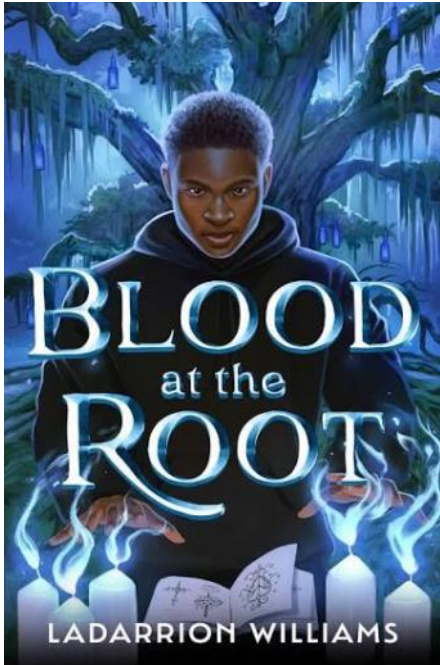
These struggles should not be just be with editors, but with themselves. The first meeting between commander Sisko and Captain Picard boils with tension, because Captain Picard was kidnapped by the Borg and assimilated, his knowledge and tactical skill added to the collective and used to ensure a massacre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

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

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

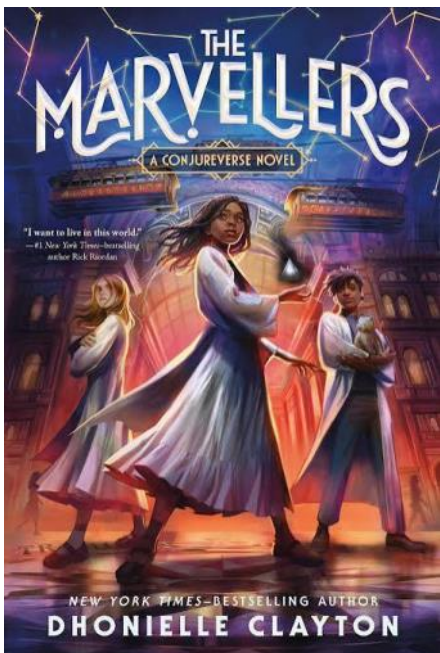
The infamous and badly written scene where Shuri puts down Tony Stark and Bruce Banner is another example of a character being promoted at the expense of an older character. It grates even for those of us who love Shuri, partly because Shuri has the advantage of knowledge and technology several decades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

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



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

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



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

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

critics to smear them in return.

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

Christopher Nuttall is the best-selling author of *Ark Royal*, *Schooled in Magic*, *Morningstar* and many other works of science-fiction and fantasy. He has a website, a facebook page, and a sub-stack blog. His mother would like you all to know she's very sorry, and she doesn't know where she went wrong.

Anime

The Magnificent Kotobuki Review by Jessi Silver

In a barren frontier where people trade goods with each other in order to help each other survive, the Kotobuki Squadron are bodyguards for hire, led by a strict but beautiful squadron leader, an unreliable commanding officer, and a true artisan of a crew chief. Alongside pilots who don't lack for personality, they take to the air in dogfights, letting the engine noise of their Hayabusa fighters ring out in the skies. – ANN

Streaming: HIDIVE

Episodes: 12

Source: Original



It's those that bellow the loudest that most need to be put in their place.

Screencap from HIDIVE.

Episode Summary: Being a pilot-for-hire is a rough job, and because of that there's some amount of trash-talking and bragging involved in a pilot's down time. When a young man from the Nazarene Squadron gets full of himself and starts to hit on the young women from the Kotobuki Squadron, he doesn't realize what he's getting into. These ladies have seen it all and then some, and don't have time to play with little boys whose 11 stars don't stack up to their combined 200.

During a nighttime transport of goods, a transport airship is predictably targeted by air pirates. While the Nazarene Squadron is taken out fairly early in the fight, the Kotobuki Squadron, piloting their Hayabusa fighter planes, manages to fend off the attackers with little collateral damage. Kirie, the group's hot-headed fighter, notices a familiar insignia on the wing of one of the enemies and decides to engage with it one-on-one, which turns out to be a poor decision. For some reason, though, the enemy leaves her alone after connecting a few warning shots.

Impressions: While I've never been all that interested in history's vast array of military hardware, some of my very vivid childhood memories involve going over to my grandfather's house and looking over his collection of model planes. He was a World War II veteran, and while he never shared many firsthand stories of that experience, he expressed some of that narrative through the tiny scale models he constructed beneath a hobby light and a magnifying lens. I was always fascinated by these delicate pieces of art, bits of wood and wire hand-painted to mimic famous Axis and Ally war planes, as well as bi-and-tri-wing planes from even earlier in history.

Today's military jets are sleek and outfitted with some of the world's most modern technology, but I've always been more interested in the rough-hewn, hand-built, riveted metal fabrications of the past even if what we have now is technically better and more efficient. The Magnificent Kotobuki is itself a fascinating clash between traditional and modern that seems to (maybe inadvertently) address this perennial conflict in both its story and its animation style.



Leaving its story aside for the time being, possibly the most immediately noticeable thing about this episode (and, by extension, the series as a whole) is that it takes a combination approach to its character animation. Many of the side or supporting characters are animated traditionally, while the Kotobuki members are rendered in 3DCG. It's reminiscent of *Kado: The Right Answer* in that respect; both series appear to have chosen to sacrifice full integration of animated

elements in favor of a hybrid approach that makes some important portions easier to animate. In this series' case, I assume the primary characters exist as 3D models so that they can easily integrate with the 3D airplanes more completely. It's an initially uncomfortable aesthetic clash that ever-so-slowly settles into itself as the episode goes on, though I suspect not everyone will agree with me on that. Not surprisingly, it's the lengthy dogfight sequence in the second half of the episode that's the most visually impressive.

I have a dual-screen desktop computer set-up at my desk; one screen is for research and writing, while the other is strictly for watching video. It's not necessarily the most immersive way to get my anime fix, but it works for me. I've rarely regretted having not watched something on my big living room television, but this may be one of those rare moments. The dogfight between the Kotobuki Squadron and the air pirates is one of the most enthralling action sequences I've watched lately, to the point where I caught myself with my mouth open like a fish just caught up in the moment. The direction, the camera angles, the first-person perspectives (utilized judiciously and for emphasis) work together like a dance to provide a sense of danger and excitement. I'm not normally one to talk to myself, but I was tempted on more than one occasion to say out loud just how awesome certain moments were.



The extended defense of the transport ship is a great argument for CG animation. Screenshot from HIDIVE.

Because the episode spends so much time hooking the audience with flash and excitement, it has less time to devote to character introductions, which leaves us with very little impression of who the characters really are. The opening scene does a serviceable job of providing some surface-level information about the various young women – there's the feisty one (Kirie, who gets most of the attention this time around), the emotionless one, the grown-up, the heavy drinker... fairly standard for an anime with a cast of mostly women. Knowing how director Mizushima's projects tend to work I suspect there will be a few character-focused episodes on

the horizon, but for all this episode's "wow" factor, I can't say that I've fully connected with it just yet.

That said, I'm a latecomer but I'm really starting to appreciate this director for his ability to simply construct something entertaining. You'd think that wouldn't be that difficult, especially if an anime series is adapted from something with well-regarded source material; being an anime fan, though, I think we all realize that a great story can be animated in a way that doesn't

take advantage of what the original source has to offer. This is a series drawn up out of almost nothing (though I will probably continue to joke that this is Mizushima getting the chance to animate Third Aerial Girls Squad in totality) and yet it already feels fun and engaging in spite of some minor criticisms I might have. That, I believe, takes talent.

I find it appropriate that the characters in this series pilot old, somewhat obsolete planes, re-tooled with love to serve their current purpose. One of the things that I love about Japanese animation is its (possibly backward) adherence to the hand-drawn techniques of the past; with each passing season, though, I get the impression that more and more of my future favorite series will involve at least some major elements of modern CG animation. The Magnificent Kotobuki appears to exist at that crossroad of old and modern, showing that yes, you can take something old and dress it up with new techniques without losing the core of what makes it entertaining. I certainly hope this is a trait that follows the series through to the end.

Pros: The first episode is very entertaining, especially the long action scene. The CG animation for the planes is utilized well.

Cons: The integration between the traditional and 3D character animation takes some getting used-to. The characters aren't engaging yet.

Grade: B

Eat This While You Read That

Crustless Shoo-Fly Pie Cooking by Cedar Sanderson



A one-bowl pie recipe!

I started looking for my recipe for this and realized it's been a number of years since I made it, and I didn't have it saved in my virtual recipe box here on the blog. This is something I used to make in my teens for school snacks, and may have gotten the recipe from a Pennsylvania Dutch teacher, or my grandmother who grew up in Pennsylvania, I don't recall any longer. I like the 'wet' version, which conveniently makes it's own crust. Sometimes I don't feel like making pie crust and rolling it out.

Crustless Shoo-Fly Pie

Preheat oven to 400F

1 c molasses

1 c boiling water

Crumble:

- 3 c flour
- 1 c sugar
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 c cold butter

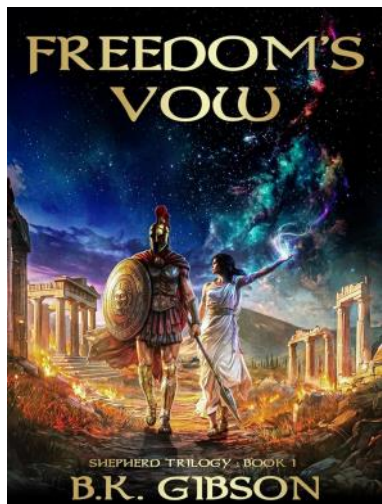
Cut the cold butter into the dry ingredients until mixture is crumbly. Pour this into the pie pan and press down lightly.

Carefully mix together the boiling water and molasses. Slowly pour this over the crumble, covering all the dry top surface with the liquid. Don't stir this up much at all.

Bake at 400F for 35-40 minutes until the center is just barely jiggly. Cool, slice, and serve with coffee and if you like, whipped cream.

Such an easy pie, and one that goes over very well with the crowd.

B. K. Gibson and A Recipe for Grecian Meatballs Cooking by Cedar Sanderson



These meatballs have a great deal of utility! They can be a main (if you double the recipe, serves 4, as it serves two or...), an appetizer, and even freeze for later. They are very tasty, and based somewhat on the Greek keftedes.

They don't take long to make, only about twenty minutes, and bake time runs thirty, so that gives you a little time with BK Gibson's book, Freedom's Vow. The book combines fantasy, ancient Greece, and combines well with these savory morsels.

Grecian Meatballs

Preheat oven to 350F. Line pan with parchment paper and place a rack in the pan. The rack should fit down inside the pan to reduce risk of spill and spatter in the oven.

- 1 lb ground beef or lamb
- 1 onion, finely grated
- 2-3 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 2 slices stale bread
- 1/2 c dry wine
- 1 egg
- 1 tbsp mild paprika
- 1 tsp thyme
- 1 tsp oregano

- 2 tsp salt
- ¼ tsp nutmeg
- 1/8 tsp cloves
- 2 tsp dried minced lemon peel

Grate the onion over a bowl. Squeeze out the juice with your hands, add the onion to the meat mixture. Discard the onion juice or reserve for another recipe.

Soak the bread in the wine (or you can use stock here).

Combine all the ingredients in a large mixing bowl and mix thoroughly. The bread you can tear up, but it will blend in once it's sopped up the liquid. Once the meatball mixture is homogenous, form into balls of about 1 ½" and place on the rack inside the pan.

I didn't line my pan this time, but it cleans so much easier if you do.

Bake at 350F for about thirty minutes.

These are very flavorful! You could serve with pita bread and tzatziki sauce, or with a salad, or as an appetizer. For appetizer, make the meatballs about 1" in diameter.

Also, meatballs freeze really well so make a double batch and freeze the others once baked for later.

Don't forget to grab your copy of Freedom's Vow and enjoy a relaxing meal while you lose yourself in the world that BK Gibson has woven. You'll find that the flavors of these meatballs bring you even closer to it while you read that and eat this!





Dragon Under the Temple

by Tiffanie Gray