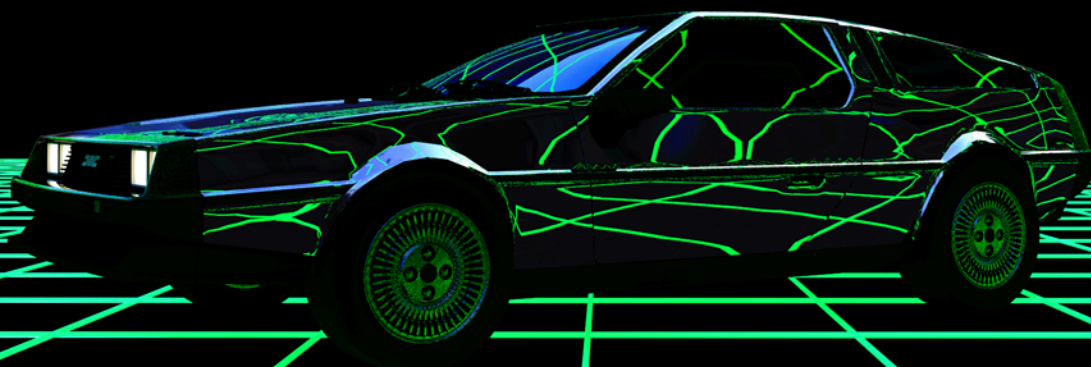


NERDS OF A FEATHER

Black Together



Hugo Award Voter's Packet
BEST FANZINE

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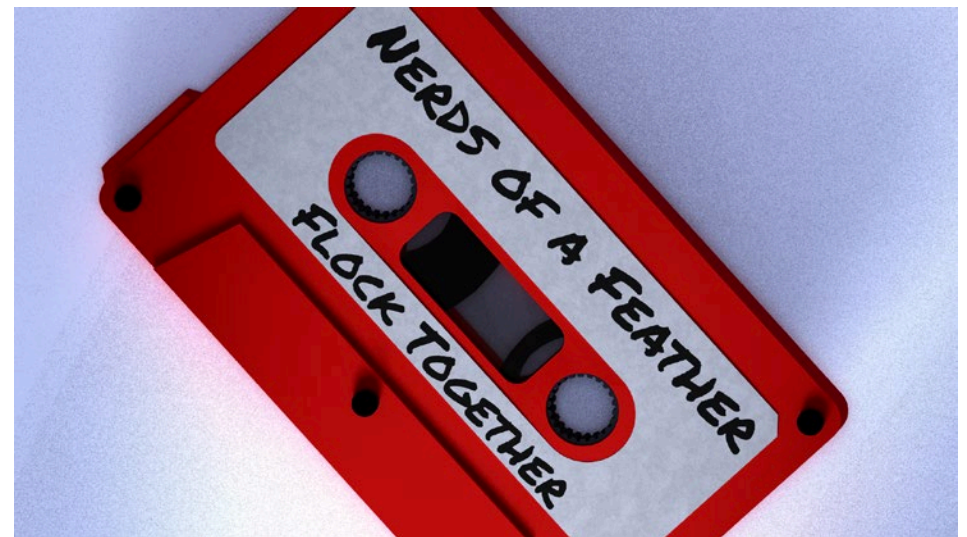
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Introduction

Adri Joy

When I joined the *nerds of a feather, flock together* team in 2018, the site had already been a Hugo finalist once and had just picked up its second nomination for Best Fanzine. At the time, I was a baby reviewer living in Yangon, for whom cons were something that happened to other people; getting to write reviews for a Hugo-recognised outfit felt like an amazing opportunity to join the fandom conversation and contribute to a community that I'd been admiring from afar for a couple of years. But the Hugo nomination itself was something a bit distant and abstract: it was before my time, too exciting to comprehend, and never, ever something that could be expected to happen again.

A lot has happened in those two years. I moved back to England, where going to cons and other fan things suddenly became possible, and even got to experience my first Worldcon in Dublin. N.K. Jemisin made history with her three back-to-back Best Novel wins, and the Lodestar got to exist (and later actually be called the Lodestar). Genre engaged in a difficult but deeply necessary stocktake of two of its biggest award names, and found ways to honour the diverse and brilliant humans in fandom today without allowing the shadows of flawed individuals to loom over their accolades. Plus, fandom got to experience such historical milestones as the first all-female space-walk, the wrap-up of the MCU's 50-movie arc in *Avengers: Endgame*, and the week when nobody

could say anything on Twitter without referencing 30-50 feral hogs. Oh, and *Nerds of a Feather* picked up another Hugo nomination, and I got to wear a fancy dress to that Worldcon I mentioned above.

Now, here we are, nominated for a fourth time, and this time with a fourth editor on our ballot, a baby reviewer turned co-editor who couldn't have imagined how much throwing in with a flock of nerds two years ago would shape my experience with the weird and wonderful world of genre fiction fandom. It doesn't quite feel real, and I can't overstate my thanks to everyone who read and nominated us last year.

Fanzines have changed a lot over the history of fandom, as the way that we connect and share our analysis, excitement, grumpiness and terrible jokes has evolved in response to the magic of technology. For many fans now, our strongest connections to the world of SFF all take place online, whether that be on Twitter and other public-facing social media, the world of Discord and Slack and other group chats, sites like *Archive of Our Own*, or over a good "old-fashioned" e-mail chain. From their original printed form, the definition of a fanzine has grown to enter the digital age with us, in the huge range of blogs, collectives, newsletters and pretty PDFs that carry the analysis of a global community. Language and other barriers might make international links difficult sometimes, but there's not a day that goes by when I'm not grateful for the opportunity to work with people thousands of miles from me (including a strangely high number of Minnesotans and an actual cat from space!) to make

this weird, beautiful little website happen. Those connections are, of course even more important right now, with the first virtual Worldcon being scheduled by the CoNZealand team in response to restrictions on how we travel and socialise safely in the midst of a pandemic. These are hard, uncertain and scary times, but they are a tiny bit easier when we have each other - no matter how far away we may physically be.

Our team in 2019 consisted of Adri Joy, Brian, Chloe Clark, Dean E.S. Richard, Joe Sherry, Michael Newhouse-Bailey, Paul Weimer, Phoebe Wagner, Spacefaring Kitten, The G and Vance Kotrla. We put out essays, reviews, author features and assorted shenanigans every Monday to Friday, excluding US public holidays, racking up an epic 283 pieces for your consideration across 2019. We editors love all our babies equally, but if you feel that reading 283 essays, reviewed, author features and assorted shenanigans might be a tall order to assess our fanzine, here's a summary of the kind of work we put out last year:

- *Our 2019 project, the Hugo Initiative, looking at works from across the history of the award in a series of dossiers, blogtables and essays*
- *Regular series like the weekly Thursday Morning Superhero column and monthly short fiction roundups, as well as limited series including weekly watches of Watchmen and the Mandalorian and our spooky Halloween special, Let's Frighten Children*
- *A ton of author content, including an interview with Best Novel finalist Kameron Hurley and regular Six Books features with a rotating*

cast of awesome folk

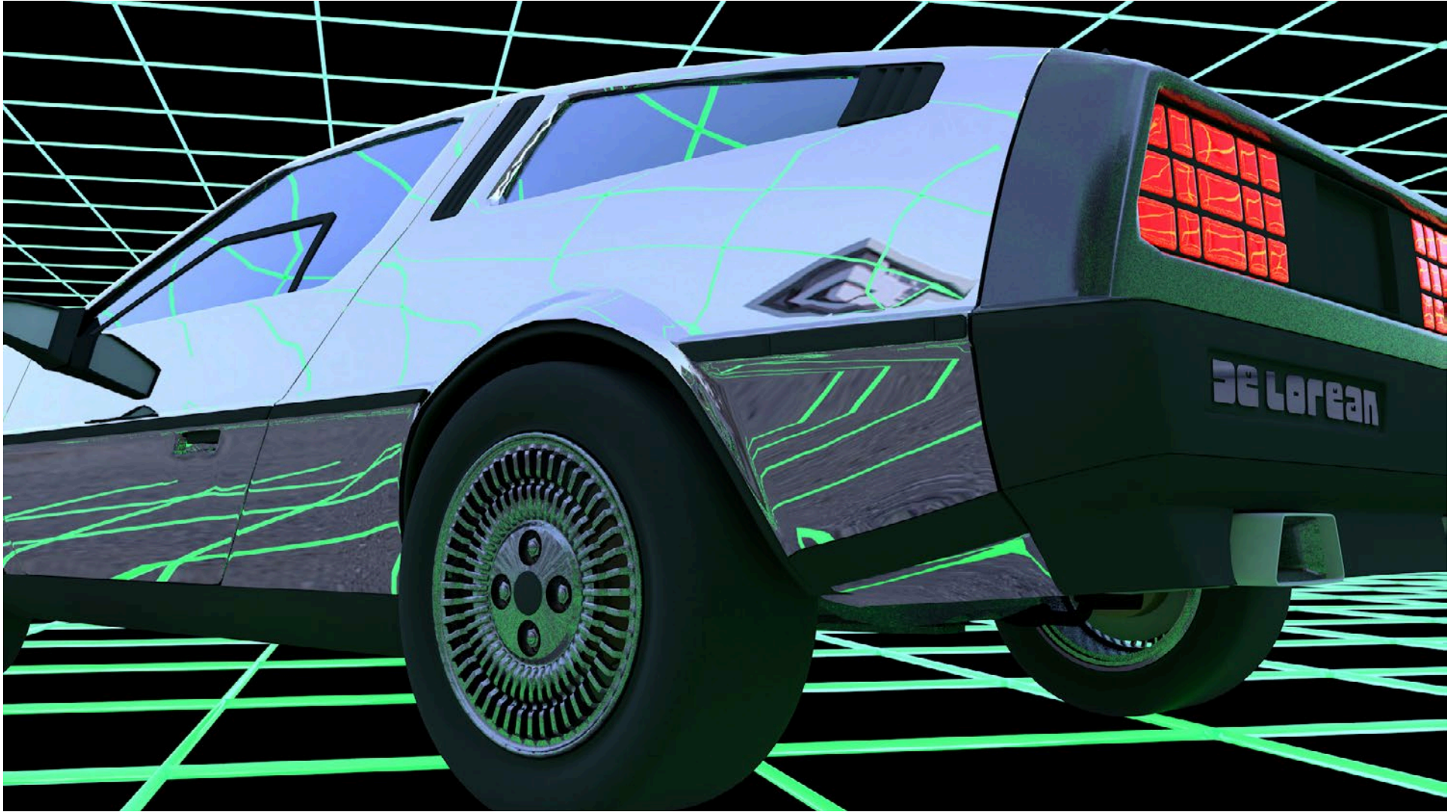
• *An intimidating number of awesome essays, reviews and roundtables tackling dozens of good things from across the nerdy spectrum.*

We're honoured to be here for a fourth time, and to be representing a tiny piece of what fanzines

can be in 2020. To all those working away across book blogs, old school zines, weekly newsletters and other labours of genre-non-fiction love: we see you and we are proud to be in this community with you! If you're a return visitor, welcome back; we're glad to have you and we're sorry the virtual kettle seems to have stopped working

again. And if you're here for the first time, hello and welcome to nerds of a feather, flock together! We've pulled together some of the highlights for your viewing pleasure; we hope you'll stay a while and check out what we have to offer. And thanks, once again, to everyone who has dropped by.

Fiction Reviews



Microreview [book]: Gideon the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir

Adri Joy

The Queer NecRomantic Murder Mystery You've Been Missing All your Life



To say that *Gideon the Ninth*, the debut novel from Tamsyn Muir, has been the subject of some hype is like saying the Pacific Ocean is a bit wet. The hype about this skeleton-based queer adventure has been slowly taking over my Twitter feed since the end of last year, and its

regularly felt like the universe was divided into those “lucky” few who had already read it (and were therefore falling over themselves to talk to the rest of us about skeletons) and everyone else waiting for the release to roll around. At last, dear readers, I have graduated into the ranks of the skeleton analysts.

Was it worth it? Oh, very yes.

Gideon is an orphan raised in indenture to the Ninth House, a crumbling ruined cult living on a high-uninhabitable planet, now facing total extinction. Ignored by most and openly tormented by the only other girl her age, Reverend Daughter

Harrowhark, Gideon has been plotting her escape for years and on her eighteenth birthday, now finally has her chance to make her way off planet and into a marginally better life. On the verge of making good on her escape, Harrow outwits her at the last minute, only to instead offer to take her as a “cavalier”, a sworn bodyguard to the House’s necromancer, on a very different sort of quest. The First House - that of the Emperor - has offered a challenge, enabling a representative from one of the houses to ascend to the Emperor’s services if they can successfully complete a task on the deserted First House planet. Left without a choice (and clearly intrigued and also maybe a bit into Harrow) Gideon takes on the challenge, taking a crash course in what it takes to be a cavalier before setting off to a crumbling house for an uncertain contest with the other seven houses. And then, of course, the murders begin.

In its worldbuilding, *Gideon the Ninth* takes a particular kind of claustrophobic gothic sensibility - one that’s embodied in speculative work like *Gormenghast* and *Under the Pendulum Sun* - and applies it on an interplanetary scale whose mechanics are vague but also irrelevant. There’s an empire, which we don’t get a whole lot of information on, but whose leadership appears to be at the least chronically absent from the house structure its created. These houses specialise in upholding different aspects of the empire, ranging from practical services like “being soldiers” or “managing the library” to more nebulous professions like “being likeable”, “thinking you’re good at diplomacy but you’re not, actually”, “dying of attractive forms of consumption” and, of course, “skeletons”. There’s definitely an evolution to

be drawn here from the districts of the *Hunger Games* or factions of the *Divergent* trilogy (and before those, the Hogwarts Houses) to this distinctly non-YA portrayal of a dysfunctional and yet internally meaningful classification system; in practical terms, the houses allow Muir to introduce a lot of characters and give them motivations in a relatively short space of time, and to allow the representatives of the Ninth House their own pre-existing prejudices and conflicts with those houses, while still maintaining them as outsiders to civilised company. Almost all of the supporting characters grow beyond the stereotypes of their house depiction (the main exception is the soldiers of the Second House, but they play their role and further nuance is not really missed), creating a highly satisfying political-necromantic soap opera which gets more desperate as the body count starts to build.

At the centre of it all are Gideon and Harrow, and their deeply dysfunctional relationship, all told through Gideon’s lens. Muir may have written *Gideon the Ninth* in third person but it’s most definitely Gideon’s voice, and the portrayal of someone who has spent so long putting up with overblown spooky bullshit that she has no more fucks or reverence to give is utterly hilarious. Though Gideon makes no explicit cultural references to anything but her dirty magazines (and those play less of a role in the narrative than you’d think), her voice is imbued with what in other mediums would be referred to as “easter eggs”: occasional memetic pop culture references to things like Mean Girls, which don’t detract from the text if you don’t read them as such but add to the idiosyncratic irreverence if you do. Because

the atmosphere is so well defined beyond Gideon's perception, it makes for some highly amusing moments where Gideon's internal descriptions contrast with what's objectively going on: for example, her enforced vow of silence in early chapters allows her to come across as a creepy, mysterious hooded-and-painted skull figure to the rest of the group, even as she's walking around being internally rude, judgemental, and bored. The fact that the atmosphere isn't really dented by Gideon's irreverence is testament to Muir's skill in balancing the tone of what could have been a very uneven book. Instead, it all meshes together to create something that feels unique and fresh with a wonderful character voice, and a strain of heartbreak that really creeps up on you under all the hardened sword-wielding snark.

Another point of skill is the way that Gideon and Harrow's enemies to "it's complicated" relationship unfolds (complete with multiple complications including the aforementioned attractive consumptive necromancer), completely against the intention of either character, against a backdrop of general queerness despite their being very little in the way of explicit romance. Although I found it mildly frustrating that the few more "established" couples seem to be heterosexual, the way queerness is incorporated normalises it in a way which then enables Gideon and Harrow to be utterly obtuse about each other without it coming across as "baiting" or textually ambigu-

ous that they could jump each other's bones (I promise that's the only skeleton pun that's going to make it in here) (but only because I'm kind of tired and don't expect any more low-hanging fruit). It's an important balance to strike particularly in a book like this where the trajectory is not towards an uncomplicated happy ending for the disastrous duo, because if lesbians are going to end the story unhappy and/or out-of-action, I need an author to have earned my trust along the way. However, this is a point where individual mileages may vary, and if you're a reader who steers clear of "bury your gays" in the broadest sense then it may be worth seeking out a more spoiler-heavy review to work out if *Gideon the Ninth* is a book you want to invest in.

For me, therefore, this book has certainly earned its pre-release buzz, and I expect the community excitement is only going to increase as more people get to experience the world and characters Muir has created here (there was already a Gideon cosplay wandering around Worldcon one day, which I was pretty excited to see even before getting to read the book). In a strong year, *Gideon the Ninth* has effortlessly risen to near the top of my 2019 reads, and while its combination of gothic-grimdark worldbuilding sensibilities and post-Potter Millennial teen snark isn't going to work for everyone, it certainly does capture a genre zeitgeist which I was thoroughly delighted by. Best of all, there's just so much more of this

bizarre world to see, and it sounds like we won't be waiting long before the next adventures of our skeleton faves in *Harrow the Ninth*.

The Math

Baseline Score: 8/10

Bonus: +1 Double Bones with Doctor Skelebone; +1 I could probably write a second review on all the other necromancers and cavaliers and my feelings about them (except the Second House)

Penalties: -1 Worldbuilding is a bit light on everything that doesn't play into the "Double Bones with Doctor Skelebone" aesthetic

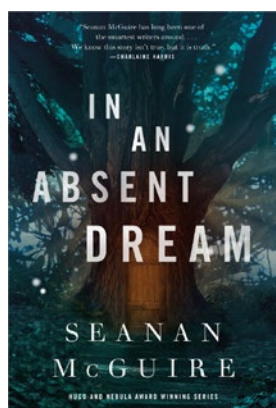
Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

POSTED BY: Adri is a semi-aquatic migratory mammal most often found in the UK. She has many opinions about SFF books, and is also partial to gaming, baking, interacting with dogs, and Asian-style karaoke. Find her on Twitter at @adrijjy.

Microreview [book]: In an Absent Dream, by Seanan McGuire

Joe Sherry

Step through another doorway and find your adventure filled with heartbreak and acceptance.



Each novella of the *Wayward Children* series has told the story of one (or more) of the children at Eleanor West's School for Wayward Children, though perhaps "children" is the wrong word to use here. At some point everybody at Eleanor West's went through a doorway, had an adventure,

lived a life in a world that isn't our own but which is also so much better suited for who they truly were, and then come home and had to figure out how to cope with living a mundane life in a world they don't truly belong.

With *Every Heart a Doorway* (my review), Seanan McGuire introduced readers to the idea of doorways and the portal worlds in which these children more truly belonged. Each novella has explored one of the perhaps uncountable number of possible portal worlds. *In an Absent Dream* tells the story of Katherine Lundy. Astute readers may remember that we first met the grown up

Lundy in *Every Heart a Doorway* as the therapist and second in command at Eleanor West's, except that "grown up" means that Lundy was at least in her sixties but had the physical appearance of an eight year old girl. Everybody has a story. This is Lundy's.

"She understood now, that the other children weren't coming; that they would always be shadowy voices on the other side of a fence, refusing to let her through, refusing to let her in. She understood that she had, for whatever reason, been rejected from their society, and would not be readmitted unless something fundamental in the world chose to shift in its foundations, widening itself, rebirthing her into someone they could care for."

Lundy's doorway takes her to the Goblin Market, a world where each and every transaction must offer "fair value" else a debt is owed, and in that world a debt has a physical manifestation. It is an eminently fair world, though certainly not an easy one. As with any world, there are rules and those rules must be followed if one truly wants to stay (and stay human).

The *Wayward Children* series has, thus far, been one where the children are looking for their doorway to open again so they can return to the world where they truly belong. Not the Goblin Market. The Goblin Market expects the children to go back to the "real world" multiple times so that they continually choose the Goblin Market, so that they always have the opportunity to "be sure". Other worlds have had that opportunity to return, but that return has always been desperate-

ly hoped for and unexpectedly granted.

The genius of Seanan McGuire is how tightly she is able to wrap barbed spikes around the narrative so that as the reader is pulled in closer and closer that those barbs pierce our hearts and we don't mind one bit. McGuire so perfectly captures the painful alienation of children. In Lundy's case, that alienation is her sister. Lundy has quietly accepted the future path of her life and is generally content until the moment she finds her door. Lundy's younger sister only knows that she has been abandoned for years by a sister she doesn't get the chance to know and grow up with. That hurts.

We're so often focused on the adventures the children are having in the worlds where they truly belong. Sometimes we get glimpses of the parents who try to mold their children into somebody they, the parents, want them to be. See *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (my review) for an example of that. But what we don't see in the *Wayward Children* series is the wreckage of a family left behind. We witness the escape.

"Wood does not customarily glitter. Few things do, unless they are attempting to lure something closer to themselves. Sparkle and shine are pleasures reserved for predators, who can afford the risk of courting attention. The exceptions - which exist, for all things must have exceptions - are almost entirely poisonous, and will sicken whatever they lure. So even the exception feeds into the rule, which states that a bright, shimmering thing is almost certainly looking to be seen, and that which hopes to be

seen is pursuing its own agenda.”

Because Seanan McGuire’s writing is so smart, insightful, and clever - we get observations like the above passage which are so pointed and so perfectly placed that we recognize that McGuire is writing about more than just sparkly things in the forest. On the surface, that’s obvious, but *In An Absent Dream* is filled with gem after gem of lines and observations just like that.

In an Absent Dream is a perfect delight. From the storytelling, the worldbuilding, the characterization - it is everything you’d want or expect from

Seanan McGuire.

“It is a place where dreamers go when they don’t fit in with the dreams their homes think worth dreaming. Doors lead here. Perhaps you found one.”

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: +1 for McGuire’s wit and wisdom

Penalties: -1 because there is a slight hint of

sameness in the overarching story of discovering the door, finding one’s place, and then losing it.

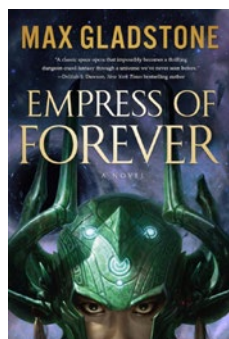
Nerd Coefficient: 9/10, “very high quality/standout in its category” See more about our scoring system here.

POSTED BY: Joe Sherry - Co-editor of Nerds of a Feather, 2017 & 2018 Hugo Award Finalist for Best Fanzine. Minnesotan.

Microreview [book]: Empress of Forever, by Max Gladstone

Paul Weimer

Empress of Forever is a rollicking, audacious, technicolor space fantasy opera that fully embodies its aesthetic and ethos while providing an over the top adventure.



Max Gladstone's novel begins with Vivian Liao. Vivian is a Elon Musk type tech billionaire who has made far too many enemies among various governments. So, a retrench and reboot and a plan to come back stronger are in order. But in the course of her

escape, Vivian is captured and brought to a far future (or is it just far away in space) in a universe with strange monks, killer robots, pilots who can bond with their ships, space pirates and much more. Including, and most importantly, the titular *Empress of Forever*.

After that measured beginning, setting up Vivian on Earth briefly enough to rip her away from it, Vivian's plunge into an outer space world is a wild ride from the moment she lands on the Mirror-faith ship and meets Hong, one of the other main characters of the novel. From being under attack by robots, to freeing an extremely dangerous space pirate who has been locked up for a very

long time, Vivian goes down the rabbit hole fast. Her goals are straightforward at first--to find the Empress who has brought her to this time and space, and find a way to get back home. In entangling herself with Hong, and Zanj (the aforementioned very dangerous space pirate), Vivian's path, if not goals, go off course almost immediately. In that tangled new course, Vivian meets new allies, new enemies and in the end, finds out the truth of the Empire and why the Empress has brought her here in the first place.

For all of the technobabble that the novel has, from the start as we learn about Vivian's life on Earth in a couple of short set up characters, through the major facets of her universe, like the hyperspace Cloud, there is a definite science fantasy feel to all of the proceedings. Not only is it technology indistinguishable from magic (which the novel has in plenty) but there are whole portions of the novel that feel like they are even more closer to the fantasy section of the spectrum. Vivian and her friends, for example, landing on the ruined planet of Orn, find themselves in a post-apocalypse society and a problem that, as the author handwaves with Vivian's thoughts, straight out of *Beowulf*. Later in the novel, as the author cranks things up to 11, the science as magic really does feel more and more like magic. The science fantasy nature of the novel reaches its zenith.

And on that way, we get a space opera/space fantasy universe that is full of sights, sounds, impressions, set pieces and environments. Overall, I could see how *Empress of Forever* could and would play out on a screen--but as an animated feature, i think. This novel would bust the budget of any

studio with trying to do practical effects and CGI with human actors. (Think *Jupiter Ascending*, to a square or cube power). Between the environments, the cinematic writing at the end, the larger than life characters, and the sheer inventiveness that the author brings means that this novel really works well for visual readers. If you are the kind of reader who relishes in those details, sights, sounds and experiences in your head as you read, *Empress of Forever*, after that early portion on Earth is done and Vivian is on the Mirrorfaith ship, the novel is most definitely for you.

That said, however, the novel, like many of the author's novels, lives and grows on the strength of the cast. Taking the aforementioned Vivian, and Hong, and Zanj (space pirate for the win!), we have characters like Xiara, a preternaturally good space pilot and Gray, a graygoo creature, to fill out Vivian's found family/team. They squabble, they fight, they come together and all have interesting character arcs, developments and growth. In a sense, I think Vivian, even though she is our Earth viewpoint character who we can relate to the most, is not even quite the most interesting character in the book. Given Hong (who feels in a sense to be the author's most beloved character, since he gets to say a phrase that I've heard the author say himself in real life), Zanj (Space Pirate!) and Xiara (space pilot from a post apocalyptic world), the novel is rich with protagonists whose stories and personalities resonate. They are the heroes of their own stories.

And then there is the titular Empress herself. Most of the novel is experiencing and reacting to her from various points of view, various reactions,

impressions, and even legends and myths for what people think of her. This gives her a larger than life quality that reminds me of the hints we get about Thanos in the early *Avengers* movies, until he actually starts to take action himself. The Empress' goals, enemies and motivations are, to remain as non spoilery as possible, extremely grounded and well thought out. Even as Vivian and her friends oppose her and all of her works, what the Empress is really after, once it becomes clear, is logical and makes sense. She IS the hero of her own story, too.

The author keeps us mainly in Vivian's point of view, but we get sections with the other characters, giving us a very good understanding of who they are, what they are about, and why as a reader we should care enough to follow their stories. In the last portion of the novel, as all actions and moves go to a conclusion, the author tries a little more cinematic of a technique, cutting between points of view to show us different portions of a wide ranging conflict.

The major thing again to keep in mind about *Empress of Forever* and deciding if it is for you

really ties back into the expectations of the novel. This is not the hard space opera that you might be expecting or wanting. It side steps into more fantastical realms, putting it in more the mind of space opera-science fantasy. However, this does not always quite work. The novel goes sideways phantasmagorical at times with an over the top world that the author is trying to describe, and sometimes, the author does exceed his grasp in that regard. Early on in the novel, before things get truly and utterly weird, the novel is on point, beat perfect and flawless. As the novel progresses, and as we get a sense as to what really is going on, and the universe becomes more defined, the action and events, paradoxically become just a tad fuzzier than I'd like. It's minor, but it was noticeable for me.

That said, however, *Empress of Forever* is what you get if you decided to marry a traditional Space Opera narrative with *Flash Gordon*, *Journey to the West*, numerous Anime properties, *Farscape*, *Jupiter Ascending*, and most centrally, I think, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. When it works, *Empress of Forever* is one of the best novels I have ever read. When it slips from that exalted mark, it is

“merely” one of the very best books I've read this year.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10.

Bonuses: +1 for excellent and inventive world-building, a unique and interesting verse
+1 for an intriguing and varied set of main characters.

Penalties: -1 for not always hitting the science fantasy mark.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10 very high quality/stand-out in its category

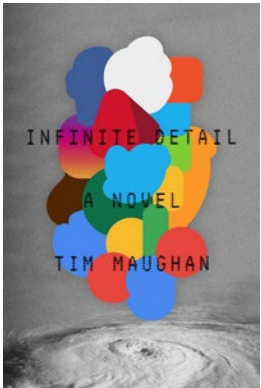
POSTED BY: Paul Weimer.

Ubiquitous in Shadow, but I'm just this guy, you know? @princejvstin.

Microreview [book]: Infinite Detail by Tim Maughan

The G

Gibson would be proud



What if all the digital technology that we increasingly rely on just... shut down? What if suddenly there was no Facebook, Google or Spotify? No working cellular towers, automated processes of access to the databases that are rapidly replacing libraries of all kinds?

We'd be screwed, right?

Now add twenty or so years of current trends to that tally, and imagine the level of screwed-ness we would experience if it all just went...blank.

This is the premise of Tim Maughan's debut novel, *Infinite Detail*, and it's as terrifying as it sounds. But not necessarily how you might think. Maughan recognizes the threat inherent to such a collapse - to states, social structures, health outcomes and so forth. And the future he imagines is bleak, populated by hardscrabble anarchist communes in the cities and forced collectivization in the hinterland - neither providing much in the way of life outcomes.

Maughan's ultimate targets, though, are the tech giants and increasingly militarized governments of today; *Infinite Detail* argues that our increasing dependence on them, as well as their interdependence on one another, is producing both dystopia and a "digital bubble," so to speak, which in turn primes us for a catastrophic collapse. *Infinite Detail*, in short, attempts to shine a light on our increasingly worrisome relationship to information technology - by extrapolating present conditions to their logical conclusion.

In doing so, it represents an important new contribution to an important tradition within science fiction, one most commonly associated with cyberpunk. But as much as *Infinite Detail* is a spiritual descendent and legatee of cyberpunk, it stands in rather sharp contrast to superficial aesthetic homages to Gibson, Sterling et al. that have proliferated over the past decade. The critique does feel a little too direct sometimes, but I honestly can't think of any near-future SF that does a better job of both grasping the deeper truths of *Neuromancer* and moving past them.

Infinite Detail takes place on two timelines: before the crash event and afterwards. Before chapters center on Rushdie Mannan, a digital anarchist of sorts who mistrusts the tech giants and so creates an intranet within the Croft area of Bristol so its residents can use an alternative. These chapters focus on Mannan's love interest in New York and are, to me, the weak point of the book. It's not that the story is bad, but it does feel a bit tacked on. There are some other Before passages, though, that really stuck to me - like one about a homeless

man in New York who can no longer collect cans for recycling reimbursement because the city has transitioned to a fully automated smart system (which locks the homeless out of a crucial means of subsistence).

After chapters center on a few characters in and around the Croft. Mary is a teenager who has visions of those who died just after the collapse; Grids runs the black market; Tyrone, who seeks out records of dubstep and drum n' bass amid the detritus of collapsed Britain; and Anika, a militant dedicated to insurgency against the Land Army - the dominant force in the countryside, and one responsible for a rather hideous campaign of forced collectivization. I liked these a lot more - they are as absorbing as they are disquieting.

Overall, *Infinite Detail* is top-notch near-future SF. I'm often frustrated at how little SF really grapples with the implications of our present. This is why I've always been so drawn to cyberpunk. *Infinite Detail* is not cyberpunk, but to me it couples the core themes of cyberpunk with a gaze that is thoroughly and unmistakably that of 2019. Highly recommended.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: +1 for this is really smart, forward-thinking stuff; +1 for channeling the spirit of cyberpunk rather than retro aesthetics.

Penalties: -1 for it feels a little too on-the-nose at times; -1 for the Before chapters sometimes feeling tacked on.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10. "Very high quality/standout in its category."

POSTED BY: The G -- purveyor of nerdliness, genre fanatic and Nerds of a Feather founder/administrator, since 2012.

Microreview [Book]: The Outcast Hours edited by Mahvesh Murad & Jared Shurin Spacefaring Kitten



There's a fine line between an anthology not really holding together and being intriguingly diverse. Every reader of *The Outcast Hours* by Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin probably has their own opinion on which side the book ultimately falls for them.

It is very diverse: there are stories about a tooth-fairy, feuding apothecaries, a babysitter for criminals' children, a babysitter for homeless dogs. Sam Beckbessinger, Lauren Beukes and Dale Halvorsen's opening story is one of the best pieces of socially relevant occult gore short fiction I've ever read – I confess I didn't know there's such a niche before picking the book up.

Night is a great theme for a short story anthology. It is mysterious, atmospheric, intriguing, fleeting and uncertain – as all enjoyable art and fiction – so there's plenty of room to play with and not too many restrictions on where you can go. My main criticism of the anthology is that quite many of the stories leave these possibilities on the table and focus on night just being synonymous with

darkness.

I mean, in some stories, night is not a mysterious landscape for whatever you can dream up. Instead, it's a place of nightmares. On the other hand, that's probably entertaining for readers who enjoy whispering to their protagonists that going down to the basement with an enigmatic, sargophagus-collecting millionaire in Karachi or to the home of a bit-too-eager Tinder date in New York City is arguably not the best thing to do if you're in this kind of a book. Nevermind the continent, your chances of living long and happy are going to take a dive.

However, this whispering business is not what I'm into when it comes to horror. I appreciate horrific stories that do a little more to make me afraid than relying solely on a spooky twist-ending, as demonstrated by Beckbessinger, Beukes and Halvorsen's great opening for the book. I fear that even that would have lost some of its power if the editors had decided to place it deeper in the anthology after some other horrors had numbed my senses first.

The best part of reading anthologies like this is of course discovering interesting new authors you had never heard of before. For me, the most promising new acquaintance is maybe Matt Suddain whose tale about two chemists in a weird fantasy (or maybe not) town that is too small for both of them is quirky, weird and suggestive with perfect dosages of each. Suddain delivers his simple story just right, which isn't that easy to do.

In the short space that each story is given, some

tales feel that they would have what it takes for being longer, whereas some others seem a bit forced at this length. Couple of the stories would probably have worked better in the same form as China Miéville's ambient one-or-two-page microstories or vignettes sprinkled through the book, as not very much is always happening.

Because the stories are so short, there's a lot of them – 25 in total, not counting Miéville's nine short-shorts. There's something to like and dislike for everyone, and the best way to experience *The Outcast Hours* is perhaps not to accelerate through it (it's a rapid series of accelerations and sudden stops) but rather to read one or two before before going to sleep – or at any rate before the night comes.

Good night and good luck!

The Math

Base Score: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 for variance and diversity

Penalties: -1 for the cheap scares, -1 for doing too many things at once

Nerd Coefficient: 7/10 – “An enjoyable experience, but not without its flaws”

POSTED BY: Spacefaring Kitten, an extradimensional enthusiast of speculative fiction, comics, and general weirdness. Contributor since 2018.

Microreview [book]: The Deep, by Rivers Solomon

Joe Sherry

The Deep is a novella filled with pain and despair and rage and a glimmer of hope. It is built off of real history and pulled in unimaginable directions. The Deep is a must read novella in a year full of must read books.



*“Remember,” she said.
This was their story.
This was where they
began. Drowning.
“Submit,” Yetu
whispered, talking to
herself as much as to
them.*

The Deep is a story borne out of the legacy of slavery, of the horrifying reality of slavers crossing the Atlantic Ocean and dumping the bodies of pregnant women overboard. It is a story borne out of wondering about what life might grow out of that death. *The Deep* is a story of origins and new beginnings, of the horror of institutional memory and what it costs the individual.

Rivers Solomon takes the song “The Deep” from Clipping and gives it further life and character, gives it a different perspective and richness that the song hinted at but that Solomon had the

room to explore across 176 pages that wasn’t possible in the same way Clipping could do in five and a half minutes. Clipping’s song “The Deep” was a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation Short Form in 2018.

*“We grow anxious and restless without you,
my child. One can only go for so long without
asking, who am I? Where do I come from?
What does this all mean? What is being? What
came before me, and what might come after?
Without answers, there is only a hole, a hole
where a history should be that takes the shape
of an endless longing. We are cavities.”*

As the sole historian for the wajinru, it is Yetu’s role and responsibility to remember the history of their race. Except for the historian, the wajinru functionally do not have long term memory or a sense of identity. With that lack of memory for the individual, the annual Remembrance gives life to the group because without it they would continue to forget who they are and where they came from. That sounds superficial, but Rivers Solomon and Clipping are not concerned with the surface. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the novella’s title (and the song’s) is more than just the depth where the wajinru exist.

The wajinru’s gradual forgetting of their cultural past causes great pain and desperation and it’s tied to a loss of individual identity as well. It is the “endless longing” quoted above. It’s more than symbolic. Born from the bodies of the pregnant women thrown into the ocean by slavers, the wajinru are something new and the creation of the wajinru is so awful, so painful, that over the

course of generations they adapt so that only one must bear the weight of history. The rest are blessed and cursed to forget. Both are with heavy cost.

I have never read anything like *The Deep*.

Solomon’s writing is incredible. With only a few sentences I felt the water, the pressure of the deep, the movement of current and body. The water almost became a character and, not to mix metaphors too much, grounded the story into a particular location that the reader can sense.

The Deep is a novella filled with pain and despair and rage and a glimmer of hope. It is built off of real history and pulled in unimaginable directions, except that it was imagined and we’re all better off because Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, Jonathan Snipes, and Rivers Solomon saw the possibilities of building something beautiful out of raw horror.

*“What is belonging?” we ask
She says, “Where loneliness ends”*

The Deep is a must-read novella in a year stuffed full of must read books. This is essential reading.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: +1 Despite the horror of history, *The Deep* recognizes the beauty and magnificence still present in the world.

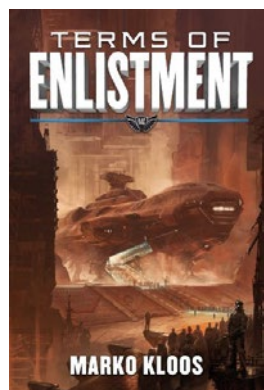
Penalties: -1 Much of the story is Yetu's reluctance to subject herself to the performative memory, but if anything, The Deep may be a touch slow in moving Yetu to the Remembrance.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10, "very high quality/standout in its category" See more about our scoring system [here](#).

Microreview [book]: *Terms of Enlistment* by Marko Kloos

The G

Solid as a Rock...



Terms of Enlistment is the debut novel from German SF writer Marko Kloos. It was originally self-published, then picked up by Amazon's 47 North imprint. Since publication in 2013, Kloos has essentially written a sequel per year. The series is highly regarded by fans of milSF.

I first became aware of *Terms of Enlistment* in 2015, when its sequel, *Lines of Departure*, was (a) included in the sad/rabid puppies Hugo slate and (b) subsequently withdrawn from consideration by Kloos because he's not a culture warrior. This piqued my interest, so I made note to read the series. Four years later I have finally done so, and am happy I did. *Terms of Enlistment* is a well-made milSF novel that is sure to appeal to fans of the style - and would also serve as a good introduction for new readers.

Terms of Enlistment tells the story of Andrew Grayson, a self-described "welfare rat" who enlists in the North American Commonwealth (NAC) military to get out Boston - which, in the year

2108, is essentially one giant housing project. After basic training, he is assigned to the Territorial Army, tasked with keeping the peace in the welfare cities of the NAC. This is a setback for Grayson, who yearns to leave Earth and patrol the outer colonies, where the NAC and rival Sino-Russian Alliance (SRA) tussle over terraformed colony planets.

After a peacekeeping mission in the Detroit welfare city goes horribly wrong, Grayson is transferred to the Versailles - an aging starship tasked with ferrying supplies to the NAC's far-flung colonies. Not long after they arrive, however, the crew of the Versailles makes a horrifying discovery - humans are not alone in the universe, and our neighbors are not exactly looking to make friends...

...

If this sounds familiar, it's probably because it is. *Terms of Enlistment* evokes the classics of the genre - and both *Starship Troopers* and *Old Man's War* specifically. It is neither as grandiose as the former nor as subversive as the latter. But Kloos is a veteran, and there are little details throughout the book that add an authenticity to Grayson's experience that make it stand out in a crowded field.

World-building is solid throughout. The NAC is basically the United Space of America, but this makes far more sense in the context of a divided Earth than it does when Earth is united. Kloos also does a good job portraying alien lifeforms. They feel suitably, well, alien.

And overall, *Terms of Enlistment* is a well-paced and fun adventure story. There is enough action to keep the reader engaged throughout, and mercifully little of the battle fetishism or tedious he-man posturing that mar the Baen-esque version of the style. Meanwhile, Grayson is a likable protagonist, though I would have liked more in the way of character development. Presumably that comes later in the series, but *Terms of Enlistment* would have benefitted from a deeper look inside his head.

Kloos' writing is clean and efficient - the kind of prose that fades into the background until you barely notice it anymore. Basically, it's "TV ready" fiction. More than once, I found myself thinking how well *Terms of Enlistment* would work on that medium. On balance that's pretty good - and way above average for milSF, which is not exactly the most literary of SF subgenres.

That said, there is too much infodumping for my tastes. The individual infodumps are relatively painless on their own but are made worse by the fact that the narrative is written in first person. If *Terms of Enlistment* were written in past tense, then I could imagine the narrative as a memoir written with future audiences in mind, but it's not. Instead, we have access to Grayson's innermost thoughts and he...explains basic politics as if addressing a tourist from another place and time.

The best SF writing, in my opinion, immerses you in perspective. It presents time and place as lived reality, exotic though it may be. It assumes that readers are smart enough to follow along, and to figure out by observing - to learn, for

example, that thermobaric grenades are dangerous just by seeing them explode. By addressing the reader directly, infodumping breaks the fourth wall and shatters the suspension of disbelief. Its presence did not ruin my enjoyment of *Terms of Enlistment*, but as far as I'm concerned, the book doesn't need it and would have been better without it.

...

It is easy to see why the puppies liked this novel, and why they misdiagnosed Kloos as friendly to their cause. Recall that the puppies claimed that recent Hugo nominees were too literary and overly focused on political messaging (while also charging that progressives manipulated the nominations process to promote these works and freeze out conservative-leaning ones).

Terms of Enlistment thus seems to embody their ideal of what a Hugo-worthy book should look like. It is unabashedly genre fiction - well crafted, to be sure, but with no literary pretensions or political ambitions. And it certainly emphasizes story over message. Furthermore, while it not conservative "message fiction," there is a certain normativity to the book, and to milSF more broadly, that could easily be reconciled with a conservative worldview. For example, while the NAC's welfare cities could be interpreted as a critique of war capitalism, they could also be interpreted as a critique of central planning and reliance on government handouts. The ambiguity seems intentional to me, but readers will likely read their biases into the text.

Political ambiguity can be a good thing. In his *Culture* series, Iain M. Banks presents us with a utopia, but then explores the Culture's imperialist tendencies. We are thereby invited to sympathize with the Culture but also to feel uncomfortable as it meddles in the affairs of neighboring societies - typically without gaining consent.

Terms of Enlistment, by contrast, seems like it's trying to avoid having a political conversation altogether. For example, early on in the book, Grayson's brigade is called on to quell a riot in the Detroit welfare city. When they get there, they find mysteriously well-armed and organized adversaries shooting at them from apartment buildings. In response, Grayson commits what is in essence a war crime - firing a thermobaric grenade into a building full of civilians.

This would be a fascinating moment to explore - not because I think soldiers should be conflicted about taking civilians lives (though I do), but because I've read enough war memoirs and spoken to enough veterans to know that they often are. But Grayson doesn't really dwell on what he did. Instead, we are told that it's okay because he was being shot at, and because he loaded the thermobaric grenade accidentally. Later, we are encouraged to sympathize with Grayson and despise the "pencil pusher" who wants him to take the fall for the civilian deaths.

Look, it's not that I think individual soldiers bear the primary responsibility for crimes of war. Sometimes they do, but more often they do not - command responsibility is a well-established principle in international law and the rules of

engagement that most nation-states adhere to. So ultimate responsibility does lie with policymakers. And the pencil pusher is no idealist - he's just covering the NAC's collective ass. But Grayson's shrug emoji reaction strikes me as a missed opportunity to both explore his mindset and raise some interesting moral questions.

(There is another example of this later in the book, but I won't mention it here because spoilers.)

All that said, I don't want to overemphasize the things I took issue with. On balance, I really enjoyed *Terms of Enlistment*. It's a fast-paced, fun and well crafted book that kept me glued to the page and got me excited to start on the sequels. It is undoubtedly a good book - just one that falls short of greatness.

The Math

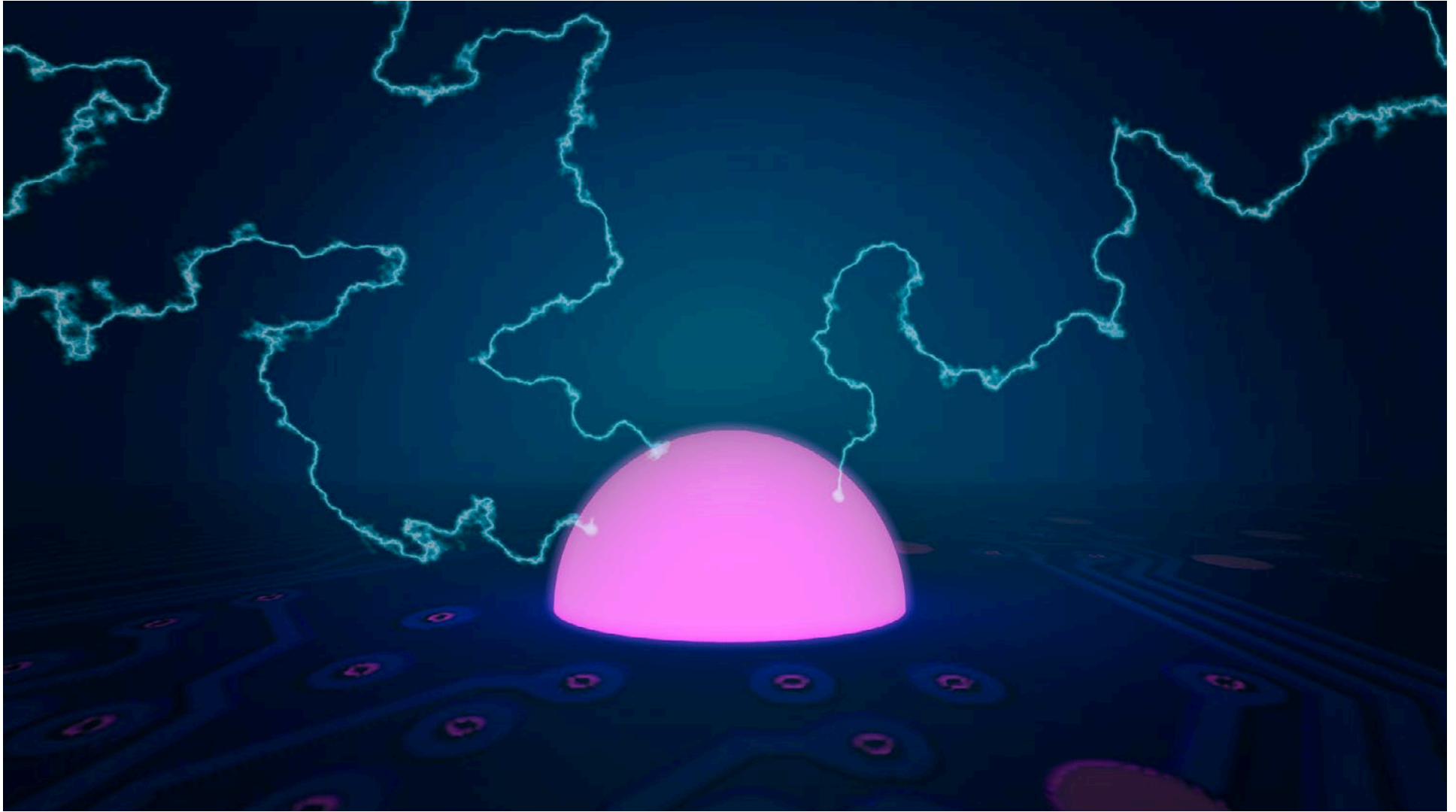
Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 for fast pace milSF fun; +1 for authenticity in the details of a soldier's narrative.

Penalties: -1 for infodumping in present tense; -1 for avoiding the tough questions it raises.

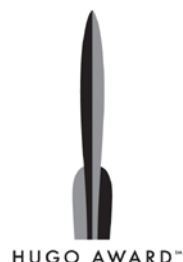
Nerd Coefficient: 7/10. "A mostly enjoyable experience."

The Hugo Initiative



The Initiative (an excerpt)

Joe Sherry & Adri Joy



Science Fiction and Fantasy fandom has often been accused taking the contradictory positions of both spending too much time focusing on only the newest and most exciting works coming out

today while being unwilling to look away from the grand masters of yesteryear.

We'd like to follow our love of the Hugo Awards to a middle ground of looking across the decades of Hugo Award winners, with a particular but not exclusive focus on Best Novel. We may discuss works from those Grand Masters, but we will also look at less discussed novels and less discussed authors. We are going to look at the history of the Hugo Award mostly through a cross section of winning novels across the decades, from the earliest Hugo winners in the 1950's all the way into the 2000's.

The Hugo Initiative will be a mix a dossier reviews, roundtable conversations, and retrospective essays. We will examine some of the most significant classics of the genre and consider if they hold up. We will rediscover works that have seemingly been forgotten and discuss whether those novels should be remembered.

The Dossier Reviews for The Hugo Initiative will have the following subheadings to focus our commentary:

File Type: The Hugo Award Category of the work

Executive Summary: Plot summary

Legacy: What is the influence and importance of the work in question?

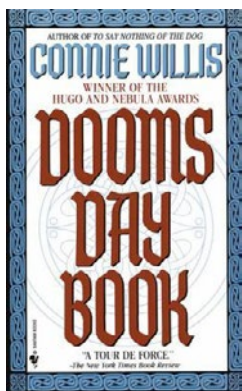
In Retrospect: An editorial commentary on how good / not good the work is from the vantage point of 2019.

Through the dossier reviews and essays, we look to engage with the history of the Hugo Awards and contrast their importance of some of the winners when they were first published (as best we can figure out) to how they read from the perspective of 2019. It'll be fun. Essays will run weekly on Mondays.

Welcome to The Hugo Initiative.

The Hugo Initiative: Doomsday Book (1993, Best Novel)

Joe Sherry



Dossier: Willis, Connie.
Doomsday Book [Bantam
Spectra, 1992]

Filetype: Novel

Executive Summary:
Doomsday Book is a near
future speculative fiction
novel in which time travel
enables historians to go

back and study the past from the field, experiencing those times directly. There are rules, because of course there are rules to time travel and these rules are such that time travel itself prevents paradox. So going back to kill Hitler or doing anything that might be considered “significant” to history.

A woman named Kivrin travels back to 14th Century England for research and experiences life on the ground there, which becomes increasingly fraught with risk and a concern that she might not have been sent back to exactly when she (and the other historians) thought.

The other primary storyline is during the “present day” of *Doomsday Book* where following Kivrin’s time travel, an epidemic of a mysterious virus ravages Oxford as Professor Dunworthy (Kivrin’s

advisor) and Doctor Mary Ahrens (Dunworthy’s friend) race to find the origins of the disease and get Kivrin back from the 14th Century, where she is now trapped.

Legacy: *Doomsday Book* is the winner of the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, and the Locus Award for Best SF Novel. It was also on the shortlist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the British Science Fiction Association Award. It also shares in the larger legacy of the loose *Oxford Time Travel* series, of which every work has won the Hugo Award, including the 1982 novelette *Fire Watch*, the 1998 novel *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, and the 2010 novels *Blackout* and *All Clear* (which were somewhat strangely combined for Hugo Award voting as a single work).

Doomsday Book tied for the 1993 Best Novel Hugo Award with Vernor Vinge’s *A Fire Upon the Deep*, a novel which would also spawn a Hugo Award winning sequel (*A Deepness Upon the Sky*) and a third novel which, unlike with Connie Willis, was not a Hugo Award winner or finalist (*The Children of the Sky*).

Thinking about the Hugo Award pedigree of *Doomsday Book* makes me wonder what other speculative series has won a Hugo for every entry. A number of series have been awarded a Hugo for multiple volumes in the same series (the above mentioned Vinge, Orson Scott Card’s first two *Ender’s Game* novels, the second and third volumes in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, three of Lois McMaster Bujold’s long running *Vorkosigan* novels have won the Hugo), but the most recent and notable example is N.K.

Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy, for which all three novels won the Hugo Award and did so in three consecutive years. Connie Willis has done it with all four entries of *Oxford Time Travel* and that’s a significant accomplishment and a significant legacy to have. While *Fire Watch* came first, it was *Doomsday Book* that cemented that legacy as the first novel in the series to win the Hugo Award.

Doomsday Book occupies a peculiar space in science fiction and fantasy history. It won the Hugo and Nebula almost thirty years ago, but few novels from that era are discussed as all time greats barring, perhaps *Hyperion* from three years prior - but the personality and politics of Dan Simmons the man is harming some of the reputation of Dan Simmons the writer, which is a different point altogether. The *Vorkosigan* novels from Bujold have perhaps aged the best, but *Doomsday Book* may still be one of the most significant novels to have been published in its time (granting Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*). *Doomsday Book* was a major novel from a major writer at the height of her powers. If it is not discussed nearly enough these days, it is because most novels of that generation are not discussed nearly enough. There remains the genre propensity to consider the “masters” of seventy years ago and the newest of the new, while letting slide those masters of twenty, thirty, and forty years ago unless they manage to still be in fashion today.

In Retrospect: One thing that I very much appreciate in *Doomsday Book* is that all of the training in Middle English pronunciation that Kivrin received and the technological aid that she has is rendered useless because we really have

no idea how the everyday language of the time was actually pronounced. Like any good English Major, I had a class focused on Chaucer and had to learn the same “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote” referenced in the novel. The class was taught with authority for the pronunciation, but I did (and do) wonder how close that pronunciation may have been. According to Connie Willis, it may not have been very close at all.

It's both easy and impossible to play the game “if this was published today” and try to figure out if *Doomsday Book* would win the Hugo Award now. Willis most recently won a Hugo Award in 2011 for both *Blackout* and *All Clear*, which isn't so long ago. I think it's possible and reasonable, depending on the year. Nothing was going to beat N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* novels, but Connie Willis is very popular with the voting members of Worldcon (having been a 24 time finalist for her fiction, with 11 wins) and I suspect many of the same readers who loved Mary Robinette Kowal's *The Calculating Stars* would still be inclined to vote for *Doomsday Book* if faced with it on a

Hugo ballot.

That is a long way to say that *Doomsday Book* holds up very well indeed. *Doomsday Book* does have the feel of a novel from another generation, which only makes sense given that the novel was published more than twenty five years ago. I won't go so far as to say *Doomsday Book* is at all comfortable reading, because there is nothing comfortable whatsoever occurring in the novel, but the prose of Connie Willis is so seemingly effortless and smooth that she eases the reader and and before we know it we're hip deep in plague and loving every page of it.

Doomsday Book is a slower burn than many of today's science fiction and fantasy novels. The novel is an inevitable march towards bleakness, but Connie Willis takes her time with small events building and building to this looming dread we know is coming and we can't look away from. At least, Willis takes her time until the end, at which point she wraps things up fairly quickly and neatly.

The thing about *Doomsday Book* is that it works. It is a masterful piece of storytelling that perhaps shouldn't work as well as it does almost three decades later. It's good enough that I want to read *Fire Watch* and the other three *Oxford Time Travel* novels sooner rather than later (though perhaps not specifically for The Hugo Initiative). The novel is a softer form of science fiction that uses time travel in a way that makes sense. No paradoxes, there is risk, and maybe don't visit a time and place with bubonic plague. And really, who doesn't want to read a novel where the protagonist is surrounded by bubonic plague and renders as much aid as she can?

Analytics

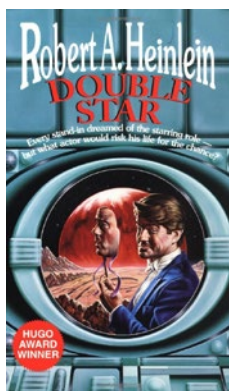
For its time: 5/5

Read today: 4/5.

Gernsback Quotient: 9/10

The Hugo Initiative: Double Star (1956, Best Novel)

Adri Joy



Dossier: Heinlein, Robert A. Double Star [Double-day, 1956]

Filetype: Novel

Executive Summary: Lorenzo Smythe is a washed up actor drowning his sorrows at a bar on earth, when he is ap-

proached by a group of spacemen with a mysterious proposition: can he commit to a mysterious impersonation, on Mars, for a handsome reward? Lorenzo says yes, and not even an immediate attack by a group of Martians in the bar makes him change his mind from the course that he's on. It's only when he discovers that the impersonation is of the leader of the Expansionist Party, Bonforte, who has been mysteriously kidnapped, that it starts to dawn on him that he might have committed himself to something that's going to take a bit more than confident monologuing about greasepaint to pull off - but Lorenzo is a Hero with an ego, and once he's in, he's in for the long haul. Getting acquainted with the small group of co-conspirators (including one woman, Penny, whose high-powered professionalism is regularly compromised by her romantic feelings towards her current boss which then makes it impossible

not to also start fancying Lorenzo's impersonation)

The world Lorenzo inhabits is one where humans have spread out to the various planets in the solar system, and have encountered alien life on many, but where Earth remains the sole centre of political power and aliens are variously disenfranchised and marginalised, subject to human expansion and colonisation of their homes. Lorenzo himself has a specific, irrational hatred of Martians which the plot deploys some weird hypnosis pseudo-science to solve; Bonforte's more progressive party has been working to expand rights to aliens, particularly the Martians, and they stand in opposition to the more human-centric party currently in power.

As Lorenzo continues with his mostly successful impersonation, the real Bonforte is found in extremely poor health, having been deliberately administered with a drug overdose by his kidnappers (who the gang are relatively sure are some of his political rivals). This prolongs his tenure as an impersonator through the election campaign, and as he continues to become more and more comfortable in the role, Lorenzo starts taking on more of the decisionmaking about how Bonforte "should" behave, almost invariably with successful, convincing results. Explorations of an interplanetary constitutional-monarchy-with-parliamentary-democracy ensue, complete with a significant political falling-out with the speechwriter and some close encounters with the Dutch Monarchy which apparently is now earth's entire government, and it's up to Lorenzo to protect his ruse, bring the process to a close and work out

what on earth he's going to do with his life after Bonforte returns.

Legacy: Ah, Heinlein. The author of whom I have heard it said most often, by people of my generation, that "maybe I should read him because he's historically important but... I don't want to?" Beloved by many who grew up with his books, Heinlein's decades-long career spanning both adult and "juvenile" (what we would now likely call YA) works makes his legacy in mid-20th century SF and the subsequent development of the genre near impossible to summarise. For a 21st century reader, however, the well-documented lack of three-dimensional female characters and the inevitable dating of plots and technology in his fairly extensive work means that Heinlein is inevitably less relevant to current genre conversations, and I've never read anything that genuinely engage with the question of where in his works to start for those embedded in the modern traditions. What I did have was a resolution to read some Heinlein for this project, and a memory of Rachel, from the Booktube channel Kalanadi, mentioning *Double Star* as a recommended read in her wrap-up of the Hugo and Nebula Award winners a couple of years ago.

Double Star is the first of Heinlein's four (non-retro - not that I would know if there's any retro ones) novel wins, and it's probably the least well known. The ballot for that year was rediscovered in 2017, and included Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*, Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity*, and novels from previously-unknown-to-me authors C.M. Kornbluth and Eric Frank Russell (who are both likely to remain unknown to me). It seems

to have resurfaced in the public consciousness in the 2000s when a cover of the book was plagiarised by a Turner Prize nominee in one of their artworks, but otherwise it doesn't make the regular rounds of people's favourite Heinleins (Rachel's video is the only mention I've seen); nor has it more generally permeated the genre consciousness in the way of, say, *Starship Troopers*. Alas, it has also not given rise to a more general genre convention of making "constitutional monarchy run by the Dutch" into the dominant governing structure of Earth.

In Retrospect: So, how did I find *Double Star* as my first experience reading Heinlein? For the most part, this is a highly readable, entertaining adventure, which works through the various episodes of Lorenzo's impersonation in a lighthearted style which nevertheless maintains the pressure on Lorenzo keeping up the impersonation, despite relatively loosely sketched consequences for the Expansionist party's failure. The fact that the premise of disguise is carried out entirely in the form of makeup and the studying of mannerisms, rather than having any science fictional technology to shoulder that part of the narrative, certainly spins *Double Star* in a very different direction to how I'd imagine a story of impersonation and identity to be taken today, but its sort of charming despite being the most dated aspect of the story.

What I found fascinating about Lorenzo is the extent to which he resembles the protagonist of a particular kind of modern YA novel, both in terms of his inner life and in the way the narrative treats him. From early scenes where he casually

goes off on a description about his own attractiveness for the benefit of the audience, to the relatively passive and almost accidental way in which he exercises his ability to take on the role of Bonforte (not to mention the presence of an abusive parental figure with whom he has a complicated personal and professional relationship), the only difference between Lorenzo and a modern YA fantasy ingenue seems to be the extent of his ego - there's no modesty here, although the talents he values and the talents other people value in him are clearly quite different. Moreover, Heinlein has no compunction of allowing Lorenzo be tactically ignorant and free of personal connections whenever the narrative requires him to be, generally for the benefit of delivering exposition. The result is a character who is simultaneously the kind of really unpleasant dude you'd go out of your way to avoid at a party, and a surprisingly enjoyable narrative voice. Whether this was the authorial intent, or we are supposed to have a straight reading of Lorenzo's self-belief, is unclear, but the result was entertaining all the same. Likewise, the supporting cast are relatively thin but all quite entertaining in their own ways - particularly Bonforte's beleaguered speech writer. The unfortunate but unsurprising exception is Penny, the novel's sole female character, who is characterised entirely in terms of her relationship and feelings about the dudes around her.

The other big surprise here is that the science fictional narrative hinges very much on questions not of "hard" science, but of the social sciences, and specifically questions about politics and enfranchisement and political reform and the role of leadership in political movements. *Double Star*

posits a world where a two-party parliamentary system has been transposed into the solar system, but where the mechanisms of that system operate on a pendulum of slow reform followed by backlash, against a backdrop of voters who are more or (in many cases, including Lorenzo) less interested in their workings. There's nothing here that's desperately new, but the fact is that with the exception of a relatively swift "hypnosis therapy" scene at the start of the book, and the presence of interstellar travel, this is quite definitely a book about those soft squishy non-sciences: how sentient beings organise themselves and the cultural implications behind those things.

Double Star isn't a particularly chewy book; its almost cosy conception of global constitutional monarchy feels so safe that I'm not sure if it ever would have been, and more recent fiction is likely to give a reader much more to think about when it comes to what makes up our identities and what it takes to change, either as a person or as a political entity. What *Double Star* is, over 60 years after its publication, is pretty good fun. If you want to try a Heinlein, this might not be the one that shows you what all the fuss is about, but it'll probably keep you entertained - if you can stomach the terrible female characterisation, at least.

Analytics

For its time: 3.5/5

Read today: 3.5/5.

Gernsback Quotient: 7/10

The Hugo Initiative: Girl Genius (2009, Best Graphic Story)

Mikey N



Dossier: Foglio, Kaja and Phil. Girl Genius and the Chapel of Bones (Volume 8) [Airship Entertainment, 2009]

Filetype: Graphic Story

Executive Summary: Agatha Heterodyne is the protagonist in this series

and up to this point has been portrayed largely as a bit of a klutz. There is a mystery surrounding her birth and many believe she is a holy child as the Heterodyne line was thought to have died off. We open this chapter with her hiding her true identity as she is trapped inside of Castle Heterodyne with others.

Meanwhile, on the outside of the castle, Gilgamesh Wulfenbach partners with the Jagers as

his father battles injuries and the threat of The Other. Gil is clearly dealing with issues associated with his status and living in the shadow of his father.

The idea of the living mechanical castle leads to some interesting drama within the castle walls as Agatha, via a blood test, is able to demonstrate she is the proper heir and gain control over the castle's expansive weapons system. She needs to repair it in order to restore all functionality and that is no easy task.

Gil returns in a triumphant moment at the end claiming he intends to aid the true Heterodyne heir after surviving a barrage of attacks from the castle's air defense system.

Legacy: *Girl Genius* is a true independently created comic from husband and wife Kaja and Phil Foglio. It was originally published as a free online comic and it built up enough of a fan base to win three Hugo Awards and multiple successful Kickstarters.

This series began in 2002 and was ahead of its time in its representation of women in the comic book industry. Filled with witty quips, heavy ste-

ampunk vibes, and fantasy-esque action sequences, it is not shocking that a series with this rabid of a fan base has had such a successful run.

In Retrospect: While the themes and story-telling remain relevant today, the art feels dated and I am surprised that it managed to beat both *Fables: War and Pieces* and *Y: The Last Man*, Volume 10 to claim the first graphic story Hugo award.

Analytics

For its time: 4/5.

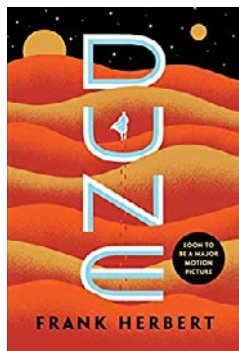
Read today: 4/5.

Gernsback Quotient: 8/10.

POSTED BY MIKE N. aka Victor Domashev -- comic guy, proudly raising nerdy kids, and Nerds of a Feather contributor since 2012.

The Hugo Initiative: *Dune* (1966, Best Novel)

Paul Weimer



Dossier: Herbert, Frank.
Dune [Chilton, 1965]

Filetype: Novel

Executive Summary: *Dune* is the story of Paul Atreides. Heir to the one of the most powerful noble Houses of an Galactic Imperium tens of

thousands of years in the future, *Dune* tells of his story of his family's fall, and his rise again among the Fremen natives of the planet Arrakis, the titular Dune. Along that journey, we learn of the long running genetic breeding program that has gone somewhat wrong to produce him early as the kwisatz haderach, a man with prodigious powers of prescience and mental power. *Dune* follows Paul as he learns to harness his superior abilities to avenge his family's fall, and topple the Emperor who ultimately orchestrated it all.

Legacy: Until the advent of *Star Wars*, I think I can reasonably argue that the most influential work of space opera in science fiction was *Dune*. Although *Star Wars* quickly took pride of place in that regard, *Dune* has been a novel that has influenced astronomy (a crater on the moon, and features on the Saturnian moon of Titan are named in honor of *Dune* and its locations),

music, video games, and a raft of science fiction. The novel is the first science fiction novel to really grapple with the problems and issues of the ecology and ecosystems of an entire planet in a deep dive sort of way (the novel's origin lies with Herbert researching a never completed nonfiction article on the Oregon Dunes). *Dune* is the origin star, ultimately, of writers who go heavily into the worldbuilding side of SFF.

I do find it interesting that the literary style of the novel is far less influential and employed today. The third person omniscient style of the novel, which sometimes switches protagonists within the same paragraph, much less the same page, is a style that has not been imitated much since. It's really difficult to pull off well. When it is done badly, it gets derided, for quality as well as stylistic distaste reasons, as "head hopping". But the third person omniscient style allows Herbert to present a variety of characters with well rounded personalities and more importantly agendas that make the novel complex, dense and endlessly fascinating. Novels, in general, especially with a single point of view, do have an artificiality to them, since we sit just in one person's point of view all the time. That's how we see the real world, but that's not how the world actually is. By having a third person omniscient endlessly shifting set of points of view, complete with long strings of mental thoughts, one really gets to know the characters, their plots, plans, and their world in a way that is very difficult to replicate, or to capture in other media. Listening to the audiobook, as I did recently, requires a careful ear to pick up changes in perspective.

Although out of the purview of this essay, it must be noted that Herbert ultimately wrote a slew of sequels to the novel, extending the history of the Atreides family and those around them for thousands of years into the future that Paul saw there in the sands, and the attempts to break that future. In addition, the son of Frank Herbert, Brian Herbert, together with Kevin J Anderson has continued that tradition with a large number of novels set in the same universe.

In Retrospect: *Dune* was and still is one of my heart novels. I discovered the novel right in my teen years, and fell hard for a story of "another misunderstood Paul" who was the son of a Noble House, but even so, unbeknownst to him, was the most special person in the entire universe and destined to become Emperor of Everything. This is heady stuff for a teenager to absorb, its catnip to a certain class and stratum of SF reader that I was a member of. And so I fell for the book, hard, and read and re-read *Dune* over the years, and discovered and consumed the 2.n adaptations of the novel.

The novel still holds power for me. Several years ago, a brand new gorgeous Folio Society edition of *Dune* was an auction item for a local con. I *had* to make it mine, and I did.

But 2019 is thirty years and change removed from my first contact with the novel. There is a lot to unpack to look at *Dune*, from the perspective of 2019. A lot of the major structure of the novel and its plot looks very different in 2019 than it did in 1965, and some of the novel has aged very badly as a result.

Let's take the premise. Paul Atreides winds up, with his mother, taking refuge among the Fremen natives of the planet Arrakis, and grows to lead them, and to lead them as an army against the Harkonnens and ultimately the Emperor as well. If one wanted the quintessential example of the white savior trope in science fiction, it would be difficult to do better than *Dune* as an example. In a time where Science fiction is recognizing and celebrating own voices, *Dune* feels much more like a missed opportunity. With such a wonderful culture as the Fremen, why, precisely, do they need Paul? If I were, in the mode of the movie *Yesterday*, were to submit *Dune* as a novel today in a world where it did not previously exist, I'd make Paul, or his equivalent, a native of Arrakis.

Then there is the gender and sexual politics of the novel. The place of women in the novel does feel very 1960's in tone and style. Sure, people like Jessica and the rest of the Bene Gesserit have power, and schemes, and long range plans. But the unrelenting patriarchal nature of the Empire also strikes a very discordant and sour note in this time and age. The narrator of the novel is reduced

to being a prize to be won without any real agency of her own within its bounds. Science fiction can, and has, done better, since.

And then there is the Baron. The Baron, now, is probably my favorite character in the novel. When I was young, I identified as Paul, because Herbert very deliberately wrote *Dune* that way to have teenage readers identify with his main character. It's part of the power of the novel, even today. But as I have aged, I have come to appreciate the manipulateness, the daring, the scheming and the power of the Baron. The idea that a novel, movie or other work really rests on the strength of the villain is true in *Dune* as well, as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen has plans and designs and personality in plenty. The issue with him, today, is that in depicting his evil and venality, his non heteronormative sexual preferences are presented as prima facie evidence that he is evil. This sexual deviance = evil person equation simply is offensive in this day and age. I am ashamed I didn't see that, back in the day, but I can't mistake it in the novel now. There is plenty to show the Baron's nature without the editorial commentary and shading of the novel that so tightly ties that

evil to his sexual preference. The novel simply doesn't need it and it is hurtful to non heteronormative readers.

Given all of its problems and issues in the modern age, though, there is an undeniably power of the monomyth that makes *Dune* one of the most powerful SF novels, then, or now. The extremely complex narrative, style and worldbuilding is probably the only reason why the novel has had so few adaptations on the screen. I am delighted to see news of a new one, but I do wonder how the director and producers will ensure that the issues mentioned above are dealt with so that a movie of *Dune* in this day and age can offer something for everyone.

Analytics

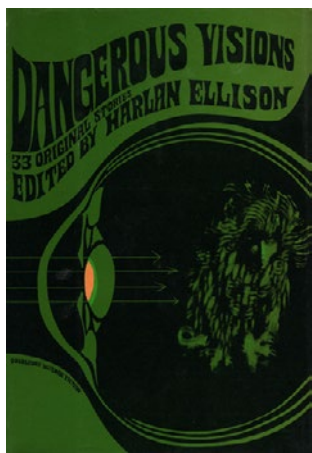
For its time: 5/5

Read today: 4/5

Gernsback Quotient: 9/10

The Hugo Initiative: Blogtable (1968, Best Short Story)

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry, Paul Weimer



The widest focus of The Hugo Initiative has been on the Best Novel category and examining the influence and importance of the various winners, but a goal for the project was to also engage with some of the other categories across the history of the Hugo Awards. With that in

mind, we are looking at the three finalists for Best Short Story in 1968:

“I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,” Harlan Ellison (If Mar 1967)

“Aye, and Gomorrah...,” Samuel R. Delany (Dangerous Visions)

“The Jigsaw Man,” Larry Niven (Dangerous Visions)

Adri: I can’t quite believe I’m reading Dangerous Visions / Harlan Ellison for you...

Joe: I’m not sure I fully processed that Harlan Ellison is at least partially (if not fully) responsible for everything on this ballot. *Dangerous Visions* really was a landmark anthology in 1967. I bought a copy years ago and until now, have never actu-

ally cracked the cover. So, I suppose, thank us all for that for picking this year’s category.

Paul: I picked up *Dangerous Visions* (and *Again, Dangerous Visions*) empty years ago when I was in a very deep Harlan Ellison phase, as I read collection after collection of his work, including his non fiction stuff. But I had not read any Ellison in a number of years before we decided to set this up. So I guess I was overdue!

Adri: First on the list, and winner of this particular year, is “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream”, by Harlan Ellison - his second award in the short story category, after ““Repent, Harlequin!” said the Ticktockman” in 1966 (no, me neither). The story follows a small group who are apparently the last survivors of the human race, as they wander through a nightmarish underground hellscape run by AM, an all-powerful AI which has wiped out the rest of humanity and now tortures them in revenge for its own suffering. There’s some vague motivations in terms of plot movement but most of the story is just about detailing the various miseries that the humans have inflicted on them (and sometimes inflict on each other) and their diminishing hope of escape.

Joe: Even though I know I’ve never read Delany or Niven, I had always assumed that I’ve read a handful of Ellison’s short stories. I haven’t. “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” is my first (and to date only) Harlan Ellison story. I’ve been at least vaguely aware of it over the years. I knew there was a video game based on it and that the story was horrifying.

This is an ugly, ugly story and I don’t know if it is actually good despite it’s stature in genre history. The story is moderately compelling, but the grimness and torture seem to be the point. There’s a place for that, but I’m not really here for grim torture porn laced with misogyny and that’s what Ellison serves up.

Honestly, the best thing coming out of “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” is the title. It’s a great title and has become so ubiquitous within the genre that I’ve used it as a template for jokes. The jokes land reasonably well, but I’m not sure the story does anymore.

Adri: I have read two thirds of these authors before but Ellison is new!

I generally agree with Joe above. Everything in this story is pretty gratuitous, and the storytelling skill is put to the service of thinking up unpleasant circumstances in which to put the characters. There are also some decidedly clumsy moments, like the way in which information about their location is imparted through some casual “story time” in the middle of the endless torture.

The story’s treatment of Ellen, the only woman in the group of humans, is a particular low point. All of the characters are presented as caricatures, through the lens of an unreliable narrator - although to a modern reader he falls uncomfortably close to just reading like a standard old school white male protagon - but Ellen is seen entirely through the lens of her sexuality, and effectively as a sexual outlet for the rest of the men. She’s also black, and the only character whose race is men-

tioned. The whole thing reads as misogynoir of the highest order, and coupled with some drive-by and frankly nonsensical homophobia which I don't even want to touch, it makes this story pretty unpleasant.

Honestly, I also found the climax to the story a bit underwhelming. Perhaps it's because of how well-used and evocative the title is, but I didn't find the "now human is blob person" to be as much of a final twist as I am clearly expected to.

Paul: I remember jazzing on this story decades ago. "How grim, how dark, how twisted, the narrator is now immortal and going to live as a thing in the belly of the beast forever." I saw it as a tragedy, and a deserved fate too, for the rather unpleasant narrator. That's how I saw this story before this time.

This reading of the story was somewhat different. Some things were still the same. The clear and really evocative writing. A world, sketched in easily and effortlessly. A contrast of character and character types, a way to have a variety of archetypes to set in this horrible situation. It's the dystopia of all dystopias, four people alive with a malevolent AI acting like an Old Testament Yahweh to torture them forever and ever. The setup and premise and basis are potent and powerful, then and now. I still think the ending is pretty dark and grim and potent.

It was the other things I saw this time, that I did not see on prior readings, that really jumped out at me. The casual misogyny of the story with how the story handles Ellen. The homophobia now

was something that really jumped out at me. I will say, explicitly, Adri, what you didn't: "He had been gay, and the machine had given him an organ fit for a horse.". I mean, what the hell, Ellison? What the heck is that even supposed to mean? I get the whole "everyone gets tortured with what they fear and hate, especially our narrator who doesn't even realize how messed up he is himself, but that does not even try and hit the mark in the case of Benny. I just couldn't accept it anymore.

Our second story is "Aye, and Gomorrah" by Samuel Delany. The story (which ended up winning the Nebula Award for Best SF story) gives us a world where astronauts, Spacers are neutered before puberty so that there isn't a mutation of their gametes. Our story follows Kelly, one of these Spacers, who finds that the only real company that will tolerate him besides other Spacers are Frelks. Frelks are fetishists who are aroused by the company of the neutered Spacers and will even pay them for that contact. There is conversation and debate and tension between Kelly and the Frelks he associates with, as the fundamental problem of Spacers, being unable to have sexual relations, and being shunned by most of society, are shunted into associating mainly with the Frelks, who can't help their hopeless attraction to a group who cannot truly return their desire. More poignantly still, it is the Spacer inability to return that desire which heightens that desire among the Frelks.

Adri: I get that Ellison predates Delany in the genre world by about a decade, but I'm not sure that makes it forgivable for the introduction to

imply Delany is a "new" or upcoming author when he had nine science fiction novels out by this stage.

This is a really interesting story because it's so firmly about sexual transgression and queerness and kink, in ways which the current myths of genre would have us believe weren't being written at this time. Clearly they were, and Ellison's patronising introduction of Delany aside, the fact that this rose to the top of *Dangerous Visions* for readers in 1968 makes it clear that the appetite for queer SF explorations - despite perhaps not being done in the most unproblematic way, from a modern angle - was clearly there.

That said, like the others, I'm not sure what to make of the story itself on an initial reading. I found the lack of opinion or perspective from the spacer himself to be kind of bizarre - we never get a sense of what spacers get out of their relationships with frelks, beyond getting paid. It feels like a line is being drawn between their lack of sexuality and their lack of opinion on human contact in general. Again, I'm not quite sure what I'd want to see here instead, in context, but I'm just left a bit confused and that's definitely not been my response to Delany works previously.

Joe: I probably spent far too long trying to figure out what exactly a "frelk" was, which was important but not as important as the amount of time I spent on it. The thing is, I'm still somewhat unclear because I'm working on the details more than the emotional arc of the story.

Spacers are neutered before puberty and feel no

sexual desire because the neuter allows them to safely work in space with the radiation. Frelks are people who love and desire Spacers, knowing that they can't really get what they want in return. But - somehow Spacers can still gigolo at frelks and pick them up and get paid. Those are details, but they're not the story.

The story, I think, might be able to at least partially be tied up into this quote:

"You don't choose your perversions. You have no perversions at all. You're free of the whole business. I love you for that, Spacer. My love starts with the fear of love. Isn't that beautiful? A pervert substitutes something unattainable for 'normal' love: the homosexual, a mirror, the fetishist, a shoe or a watch or a girdle."

I may not grasp what I've read, but I really appreciate that sentiment.

Also, I wish I didn't read Ellison's introduction to the story which includes a crack about pitiful homosexuals living at home with their parents. There's stuff to get into here given that it is in the intro to a Delany story (which is beside the point of its general offensiveness), but I'm not sure it's really worth the time.

Paul: It's been a long long time since I read this, and I had not remembered it at all. I read the DV and ADV anthologies and so I know I must have read it, but it didn't press on me, then. Maybe it was a case of not grokking what I read, then.

Now, I understood it a lot better. At least I think I

do, anyway. Fetishization, prostitution, the literal neutering of one's desires and one's sexuality, it's clear that Delany was playing with very potent concepts, now, and especially then. What did the readers in the late 60's make of this (answer they gave it a Nebula award). I can see why I blacked it out of my mind back at the time, because I probably didn't understand it at all then. I read it twice here and now to try and grasp what I am reading. I think I do better with longer form Delany, so that I am in the text, in the space longer and more immersed so that I really get my mind around it. Shorter Delany doesn't let me do that and re-reading it kind of puts me at the start, again and again. I think this story is ultimately about loneliness, and trying to transcend it, no matter what one's nature is.

Joe: In Larry Niven's "The Jigsaw Man", the advent of blood typing has led to people convicted of the most serious crimes being forced to "donate" their organs for the betterment of society and to provide restitution for said crimes. But, because the societal demand for those organs is so high, lawmakers have re-evaluated the degree of criminality required for the death penalty and organ donation.

Adri: Because my experience with Niven to date was with *Ringworld*, a novel that to my modern eyes calls forth images of the Halo video games before anything else, I really side-eyed the introduction to this which states that Niven is in the game of hard science fiction only, things that are provable with current facts and progress, no speculation here. This story then sets itself up as what effectively reads as an alternate history: though

I think the setting is intended to be near-future relative to the time of writing, because it draws on the discovery of blood types in 1940 it bases its vision of the future on assumptions about the social and ethical significance of that discovery which, even at the time, were provably false.

It's a shame, because I think I'd have been a lot more well-disposed to the story if I wasn't applying such strong scrutiny to its plausibility. The idea of exploitation of people's lives and bodies by rich and privileged groups is a theme that's just as timely now as it apparently was at the time of writing (see, for more recent examples, *Never Let Me Go* and *Jupiter Ascending*, or any speculative future with corporate indenture in its worldbuilding). In some ways, the construction of the story to leave the protagonist's very minor crimes as an eventual twist sort of undermines this, in that it hides the extent of injustice within the system until the final sentences.

As with "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream," the elements that rely on horror were the least successful for me - during the actual scene dealing with the organ harvesting technology I had to wonder what it would look like if someone like Kameron Hurley had been writing 50 years earlier. Otherwise, while I certainly wouldn't say "The Jigsaw Man" changed my life, and I wouldn't say it lives up to its own promises when it comes to "just the facts" SF, I did quite enjoy the action here.

Paul: Like Ellison, I had a strong and long Niven phase, where I read all of his stories, read all of his novels, really thought that what SF and especially

SF Space opera was, that is what Larry Niven was writing. Just like I tried to read all of Heinlein's future stories, I tried to read everything in the Larry Niven timeline of *Known Space*.

"The Jigsaw Man" is a pretty old story and pretty early in the timeline. It turns on the implications of one premise and I admired, then and now, just how that it goes from the implications of that one premise: guaranteed no-rejection organ transplant technology. Given that premise, the entire world we see spins out, from Niven's vision. The old and the rich will criminalize everything, with the death penalty, for the steady supply of organs that will keep the rich alive as long as possible. And thus we have someone who violated some traffic laws being under a death sentence.

Today, I am much more cynical than I was back when I first read the story and I am more inclined to believe it would really go this way than I did back in the day. Wouldn't the rich see the organs of others as a resource and thus make sure they could get them by any means necessary? I agree it is a VERY fearful story and fearful vision, but does that mean that Niven is *wrong*?

Joe: Larry Niven wrote "The Jigsaw Man" in the still early days of human kidney transplants and as liver, lung, and heart transplants were just beginning to be worked on, some more successfully than others. It's a fascinating concept that Niven saw those medical advances, the possibility, and what he saw as a possible future was that the ability to save human organs in transplants could be enough to change the morality and the law in countries so that the death penalty would become

rampant and in use for even minor crimes.

It's easy to say looking back on a story written some fifty years ago that Niven is pushing a crazy fearful vision of the future. "The Jigsaw Man" feels like a stretch, even for science fiction. It's not a story that I can see written today (at least not as a story written in a plausible future). I can see how it might have been plausible then, but I don't see it as plausible now. At least not without a greater revolution - something that goes further in codifying the privilege of the wealthy into law. More than just having enough money to be somewhat above the law, but rather to have that status fully protected. I don't see that future.

Adri: Paul, here's a question that you are uniquely qualified among us to answer: Do you think that the Delaney and Niven stories are two of the strongest from the *Dangerous Visions* anthology? It clearly underscores how important it was at the time that 2/3 of the ballot is drawn from it, but I find myself wondering (without having the time to commit to the rest of this quite large volume, for now) what drew voters particularly to these two.

Paul: These are strong stories in a strong anthology, but Hugo and Nebula voters aside, I think there are equally strong stories in the volume.

"Faith of our Fathers" by Philip K Dick is maybe the one best distillation of PKD into a story that you can possibly get. Its for me THE PKD story and its a personal favorite.

"Gonna Roll the Bones" is a fantastic Fritz Leiber

story that I also think is really strong. (It won the Hugo for best Novelette!)

"Auto da Fe" by Roger Zelazny is a very Zelazny story, but I don't think it's his best, but its a really good Zelazny. That IS a theme of the anthology for all of it being *Dangerous Visions*, it's an anthology where time and again, the real distillation of an author is found in the story they wrote. Spinrad's "Carcinoma Angels" is also in that tradition, and really potent and powerful, with a killer ending.

Granted, *DV* is not all great, and I think there are some real clunkers of stories--clunkers by authors I really otherwise like, too.

Joe: Here's a question to close out this Hugo conversation. Now that we've read the 1968 Short Story ballot - how would you vote? Who would you give the award to?

Adri: This is a really hard question, because there's so many factors involved with information I don't have access to - this is such a tiny snapshot into a full year of story, and the genre has evolved so much since this was considered the top flight of material. What I can say definitively is that "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" would be at the bottom of my list - if I were thinking through my equivalent processes in recent Hugos, it would then be a toss-up between the story I liked more (Niven), or the story I think probably had more to say (Delany). I can't begin to answer the question on where "No Award" would go, though - what constituted Hugo Worthy in 1968? The story I liked least, apparently, so where does

that leave my analysis.

Paul: How would I have voted? That's a good question and has multiple answers based on whether you're asking how I'd have voted when I first read the stories, or NOW? Back in the day, I would have gone Ellison-Niven-Delany. Now? I think the misogyny and homophobia of the Ellison would knock it off of its perch but I feel

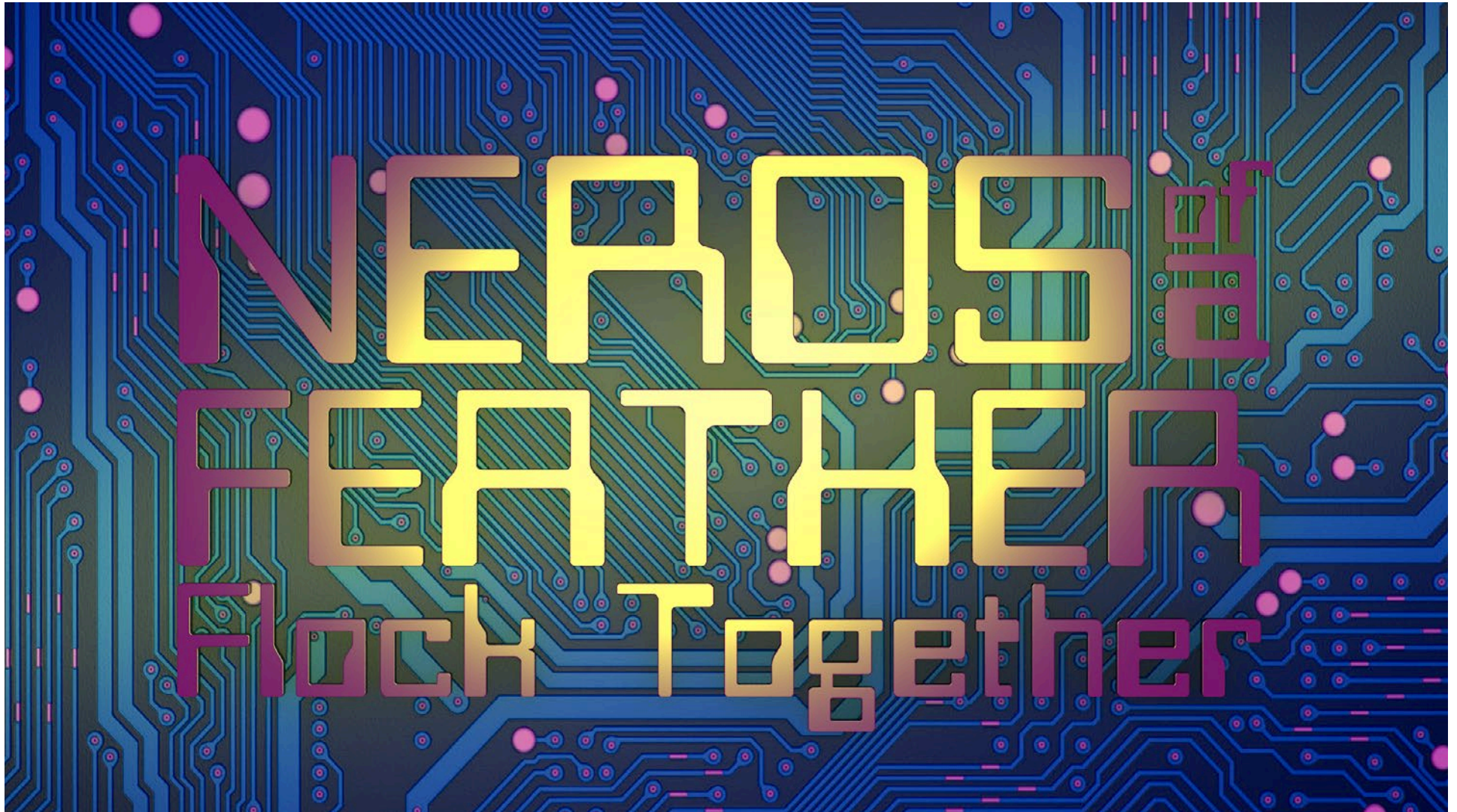
conflicted between the Niven and the Delany, with maybe the Niven just edging it out. I would NOT No Award the Ellison, though. But ask me again in five years and my opinion on that could change.

Joe: I expected a wider range of opinions, but I agree with both of you on this. It's a toss up between Niven and Delany. Niven's story is a bit

smoother and hits my storytelling buttons, but I think Delany's is better written and has much more to say. There's a more important point to "Aye, and Gomorroah". Harlan Ellison would rank third. I wouldn't consider No Award, but I seldom use No Award.

Anyway, this was fun. Thank you both.

Features



Reading Deryni: The Bastard Prince

Joe Sherry

Welcome to the final installment of a six part series of essays focusing on Katherine Kurtz's Deryni novels (you may find the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth parts here). As I am physically incapable of actually reviewing these novels with any semblance of objectivity because they've imprinted themselves deep into my heart, what I am going to do instead is write about the aspects of each of the "Camber Era" novels which have stuck with me throughout the years and which I find intriguing today. Shall we conclude?



Okay. It's been not quite a year since I wrote about *King Javan's Year*, my entry point into the Deryni universe and still the Deryni novel of my heart.

I've always been reluctant to read *The Bastard Prince*. I'm not sure if it's because I've always preferred the this era

of the Deryni novels and this is where Katherine Kurtz brings the era to a close, or if it's because I was so emotionally drained after *King Javan's Year* (and the four preceding volumes) that going once more into that breach is one novel too many. Also, it is a little jarring to go from Javan's story in the previous two novels to Rhys Michael. It's never been a statement on the quality of the novel for me, just a general reluctance.

I often describe *The Bastard Prince* as of the Deryni novels I've read the least, although I'm not sure that is entirely true. I've only read the second *Kelson* trilogy twice and I know I've read *King Kelson's Bride* and the *Childe Morgan* novels just once. The *Kelson* novels have never held the same appeal to me, so if I'm going back to read Deryni, I'm revisiting the old friends and the old horrors of this era of the Haldane restoration and the deryni purges. But, I don't go back to the sixth novel without re-reading the first five. The other novels were formative, this one was not.

It's been six years or so since the events of *King Javan's Year* and everything is still awful. Everything may be even more awful than that. Rhys Michael Haldane is king in name only. Alroy's former regents, having conspired to murder Javan, are now ruling Gwynedd in fact. To say that Rhys Michael and his wife, Michaela, are chafing under that presumption of authority would be a gross understatement. They know they are puppets, but they also know that open defiance is a death sentence. Producing heirs to the throne is a death sentence. Not producing heirs will result Michaela's rape in order to produce a presumptive heir, and then a death sentence. Everything is awful.

It is on the back of that awfulness that Torenth (the long standing rival kingdom to the East) has invaded, taking a border town and killing its lord. But, it is not just Torenth that invaded, it is a man named Marek, the son of the deryni king deposed by Camber and his cohort way back in *Camber of Culdi*. Marek has never ceased his claim to the throne of Gwynedd and this mini in-

vasion is one that must be answered by the king, in person. The less awful bit here is that it relaxes (somewhat) the leash on Rhys Michael, but we (and Rhys Michael) are constantly reminded how tenuous that relaxed grip is.

We know from *Deryni Rising* that the authority and actual rulership of Gwynedd does eventually return to the Haldanes, and this would be a bleak novel indeed if there was no hope of that occurring here.

The thing is, *The Bastard Prince* is a bleak novel.

It's been a long, long time since I've read this book and I remembered that the crown of Gwynedd is freed and restored to Haldane rule. What I didn't remember is that Rhys Michael doesn't live to see it happen. I thought he was the one to restore the throne, but the infection from his hand that was wounded in battle with Marek eventually killed him without healing, sped along by the medicinal "bleeding" he was subjected to by the Custodes Fidei and the regents at the very end of his life.

Of course, it was the actions of Rhys Michael that made the recovery possible, the "codicil" to his will putting loyal men permanently on the regency council guiding his son Owain to his majority. It cost his life (maybe the bloodletting wasn't entirely medicinal and was perhaps punitive in nature), but it saved his children.

The Bastard Prince ends with a significant exhale as the evil (I don't use the word lightly) former regents are all dealt with, most end up immediately

dead, and even though the Status of Ramos that caused such immediate persecution of the deryni are relaxed if not rescinded, and the harshest of the laws are eliminated (except, notably, the one dissallowing deryni in the priesthood, this does lead to an excellent later set story, “The Priesting of Arilan”).

Throughout the Reading Deryni project, I’ve considered the nature and application of deryni magic and I find myself coming back to it again in my reading of *The Bastard Prince*. Throughout the six novels set in the “Camber Era” of the Haldane Restoration, the use of magic has been subtle, often with ritual and mysticism. Magic has been used to read the truth of words, to suborn the will of another with a touch, to ward against sound, to communicate without speech, to heal, and to travel through the use of magically constructed portals. Except, perhaps the ability to fast travel, the use and application of that magic is internal. The consequences are visible, but the action of that magic is not.

Some two hundred years further down the timeline of this world, in the era of King Kelson, there are epic magical duels using spoken (and rhyming) spells and the visual results are spectacular.

The Bastard Prince seems to begin to bridge that gap between the first five novels of this era against what we are first introduced to in *Deryni Rising*.

“Miklos stabbed a gloved forefinger at the ground behind Rhys Michael. Sudrey screamed

as flame leaped up from the very ground and began to trace a curved fiery line around to the side and then behind Miklos, laying down a containing circle.”

“Without further preamble, he raised his right fist and thrust it toward her with a muttered Word, opening out his fingers with a snap. The gesture launched a fist-sized ball of fire that roared toward her like an inferno, growing as it came”

“A Word of command conjured heavy cloud above the flames, weeping moisture that changed to steam as the fire below was quenched”

Not that I would ever recommend a reader begin reading Deryni with *The Bastard Prince*, but for readers who are now (at least) five novels deep into the series, the change in how magic is used is a bit jarring. Or maybe I’ve just spent too much time thinking about deryni magic and ethics and use. Regardless, I am quite happy that Kurtz did not reintroduce rhyming magic battles to this world.

The fire and blasts are a more much external use of magic, and I’m now wondering if and how magic is used in this world is a cultural thing. It is only in clashes with the Torenthi (Charissa, Marek) that we see that sort of battle magic. I can assume that since Torenth is ruled by deryni that overt displays of magic is culturally accepted and the Torenthi magic schools are teaching different

magical arts. The Gwynedd magic schools were in various monastic traditions and focused on the more contemplative traditions we’ve seen across the previous five Camber-Era novels.

We only have glimpses of Torenth, but now I wonder about the wider world the novels never touch on. What is the Chinese analog in this world and how do they handle deryni magic and culture? What about African deryni? Peruvian? There’s no answer to those questions, but I’m now I’m curious.

Speaking of the use of magic, but since I’d like to beat this horse one final time, I’m continually interesting in the slippery slope of the ethics of how deryni use their magic.

“It can be argued that since he didn’t agree to the changed terms we’re imposing, his death won’t technically be suicide anymore. Call it an indirect execution if you prefer. Personally, I would as soon send his unrepentant soul straight to hell, but my office as a priest forbids indulgence in vengeance. I salve my conscience with the knowledge that at least he’s going to have a chance to make some restitution before he dies - even if he’s forced to do it”

That is Bishop Niallan talking about Dimitri, a deryni agent of Torenth who voluntarily had a “death trigger” to prevent revealing his true loyalties, but who has been suborned by the Camberian Council on behalf of Gwynedd and who now has his will forced to do the bidding of his new implanted orders and the death trigger altered to prevent *that* knowledge from getting out. The

argument, I suppose, is that this is essentially war and the survival of a race dependent on a sympathetic Haldane regaining the crown in truth, but it is part of a continual pattern of how far the “good guys” will go to justify their actions. Their cause is just in opposing the murderous regents, but it is a continued example of exactly why many humans fear the deryni.

This is a point that I’ve hit on again and again throughout my reading of these six novels of the Deryni written by Katherine Kurtz, that though readers are rightly sympathetic towards the deryni and find the persecution of the deryni abhorrent, the magical actions of the deryni towards humans are often absolute violations. If you don’t spend much time thinking about ethics and just enjoy those fleeting moments of our heroes getting the upper hand, it is so easy to slide past the implications. It is absolutely a matter of life or death for the deryni and the Haldanes, and it is absolutely wrong.

One final thing I would like to discuss, and there hasn’t been space for it the previous Reading Deryni essays, is what the hell happens in the future? I know, that’s a vague and misleading statement. We know what happens two hundred years in the future. Kelson becomes king and Katherine Kurtz writes seven books about Kelson. With her Childe Morgan trilogy, Kurtz takes a slight step back in time to the reigns of Kelson’s grandfather and father.

What I want to know about is what happens in

the immediate twenty years after Rhys Michael dies and Owain takes the throne as a four year old boy. One of my favorite things about this series is the inclusion of various appendices at the end of most of the books. There is a “Partial Lineage of the Haldane Kings” and “Partial Lineage of the MacRories” and those genealogies tell a story. They tell a story of Owain Haldane dying in the year 948 at the age of 24. That’s young, and the early deaths of Alroy, Javan, and Rhys Michael suggest that dying young while king should be viewed with suspicion.

But then you look at the MacRorie family tree and something jumps out at you. Joram dies in 948 at age 70. Okay. His son Tieg, the healer, dies in 948 (age 34). His nephew Ansel dies in 948 (age 48). His cousin Camlin dies in 948 (age 42).

What happened in 948?

Besides the king, these are all members (formal or informal) of the Camberian Council. That is a council formed by Camber in exile in order “to prevent flagrant abuses and to discipline those we can’t prevent” and it will be “Deryni sitting in judgment of Deryni” (quotes from Saint Camber). It’s more than suspicious that so many of these characters died in the same year, there’s a story in those genealogies and it is one that I have been waiting more than twenty five years to be told. Unless Katherine Kurtz is working on that 948 novel now, I don’t expect to ever get it.

Between a 948 novel and an Orin and Jodotha novel, there are so many questions raised both in the genealogies and in tantalizing hints in the

novels themselves. After Owain dies, his brother Uthyr reigns for more than thirty years and, presumably, offers an era of relative stability. But Uthyr’s three sons all die relatively young and have short reigns of three years, two years and nine years. What happened then? Tragically, Michaela (Rhys Michael’s queen and regent mother of Owain) buries both of her sons and two of her grandchildren.

Even though the actual content of these six Deryni novels have been increasingly unpleasant, it has been a delight and a joy for me to revisit this series. I am continually waiting for Katherine Kurtz to be named a SFWA Damon Knight Grand Master and / or receive a Lifetime Achievement from World Fantasy. Either would be more than well earned and well deserved. One day?

Thank you for going on this journey for me, hopefully it has been as much fun for all of you as it has for me. I know there are ten deryni novels I haven’t included in this re-read, plus two short story collection (one written by Kurtz, one edited by the author), an encyclopedia, and a book about the working of the deryni magic that I suddenly wonder if I should look at just to answer some of those questions I have about the differences in how magic has been used in this series; but I just don’t see another round of essays happening. Never say never, but maybe don’t hold your breath for very long.

Read Katherine Kurtz. Read Deryni.

LET'S FRIGHTEN CHILDREN! The Mainstream

Vance K



When I saw *Coraline* in the theater, I thought, “Nope nope nope. This is way too scary for kids.” I loved it, but the movie was legitimately unnerving. Buttons for eyes, sewn-up mouths, dead kids, a spider-lady. But then I heard an interview with Neil Gaiman where he

was asked basically the same question — why did you write such a scary thing for kids? His response was wonderful (I mean...Neil Gaiman), and it was that things that are scary to adults are not the same things that are scary to children.

I think about this a lot, and try to take it into account when thinking about what to show my own kids. At the bottom of it all, the way I understand Gaiman’s meaning is that what’s **truly** frightening is the notion that the world ultimately doesn’t make any sense and isn’t governed by any rules that can be understood. As a kid, you’re always finding yourself in trouble or with aggrieved parents for reasons you don’t understand. The great hope is that one day the world will make more sense, and the feeling of careening between invisible, unfair obstacles will lessen.

It’s a lovely fantasy. We don’t want to burst their

bubble too soon. There is a pervasive mindset that runs throughout much of horror, which is that evil is omnipresent, its application is essentially random, and it is unstoppable. This is a universal feeling and one that older audiences are generally forced to reckon with beyond the confines of movies. One of the great gifts of horror stories to audience members is these tales allow the listener/watcher to confront their very real fears of an impersonal, uncaring, and brutal world in a safe environment. But for kids, the concerns are not yet of that nature. They are personal, dealing largely with one’s place in the world. And these fears, too, are more-or-less universal.

The good news is that there are a ton of films that address these fears in a family-friendly way. And by and large, they’re the films you’re probably already familiar with.

Stranger Things

This is probably more of a no-brainer today than I give it credit for. I had some mixed feelings about showing my kid the breakout pop-horror title of our moment, but then I got the, “EVERYBODY at school has seen all three seasons and I’m getting SERIOUS spoilers” treatment, so now we’re plowing through.

After *Stranger Things*, Season 1, I weighed in on this site about what I thought was a bizarre co-opting of...well, pretty much all the other titles I’m going to mention in this series. But here we are, two seasons later, and if kids today don’t have time to read/watch every single thing me and the Duffer Brothers read and watched a million years ago, well, who can blame them? If *Stranger Things*

is what steps into the breach, I can think of far worse things.

Tim Burton and LAIKA

At some point, everyone feels alone. Everyone feels like an outsider, or an imposter. Everyone feels un-understandable. This makes sense -- we each experience the world discretely from within our own literal shell. We are unique, separate beings, and each of us experiences the world in a singular way. It’s scary. When you get right down to it, it’s terrifying. It’s only through shared experience and through story that we begin to recognize our own experiences in the experiences of others. Many of us are lucky in that we overlap in many ways with those around us, and begin to recognize these shared impressions almost before we are conscious of them. I guess this is what’s called “fitting in.” But some of us take a long, long time to encounter another or others who make us feel like we’re not the first ones to fight these particular battles.

Artists are generally outsiders. Otherwise, we’d all be businesspeople. Growing up, we’re often bullied or shunned. The weird kid. The oddball. The quiet one. Like Tim Burton, who famously idolized Vincent Price as a child and struggled to fit in, yet grew up to put a stamp of weirdness across the whole of popular culture that continues to invite other oddballs to feel ok about standing out. As a creator under the ubiquitous Disney umbrella, it’s probably easy these days to shrug off Tim Burton. But I don’t. This is, after all, the man who directed *Ed Wood*. He’s more than earned his place on my Mount Rushmore. The first two horror-adjacent films that my kids

loved and re-watched again and again at a very young age were *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Edward Scissorhands*. But there's a funny thing about the movie that is billed as Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* — Burton neither wrote nor directed it. Henry Selick directed and Caroline Thompson wrote the script. Now, Caroline Thompson's a helluva writer. She also wrote *Edward Scissorhands*, and *The Addams Family*, and *The Corpse Bride*, among many other titles in her 30-year-and-still-going career.

Henry Selick later moved to LAIKA and directed their first feature film, *Coraline*. You're sensing a pattern, I know. *ParaNorman* was the studio's second feature film, and is, to me, an indispensable family horror film. There is a lot of very dark thematic material in it, particularly when we learn about Agatha's backstory, but that character, like the rest of the film, is handled so empathetically and with so much care that I never hesitate to recommend the movie. Plus, the zombies are no scarier than Scooby-Doo villains, and are often played for laughs.

I mentioned how the film treats Agatha with empathy. This is a common thread in so many of these films. Norman himself is an outsider, someone who is misunderstood both at home and at school. Like *Edward Scissorhands*. *Coraline* is ignored, and feels invisible. And Jack Skellington is someone who seems cool and the guy everybody else wants to be like...but he feels out-of-place and like something's missing. For kids (and, let's be honest, most adults), these films model a way of existing in the world that resists being governed by the fear of not fitting in, encourages being open and welcoming to others who may be different, and highlights the fundamental human connections that bind us.

These are powerful messages, and they run counter to so, so many of the messages that kids receive on a daily basis.

If we can encourage our own little weirdos to be themselves and support each other, and we can do it with ghosts and spider-ladies, isn't it kind of incumbent on us to do so?

Recommendations

For kids, I recommend:
The Nightmare Before Christmas
Edward Scissorhands
Coraline
ParaNorman
Stranger Things

And though I haven't seen them, I have had good friends with kids recommend the more recent:
Goosebumps
The House with a Clock in its Walls

Posted by Vance K – cult film reviewer and co-editor of *Nerds of a Feather* since 2012. Emmy-winning producer and director, and lifelong horror geek.

Mondays on Mandalore: A New New Hope

Dean E.S. Richard



Welcome to Mondays on Mandalore. Unlike Mandalorians, this will not be a quiet, stoic affair. It will, however, discuss *The Mandalorian*, and in doing so, assume you have seen same. So there are spoilers.

What, at its heart, is *Star Wars*? In 2019, that is not an easy question to answer. There has been nearly endless media dedicated to it - books, comics/graphic novels, video games, TV shows and, ya know, movies. But what make *Star Wars* *Star Wars*, instead of.... not?

Personally, I think a huge thing that when *Star Wars* gets it right, it gets it very right, is that it doesn't take itself too seriously. The prequels messed this up, badly. They were Very Serious About Themselves, and they are garbage. *Star Wars* is about space wizards in the future-past, and sometimes it's silly, sometimes it's fun, but when it says "hey, I am more than I am", it stops

working.

But then... it's also more than the sum of its parts.

Going back to its roots, back in the actual *New Hope* days, that is what *Star Wars* is. Even amidst galactic conflict and high stakes, there is silliness and, well, life.

All of this is to say that *The Mandalorian* is *Star Wars*. There are tons of moments that make you laugh - even at its most tense. The stakes don't seem high, at least until the end of the first episode, even for our helmeted protagonist. In my semi-humble opinion, that is where stories are the best - we know the Mandalorian himself will survive, but what will that cost?

[seriously - spoilers]

When he discovers the Yodling (not Baby Yoda, Yodling), that is a "I am your father" level twist. But it is a twist that can go any way. He could let IG-11 just end it, and then the story goes on in a different direction. Just like a bounty hunter, allowing the fate of the universe to play out without much regard for it... except our hero, such as he is, ends IG-11 instead.

That, my friends, is a pretty monumental moment! It tells us so much about him, about the universe, and what we are in for, but along the way... so many silly moments.

I have written before about heart being an essential element of story. The Original Trilogy is a pretty straightforward good v evil story, the

plucky rebels, armed only with justice and the strength of their courage against the evil empire, that is... well, evil. They blow up planets 'n stuff. But within that is a lot of heart. Han Solo finds his heart, Leia is an inspiring leader, Luke sucks, etc.

The Mandalorian is... not that. It is an exploration that can only exist because of the cultural touchstone *Star Wars* has become. There are a billion good v evil stories out there that we don't wonder what the grey areas look like. They are popcorn movies/shows/books which we consume, enjoy, and then move on with our lives. *Star Wars* is part of our lives, and part of our culture, so at a certain point we start go "wait... life isn't like that."

So *The Mandalorian* - like other recent *Star Wars* media, most notably *Rogue One* - dives into those grey areas. But what it managed to do was keep the heart of *Star Wars* - human moments, funny moments that underscore the actual stakes at hand.

The best example of this is in the moments after the firefight at the end of the first episode. Our hero and IG-11 have a door they need to get through, and a big gun to get through it with. The simultaneous realization and turn to the gun is a great, funny moment.

But a few seconds later, we have a critical moment, as they discover their quarry is a Yodaling (which is a way better name than Baby Yoda, make it happen). Here's where I really felt like this show nailed it: We didn't know what was going to happen. We had a pretty good guess, but

it wasn't 100% certain that he was going to save the Yodaling.

We still don't know where, exactly, the show will go, or its impact on the Star Wars universe, but the early results are promising, and it looks to be full of heart (and cuteness).

Target Practice:

- I want to write more about it later, but in case I don't... I love the pacing of this show. It's tight, there is nothin superfluous or wasted. In an age of bloated shows that drag on, *The Mandalorian* zags, and is better for it.

- Seriously, how cute is the Yodaling? Disney is printing money at this point.
- For all that I appreciate about the limited cast of the first couple episodes, I really want more of the *Star Wars* criminal underworld.

-DESR

Dean is the author of the 3024AD series of science fiction stories (which should be on YOUR

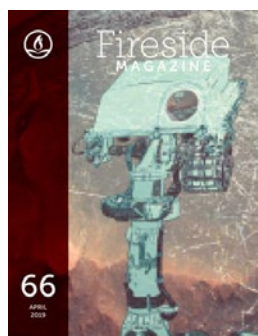
summer reading list). You can read his other ramblings and musings on a variety of topics (mostly writing) on his blog. When not holed up in his office tweeting obnoxiously writing, he can be found watching or playing sports, or in his natural habitat of a bookstore.

Questing in Shorts: June 2019

Adri Joy

One day, I hope to discover a speculative fiction magazine called “Fluffy and Lovely Futures”, which will be full of all the diverse ways in which people can just be fundamentally OK. When I have this magazine, (and if somebody is already out there publishing it, please point me in their direction!) I’ll save up the issues to read right after particularly heartbreaking issues of other magazines. The only issue is that Fluffy and Lovely Futures might have to come out on a weekly schedule to keep up with the many and varied ways in which the stories in other magazines keep breaking my fragile little heart. To be fair, they do it so well that I can’t help but come back for more...

What do I have for you this June? Read on and find out:



Fireside Fiction Issues 66-68

I’m sad to see that Julia Rios will soon be leaving her editorial position at *Fireside*, but excited to see them test a new editorial model: each quarterly issue of *Fireside* will go to a different editor, and the plan is to bring in not just established names but also new editorial voices. It sounds like a great way to shake up the magazine’s diverse offerings still further and to offer opportunities to a wider range of editors, and I’ll be really intrigued

to see what changes it brings to *Fireside*’s overall tone. Here in the present, this quarter’s offerings are another weird and wonderful, emotionally driven mix of flash fiction and short stories. “My Sister is a House” by Zoe Medieros proposes a world where kids can grow up to be almost anything - animate or otherwise - but that those things are defined in aptitude tests and there’s an ongoing cultural argument over whether it is possible to change one’s nature. The narrator’s and her twin sister have always felt there is a gulf between them across which it is hard to communicate, and when her becomes a house, the narrator moves into it and speculates on how this changes the way she can connect with her sibling. The premise allows for musings on family bonds and human nature which defy easy categorisation but come together well in the context of the story, creating something weird and thought provoking and full of beautiful asides.

“How to Say I Love You With Wikipedia” by Beth Goder is a story about a Mars rover trying to communicate its “feels” with its human companions during a manned science mission; I’m personally a bit over anthropomorphising the tragedy of dead Mars rovers after the outpouring from Opportunity a few months ago, but it’s a sweetly told story that will no doubt appeal to those being less cynical about its central premise. I mean, for all my grumpiness, one fundamentally can’t go wrong with a robot pal, right? For me, the standout story from the quarter comes in April with “Aging Elements” by Ben Francisco, which takes the Icarus and Daedalus myth and turns the lesson into something very different; in this version, Icarus is not brought down by his hubris

and by failing to listen to his elders, but takes his own knowledge and uses it to literally surpasses his father, leaving him heartbroken but hopeful for his son’s future even as the people around him take the incomplete story he has told and turn it into an overly simple lesson which doesn’t reflect their truth. It’s got all the elements that makes a retelling worthwhile, providing a fresh take both at the surface and in the deeper layers of the story, and the emotional elements are deeply affecting.

Rating 7/10

Anathema Magazine Issue 7

Anathema is back for a bigger, better seventh issue, including some really neat story and poetry thematic match-ups (the poetry is new and it works great!) While I don’t normally review the non-fiction of magazines, the editorial essay of this issue also really spoke to me: it’s about how we as readers can support and boost the range of fiction that we want to see out in the world, and definitely worth a read for anyone reflecting on that.

The stories themselves are more hit and miss for me than in previous issues - specifically, the story about arranged “mating” and alphas and betas hits too many personal “nopes” - the stuff that hit the spot lives up to the challenging, heart-breaking excellence I’ve come to expect from the publication. “Raices (Roots)” by Joe Ponce is the standout here for me, drawing on the xenophobia and abuse of the USA’s current border regime - including the separation of children from their parents - to tell the story of a man from the USA whose Mexican half-sister and her son cross with-

out documentation to stay with him, against the backdrop of an epidemic where migrant children appear to be developing plantlike symptoms. That premise plus the title should probably clue you in to where this is going; it does so in a way which juxtaposes the body horror of peeling skin and creaking movements with the mundane awfulness of a racist, hostile immigration regime, questioning bonds of family, nationality and of human empathy in a way which is chillingly recognisable in the way countries like the USA (and UK) treat those who come across their borders. The issue's first story, "Moses" by L.D. Lewis, also explores supernatural power and trauma from a different angle, looking at the life of a woman with the power to make people around her disappear, and the impact that this has on her as she seeks ways to control herself and avoid harming those she loves, no matter how self-destructive the methods might be.

Rating 7/10

The Dark, May and June 2019

Inspired by my horror reading of a couple of months ago, I've added another subscription to my expanding list in *The Dark*, a monthly horror magazine releasing two new and two reprinted stories every month. The new stories and the reprints are mixed in here, and they're all great in that awful, awful way where really everything is not OK at all and we're all going to die horribly. Yay!

May starts off with "Wildling", by Angela Slatter: a story about eating cats (among other things). LP is a childless woman whose home is visited by

a "Wildling" who kills and eats her boyfriend's unpleasant cat. Ground down by a society which keeps assuming her worth is only proportionate to her childlessness, she develops a fantasy of "taming" the child and taking it in, sourcing more cat food to try and entice them. It's a grim story whose character motivations are pretty hard to sympathise with, but the twist is perfect and awful. The second original story is "The Wiley", a woman involved in a huge technology sales deal finds herself dealing with an unexpected consequence of the programme she helped to build, which is now affecting the world in dramatic and unexpected ways; aided by supernatural forces in her own home, she makes it her mission to figure out how to overcome the problems she has unleashed on the world in a story that satisfyingly blends magic and technology in a way which underscores the narrator's emotional journey.

June brings the terrifying, atmospheric "Therein Lies a Soul" by Osahon Iye-Iyamu, a story which, like its protagonist, comes into the world "sticky and belting out the highest notes"; it's full of spiders and cobwebs and sickness and oppressive systems and a ghost who can steal voices, and it will make you ask "what on earth just happened" in the best possible way. "We Sang You As Ours" by Nibedita Sen is more straightforward, but just as full of claustrophobia and inescapable destinies: Cadence, the oldest daughter of a monstrous race whose women use siren-like powers to lure humans out to sea and feed them to the ocean-faring males they are attached to, questions the life she's been brought into, especially after one of the "Mothers" who raised her runs away to apparently escape her biological calling. By "hu-

manising" Cadence and her struggle at the same time as it shows her going through the motions of her terrifying calling, showing the way that she connects with her victim - a teenage boy whose fate the story doesn't sugarcoat with any "maybe he's a monster too" speculation - makes for a really effective, satisfying story. If you're up for some delicious discomfort, *The Dark* is definitely a magazine to check out, and I can't wait to see what it brings next.

Rating: 8/10

Uncanny Magazine Issue 28

There's also plenty of creepy delights in this issue of *Uncanny*. Ellen Klages "Nice Things" has the protagonist going through her unpleasant mother's things after her death, eventually baking a cathartic cake for a personal ritual that ends up not quite going to plan; Emma Osborne's "A Salt and Sterling Sea" talks about a grieving mother rediscovering love after the transformation and death of her son; and the reprint, "Corpse Soldier" by Kameron Hurley (originally released on Patreon) is a return to her world of body-jumping mercenaries previously explored in "Elephants and Corpses" and other stories (more on those next month, probably). The creepiness reaches a peak in Elizabeth Bear's story, "Lest We Forget", which is told from the perspective of a war criminal who is now narrating the story of their own death. As the narrator recounts the circumstances that have led to their dying, a picture emerges of an individual and society going to great lengths to repair the horrors of war, with results that wind up creating new horror instead. It's almost a shame that the Hurley story in this issue isn't one

from her Red Secretary universe, as the sense of inescapability in this story is reminiscent of the premise of that world (more on that next month). It's short, but you'll need to schedule in a few minutes to mutter "oh no oh no" repeatedly to yourself after reading.

Balancing out the creepiness, there's also a new exploration of love and family and diaspora identity, "Probabilitea", from John Chu. Katie's dad is "a physical manifestation of Order and Chaos", as is she; meaning she's inherited his power to understand and manipulate probabilities and the fabric of reality. This is understandably a pretty terrifying power to have if one doesn't know how to control it, and Katie is working on learning how, when a friend, Jackson - who happens to be a physical manifestation of Life and Death - asks her for help with a mission that only she can complete. The character relationships between Katie and her father, and Katie and Jackson, are all highly compelling, and it's a great exploration of maintaining human relationships and respecting the self-determination of loved ones even with those godlike superpowers in the equation.

Rating: 7/10

Stories of your Life and Others by Ted Chiang

Yes, yes, Ted Chiang has a new short story collection out this year, but I have never promised you current coverage in this column and, up until now, Chiang's highly accoladed debut collection has been a notable gap in my reading. The universe decided to remind me of this fact last year when I received the collection in not one but two different Secret Santa exchanges, and I finally paid attention and got down to it (with the exception of the titular story, which I had read and decided to skip this time around - so this review is technically just of "Stories of Others").

Having so much uncanny, slipstream-type fiction in this month's selection made it all the more interesting to sit down with Chiang's matter of fact science fictional style, and it's clear that so much of what makes this collection so well regarded is his ability to take simple yet outlandish science fictional premises and put them in a context that makes you go "oh, yes, of course". From the literal exploration of the biblical heavens - and the communities which would spring up in a centuries-long process of reaching them - in "Tower of Babylon" to the documentary narrative of a university wondering whether to make

"attraction-blindness" technology compulsory in "Liking What You See: A Documentary", there's a sense of reading narratives where each piece is a controlled, explicable part of the wider whole. The common theme throughout is that of discovery: each story takes either a science fictional premise or alternate historic versions of science and the organisation of the universe, then puts characters into a position to make new discoveries within them. Different stories start this journey at different points: "Tower of Babylon" and "Understand", for example, put their protagonists at the start of a journey and follow them through it, whereas "Divide by Zero" and "The Evolution of Human Science" (a flash fiction piece originally written for Nature and by far the shortest story in the collection) focus more explicitly on the psychological repercussions of discoveries which upend one's worldview. The result is a really satisfying set of "what-ifs" from an author who, as has been consistently remarked, always seems to be at the top of his game. It's nice to read a book that lives up to the hype and, who knows? Maybe I'll get to Exhalation before the year is out.

Rating: 8/10

Introducing Watchmen Wednesdays

Phoebe Wagner



After seeing the first two episodes of HBO's adaption of *Watchmen*, I'm itching to write about it. First, I'm going to be upfront and say I'm not a huge fan of the comics or the Zack Snyder movie (2009). Of Alan Moore's work, I preferred *V for Vendetta* or *Swamp Thing* for the

commentary on environmental issues and governmental power whereas *Watchmen* felt more so for fans of comic book superheroes, which I still struggle to engage with due issues of social justice, particularly sexism (though with writers like Saladin Ahmed, Roxane Gay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Nalo Hopkinson, and so on, comics are becoming more aware of social justice issues for sure). So, when the trailer came out for HBO's adaption, I was interested but not overly so. I figured I'd give it a few episodes and see. The trailer suggested a strong political undertone—which made sense for *Watchmen* as a whole—but I worried it wouldn't go far enough and just be some neo-liberal commentary that pretends to solve racism by the end of the first season.

Not so! Episode one, "It's Summer and We're

Running Out of Ice," begins with the massacre at Black Wallstreet in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. The opening sequence of scenes depicts the KKK on a killing spree and destroying property. While intense and difficult to watch, the show was quickly praised on Twitter and other media websites (see Leah Schnelback's wonderful write up for Tor.com here) for representing a moment in history often forgotten by (white) history books. This sequence sets the tone for the first two episodes in a timeline that has diverged from our present. Instead, Robert Redford is president, Vietnam is a state, reparations are enacted but called Redfordations, and police wear masks.

The story revolves around Angela Abar (played by Regina King), a police officer injured during an attack that caused all police to wear masks afterward. Rather than just the yellow bandanna many police wear, Angela becomes Sister Knight, working alongside Looking Glass (also called Wade and played by Tim Blake Nelson) and Red Scare (played by Andrew Howard). With the police at their backs, they work to take down a violent white militia who wear Rorschach masks and go by the Seventh Kavalry. After a black police officer is killed by a Kavalry member, the force is galvanized into taking them out.

Now, this storyline is reasonably straightforward—cue the weirdness. Jeremy Irons plays an unnamed character (that is maybe Ozymandias?) with servants that seem awfully android-like. Or maybe clones. Regardless, they do not act fully in tune with human society. Little is revealed of Iron's character, but we know he is writing a play and one android, Mr. Phillips (played by Tom

Mison of *Sleepy Hollow* fame) gives him a watch as a present.

The episode ends with death of the white police chief, Judd Crawford (Don Johnson). He's lynched and the person who calls to tell Angela about the chief's death is an elderly black man in a wheelchair, sitting by the body. As the episode ends, it's clear this man, Will Reeves (Louis Gosset Jr.), is a survivor of the Tulsa Massacre.

Episode 2, "Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship," (no, I have no idea what the title means) mainly focuses on three plots: investigating the murder of Chief Crawford, Jeremy Iron's character and his play, and discovering how Angela is connected to the elderly Will Reeves. While interrogating him, Will tells Angela that the police force has skeletons in the closet, which prompts her to go investigate at the memorial for Chief Crawford, even though he was her long-time friend.

In nicely cinematic moment, Angela enters the Crawford's bougie house and as she passes through the mourners, it becomes clear she is the only person of color in the room. If the viewer can catch this pointed shot, then what follows next shouldn't be too surprising: Judd Crawford has a KKK hood with a sheriff's star in his closet.

Meanwhile, in an effort to stop the cop killings, the police force raid the local Seventh Kavalry hangout at a white trailer park. The scene is a brutal reversal of police violence so often depicted on the news today, whether it's against BLM protestors or the Hong Kong revolutionaries. Angela

hesitates to become involved in the violence until a white guy with a bat attempts to take out her friend Wade/Looking Glass, which prompts her to beat the man bloody.

Interspersed between these incidents of police brutality is the weirdness of Jeremy Irons' character. In his storyline, we see the play he was writing performed by his possibly androids Mr. Phillips and Ms. Crookshanks. The play depicts the creation of Dr. Manhattan's powers (which has prompted new fan theories that Irons is Dr. Manhattan, who according to the show, is living on Mars). As part of the play, one of the Mr. Phillips clones/androids/who knows is burned alive while Irons' character yells at Ms. Crookshanks to cry real tears. It's horrifying in that surreal arthouse kind of way. After Mr. Phillips burns up, another Mr. Phillips—painted blue and, you guessed it, naked—lowers from the ceiling. The sequence ends with little more understanding of Irons' character, except to blur whether or not he is Ozymandias.

The episode ends on two threads. A documentary that has been discussed throughout the first episode is aired (and watched by some characters). It seems to depict the original "heroes" of the *Watchmen* comic and their origin stories. The second thread is Will Reeves. Angela is about to turn him in and puts him in her car when a giant

magnet attached to a helicopter steals him away (and her car). All we know is that Will doesn't seem surprised and winks at Angela.

Episode three, "She Was Killed by Space Junk," returns to familiar territory. The episode starts with Laurie Blake (an excellently cast Jean Smart), who now hunts vigilantes for the FBI. Not only that, she's rather good at it. She's sent to Tulsa to investigate the murder of Judd Crawford and teams up with Agent Petey, a former PhD in History turned agent who provides the historical context for the characters since the end of the comic book (or if it's been awhile for the viewer since reading *Watchmen*). Most of the episode allows for the heroes to be seen through the jaded eyes of Laurie Blake, yet again adding layers of complications, such as police violence portrayed behind the mask, as Blake says: "Do you know how you can tell the difference between a masked cop and a vigilante? Me neither."

Following in the footsteps of introducing Blake's character, Jeremy Irons is revealed to officially be Ozymandias. Yet, as soon as this mystery is cleared up, another is produced: the Game Warden, which Ozymandias calls his adversary.

The episode ends in a call back to episode two, as an SUV falls out of the sky, apparently the same one that Will Reeves escaped in. While a little

slower paced than the previous two episodes, the introduction of Blake sets the stage for Alan Moore's creation to become more involved in this latest adaptation. And, Dr. Manhattan continues to be teased--can they get away without actually putting him and his iconic crotch on screen? We'll see.

For the rest of the season, I'll be providing episode recaps, diving into some theories, and writing about my own ideas (will we get a cameo from Robert Redford?). So far, *Watchmen* has provided an interesting cultural critique of the violent, nationalist time we are experiencing, complete with commentary on police brutality and forgotten racially-motivated violence. There's a lot of our own forgotten history to be explored through this lens.

Phoebe Wagner currently studies at University of Nevada: Reno. When not writing or reading, she can be found kayaking at the nearest lake. Follow her at phoebe-wagner.com or on Twitter @pheebs_w.

Thursday Morning Superhero

Mikey N

This week's big comic book news is that Netflix has picked up Jeff Smith's *Bone* for an animated series! With the rise of Disney + and other streaming platforms, Netflix is going to have to rely heavily on its original programming and the addition of one of my family's favorite series has me quite excited.

Pick of the Week:



Gideon Falls #17 - I am beyond thrilled that this story from Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino has been developed into a television series. The new arc reaffirms how gripping this universe is and how intriguing the allure of the Black Barn is. This book won the Eisner for best new series in 2019 and Sorrentino should have a strong chance of winning an Eisner for Best Writer/Artist as the visuals are some of the most effective I have seen in print. This arc opens with Norton's father trying to regain his

own consciousness after being taken over by a being in the Black Barn. Watching his internal struggle completely draws you in as a reader and puts you in his mental space. In addition to the gripping element of Norton meeting his sister and father despite having no memory of them, Father Fred and Dr. Xu are tasked with something big from a group of priests. This arc is setting up to be quite intense and I look forward to seeing what direction it goes.

The Rest:

Trees: Three Fates #2 - Sasha's investigation into the murder that took place last night is uncovering few answers and more questions. The autopsy confirms that the body was dumped at the site and that an altercation, leaving one person injured, accounts for the blood at the scene. That is the gist of the ordinary parts of this tale, but the supernatural elements bring in some fortune telling, time travel, and sabotage from a mysterious visitor that will likely cross paths with Sasha. Having never read the original series in its entirety, there are elements that are confusing, but Warren Ellis does a nice job of developing a mystery that draws the reader in. I am really enjoying the first two issues of this series and it reminds me a bit of *Dept. H* from Matt Kindt. That is a com-

pliment.

Captain America #15 - As Captain America still seeks to clear his name, he learns that this will be a difficult task as long as Fisk is Mayor. He is coming to grips that the Daughters of Liberty, who are protecting him, have a different approach for finding answers and are likely tracking his every move. He isn't sure how much he can trust them, but they have given him little reason not to. The investigation into who framed him takes an interesting twist as some surveillance footage that was not easy to obtain reveals that the Scourge of the Underworld may be behind it.

Star Wars Adventures: Return to Vader's Castle #3 - This week's spooky issue gives heavy reference to *Little Shop of Horrors*, but instead of Aubrey II, we have a pet sarlaac which is causing more mayhem than a State Farm Insurance commercial. The story sheds some light on Asajj Ventress prior to her joining the Sith. Like the other issues in this series, it is an entertaining read a good break from the heavier titles I enjoyed this week in *Gideon Falls* and *Trees*. Definitely not my favorite book by a long stretch, but one that is entertaining and appropriate for some light October reading.

WE RANK 'EM: Villagers from Untitled Goose Game (House House)

Adri Joy



If you've been following the internet at all recently, it will have been hard to escape the meteoric rise of a certain set of memes and crossovers, involving a flatly rendered goose staring dead-eyed out at the viewer, ready to cause problems on purpose. This is, of course, the doing of *Untitled Goose Game*, the low-stakes sadism simulator in which you take the role of a horrible goose terrorising the residents of an otherwise idyllic English village. Its a game that delivers exactly what it promises in a deeply satisfying way, and which very much deserves the place in cultural consciousness which it is noisily honking its way into.

Having sunk a significant amount of time into the goose uprising - learning the ways of the village, its routines, and what happens to all the items I've been throwing down the well - I have decided, rather than undertaking a review, to

resurrect a hallowed *Nerds of a Feather* institution: the We Rank 'Em post. I now bring my extensive goose game expertise to bear on the objective ranking of the villagers of goose game, from my omniscient perspective as the objective arbiter of their destinies. This ranking has been cross checked using the most advanced scientific principles available to game character analysts today, and was also compiled while I was hungry and therefore very motivated to put down the most straightforward, no-nonsense reasoning I could so as to get on with the more important business of reheating leftover noodles and maybe making a mug cake. With these factors in mind, I present to you: the definitive ranking of untitled goose game villagers.

Honourable mention/God Tier: The Ladies at the Pub

Alone among the villagers of *Untitled Goose Game*, this pair of endlessly chatting ladies resist any sort of inconveniencing over my horrible goose antics - indeed, they seem more charmed than anything about my ability to honk and flap on command (all for the purpose of flower thievery, of course). Why? I feel there is some deep, complex relationship here; a hard-won truce or pact, perhaps, which the franchise has barely begun to scratch the surface of. I sincerely hope this is something that gets explored via the inevitable proliferation of *Untitled Goose* fanfiction. For now, the ladies must remain the most enigmatic of the *Goose Game*'s human cast, and must sit outside the powers of ranking in a God Tier category all of their own.

6: The Publican and her Husband

Look, I do a rail commute across London most weekdays, and I get quite enough unwanted jostling from that real life adventure - so this pair of uptight small business owners, with their constant desire to bodily force me out of their space, don't endear themselves to me. Plus, they're landlords, meaning they are clearly even more opposed than the rest of the village to my anarchist anti-property agenda, and it shows - they'd rather have me smash all their pint glasses on the floor rather than accept the impermanent nature of possession and the inevitability of me stealing them all and making everyone drink beer straight from the barrel. The fact that they have spent some of their ill-gotten capitalist gains on creating an actual printed metal "no geese allowed" sign for their property, rather than the endearingly ineffective handmade signs of the rest of the village, cements their place at the very bottom of the village index (aside from the other people I haven't even bothered to rank).

5: The Shopkeeper

Like the Publicans, the Shopkeeper's excessive capitalist agenda and overzealous enforcement of her right to exclusive use of shop land are traits that get tiring quickly, and which regularly interfere with the activities of me, a goose, just trying to go about my totally normal daily activities. She does get some extra points however, for her calculated indifference to the suffering of the kid wandering around outside her stall due to his recurring goose troubles (more on those later), and for her penchant for profiting off the items I bring to her stall by making their "owners" spend money on them. Her support to the goose agenda may just be an unwitting side effect of her own

personal awfulness, but at least it does sometimes work in my goosely favour. The Shopkeeper is also the villager most likely to actually be called Karen.

4: The Tidy Neighbour

The Tidy Neighbour likes cricket, and tea, and his newspaper, and does not like having anything in his garden unless he has carefully curated it to match one of those three interests. Everything else - even the items which I might carefully present to try and further one of those interests, like a delightful lightly-used thermos - gets tossed over the fence without any regard for my effort in bringing it to him. Yes, sometimes this is useful, like when I want to fill up the house two doors down with garden implements and then watch them all get thrown out the front door in a giant wood-and-metal tangle. But often it hurts my delicate goose feelings. When I go to such great lengths to bring him delicacies from across the village which just get thoughtlessly wanged onto the messy neighbour's patio. Other than this relentless thoughtlessness, there is not much to say about the tidy neighbour. He's boring. His pond is boring. His garden is boring. Yawn. Next.

3. The Wimpy Kid

Is this the only child in the village? Is he reduced to weakly kicking around a football by himself on the tarmac because there's nobody else to play with him, or is there some super fun adventure playground in another part of the village that our poor weedy boy has been kicked out from? Either way, the Wimp presents the most sadistic avenues for goose mischief, which generally take the form

of making him run into things, stealing his glasses and forcing him to follow the sound of pattering goose feet across the village in the vain hope of retrieving them, and untying his shoelaces then honking until he trips in a puddle. If the pub ladies are characters indicative of a deep, barely explored backstory to *Goose Game's* relationships, the Wimpy Kid is the character on whom the sequel potential clearly rests: an endlessly tormented child, falling for the same tricks ad nauseum, whose future disposition is inevitably going to be shaped by my actions in this game. Until he reaches that potential, however, wimpy kid must sit in the middle of these rankings.

2 The Gardener

As my sole interlocutor for the first part of the game, I feel a special affinity for the gardener and the rivalry we play out through our different conceptions of what his garden should look like. He thinks the trowel should live on the chair; I think it should live in the pond. He insists the carrots should go in the basket; I think they should live in the pond. He thinks the radio is best left on the cooler; I think... well, you get the idea. His willingness to chase me into said pond for some items and not others (like his special hat) makes me feel like there's a deep, thoughtful full of quirks here that in another game, I might consider getting to know better. If *Goose Game* were made by Bioware, the Gardener would be the default heterosexual female romance option, complete with a tragically dead previous flame, who I'd roll my eyes at and tell myself I wasn't going near but then accidentally get invested in on my first playthrough anyway. Tell me about your

charming, safe feelings, Gardener! I promise they are not wasted on this, uh, goose!

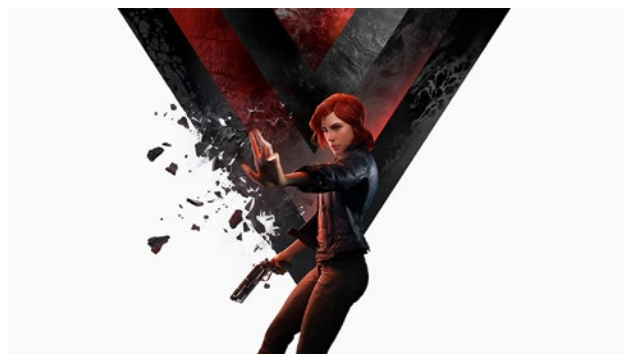
1. The Messy Neighbour

We come now, at the pinnacle of this ranking, to an uncomfortable truth: when we see the goose game for what it is, we must inevitably contend with the fact that, were we to be transported to its world, we would not identify with the agenda with the loathsome get awe-inspiring goose, but with the ordinary residents who rail, however ineffectively, against the transportation of their worldly possessions to a rubbish island near the village green. There comes a point at which we must search ourselves for some modicum of empathy towards these hidebound cretins, lest we fail to recognise the mirror they hold to our own selves. In doing so, it becomes clear who the unsung hero of the *Goose Game's* villagers truly is: the woman who has filled her garden with weird statues, entertaining windmills, a bath full of flowers that for some reason still has soap on it, and other non-conformist delights. Of course, what truly sets Messy apart from her peers is her subtle yet unmistakable assimilation into the Goose agenda. For one thing, she'll let me build a pile full of things her neighbour has thrown over the fence into her garden, and even dress up one of her statues in the detritus I bring her. She also shares my love of spying on her fellow villagers for maximum mischief, though her options are limited in this regard. Sealing the deal, and her place at the top of the list, is the giant garden bell. Never change, Messy Neighbour: the village resident we should all aspire to be.

Microreview [video game]: Control by Remedy Entertainment (developer)

Brian

Bigger on the Inside



Control had some work to do right out of the gate. *Quantum Break* wasn't exactly an unqualified success and Remedy's relationship with Microsoft seemed to disintegrate from it. Now back out on their own and paired with 505 Games, *Control* is a bit of a return to form for Remedy. Smaller in scope than *Quantum Break*, but doing more with less.

Control is a third person shooter with mind powers. You play as Jesse Haden, a woman who walked into the Federal Bureau of Control, and assumed leadership by bonding with the weapon of the former director. If that sounds weird, we haven't even scratched the surface. The FBC is charged with protecting the nation from supernatural threats, and it's been invaded by a threat

called The Hiss.

Control is a pitch-perfect blend of creepypasta, *Lost*, and *The X-Files*. There's lot of talk in memos and audio logs about containment and neutralization of Altered Items and Objects of Power. Jesse can bind with some of these OOPs to get new powers, starting with the ability to throw stuff with her mind. Littered all over this game are collectibles describing the supernatural effects of these items and how the FBC are working to contain them. There's also a series of videos that look like someone took the Dharma Initiative videos from *Lost* and made their own. These all star the same guy who played Alan Wake. Speaking of Alan Wake, there's also a series of videos starring the guy who voiced Max Payne. This whole game is stuffed with creepy fiction and Remedy all-stars and I loved it.

The gameplay is also well suited to the atmosphere. This is no cover shooter. Jesse has the archetypal shooter weapons: pistol, shotgun, sniper, etc. Augmenting these are the mind powers, with the first and most useful being Launch, which throws stuff. Essentially every piece of set decoration can be picked up and tossed at the enemy. It does a healthy amount of damage right out of the gate and it's extremely satisfying. More abilities trickle out later, but Launch is a mainstay through out of the game. Both weapon ammo and mind powers are on a delayed recharge, so combat is usually a matter of emptying one of those meters, and then emptying the other while the first recharges. Enemies also explode with health pickups when they die, so it makes no sense to sit in one place and shoot things in the

distance. Eventually you need to get up close to heal. There's a good variety of enemies, so the mix of weapons and mind powers have plenty of uses and combat essentially never gets boring.

There are two things that take away from *Control*, and that's the environments and difficulty spikes. The whole game takes place in the same extradimensional building (think *House of Leaves* or the Tardis from *Doctor Who*), and eventually I noticed that it's an awful lot of poured concrete. It's good looking and well-designed but there's just so much grey I can look at. Jesse is also fairly fragile, and I found numerous points in the game where difficulty spiked really hard, to the point that I sometimes just walked away from a mission and did something else, or quit out of the game entirely from frustration. There's a brutal section near the end of the game that took me at least a dozen attempts to get past, and required that I play the game differently from how I spent the rest of the game playing it. It wasn't fun. Even now, there are a couple side missions I may not finish because I'm past the ending and they're annoyingly difficult.

Despite these fairly minor quibbles, I absolutely loved *Control*. It's creepy, it plays well, and it looks great. *Control* is an excellent storytelling game.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10

Bonuses: +1 collectibles worth collecting, +1 gameplay that punishes inaction

Penalties: -1 same-y environments after a while,
-1 brutal difficulty spikes

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10 (very high quality/
standout in its category)

POSTED BY: brian, sci-fi/fantasy/
video game dork and contributor
since 2014

Essays



The Community of Apocalypse: On N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

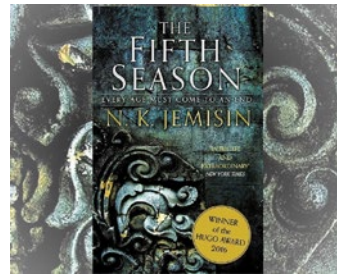
Phoebe Wagner

*Hey all, I've got another longform essay for you about N. K. Jemisin and *The Fifth Season*, with a focus on colonialism. Happy New Year!*

The Community of Apocalypse

N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy represents one of the most important works of 21st century speculative literature. While the narrative remains as exciting and entertaining as to fit the speculative genre expectations, the narrative skill is reminiscent of Samuel R. Delany's postmodern triumph *Dhalgren* (1974) or Ursula K. Le Guin's groundbreaking *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Yet, *Broken Earth* is never so simple as to become a single-issue trilogy. Rather, the novels center people of color, climate crisis, gender studies, colonial power structures, found family, intentional community, human rights theory, the nonhuman, and so on. Though many methodologies could be applied to an analysis of the trilogy, this paper will focus on a postcolonial reading of book one, *The Fifth Season* (2015). This novel is important to postcolonial studies because it represents the fall of an empire through environmental apocalypse rather than political or military change. While the shape of any community changes after colonialism, the combination of imperial collapse during environmental apocalypse depicts a reality that climate change could

produce. Already indigenous writers have imagined how shifting society due to the climate crisis would change colonized lands, such as the walled and expanded Diné lands described in Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning* (2018). This paper argues that ending empire through environmental collapse rather than through revolution or the withdrawal of colonial forces creates space for new communities more devoid of nationalism or repeated colonial power structures because community begets survival.



The Fifth Season is the first book in the trilogy and introduces a braided narrative with a strong first-person narrator. The three point of view characters are Damaya, Syenite, and Essun, who are revealed at the novel's end to be the same person at different points in her life. While the world seems recognizable—there is asphalt, cities, technology—two major changes impact the novel: consistent apocalyptic events (called Seasons) continuously decimate much of the continent and people exist who can sense and control these events called orogenes. While orogenes appear human, they can access earth-power, particularly heat, which allows them to create and control geologic forces. For example, by drawing heat from a human body, an orogene can flash-freeze a person. An orogene can also start an earthquake

or shield an area from tremors. In a world where “Father Earth” causes apocalyptic geological events regularly, such skills could be a boon to any community rather than a threat (8). Instead, orogenes are murdered, and if they survive to grow up “feral,” they are hunted and enslaved by the Fulcrum. The Fulcrum trains orogenes to work on behalf of the Fulcrum and other political leaders, though the Fulcrum represents the largest power structure in the novel. The orogenes’ enslavement involves being connected to a Guardian, a person with the ability to stop orogene abilities. Guardians are an exclusive caste that allows them special treatment, even during the apocalyptic time of a Season. They also exclusively work for the Fulcrum. While much postcolonial speculative literature investigates the invasion of other lands or nations, this novel depicts internal colonialism, such as defined by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang: “[I]nternal colonialism, the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the ‘domestic’ borders of the imperial nation. This involves the use of particularized modes of control—prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing—to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite” (4-5). This paper focuses on tracing the changing power structures of internal colonialism during the three sections: Damaya as a child taken to the Fulcrum; Syenite as a powerful but obedient orogene working for the Fulcrum; and Essun as an orogene coming out of hiding during a Season so destructive the Fulcrum will not survive. Each storyline displays a different type of colonial structure and the community that forms in accordance or in resistance to this empire.

Damaya's storyline displays how the colonial structures function as she must learn to survive within their abuse. In Damaya's first chapter, she is removed from her community as a child because her orogenic powers are discovered. Damaya's removal, while not exact, parallels indigenous child removal, especially as she is taken to the Fulcrum to learn not only about her powers but for general education as well, much like a boarding school. This removal and focus on education demonstrates the Fulcrum's usage of internal colonialism to control orogenes. Indeed, the instigator of this removal is Damaya's Guardian Schaffa, the only main human character described as white. Damaya at first identifies him as a "child-buyer," which remains accurate even if he is a Guardian, and she describes him as "almost white, he's so paper-pale; he must smoke and curl up in strong sunlight. [...] But what strikes Damaya most are the child-buyer's eyes. They're white or nearly so" (29). Additionally, the description of his voice could suggest a brogue: "[H]e speaks with an accent like none she's ever heard: sharp and heavy, with long drawled o's and a's and crisp beginnings and ends to every word. Smart-sounding" (26). While accurately described as a child-buyer, he also positions himself as a savior—to Damaya's family, he is ridding them of a dangerous creature, and to Damaya, he saves her from the mob violence that often results in the death of orogenes born outside the Fulcrum. Jemisin often details the skin color and hair type of characters, but Schaffa's appearance and actions so early in the narrative set up his role: the white colonist sent to educate and save orogenes for a greater purpose.

In the early stages of their relationship, Schaffa

begins teaching Damaya while traveling to deliver her to the Fulcrum. He tells Damaya the story of Shemshena, which is often taught in their schools. The story features a human outwitting and killing a supposedly violent orogene intent on massacring a human city for no reason. At first, Damaya likes the story but realizes at the end that she is not allowed to picture herself as the hero Shemshena but can only be regulated to the massacring orogene who comes to a violent end. She realizes this feeling was Schaffa's goal: "She doesn't like the one he just told, not anymore. And she is somehow, suddenly certain: He did not intend for her to like it" (93). The foundation of Damaya's community at the Fulcrum is based on such stories and information, which becomes more evident when she must unlearn them as Syenite then Essun. In *White Mother to a Dark Race*, Margaret D. Jacobs writes about the importance of such narratives in settler-colonial practice:

"The concept of the frontier in both countries has also contributed much to the heroic narratives of settler triumph that all but erase the histories of violence and conflict with the indigenous inhabitants of each continent. Myths of valiant settlers on the frontier work to obscure colonial histories in both counties" (6).

While Schaffa and the other Guardians do not enter an environmental frontier as they practice internal colonialism, they do free the land of what they see as threats to their power, thus enslaving powerful resources. As Schaffa says in a textbook definition of Said's Orientalism: "[Guardians train] as Shemshena did. We learn how orogenic

power works, and we find ways to use this knowledge against you. [...] I am your Guardian now, and it is my duty to make certain you remain helpful, never harmful" (93). Schaffa admits to the colonizer's tactics of creating a knowledge base to enslave an entire group of people while also couching it in emotionally manipulative language that would impact a child who doesn't want to hurt others. Thus, Schaffa introduces Damaya to what Said calls "dominating frameworks" through created knowledge: "Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (40). Schaffa uses this tactic to change Damaya's views of herself and her world, turning both violent. At the Fulcrum, Damaya is forced into this act of colonization and the reader learns how successful the Fulcrum tactics are through the older but obedient actions of Syenite. Syenite's world is created by the Fulcrum's knowledge and domination of what it means to be an orogene.

While Damaya is being reeducated by Schaffa and the Fulcrum, the braided narrative continues with Syenite, who has changed to survive the Fulcrum's violence. She's tough, talented, and believes the Fulcrum is, for the most part, right. She's given an assignment to "breed" with the most powerful orogene under the Fulcrum's command, named Alabaster (72). He's earned the right to refuse missions and travel alone, something most orogene never experience under Fulcrum rule and something Syenite desires. While he also obeys the Fulcrum's order to produce a child with Syenite, he works to undermine her belief in the Fulcrum, such as when he takes her to see a node station operated by one of his other orogene chil-

dren, meant to stop earthquakes and tremors near the empire's center. There, Syenite is reminded of the Fulcrum's true horrors:

The body in the node maintainer's chair is small, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things—tubes and pipes and things, she has no words for them—going into the stick arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There's a flexible bag on the corpse's belly, attached to its belly somehow, and it's full of—ugh. [... There's] a part of her that's gibbering, and the only way she can keep that part internal and silent is to concentrate on everything she's seeing. Ingenious, really, what they've done. She didn't know it was possible to keep a body alive like this: immobile, unwilling, indefinite. (139-40).

Much like Syenite, this moment is also the reader's first experience of the Fulcrum's ingenious horrors. The pattern of colonial violence is clear on the page, but Syenite's experience at the node demonstrates how the Fulcrum's framework had dominated her worldview. This scene demonstrates how the Fulcrum sees orogenes as resources, not people. As Alabaster says of the empire: "Mother Sanze can always find another use for [orogenes]" (140). In a postcolonial reading of this novel, such a moment is important because it demonstrates colonial power structures remain past the initial event. In the novel, these structures of control have been institutionalized and normalized as internal colonialism. Rather than focusing on an empire invading another land, a colonial trope in much epic fantasy, Jemisin's

worldbuilding relies on a much more deceptive form of colonization. This moment corresponds with Paul Gilroy's argument of reviewing the violent colonial archive: "The countless tales of colonial brutality are too important to be lightly or prematurely disposed of. [...] My argument is that these accounts of colonial war must be owned so that they can become useful in understanding the empire, in making sense of its bequest to the future" (47). Indeed, this previous violence is very much part of Essun's structuring of community later in the novel, where people are people no matter what (Jemisin 402). This realization of using orogenes as mere resources, though, leads to Syenite finding some form of community not dominated by Fulcrum knowledge. Until this moment, she had tolerated Alabaster, but the shared experience becomes an important source of knowledge that they keep secret in order to survive under the Fulcrum's oppression.

The novel ends with all three braids of the narrative coming together to make and reveal the main character of Essun. While the novel started with Essun alone, about to be turned on by her community, this book ends in Castrima, a geode that has a sustainable energy source that orogenes can access. The community already hiding and surviving the apocalypse in the geode is described by Essun as "people and not-people," of which Essun is a not-person (332). Yet, the Castrima community does not see themselves that way. Rather, to join the community, equality between human and nonhuman is required. Orogenes and humans work together for survival. The community leader, an orogene, states: "This is what we we're trying to do here in Castrima: survive.

Same as anyone. We're just willing to innovate a little" (343). In this moment, "innovate" takes on a double meaning. In the novel, it means they are willing to risk living in a geode that runs off orogene power, but in reference to the colonial structures depicted throughout the novel, "innovate" references the destruction of their normalized ways of treating others. No longer are orogenes feared by humans as together is how all—human and nonhuman—can survive the apocalypse.

The Fifth Season's focus on apocalyptic collapse separates it from other postcolonial speculative narratives. In the midst of apocalypse, community forms, found families fight, and internal colonialism is dismantled. Environmental apocalypse changes the type of community viable in Essun's world. No longer are dominating colonial structures sustainable, so the smaller decolonized communities—previously kept hidden—can reveal themselves and not only survive but thrive. While the novel offers many diverse readings, using the postcolonial critical lens opens an important avenue for future study—what happens when the climate apocalypse weakens or destroys colonial structures? N. K. Jemisin answers this question by ending her apocalyptic novel with a focus on intentional community that dismantles colonial systems as a valid form of survival.

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This is Not a Review of The Joker

Dean E.S. Richard

I have often speculated on why you don't return to America. Did you abscond with the church funds? Did you run off with a senator's wife? I like to think you killed a man; it's the romantic in me.

-Captain Renault, Casablanca



This is not a review of *The Joker* because, frankly, it doesn't need one. It has been reviewed, and the people who reviewed had the advantage of seeing it, which I lack - mostly because I don't feel the need to see it. I'm not saying it shouldn't exist, nor that it shouldn't be judged on its own merits, because art does have a right to exist - but the right to free speech doesn't mean people should talk incessantly.

To be sure, it looks good. Joaquin Phoenix looks the part every bit as much as Heath Ledger did, even as my keyboard itself revolts against the veracity of that statement. I - like most people,

I think - expected *Suicide Squad 2.0* from this; a hot mess of flaming garbage foisted upon moviegoers who should know better - yet, somehow, against all odds and whatever DC movies have been this past decade, what we received was an ostensibly compelling narrative of the origin of the one of the most compelling villains of all time.

Which raises two questions, at least for me. Indeed, they are both the same question - why?

In the first place, why do we need to know the origin of the Joker? For all his iterations through film, television and comics, what bearing does who he is and where he came from matter in the slightest? He is a villain for the sake of being a villain, which is a luxury most people writing fiction aren't allowed, despite it being allowed in real life 2019. It works for the Joker precisely because he is The Joker - insane, given to sadistic whimsy, crafting ornate plans while simultaneously not having one at all. He works because he doesn't have an origin. His adversary, Better Elon Musk, is all backstory. Rooted in his childhood trauma, he puts on a mask to keep it all out. Joker is what he is, unapologetically, always in pursuit of his mercurial goals, but doing what it takes to achieve them - Bats will give up his to protect a life, never willing to make the sacrifices truly needed.

In short, Joker works narratively because he is the perfect antagonist for Batman.

So if you tell me there is a compelling Joker story out there, I am all in. But this movie leads to yet another why - why does it need to exist? Why does it need to exist, specifically in 2019, where

we have villains aplenty, particularly of the variety that this film is asking us to sympathize with? Now, there is certainly a place for a sympathetic villain - they are usually the most compelling. But when we live in a world where real, actual human beings are holding up the Joker and his ilk as heroes, not because of their struggles, but because of their violence and lack of sympathy for the world around them, why are we making this movie?

There is a lot of validity to telling stories outside the traditional Heroes Journey, gets-the-girl and saves-the-world narrative. The same is true of flawed heroes, something other than perfect knights-in-shining armor. None of those things are real or particularly relatable. People are evil and selfish for a myriad reasons; we don't need to explore their backstory every time. We certainly don't have to empathize with them, or be asked to agree with them, or give tacit approval in the way we are so often in the real world as long as it doesn't affect me.

So why don't we empathize with a flawed hero, who maybe doesn't get the girl, who maybe doesn't win, but instead takes the hand they have been dealt and does the right thing with it? Richard Blaine, to whom Renault is speaking in the quote up top, is that (and one of the many reasons *Casablanca* is a perfect movie, but more on that another time). His arc is him going from being a cold isolationist, with no regard for the people or world around him, because he Didn't Get The Girl, to realizing there are things larger than himself and making sacrifices for that - including the girl he's been pining after.

Individuals matter. People matter. Everyone should feel loved and accepted for who they are. But it is all too common to see subsets of humanity care about themselves, how they are treated or mistreated or how they perceive they are, and lash out because of it (instead of, ya know, taking a shower and getting out of their internet echo chambers and doing something with their lives that would lead to them being loved and accepted, but I digress).

Art is simultaneously a reflection of who we are, and an image of what we can be. Let's make art that asks us to be better than we are.

-DESR

Battlestar Galactica as a Human Rights Narrative

Phoebe Wagner

Hey all, I promise this will be my last longform essay for a bit. I've been aching to write about Battlestar Galactica since the first time I watched it. Below are some musings on the role of Edward James Olmos as actor and director on the show.

Battlestar Galactica as a Human Rights Narrative



In 2003, Ronald D. Moore rebooted the 1970s television series *Battlestar Galactica* with Edward James Olmos in the star role. Unlike the campy *Star Wars*-inspired original, post-9/11 politics directly motivated the reboot as Moore and

the cast, particularly Olmos, sought to explore human rights through a violent division between human and nonhuman (Woerner). While one could criticize the show for being post-racial, the discussion is shifted to human rights as humanity and the human-looking robots called Cylons attempt genocide against each other. Space might seem borderless, but a key image from season one remains the border between human and Cylon planets, and destruction of that border sparks war.

By delineating human and Cylon spaces with a border, the line also decides who is human, thus uniting popular culture studies and human rights through the explorative lens of science fiction. While the entire series is beyond the scope of this paper, I apply James Dawes' human rights subgenre theory to a close analysis of Olmos' directorial debut on the show, "Tigh Me Up, Tigh Me Down" (2004). The popular culture nature of the show might seem dichotomous to human rights theory, but the 2009 presentation by the showrunners and actors, including Olmos, at the UN to discuss human rights suggest the cultural importance of *Battlestar Galactica* (Woerner).

When the reboot first aired with a miniseries in 2003, Edward James Olmos had a storied career ranging from his Oscar-nominated performance in *Stand and Deliver* (1988) to a starring role in *Miami Vice* (1984-1990) to the cult classics *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Selena* (1997) ("Edward James Olmos"). While only a sliver of his long career, these performances seem dichotomous from the role he often discusses: Commander Adama. A seemingly unusual turn in Olmos' career, the show represents one of the only shows from that era with a person of color in the leading role, let alone a Chicano actor. While shows like *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, *House*, *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and the standard *CSI* and *Law & Order* dominated the small screen, only *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010) overlaps with *Battlestar Galactica*. Unlike *Ugly Betty*, the show did not focus on the Latino/a/x experience but demonstrated a post-racial attitude. That being said, *Battlestar Galactica* strived for diversity before diversity became mandated by millennial audiences and had near gender

parity, attempts at queer representation, disability representation (though not by disabled actors), and an ensemble cast featuring enough diversity that white actors did not dominate the screen. All of this is not to dismiss the problematic representation in the show, particularly with which characters experience violent deaths and villain-as-disabled trope. Yet, the show represents a network television show actively engaging with not only diversity but post-9/11 thinking. Indeed, the United Nations' Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Planning Robert Orr commented that "if [*Battlestar Galactica*] can get us thinking about [post-9/11 issues], then Amen, because it isn't easy" (Woerner). Few shows on network television have as successfully demonstrated these commitments—and surely not on the Sci-Fi/SyFy channel, though *The Magicians* (2015-present) makes similar attempts. Current scholarship on *Battlestar Galactica* examines the show's diversity and exploration of otherness through the Cylons, but much of the scholarship focuses on the show's connection to international relations. This paper argues that show represents an early presentation of human rights post-9/11 and creatively engages with what James Dawes' calls "literature and human rights:" "[It] is not only a name for an academic subfield; it is a descriptor of increasingly deliberate institutional relationships and collaborations" (128). During the years that Dawes argues the field was solidifying (around 2007), *Battlestar Galactica* also explored these ideas on the small screen.

While different season arcs develop and create complexity from 2003-2010, a singular concern on *Battlestar Galactica* remains survival. The

opening miniseries shows the hatred between humans and Cylons as Cylons destroy the majority of the humanity with a nuclear holocaust. Less than fifty thousand people survive, including Commander Adama (Edward James Olmos), commanding the only remaining battlestar, a military ship. After the genocide, Commander Adama and his crew represent the remaining human military force and only protection against the Cylons' military presence. A few civilian ships escape and form a fleet under Commander Adama and the new president of humanity, Laura Roslyn, who was sworn in because she was thirty-fourth in line as minister of education. This power imbalance between experience and lack thereof (and between civilian and military authority) creates much of the tension around Commander Adama's character arc in the first thirteen episodes. In season one, two main conflicts dictate the arc: general survival after the nuclear destruction of humanity and uncovering the human-like Cylons in the fleet.

While popular culture has not always handled human rights issues with sensitivity, *Battlestar Galactica*'s season arcs align with the creation of James Dawes subgenre of human rights literature. Dawes describes the paradox of human rights literature: "That representations of atrocity are both ethical interventions and acts of voyeurism; that human rights work protects the dignity of the human by juridically restricting what counts as human; or that it grounds itself in the integrity of the unviolated body even as its theoretical dualism denigrates bodily experience" (130). Exploring atrocity through speculative fiction shortcuts some of these issues—particularly

voyeurism—but creates another: does treating such human rights violations as science fiction or fantasy dissociate from the reality of these lived experiences? Perhaps speculative fiction works best in concert with other works of literature and scholarship but not in isolation. Indeed, speculative works allow for theories in addition to experiences to be translated to a popular audience through the lens of popular culture. It also allows for subversion across partisan lines. For example, in *Battlestar Galactica* a season-long arc dramatizes a new colony of humans occupied by the militarily superior Cylons. The humans respond with suicide bombers, and while some characters discouraged the action, one of the main characters (Adama's best friend, Saul Tigh played by Michael Hogan) deems the suicide bombers necessary to drive away the Cylons. This arc not only critiques the US invasion and occupation of Iraq but also demonstrates how that occupation radicalizes people. Here lies the power of speculative stories—they can distill ideas into a popular framework.

Notably, the show engages with both plot structures that Dawes describes in "The Novel of Human Rights:" the justice plot and the escape plot (137). The first half of the series demonstrates the justice plot: "In the justice plot, the central narrative is a narrative of return, of violation and its investigation, of the pull of past crime and attempts to repair it" (137). Especially in season one, investigation of who might be a Cylon, how the Cylons were able to destroy humanity, and how the Cylons are able to track the remaining humans creates much of the tension. In addition, revenge for the genocide of humanity also pro-

vides character motivation. During the second half of the show, as Cylons and humans intermingle and form partnerships (including the first Cylon-human child), the plot shifts to the second plot identified by Dawes, the escape plot: "In the escape plot, the central narrative is a narrative of departure, of accumulating, forward-pushing violations, of escape as opposed to repair" (137). Rather than looking backward and remembering their human cultures, humanity and Cylons alike search for a paradise-like planet, prophesized as the home world of human and Cylon: Earth. The focus becomes escape as life is no longer sustainable on the worn-out ships.

Significantly, Edward James Olmos' first turn as director on the show address the concern of who is human and who is Cylon in season one's "Tigh Me Up, Tigh Me Down." The A plot and B plot of the episode revolve around accusing multiple people of being Cylons. President Laura Roslyn believes Commander Adama is a Cylon after being lied to by another Cylon. Her fears are only supported by Adama's strange behavior, which is caused by the random appearance of Ellen Tigh, his executive officer's wife. Of course, due to her sudden appearance on a civilian ship, Adama fears Ellen could be a Cylon. A few minutes into the episode, President Roslyn approaches Commander Adama on his command deck, a space that he very much controls. As a Cylon detector has just been created, Roslyn asks Adama to have his blood checked first: "I completely agree [that people in sensitive positions should go first]. How about you? [...] If you're a Cylon, I'd like to know" (Olmos). This question immediately others him, and while the show attempts post-ra-

ciality, a powerful white woman asking an equally powerful Latino to prove himself—by extension, his humanity and loyalty—creates a tense scene that crosses into Dawes’ justice plot as finding the Cylons means exacting revenge not only for the genocide but the deaths that occurred since humanity has been forced to flee. If Adama were a Cylon, enacting justice against him would provide closure for the deaths that happened since humanity fled the genocide. These moments more clearly resonate with post-9/11 fear, but the fact they continue to resound over a decade later speak to how show tapped into a larger US-cultural fear.

In particular, Roslyn plays detective while trying to discover why Adama has seemed distracted over the past few days, thus aligning with Dawes’ theory again: “The justice plot looks to the detective novel” (137). Indeed, detective novels are a leitmotif throughout the show, particularly between Adama and Roslyn. She continues the investigation by asking her assistant to question his girlfriend (an officer on the battlestar) about Adama’s actions. She even brings in Saul Tigh, Adama’s best friend, for interrogation with her assistant, creating a low-key good cop/bad cop situation as she and her assistant question Tigh. The tension rises as Roslyn says: “I advise you right now to not say anything you would regret” (Olmos). The investigation continues to unravel as Tigh reveals his wife’s name, cluing Roslyn into Adama’s distracted behavior and making her suspicious that Tigh’s wife could be a Cylon.

While the episode could continue to develop the tension between Adama and Roslyn’s relationship

evident throughout season one, the episode takes an unexpected turn to humor, which also undermines the justice plot. Due to the serious topics of the show, humor rarely appears. When the studio asked for “Tigh Me Up, Tigh Me Down” to represent a less serious turn on the show, Olmos disagreed with the choice but said: “Okay, but if you guys want humor, then I want to direct it” (ScreenRelish). The required use of humor inspired Olmos directorial debut on the show, and certain moments of humor in the episode are decidedly directorial through blocking, framing, and camera angles, particularly in central ensemble scene: a celebratory dinner and a confrontation over who could be a Cylon. The dinner scene consists of five characters: Saul Tigh and his newly recovered wife Ellen Tigh; Adama and Roslyn who both believe Ellen could be a Cylon; and Adama’s son Lee, a fighter pilot captain. Adama and Roslyn each attempt to ensnare a drunken Ellen in her words, such as when Adama says: “Any one of us could be a Cylon” (Olmos). Even though intoxicated, Ellen eventually catches on. A series of quick cuts provide close ups of each actor as they consider whether Ellen might be a Cylon, interrupted by Ellen shouting “Boo!” A wider shot shows the startled reactions as the moment of tension—in the room and for the viewer—is broken as there is no way this drunken, silly woman could be a master mind of evil. As Roslyn says later: “You actually think that woman is a Cylon?” (Olmos). Ellen’s actions end the dinner, though Adama, Roslyn, and Lee compare notes afterward, leading to another moment of humor. After watching Saul and Ellen drunkenly stumble out, almost falling in the corridor, Adama says: “Ellen used to encourage the worst instincts in

this guy. Bring out the self-destructive streak in him” (Olmos). His son Lee responds: “Used to” (Olmos)? They stop cleaning up the dinner plates, pause for an extended beat staring into the middle distance, then resume cleaning. In a cathartic release with the characters, the audience can laugh about how ridiculous the drunken Ellen can act. This beat also enforces that Tigh, a recovering alcoholic, is in serious trouble with the return of his wife.

Battlestar Galactica rarely uses humor throughout an episode, so the turn to humor could possibly undermine the show, one reason Olmos wanted to direct the difficult—though memorable—episode. Similarly, the novels James Dawes explores as part of defining the human rights subgenre are not comedies but serious explorations of atrocity. While the episode’s humor is decidedly dark—questioning someone’s humanity, which would lead to their execution, is not typical dinner table talk—it demonstrates how such atrocity deeply changes people until even what is acceptable humor changes. Overall, *Battlestar Galactica* questions what becomes acceptable after genocide—torture, suicide bombers, mandated childbirth, martial law. Part of this questioning eventually leads to what becomes acceptable for survival, including relationships with Cylons. Through the popular culture medium of a speculative television show on the often derided Sci-Fi/SyFy channel, *Battlestar Galactica* ultimately works to erase the imagined line between what is arbitrarily defined as human or alien.

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How to End a Game of Thrones

The G

It was the best of times; it was the blurst of times...

[Warning: Spoilers Everywhere]



The year was 2006. My fiction reading list was maybe 60% science fiction but 0% fantasy. It had been this way for years, after my love for second world fantasy died on a hill called The Wheel of Time. Subsequently, I had internalized normative cultural discourses that devalue fantasy unless packaged as “magic realism.” Former NOAF contributor Jemmy, however, had other ideas.

At that time we were working for the same company, our offices strategically located in a neighborhood famous for its second-hand bookstores. We would often visit them during our lunch hour; without fail, Jemmy would pester me about this fantasy series that he claimed “changed everything.” But I was resistant, that is, until he bought me a copy of George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* and I relented.

So I read the first chapter, and then the next, and

then the next. Within a few days I had devoured *A Game of Thrones* in its entirety, proceeding to devour its sequels, *A Clash of Kings* and *A Storm of Swords*. I couldn’t get enough, so I moved on to other series; I was most definitely back on the fantasy train.

I have issues with those 3 books, some quite serious, but for my money the worldbuilding, character development and punctuated narrative moments are as good as any in the genre. Furthermore, despite their heft, these books feel meticulously planned, tightly plotted and rich with narrative detail. Most importantly, they revived my interest in fantasy and led me to discover a range of authors I otherwise might not have read: Andrzej Sapkowski, Gene Wolfe, Elizabeth Bear, N.K. Jemisin, Steven Erikson, Kate Elliot, Djan-go Wexler and many others.

I like to think of those first three books as a complete trilogy with an ambiguous ending. It’s a coping mechanism that helps me deal with the fact that the next two books - *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons* - are such disappointments; a single, bloated novel in two 1,000-page installments; a failed attempt to “get to Mordor” that aptly demonstrates the importance of a good editor in no uncertain terms. And it helps me deal with the fact that Martin may never finish the series.

Enter the Series...

When *Game of Thrones* launched in 2011, I was excited. Early indications suggested HBO would go all out adapting the series. Like many fans of

the book series, I hoped this it would serve as a catalyst for Martin to finish the series. Instead, it has finished the story for him. But more about that in a bit.

The initial season was a masterful adaptation of the first novel, which is far tighter in both narrative and geographic scope than its sequels. Many of the actors looked and felt exactly like their written counterparts; some – like Jorah Mormont and Tyrion Lannister – were an improvement. The second through fourth seasons captured much of what made *A Clash of Kings* and *A Storm of Swords* effective as novels, though they also amplified the shock value of their punctuated moments. In truth, there’s nothing in the show that isn’t also represented in the books, but the show frequently makes explicit what is relayed second-hand or merely suggested in the books. To put it another way, the books already make it clear how common murder, rape and torture are in this world, but the show positively revels in it. The effect is to cheapen their impact; we are frequently shown how grim and dark this world is, but little or no time is spent on exploring the implications and consequences of all the grim darkness. Not in any meaningful way, at least.

On the other hand, the show pulls off a fairly remarkable feat: adapting a sprawling fantasy epic for a medium that can do plot and character, but routinely struggles with the kind of myth- and world-building that are essential to second-world fantasy.

As with the books, though, things degenerate once the show moves on to interpreting *A Feast*

for *Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*. Though mercifully eliminating the horrid Quentyn Martel storyline, nearly everything else that made those books a tedious slog is recreated for television (only now with more rape and torture!). The low quality of storytelling from these books mars seasons 3 and 4, and (in my view) outright ruins seasons 5 and 6.

In season 7, Benioff and Weiss officially moved past the source material altogether (though apparently with some input from Martin). Like many fans, I was deeply skeptical of their ability to right the ship. In fact, I probably would have quit the series if I hadn't been worried that this was the only ending we'd ever get. Only, I found the experience oddly liberating – for the first time since season 2, I wasn't comparing the show negatively to the books, even to the books I didn't care much for.

Season 7 has its share of head scratchers - most notably, Jon Snow's incredibly stupid plan to risk half the elite warriors under his command on a commando mission to bag a wight to show Cersei (who, predictably, is unmoved). But it was dirty

fun.

The narrative decisions in season 8 are better, but nearly all require more exposition than they are given. Danaerys becoming the "Mad Queen" is a perfect example: history is replete with individuals who begin as idealists and end as ideologues; who through struggle come to believe the ends justify the means; or who believe the justice of the cause confers infallibility onto its avatar.

By the season finale, it is clear Danaerys has become all these things - only we haven't made that journey with her. Rather, it happens so fast that you're left wondering if it was something Tormund said, or that time Jon didn't want to kiss her. It would have been much better, and much more believable if we'd had a few more episodes of developing paranoia and anger.

The season finale is, in a word, polarizing.

Long-anticipated series finales often are, and several times I've been on #TeamKvetch (e.g. *BSG*). But I found this denouement quietly gratifying.

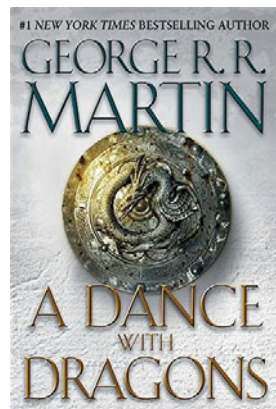
Bran becoming king is a bit weird, until you realize the whole point is to devalue kingship. And I was neither here nor there on Arya the Pirate (though what a great spinoff that would make). On the other hand, I loved Sansa asserting the independence of the north - regardless of the fact that her brother sits on the proverbial Iron Throne. Jon rejoining Tormund and Ghost felt equally appropriate, as did Brienne honoring Jaime in the annals of the Kingsguard - a touching act that almost helps you forget that bizarre moment when their friendship became gratuitously (and unnecessarily) sexual.

My favorite moment, though, comes when Tyrion waits for the new Small Council - which includes Brienne, Sam and new Lord of Highgarden and Master of Coin Bronn - and nervously keeps adjusting the chairs. It's a tiny detail, but one that speaks volumes to the endurance of hope.

I don't know if Martin will end his books the same way, or if he will ever end them at all. I certainly hope he does. But if he doesn't, then at least we have this - a poignant and cathartic end to the journey we started so long ago.

George R.R. Martin is Still Not Your Bitch, and other stories

Joe Sherry



When Neil Gaiman wrote his famous and infamous essay “Entitlement Issues” (most well known for the pull quote “George R.R. Martin is not your bitch.”) in 2009, it had been four years since the publication of *A Feast for Crows* and it still would be another two years before Martin

published *A Dance With Dragons*.

In his essay, which was really more a response to a reader question, Gaiman noted that Martin (or any author) is not working on contract to the reader, that buying an earlier volume in a series does not entitle the reader to a later volume at any time other than which the author is ready to produce it.

I’m sympathetic to both the frustrated reader as well as the frustrated writer. I’ve been online for too long as I’ve gotten older and I’m aware of many of the issues preventing writers from getting that next book out, whether it is health issues, publisher issues, or just that book just being really fucking difficult to write, I get it. As much as someone can who doesn’t actually write fiction can get it, I get it. It can still be frustrating for the

reader when the next series volume doesn’t come out when previous books were on a more predictable timeline.

It has now been eight years since the publication of *A Dance With Dragons* and in that time HBO will have begun and finished all eight seasons of *Game of Thrones*, the television show based off of Martin’s novels (on the off chance any reader of *Nerds of a Feather* was not aware of the show or its source material)

I’m not here to legislate a single thing regarding what GRRM should or should not do with his time, how long it should take to write a book, or make any demands. I’ve seen the comments readers make online when Martin dares to mention *Wild Cards* or any ancillary project he might be working on or even any aspect of his personal life that doesn’t involve the completion of *The Winds of Winter*. Frankly, those readers are assholes and I want no part of their vitriol. It is toxic. It is unhealthy. It is not what I’m about.

Ever since the show surpassed the books, I’ve been in the same place as every other reader who is watching *Game of Thrones* - uncertain as to how closely the show will mirror the novels and in what ways the show and books will be different. Will the series end at the same point the show does? Does Arya still kill the Night King? I’ve already lamented (in private) the difference in Sansa’s storyline from the book to the show, and many readers have been disappointed by the absence of Lady Stoneheart in the show.

I still want to know how those stories will resolve,

perhaps now more than ever. How close is the show to Martin’s original plan? Assuming Danaerys putting King’s Landing to the dragon was GRRM’s idea, will the (mostly) vitriolic response to “The Bells” change Danaerys’s story arc in the books at all? Does it matter?

Of course, waiting for the next book in a series is nothing new to genre readers. In the eight years since *A Dance With Dragons*, I’ve lost much of my eagerness and rapt anticipation for *The Winds of Winter* (which is not to say that a real announcement won’t ratchet my excitement level up to eleven in a third of a second). It’s been eight years since Patrick Rothfuss published *The Wise Man’s Fear* and I’ve seen the same frustration (and hate) online directed at Martin also directed at Rothfuss. But fans of Melanie Rawn have waited twenty two years for *The Capital’s Tower*, the concluding volume in her *Exiles* trilogy. *The Mageborn Traitor* was published in 1997. Even twenty-two years isn’t all that unusual in the genre, though.

It’s not the most of original thoughts to say that even though I’m (fairly) patiently waiting for *The Winds of Winter* and *The Capital’s Tower* and that year 948 Deryni novel from Katherine Kurtz that she hasn’t even announced she’s working on, I’m not really waiting for them. There’s a LOT to read out there. I’m working my way through this year’s Hugo Award finalists. I finally caught up on the *Vorkosigan* novels from Lois McMaster Bujold, which only means that I have three more Chalion novels and all of the Sharing Knife to go. Also, do you have any idea how far behind I am on Kate Elliott’s work? Feminist Futures has reshaped what I want to read and when, and there’s an

ocean of great stuff out there.

I'm not saying that it isn't worthwhile to be frustrated when a favorite writer is taking longer than you'd like with your favorite series. I get it. But I also tell my four year old son that throwing a fuss isn't going to make the time go by faster. If he knew how to spell and type, he'd probably be on twitter complaining that having to wait three days to see grandma is an excessively long time. Everything is relative.

I've long disagreed with Gaiman, at least in part, with the idea that purchasing book one in the

series only entitles the reader to that one book purchased. I agree with Gaiman that purchasing a book is purchasing a book and that yes, you are only entitled to the one book you purchased. There is, however, an implicit promise by the author that when a book is "Book One of The Gibbelhead Fountain" that there is an intent to deliver a complete story that provides an ending.

For those keeping score at home, I don't include a series where each novel stands on its own even if it is building a larger world and gradually a greater story on top of the individual discrete stories of the novel. Think Seanan McGuire's *Incryptid* or

Diana Rowland's *White Trash Zombie* series.

This should go also without saying, but tied to that implicit promise is that besides the reality of the entire publishing industry is an understanding that life is a very good reason for a novel to not come out when "expected" - whether it is health, family, or simply because writing a novel with excellence is really fucking difficult.

What I don't care about is how long it takes for my favorite writer to publish the next novel in my favorite series.

Conversations



Adri and Joe Talk About Books: 2018 Locus Recommended Reading List

Adri Joy & Joe Sherry



Joe: The Locus Recommended Reading List is out, which is always something of an annual event. I don't think this is an original idea, but I've long considered the Locus Recommended list to be one of the best snapshots of what is going on in the genre in a given year. It's certainly not exhaustive, and there's always going to be favorites left off the list, but from a high level - these are most of the important and noteworthy SFF books and stories from the previous year.

What are your initial impressions of the list?

Adri: At this stage, I think I've read over 50 novels (and a sizeable number of novellas) published in 2018, but I have to say that every time the Locus list comes out I have a moment of screaming into the void over what a drop in the ocean that is compared to the number of fantastic books that come out. This year is no exception and for every book I've read and am excited to see here, there's

another one I want to catch up on or want to find out more about! That is, of course, a brilliant problem to have compared to the alternative of having read everything...

Joe: I'd give myself around 60 books from 2018 (a down year), including novellas, and I think I have much the same reaction. I quickly scan the list thinking "that was good, that was good, damn it I haven't read that one yet, that was good, what the heck is *Theory of Bastards*, that was good", and so on. Besides the fleeting joy of seeing stuff that I like get recognized, it's the combination of discovery and reminders that I like.

For example, I'm pretty sure I first heard about this on the Coode Street podcast, but there's a science fiction novel titled *Condomnauts* and it's about galactic sexual ambassadors from Earth, because sex is diplomacy. I'm just so glad this novel exists and that it made the Locus Recommended list.

I am reminded that I need to read Sam Miller's *Blackfish City*. I fully expect it to end up on one of the awards ballots, probably the Nebula.

Adri: Yes to both those things! *Blackfish City* is great but having read it, it definitely "feels" like a Nebula book - although, saying that without qualification feels a bit obnoxious...

Joe: No, I agree. Without being able to really put my finger on it (and without having read it), *Blackfish City* *feels* much more like a Nebula book in that same way that I'm not surprised *Autonomous* made the Nebula ballot last year and

not the Hugo (while fully noting that *Autonomous* placed 8th in the nomination tally - but if you asked me if *Autonomous* would get a Hugo or a Nebula nomination, I'd have said Nebula).

Of course, I hated *The Three-Body Problem* and wouldn't have called it for either award, so what do I know?

Adri: I mean, there's nothing on this year's list that I would be as annoyed to have to read for awards purposes as I was with *Death's End*, so that's definitely a good starting point.

Joe: Ignoring for a moment the lack of recognition for our own Feminist Futures project in Non-Fiction since it wasn't actually published in book form, are there any other glaring omissions that jumped out at you?

Adri: So, apparently I'm being contrary this year, because two of my novel nominees and four of my favourite novellas didn't make the cut. Of those, I'm most disappointed not to see *Before Mars*, by Emma Newman - I caught up on both of the more recent *Planetfall* novels last year and they both completely blew me away, especially this. I also think it's a shame not to see any Book Smugglers stories here, especially as this is the last year for their publishing wing; they came out with some really interesting novellas last year, including *Accelerants* by Lena Wilson and *Between the Firmaments* by JY Yang.

Overall, it's quite interesting to see where sequels are being recommended and where they aren't. I like that Tim Pratt's *The Dreaming Stars* is here, as

that's shaping up to be a great series, and it's nice to see Vivian Shaw's irreverent horror-based urban fantasy, *Dreadful Company*, in the mix too, even if I'm still waiting for that series to capitalise on the potential of its female characters. *Salvation's Fire* by Justina Robson - the second in a shared universe series kicked off by Adrian Tchaikovsky earlier in 2018 - is a bit of a surprise to me as the sole entrant for that series, but I do see the appeal even if I liked its predecessor better.

On the other hand, there's no threequel love for *Binti* or the *Wayward Children* (in a much shorter overall novella list), and neither of John Scalzi's novels - *Head On* and *The Consuming Fire* - get a mention. They're my top contenders for the unusual "not on the Locus but made the Hugo ballot anyway" spot this year.

What did you expect, or want, to see here that isn't?

Joe: The first thing I specifically looked for was Matt Wallace's final *Sin du Jour* novella *Taste of Wrath*. I'm not entirely surprised it didn't make the list simply because I'm not sure it's received a fraction of the attention and love that the series deserved. I passionately and sometimes aggressively love those stories and it has been a perpetual disappointment to me that they haven't been nominated for everything they are eligible for and even for some things they aren't. I'm holding out for a Best Series Hugo nod, but maybe I shouldn't hold my breath.

The second thing I looked for, and this was mostly out of curiosity, was whether anything from

Serial Box made the cut. Nothing did. Because I'm that sort of wonk, I did a super quick check of previous years and the first season *Tremontaine* made the list. I'm not surprised by that either, because *Tremontaine* is an expansion of the Sword-point world and I would expect to see Locus recognize Ellen Kushner. I do wonder if next year we'll see recognition for *The Vela* or *Ninth Step Station*. Both seem like something that might get some extra attention, eyeballs, and acclaim.

Adri: *Bookburners*, helmed by Max Gladstone, also made in 2017 but I take the point about next year's list.

Joe: I didn't notice it until you mentioned it, but the lack of *Beneath the Sugar Sky* from novella really does seem glaring. It's perhaps my second favorite of the four (behind *Every Heart a Doorway*), and I have to think it'll make the Hugo ballot.

Adri: Yes, it's on my novella ballot, and it's my runaway favourite of the *Wayward Children* series so far, although I freely admit there's a heavy dose of personal taste in there...

On the other hand, is there anything other than *Blackfish City* that's jumped to the top of your TBR after seeing it here?

Joe: Sue Burke's *Semiosis*. Would you believe I've had that on my Nook for pretty much all of 2018 and I still haven't read it? Any mention of it has practically glowed with praise and I just never got around to it.

I do also want to read *Chercher La Femme*, the latest from L. Timmel Duchamp published by Aqueduct. Those two, along with *Empire of Sand* and perhaps *Dread Nation* are the ones to really catch my eye.

Adri: Conveniently for me, *Semiosis* just went on sale on Kindle UK! It's been on my radar for a while and I'm really keen to check it out. The other one I'm very interested in is Tasha Suri's *Empire of Sand*, a very intriguing looking fantasy set in a Mughal Empire-inspired world.

I'd actually had Chandler Klang Smith's *The Sky is Yours* on my radar and then forgotten about it until now. I think in my mind, the neon cover got confused with the cover of *Blackfish City*, because apparently I can keep eighty different spaceship covers straight in my head but not two actually very different-looking city-based science fiction novels. Back on the list it goes!

Joe: From what I can tell, Locus tends to do a good job mentioning UK publishers, but just out of curiosity, how US-centric does the list feel to you?

Adri: Well, nothing jumps out as a glaring US-centric text, and I don't think there are any buzzy books that I've struggled to gain access to in the UK. One thing I did note is that there are a couple of things on my Hugo radar (although not my ballot) that are in "second wave" eligibility i.e. first publication in the US in 2018, which I don't think the Locus list counts? Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* was a 2015 UK release that won the Clarke, my heart, and a 2018 US edition (in

that order), but I don't think that counts for this list, and the lack of Tchaikovsky overall makes me a bit sad. *Terra Nullius*, by Claire G. Coleman, was released by Small Beer Press in 2018, a year after originally being published in Australia, and it's an absolutely searing take on colonialism that deserves a wider audience. I also noticed only one translation among the novels - *Yoss* - and surely there must be more worth noting? Jin Yong's *A Hero Born* came out in English for the first time in 2018.

Joe: I expect Rachel Cordasco will have something to say about the lack of translation. I counted two (*Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the aforementioned *Condomnauts*).

The thing that jumped out at me with the UK publication is the Adam Roberts novel only with a UK publisher listed. I think Dave Hutchinson has had greater success in the UK than in the US. I just didn't know if all of the books I was aware of was because they were more prominent in the US than in the UK, and if you're more aware of them because of how they are positioned here versus books you'd actually see in the shops or discussed where you live.

Adri: Yes, I think the UK is pretty well represented in this list, at least based on the novel sections? Hutchinson's *Fractured Europe* series has definitely been bigger in the UK (although I can't quite bring myself to finish it despite owning *Europe at Dawn*, for a couple of reasons). Ben Aaronovitch is also huge, and *Lies Sleeping* was a really great entry to the *Rivers of London* series (probably the best since the fourth), so I'm happy to see that get

some love! Jasper Fforde's new standalone (*Early Riser*) isn't here, and a new novel from him is always a big deal, but I'm not sure it's at the level of quality where I'd expect it to appear. From a publishing standpoint, only *The Dreaming Stars* makes it for Angry Robot but there's a fair bit of love for *Solaris*, which is based in the UK.

But yes, an increase in translation is something I'd love to see on this list from a selfish standpoint - I don't read nearly enough of it to know what I'd like to see here (and I bounced pretty hard off the misogyny in the *Yoss* book I previously tried), but I'd love it if Locus could solve that problem for me. Of course, there already are people out there doing that work, and not all lists can do all things, so I guess I'll cope.

Joe: To the point that we can look at the Locus Recommended list and extrapolate out to the Hugo and Nebula Awards (I believe there's something like a 75-80% hit rate on novels and novellas), what would you expect to see make the final ballots? Or, at least, what would you not be surprised to see make the final ballot?

Adri: My money is on *The Calculating Stars* by Mary Robinette Kowal making both lists: it's been a huge hit (including with you!) and while I have somewhat mixed feelings about the duology as a whole, I think it deserves to be recognised. I think *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang is also going places, although it will be interesting (and frustrating) to see if the first half of the plot, which takes place in a school with a teen protagonist, leads to people nominating it for the YA awards when it so clearly isn't. And if Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail*

of Lightning doesn't make one or the other I'd be super surprised, given her short story wins last year. Finally, Catherynne M. Valente seems to fly under the radar of awards notice a lot of the time but there's been a lot of buzz around *Space Opera*. While it's not at the top of my personal list, as a fan of Eurovision I would not be sorry to see a book that takes its chapter titles from the contest's greatest hits and its section names from the Captain Planet elements get some best novel love.

Joe: I agree that *The Calculating Stars* seems like as much of a lock as a book can reasonably be. I think it was a major hit in both nominating audiences and Kowal has been generally popular with both the Hugo and the Nebula crowds (she's a two time Hugo winner for her short fiction and once more for Writing Excuses), plus the original *Lady Astronaut* novelette won a Hugo.

Space Opera seems likely. Like we discussed, *Blackfish City* seems reasonable for the Nebula. I won't be surprised by Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Moon* getting a Hugo nod. Robinson's novels tend to get nominated (*Shaman* did not, but I expect *Aurora* would have had it been published in a normal Hugo year). *Revenant Gun*? *Record of a Spaceborn Few*? I will be surprised if Robert Jackson Bennett's *Foundryside* makes the list. I just haven't seen the conversation around it, and if his *Divine Cities* didn't make it as individual novels, I don't think this is the awards breakout. I won't be surprised if Scalzi makes the Hugo ballot with one of his two novels.

The one I think you're right about is *Trail of Lightning*. Traditionally, no. It's not the sort of

novel that gets recognized, but Roanhorse was so popular with “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience” and *Trail of Lightning* was so well received, that I’d also be surprised if it doesn’t make at least one of the ballots.

I expect to be disappointed by *The Poppy War* missing out.

I also won’t be mad if something like *The Red Clocks* sneaks onto the Nebula ballot. Or Made-line Miller’s *Circe*, but I think that’s a stretch.

Oh! I forgot the obvious one: *Spinning Silver*. I can’t imagine an awards season where Naomi Novik’s novel isn’t nominated for one award, if not both the Nebula and the Hugo.

Adri: I agree with you for *Foundryside*, unfortunately, although it’s on my ballot and I think it’s just as worthy as the *Divine Cities* (which were robbed last year). And yes, *Spinning Silver* feels like a near certainty - insofar as anything is - too.

I think *Revenant Gun* is the thing on my personal

novel ballot that is most likely to make the final list (because apparently I’m rooting for some serious underdogs this year - though I’m also cross-pollinating with *Tess of the Road*, my hands-down favourite book of 2018, which I refuse to contemplate not being up for the Lodestar). However, it doesn’t feel as certain as the previous two novels - which would be a shame, because I think it’s a much stronger book than Raven Stratagem and did some unexpected but quite satisfying things with its final-act character arcs.

Joe: The one book not mentioned so far that I do have on my Hugo ballot is Nicky Drayden’s *Temper*. I liked *Prey of Gods*, but *Temper* was Drayden leveling up. I’d expect it more on the Nebula than the Hugo, if it gets anywhere.

Adri: Yes - *Temper* is another one that narrowly missed out for me, but between that and *Prey of Gods*, Drayden is basically on my autobuy list for future novels. I do also have to note that I think she’s the only Black novel author not on here for YA (this is not to disparage YA at all, but the barriers to entry in that field are different to those in

adult SFF), which feels frustrating after the glow surrounding Jemisin’s three-Hugo streak. There are people and publications out there doing great things when it comes to increasing representation of marginalised voices in the genre; we’ve not touched on the short fiction categories but I was really pleased to see *FIYAH* Literary Magazine represented with 6 stories, 5 more than last year, among lots of other good venues. But it’s frustrating to see PoC representation continue to fall on so few shoulders in the novel lists. I hope there will be more detailed analysis of this (Natalie Luhrs has done a great breakdown for the last few years) because it’s something worth keeping in mind when using these lists.

Joe: Hey - I really enjoyed this. We should do another one, maybe when the Nebula ballot is announced.

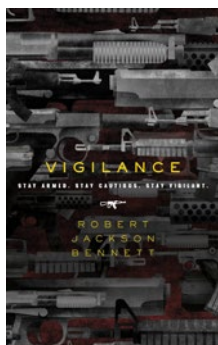
Adri: Absolutely! Thanks for putting this together and I look forward to seeing what this year’s awards reading has in store...

Review Roundtable: *Vigilance* by Robert Jackson Bennett

Adri Joy, Brian, Joe Sherry, Paul Weimer

The escalating havoc and ultraviolence of *Vigilance* holds an effective, if culturally specific, mirror to violence and fear in the US.

CONTENT WARNING: This review discusses gun violence throughout, and includes references to child death. Also, we're discussing the whole novella, so BEWARE SPOILERS.



Vigilance, the new novella from Robert Jackson Bennett, is out today and it's a searing look at gun violence in the US. In this near future dystopia, John McDeane is tasked with running "Vigilance", the nation's favourite reality programme, in which real shooters are released

on unsuspecting locations with military-grade armaments, and the resulting carnage is broadcast as a "lesson" in how to protect oneself. McDeane and his crew at ONT station think they have the variables of *Vigilance* down to a fine art, but in the novella's ensuing escalation find themselves taken down by one of McDeane's own blindspots, to dramatic effect.

We've got a lot of Bennett fans on our team here at *Nerds of a Feather* and when this novella came to our attention, lots of us were interested in reading it to review. That's why, instead of taking it on alone, today I, Adri, am joined by Paul Weimer, Brian, and Joe Sherry to unpack Bennett's highly topical novella and our reactions to it.

Adri: *Vigilance* is a novella about a near-future America that "from the beginning, ... had always been a nation of fear". In it, the perception of internal and external threats has given rise to a reality TV show (also called *Vigilance*), where state-sanctioned shooters are let loose in public spaces with the subsequent carnage broadcast for entertainment and "education". Was *Vigilance* what you expected going in?

Paul: I want to begin with something I saw on twitter from the author, Robert Jackson Bennett. In talking about the novella, he said:

 **ol johnny websites** @robertjbennett
my novella, *VIGILANCE*, out in January, is about a cynical entertainment news channel creating its own news to manipulate Americans' fears, only to be itself manipulated by a hostile foreign power
it was super hard to make this a satire and im not sure i did
27 11:23 AM - Dec 20, 2018

 **ol johnny websites** @robertjbennett - Dec 18, 2018
so I have a novella from Tor out next month, called *VIGILANCE* - a satire about a reality game show in a near-future America, where people are suddenly subjected to a mass shooting, and the audience watches to see who's going to prove to be "vigilant" and survive
 **ol johnny websites** @robertjbennett
a lot of folks are interpreting this book as a take on gun culture, which is fine. but for me, guns are a symptom to larger culture of fear and insecurity which manifests in all kinds of unpleasant ways - hence the never-ending, hysterical need to be "VIGILANT" at all times
15 11:45 AM - Dec 18, 2018

 **(((Dan Hodges)))** @DPJHodges

In retrospect Sandy Hook marked the end of the US gun control debate. Once America decided killing children was bearable, it was over.

213K 10:07 AM - Jun 19, 2015

172K people are talking about this

When I picked up the novella, which was before these tweets, I went in with the expectation that it was aimed at gun violence and gun culture. That's how it had gotten sold to me. That's how the novella overtly sells itself, as judging the book by its cover: full of guns, and with an icon of a gun between the title and tagline and the author name.

As I read it, my mind went to *The Running Man* (both the novel and the movie) more than anything else. Sure, there are plenty of guns and the insanity of a heavily armed society, but the theme of the entirety of America as a high-ammo *Truman Show* where at any moment, people might get caught up in gun violence made this a very surreal and uncomfortable experience to read.

Joe: Not at all. Like Paul, my initial assumption was that this was going to skewer (in some capacity) America's obsession and glorification of guns, gun culture, and violence. I missed Bennett's comments, so I went into *Vigilance* with those initial assumptions firmly in place.

Those assumptions were challenged fairly quickly when Bennett pushes the idea that this, all of this, is really about fear. The extended quote from *Vigilance* is awfully telling.

“The heart of the matter was that, from the beginning, America had always been a nation of fear. Fear of the monarchy. Fear of the elites. Fear of losing your property, to the government or invasion. A fear that, though you had worked damn hard to own your own property, some dumb thug or smug city prick would either find a way to steal it or use the law to steal it. This was what made the beating heart of America: not a sense of civics, not a love of country or people, not respect of the Constitution - but fear.”

Bennett pushes that farther and baldly states that America’s love of guns, America’s mythologizing of guns is directly tied to that fear which is then tied to the monopolizing and capitalizing of that fear. It’s also tied to the idea that a good man with a gun can save the day and that if the bad guys are armed, and you know they will be because by golly, they don’t respect laws, then we’ve all got to be armed, too. It’s irresponsible not to be.

Of course, *Vigilance* is a novella about fear and complacency, which is also strangely tied together.

brian: No, though, to be honest, all I needed to see were “Robert Jackson Bennett” and “dark science fiction” for me to jump into *Vigilance*. I went into it almost blind, just a fan of Bennett. I was not expecting *Vigilance* to be quite so near future, nor so close to a possible reality that I could smell it. It was hard for me to read *Vigilance* when I sit in an office all day that has a TV set on a cable news station that increasingly resembles ONT. It was hard for me to read when *Vigilance*’s “Ideal

Person” is not only people I’ve met, but people I work with, and people I am related to. I was expecting something grim, but I was not expecting something real.

Adri: And it’s interesting that, from a reader perspective, that fear is so transparently co-opted: something that is ostensibly directed at the elite, is then used by the elite, to put at risk everything but the elite, with just enough confusion over ownership to allow plausible deniability from both the media and the government. On the whole, it’s quite a concept to pack into novella length, although I suspect most of the target audience will be coming pre-invested to the line being taken here.

Another thing I noticed about *Vigilance* was how well the characterisation fit with the wider themes of the novella. As you’d expect from the subject matter, there are no heroes here, and almost nobody who is genuinely sympathetic. Beyond that, though, there’s a constant sense of watching “personas” rather than real people. Indeed, the first character we are really introduced to is John McDean’s “Ideal Person”, supposedly the target audience for the *Vigilance* programme (which is hosted by fabricated CGI personas). From the power fantasies of the “actives” selected to carry out the shootings, to the highly scrutinised survivor role Delyna resists but is ultimately forced to play, to the more overt deceptions that come into play at the end, there’s a pervasive sense of unreality even outside the game world. What did you think of Bennett’s characters - did any leap out for any reason?

Paul: McDean is ostensibly our main character, the one that we use for the majority of the novella in setting up the scenario. He’s hardly sympathetic, I think he is deliberately drawn to be that way. We can look at him as the Richard Dawson’s Killian analogue. I am not sure that I hated McDean but I definitely wanted to see him taken down a peg by the end. Comeuppance on a personal level was one the expectations that I had for the story, and we do get that on an emotional level with him, when he sees what he has helped midwife come into fruition.

I am not entirely happy with the blurb on the back, because the promise made there for him is only really paid off at the end, In a sense it gives away the ending.

Adri: I felt that about the blurb too! It sets you up to be looking out for something to happen to McDean and his team from what feels like a too-early point, although the “how” of it did come as a surprise to me. But then, how the does the arc of the “secondary” PoV character, Delyna - a young black woman working in a bar where the *Vigilance* show is being screened - affected the sense of payoff for McDean’s comeuppance?

Paul: That last scene with Delyna does underscore just how futile the addition of more and more weapons into a charged environment does anything except escalate matters. I do think it’s a “take that!” directed squarely at the “good guy with a gun” and the other narratives here in the US, which promote the idea that the only way to solve gun violence in schools and other places is to arm everyone. As Delyna sees and witnesses,

all it does is up the body count. A society where everyone has weapons isn't a safer and more stable society, it's a more vulnerable and fragile one.

Joe: I'd argue that Delyna is a sympathetic character and probably the closest to the reader's "ideal" stand in character. She speaks up and speaks out when the easy and safe answer is to leave the television on. Of course, that's followed by a Tarantino-esque standoff and then escalation after escalation.

I think you're on to something with your larger point that we're watching personas act out their roles rather than following fully realized characters. I don't know if you've read Bennett's *Divine Cities* trilogy, but his skill at characterization is absolutely top notch. I think it's a deliberate choice here. The game show nature of *Vigilance* lends itself to that unreality, as if we're never sure if we're ever out of the game world.

Paul: Joe, I have read and loved the *Divine Cities* trilogy, and I think you are right here, Bennett is crafting these characters as roles to deliberate affect. It's a bold stylistic choice, that goes with the whole unreality of the world.

Adri: Agreed on *Divine Cities* too.

brian: I'm definitely feeling the roles over characters, particularly since I can more clearly remember the function of each team member in the *Vigilance* production team over their names.

With that said, the character that stood out the most to me was Ives, the social media wrangler.

We know our social media vessels such as Facebook and Twitter are primed and almost designed for spreading misinformation, and here we have ONT using bots and other social media shills to steer the flow of communication and interaction to *Vigilance*. A lot of words have been typed about how dangerous it is for social media disinformation campaigns to disrupt political power, so it's almost quaint that ONT is using these tools in the manner they were designed to benefit: advertising. #brands #engagement #howdoies-capethishellihavecreated

Adri: As the token non-American in this group, I also have to ask about the elephant in the room: how US-specific is *Vigilance*? The idea of citizens living in fear of their own government clearly isn't tied to a single nation or identity, and neither is the manipulation of crime or fear of the "other". Yet, perhaps because artificiality is such a running theme through the novella, I found it hard to personally connect to the satirical elements of the text. Many of the points felt either very on-the-nose or too far-fetched, with little in that sweet spot where reality is distorted but all the more recognisable through the satirist's lens. What were your experiences? Am I just too far away from Bennett's "Ideal Person" in this case?

brian: Terribly US-specific? Let's go with terribly. Fear of government is so ingrained into American culture that we wrote the right to give ourselves the means to violently overthrow the government into our constitution. Every year, maybe every month, we suffer a violent outburst that involves someone using a firearm to shoot innocent people. Time after time, we decry the tragedy and

refuse to do anything to address the cause, which is the wild proliferation of weapons in the US. Instead, we put bulletproof plates in childrens' backpacks, drill on what to do during an "active shooter" incident, and wait for our turn at our own *Vigilance*. I can't recognize *Vigilance* as satire. I see the conditions that lead to *Vigilance* happening too often for it to be anything but a glimpse into our future.

Adri: Wikipedia suggests in 2018, mass shootings happened in the US on an almost daily basis...

Joe: I'd like to be able to say that the main aspect of *Vigilance* I found too far fetched was the mass shooting competition itself, but even though we joke about how *The Running Man* and *The Hunger Games* could never actually happen and would never be broadcast, I'm feeling a little cynical this morning. I'm not so sure. Besides, that mass shooting competition, the "vigilance" of the title, is the hook of the novel. There's more than enough of a literary and film tradition to hang a story on.

I'd really like to be able to say that Bennett's commentary on America's indifference to school shootings and murdered children is far fetched, but that's just cooked into the fabric of American society right now.

I don't know if he originated the idea, but British journalist Dan Hodges wrote in 2015:

Sandy Hook, if you don't remember, was an elementary school in Newton, Connecticut where twenty students between the ages of 6

and 7 were killed in a 2012 shooting, as were six staff members who died trying to protect the kids. (Also, as the father of a now four year old who is shockingly close to being old enough to go to school, that was honestly one of the most difficult sentences I've had to type.)

Hodges was not wrong. America's legislative response was silence. Thoughts and prayers. Inaction. Indifference.

Also, if you want to really depress yourself about America, spend some time reading through a list of school shootings in the United States.

But, Adri, you said that you found the satire either too on the nose or too far fetched. Can you expand on that a bit more? For me, the stuff that was on the nose was generally just accurate and perhaps a bit sad / painful in the "it's painful because it's true" paraphrase of The Simpsons.

Adri: I might be setting the bar too high, but I think that fully communicating satire across cultures is a challenge for both reader and writer, because it's inevitably going to be the more subtle elements that are lost. And when a high action story like *Vigilance* stops communicating its subtlety, it just becomes a relentless gore-fest; incidentally, this is also how I feel about Tarantino films, and there's definitely similarities here, and also I know lots of mostly-male English friends who who love Tarantino for what are almost certainly very similar reasons to their American counterparts, so this is not some impenetrable cultural barrier in general - perhaps just an aesthetic one.

Paul: Is *Vigilance* satire or prediction? I think it's just implausible enough to be firmly satire, but I am very uncomfortable, and was very uncomfortable as I read it, as to just how plausible a US that was sinking lower and lower by the day would turn to fear cannibalizing on itself, and America being okay with it. Fear may be the mindkiller, as *Dune* taught us, but Fear sells. Fear motivates people to do very terrible things in an effort to placate and ameliorate that fear. I think of Security Theater at airports--restrictions on liquids, and shoes just as simple examples of "being seen to address the fears" is meant for public relation, and oh at the same time reminding people of the danger.. Or the fears stoked up this fall and winter over the migrant caravan. But can we get from here, now to the world of *Vigilance* two decades hence? I don't think we can logically and rationally get there from here, but I think we could get disturbingly closer. So *Vigilance* is still Satire, and not Cautionary Tale. But it's a close run thing.

Adri, you brought up before the idea of this being a US-specific book. Is there anywhere else in the world that you think a story like this could have been written? Brian, Joe and I swim in this water, and unless one widely travels, it's hard to escape seeing that water as being anything except "the way things are".

Adri: My experiences are far from universal, but I don't think you could write about this particular response to fear -- the state sanctioned libertarian arms race -- in any of the places I've lived. It's interesting that Joe mentions Sandy Hook as a potential turning point above; because I grew up

partly in Australia with British parents, I have the massacres in both Dunblane and Port Arthur (which happened within 2 months of each other in Scotland and Tasmania respectively; Dunblane in particular had heartbreaking similarities with Sandy Hook, over a decade later) in my childhood consciousness. Each prompted fundamental changes in gun control and the perception of guns in those countries, which were treated as completely self-evident. Over twenty years later, it means I now live in a city where outrage and grief is directed towards the level of knife crime, which is also awful, but doesn't create the same level of destruction and collateral damage as guns do. It's hard to get past my own ingrained bias that safety means fewer machines designed to kill you in close proximity, and that being "vigilant" and "safe" always means de-escalation except where absolutely necessary. And while I've also worked in conflict resolution, meaning I've met plenty of people for whom that bias isn't true, that was a very different context to the relationship most Americans - particularly the ones most likely to be vocal about gun ownership - have with their national government.

To me, this loops back to the point about what *Vigilance* is about: it's not just a story poking fun at gun-obsession through a lens of ultraviolet absurdity, but one about the fear that brought this society about, and that it feeds back into in turn. While some elements of US national fear and the rhetoric around it do get replicated elsewhere - like the language around the war on terror, or immigration - the context around the Second Amendment, the NRA, the inaction and victim blaming and everything around it is so

specific that you could only tell this story in the US. And, while many of us outside that context have news consumption and Twitter feeds that constantly bring us into contact with this debate, I do feel there's a fundamental gap in what can be understood from an outsider perspective. To me, the ultraviolence and the fear of oppression feel equally speculative, even though I intellectually know they aren't supposed to be. It means on an emotional level, *Vigilance* functions much more along the lines of *The Hunger Games*, a series which also marries both violence and fear to great effect but whose worldbuilding "how did we get there from here" gaps are tricky to intuit, than as the satirical "close to home" text it's intended as. Speaking of international influences, I wanted to discuss the very left-field ending to the plot. In a nutshell, the thrust of the story is that McDean's crack team (who have enough power to be targets) spends so long thinking about internal threats that they forgot about external security, and in particular how threatening China is. This is a mistake that proves fatal not just to ONT and company but, apparently, to the entire audience of *Vigilance*. Again, this is a combination of "frighteningly plausible" - America is taken down by a combination of cyber security leaks and sexual exploitation of interns - and "not going to happen" - China would benefit from the US declining in power relative to itself, but probably not from instigating mass death.

Paul: Was the out-of-left-field meant to be a deliberate writing technique on Bennett's part to show that people were focusing on the wrong things, so that when "Tabitha" makes her reveal, it is a "Wait, what?" moment for reader and

audience alike. The whole bit about Americans not paying attention to the fact that there was an international crisis going on for days--sadly, that's not really very much satire any more, not here in the US, and the obsessions and blinders of the news media, now.

brian: What I found interesting about the twist was the difference between McDean/ONT and the Chinese. ONT is using high technology to craft their fakes, and the Chinese used actual people. Infiltrating an organization using people isn't high tech; it's the oldest, most basic technique available. It still works, and it's why we're talking about what impact Marina Butina may have had on the US government by infiltrating a powerful gun advocacy lobby.

But what McDean and ONT do to the American population, the Chinese did to McDean/ONT. They know their "Ideal Person" (McDean) and use his personal taste to manipulate him into doing what they want. He becomes so hyperfocused on sexual release with Tabitha that he installs some unknown phone app that ends up giving the Chinese a backdoor. He's also so enamored with Bonnan (the *Vigilance* contestant who is also a literal Nazi) that he has to put him in the next episode. ONT is so focused on the shootings and violence that they don't even consider that you don't need a weapon or a threat to manipulate people. You can use something alluring and they will do what you want anyway.

Adri: Any final thoughts before we wrap up this review?

Joe: The comparison is to classic novels like *The Running Man*, *Battle Royale*, and *The Hunger Games* and I think the thing I am most curious about is whether *Vigilance* will have that sort of staying power or cultural impact. That level of impact is doubtful, but *Vigilance* does hit those buttons in very accessible terms. It may well surprise us. At the very least, it's led to a great conversation here and hopefully similar conversations in other spaces.

One thing that I wanted to note, that didn't come up earlier in the conversation is that as much as a primary focus of *Vigilance* is on the intersection of American gun and fear culture and how that it is monetized and weaponized, Bennett does make a point to very briefly bring race into the conversation. Race comes up in McDean's Ideal Person and it comes up sideways in aspects of how that fear culture is consumed, but it is dealt with firmly with the character of Delyna and in her family background. Delyna is black. I'm not sure how this plays outside the United States, but Black Lives Matter is a major movement inside America and police shootings are woven into the racial fabric of America. In the novella Delyna's father was a police officer killed in the line of duty, but he was killed by a fellow police officer, a white police officer who, instead of seeing another cop, saw a black man with a gun and opened fire. I don't have a larger point in bringing this up, except that I didn't want it to go unmentioned, and it could easily be the spark of another larger conversation. Hell, it could easily have been the spark for an alternate universe version of *Vigilance*.

Thank you for putting this together, Adri.

Paul: Thank you for putting this together, Adri. I agree with Joe, will this have the long term cultural impact of previous efforts in the genre? Will it be seen as an artifact of our times, or a dark prophecy of what could happen “if this goes on...”. Hard to tell. Bennett’s writing is certainly strong and sharpened toward a goal and social goal. In that, it has a hell of a lot of ambition--more so than *The Running Man*. It may not completely succeed at entertainment, but I don’t think Bennett wrote the book with that aim. I will be interested in how others view this, both within the SFF genresphere and as a more general conversation.

Adri: You’re welcome - thanks for participating,

all, and thanks to everyone reading!

The Math

Adri’s Verdict: 6.5, rounded up to 7. I understand what it’s trying to accomplish but the particular blend of ultraviolence and satire didn’t quite strike me right.

brian’s Verdict: 7. It works for me because it’s a future I can grasp that I do not want. Observations about roles/stereotypes over characters are completely valid though. They’re not quite cardboard cutouts, but not far from it either.

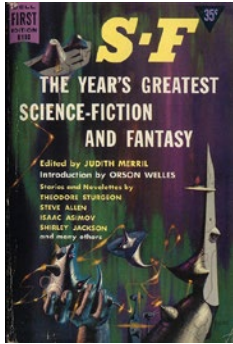
Joe’s Verdict: I’m between a 7 and an 8. *Vigilance* almost completely worked for me. I get

that most of the characters are more outline than breathing, but that’s part of why the story works so well. It’s about the ideas Bennett is playing with. Occasionally didactic, but done so well that it is remarkably effective.

Paul’s Verdict: I’m somewhere on a 7.5. It’s nearly succeeded for me at what it was trying to do, but there were some pulling tensions between having characters as archetypes and a story that don’t quite mesh with the dialectic that Bennett was aiming for all the time. For all that, when it was “on”, it was terrifyingly effective, dark and chilling. If that was Bennett’s intention, then at points he succeeded to very strong effect.

Time Capsule: SF - The Year's Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy (1956)

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry, Paul Weimer



Joe: We do enjoy our conversation pieces here at *Nerds of a Feather* and though we do love talking about awards, we wanted to step back from that and instead to focus a conversation around one book much as we did with our roundtable *Vigilance* review.

We are hopeful that this will be the first in a new series of focused conversations and with that in mind, we wanted to pick something that felt like a spiritual successor to our Feminist Futures conversation.

Judith Merrill may be best known today is a short fiction writer. Her debut story “That Only a Mother” was reprinted in Pamela Sargent’s *Women of Wonder* anthology as well various Science Fiction Hall of Fame anthologies and more. Merrill’s influence on the genre, though, is less about her fiction than it is for her editorial work (and more). Merrill was the editor of twelve editions of Year’s Best anthologies (which included inconsistent title naming conventions, ranging from “The Year’s Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy” to simply “SF12”), the first edition of the *Tesseract* series anthologizing Canadian short fiction,

and an additional seven anthologies (including *England Swings SF* notable for helping to launch the New Wave in the United States). Merrill also helped to found the highly influential and important Milford Writer’s Conference with Damon Knight and James Blish.

Today we’re talking about Judith Merrill’s first Year’s Best anthology: *SF: The Year’s Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy*, originally published in 1956.

Adri: Yes! Second hand retailers have been scoured, books have crossed oceans (well, the North Sea), and I have had the kind of fragile paperback reading experience which has renewed my love of ebooks, and of publishers like Gollancz, who make a lot of classic longer SF accessible on e-reader.

Paul: I am reminded that rights make it difficult to get many of these older anthologies except in falling-apart paperbacks. I do think there is something lost when these things fall out of print, because the notes make this more, in my view, than just the sum of the stories. There is value in reading this collection above and beyond the individual stories themselves.

On that note, one thing I did like in this anthology that you don’t get in a lot of modern anthologies is the “Sewing together” that Merrill does in providing explicit direction as to what she was thinking in placement of stories on subject and theme. I don’t think that gets enough play these days, and too often, anthologies seem to have stories in any old order without a sense of how they

reflect and refract on each other. Merrill WANTS you to know what she is thinking. It’s a more “present” place for an anthologist than what you get these days.

Joe: I’m not sure what surprised me more, that the introduction to this anthology was written by Orson Welles or the tone of it. Here is how Welles opens his essay:

“One thing’s sure about science-fiction: there’s too much of it.”

A leading editor in the field announces that the boom days are over, but the yearly amount of the stuff that still gets into print is pretty staggering.

My advice to any but the most bug-eyed addict would be to abstain from the novels. “S.F.” is often at its aching worst in “book-length” versions”

The rest of the essay proceeds by being a knock down of nearly all of the science fiction novels of the day, most of the stories, and many of the magazines. It’s as if Welles is trying to sell this anthology by saying it is the only thing that matters and that everything else is bunk.

I want to quote the entirety of the Orson Welles essay, but I don’t want to contact his estate for the rights.

Adri: Yes, the introduction is fascinatingly backhanded. Even the praise for short fiction, and the stories in this anthology, is qualified by compar-

ing them to fables and suggesting that it's hard to get a fable wrong. Orson Welles is a big deal, so I guess he could say what he wants and "introduction by Orson Welles" would still be a selling point for the anthology, but it adds this tone of self-deprecation to the anthology as a whole which is just a bit unnecessary?

Joe: The other quote I'd like to offer up for comment is from Judith Merrill in her preface.

"The serious-minded reader will also have to forgive our authors if they resort to the frivolities of space-ships and flying bath-mats, robots and talking rats, to make their points. Even in s-f, a writer is only secondarily a philosopher; his first big job is entertainment...and that hasn't changed since Aesop's time at all"

I find it fascinating that Merrill's preface talks about the big ideas science-fantasy writers are tackling and not providing neat answers, how the stories are the testing ground for why and what if, but then she weirdly undercuts it at the end. Of course, that's how it presents in 2019 to a reader steeped in science fiction and fantasy, who lives in a time where speculative fiction is at the forefront of popular culture, where there is no shame except in the highest of literary towers to tell a story smacking of genre. How would that preface have read sixty years ago when this anthology was first published?

Adri: It's timely to look back at this at the same time that there's been some conversation on Twitter about the current direction of genre snobbery between literary fiction and SFF, and how some

who read across both camps feel there's more coming *from* the SFF-verse and the wholesale dismissal of litfic as "professors with midlife crises starting inappropriate relationships", whereas on the literary side SFF themes are quite widely accepted as potential areas of exploration. I can only interpret Merrill's introduction as the kind of putdown one comes to when you're pre-empting other people getting there first?

Joe: Equally interesting, Merrill's conclusion almost reinforces the intro from Orson Welles, "This was the year the house collapsed. The house of cards, I mean, otherwise known as the Science Fiction Boom". Merrill seems to be talking about the state of science fiction publishing, and it is an echo we hear about time and time again in the more than sixty years since this anthology was published.

Adri: What I found interesting about the stories in here is that they challenged my biases about the kinds of themes that this era of SF dealt with and valued, even as they confirmed my suspicions about the representation of humanity in said stories. For example, the opening story, "The Stutterer", deals with an invulnerable robot who is being hunted down by humans, but whose inner life shows he is just as alive and worthy of respect. This is the first of a few "humanising the other" stories here, which is more interested in exploring psychological responses to the robot than to going into detail about the fictional metal he's made of, but the "humanisation" is done by giving him a neurotypical white male psyche that's clearly supposed to read as "default".

Also, given that there's a certain narrative about classic SF as being about "fun" and "the adventure", which does shape the conversation despite the... agendas... of many who promote it, it's interesting to see stories like "The Hooper" and "One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts", which deals in the day-to-day struggles of people living their lives in space or with fantastic elements, without having to make galaxy-changing decisions.

Joe: I've read a lot of feminist science fiction over the last year written during this period, as well as a number of anthologies featuring stories from the era. There were certainly fun adventure stories chock full of action and swordplay and ray guns, but they were no more fully reflective of their era as you could say that the 1980's and 1990's were all about a particular style of epic fantasy because of Terry Brooks, David Eddings, Raymond Feist, and Robert Jordan. It's never just one thing.

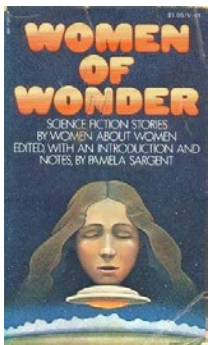
Paul: "Pottage" by Zenna Henderson felt really like something from a "different planet" as does a lot of other Henderson work as put aside Campbellian Science Fiction. And even as it has a female MC and is seemingly of a separate strand of SF, it still manages to touchstone some SF tropes. Psi powers. A MC who knows more than she is telling at first, and only in time reveals what she knows--and what she does.

More contemporaneously, the cult like atmosphere of the repressed group is interesting, and also what about immigration and minorities in today's society--they feel real different than they did when I first read them.

Joe: *SF: The Year's Greatest Science Fiction and Fantasy* is by no means a feminist anthology. If I can count, only three and a half of the eighteen stories are written by women and there is a limited number of female protagonists, let alone the push of the stories. But you are absolutely right - given the generic stereotype of classic science fiction, this anthology is very much not that.

Paul: It does undercut the whole narrative that there was none of this stuff to be found until the 1960's and 1970's. Is it overwhelmingly male authors and protagonists? Sure. But there is more representation outside that than I was expecting. I think that's the editorial hand at work.

Adri: Not to be the disruptive diversity hire here, but despite Merrill's hand at the helm I didn't have that experience. I got about the level of representation I was expecting, which was next-to-none and generally reinforcing hierarchies when marginalised groups do put in an appearance. Which is fine. It's fine, guys. Fine. Just fine. I'm glad the genre has moved on.



the page or reflective of what her editorial eye might have been (either by design or by necessity)

Joe: I did expect more diversity in the anthology than we got, but that's because at this point I'm used to seeing Merrill mentioned or included in anthologies like *Women of Wonder*, *Sisters of the Revolution*, and *The Future is Female!*, so there's a connection in my mind that isn't necessarily on

Adri: I guess it's hard to judge based on one anthology, when Merrill's contribution to the genre spanned so much writing and editorial work as you mention above. There's a couple of "Best of the Best" anthologies drawn from the first ten years of these annual editions and I'm intrigued to pick one up and see whether those volumes, with more material to pick from, come across any stronger in their representation - at least of women.

Joe: I'm not going to speak to which story is "best", but the one that most jumped out at me was "The Cave of Night", by James Gunn. I dug this story. Gunn references how stories of people trapped in impossible situations until rescue might possibly arrive is transfixing in a way that can't quite be explained, and then goes on to tell the story of an Air Force pilot, perhaps one of the first astronauts, is hopelessly stuck in the first rocket to orbit the Earth. Remember, "The Cave of Night" was published in 1955 and Yuri Gagarin would not leave the planet for six more years. In Gunn's story, the 30 day odyssey captivated a nation and the globe.

Paul: I do have opinions, though, on which stories I thought were the best, or the strongest, or the most resonant for me, and I think we can talk about those stories that worked for it. As it so happens. Joe, I thought Gunn's story was one of the best of the best of the set for me, too, although I am not sure about the premise, at least if it happened now. Do we have too fractured a landscape of news and information that if it happened now, it would not captivate and moti-

vate the world in the way it does by effect here? Ten, twenty, thirty years ago, though I wouldn't quibble with the premise.

And I am reminded of Mary Robinette Kowal's *The Calculating Stars* where the asteroid impact and disaster does mobilize a response to get off of the planet, but even there, MRK is careful to note there are countervailing forces against that push.

Joe: Honestly, I do think we'd get suckered into someone being stuck in orbit. We still get enraptured by that sort of tragedy. The Chilean miners in 2010, Baby Jessica stuck in the well in 1987. Standoffs. I know you said that you'd believe it even ten years ago but not now, but I suspect if there was a major catastrophe AND we could communicate in some fashion with the trapped, we'd respond. We'd listen.

Would it be enough to mobilize the future into a major space race? That's a much bigger question.

Paul: Very much so. This also puts me in the mind of stories where a fake alien threat is meant to unite the world (also, c.f. *Watchmen*)

Adri: It's interesting that you pull this story out - for me, it was an intriguing blend of timeless elements (for an even more recent example than Joe's, look at the Tham Luang cave rescue in Thailand last year) as well as being really hard to separate from its time. This was very much the story that brought home to me that I was reading science fiction written before spaceflight, and both this and "Bulkhead" do a convincing but recognisably speculative job of representing what

that might be.

On the fictional side, the appeal to collective humanity is a significant motivator for all the humans who aren't Mark Watney in *The Martian*: a prominent recent title whose blend of human interest and scientific elements feels like one of the most direct descendents of some of this stuff.

Speaking of stories that gave me a weird mix of 2019 and 1956: check out "The Public Hating", by Steve Allen, one of the few non-prolific genre authors in the anthology. This tale of future crime and punishment, in which a man is publicly shamed to death by the collective mental powers of the rest, feels in part like the kind of thing someone would write (probably in a *Black Mirror* episode) while staring meaningfully at Twitter. While there are certainly parallels to be drawn around shame and holding people to account in the public sphere, it's a pretty shallow analysis - and it also involves a very 1956 exploration of psychic powers (or "psi") and an inescapable aura of anti-Soviet sentiment which kills the Charlie Brooker vibe somewhat.

Joe: There's also a bit of the whole "mob mentality" that comes out here, where the protagonist maybe wasn't all about the hate but was swept up in it - of course, he did come out to participate. Plus, there are echoes of George Orwell's *1984*.

Paul: I was also thinking "Two Minutes Hate" but with Psi powers which just makes the subtext, here. Here, the hatred can literally kill.

I didn't really remember or grok how much Psi

powers were a thing in the 50's until recently. It's a nail that gets hit again and again in this volume, in different ways. It might even be a theme: psi powers of aliens, of supermen, of ordinary people, amplified.

Joe: It was seriously a thing, and all the psi-powers puts me into mind of the *Darkover* novels from Marion Zimmer Bradley, which also began in the late 1950's (though Bradley is persona non grata and rightfully so).

Adri: Yeah, the psi concept - especially as explored here, and in Clifton's "Sense from Thought Divide", hasn't stood up well as a trope. The main feeling it evoked from me after reading was a desire to go and play the recent X-COM games, which I have just now realised are the main vehicles for these sorts of pulp sci-fi concepts to infiltrate my cultural awareness. So, hey, I guess I do like psi, but only when it turns my freedom fighting supersoldiers into unstoppable purple glowing war machines.

Joe: I expect that a common trivia question would be "Who won the first ever Hugo Award for Best Novel"? (Alfred Bester for *The Demolished Man*). A harder question would be: Who won the second Best Novel Hugo? That would be Mark Clifton with Frank Reilly for *They'd Rather Be Right / The Forever Machine*.

Adri: An easier question than you'd think if you've ever Googled "what's the worst Hugo novel winner", for which this is one of the commonly accepted answers. I haven't read it, so I couldn't objectively comment, but Jo Walton makes a

pretty compelling case in her history of the Hugos despite also not having picked it up...

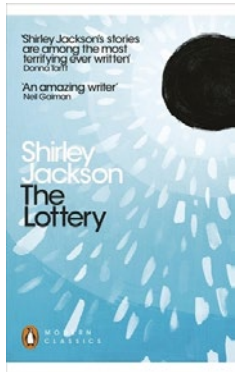
Joe: There's a part of me that has wanted to go back and read all of the Hugo winning novels, but more likely I'll focus on *Dreamsnake* (Vonda McIntyre), *The Snow Queen* (Joan Vinge), and *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (Connie Willis) this year. Which is besides the point of talking about this anthology, but I do love my digressions. Regardless, I don't expect to ever get to the Clifton / Reilly novel given how forgettable "Sense from Thought Divide" was. I had already forgotten the story less than two days after finishing it.

Much more memorable for me was Theodore Sturgeon's "Bulkhead." I'm not going to claim that Sturgeon is the most prolific short story writer out there, but his name is synonymous with short fiction (he does have an award named after him, after all).

I got a weird *Johnny Got His Gun* feeling from "Bulkhead". Sturgeon doesn't necessarily reference Dalton Trumbo's classic 1938 novel, but he does echo the brokenness of Trumbo's protagonist.

Paul: I thought this was going into "Cold Equations" territory for a really long while, stowaways and all that. I was surprised by the turn into psychology. Really solid writing, character analysis and depth here.

Adri: A bit weird, a bit overly militaristic, but still one of the best stories in the collection for me - really compelling in a way I can't quite figure out how to describe.



Joe: One final story to briefly discuss is from Shirley Jackson, “One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts”. The title is somewhat on the nose, because this **is** a very ordinary (if compelling) story with a twist at the end. Because I read far too much genre, I wonder if the older man and his wife were supernatural in any way or if they just go around being good / being complete dicks to people.

Paul: Hey, another genre story from the author of “The Lottery”. The randomness of how the MC (and it turns out his wife) do in changing lives, for good or for ill, does feel rather random. A question that shows how lives can be changed by small encounters, but not very genre. I think the implication is that they ARE supernatural, or at least knowing enough or being skilled enough to “place the lever”. Even in a collection with Psi powers, this felt the most fantastic.

Adri: Funnily enough, I just read “The Lottery” as the only genre story (non-supernatural horror) in an otherwise very literary anthology of forgotten 20th century women authors. Not that I don’t like a good “how sad it was to be a divorcee in 1947” tale, but it really stood out in that company. “One Ordinary Day” feels a lot lighter and not quite at the same level, but it’s still an inter-

esting one.

Paul: Overall, looking at the collection from a couple of weeks remove of reading it, I think that the already noted prosaic nature of a lot of the stories does come back to me time and again. Maybe the Mundane SF crowd have a point about the strength of setting SF right here and now as opposed to more interstellar and galactic horizons. Or maybe the province of space opera and the like really is at a longer length than you typically can manage in a collection of this size. You can in the end only get so much information density on a page.

I want to thank you both for joining me in this look at a seminal SF collection from a seminal figure in the field.

Adri: Yes, this time capsule of an anthology challenged my expectations in ways I didn’t realise it would - which has in turn made me look back and realise where those expectations come from in the first place. As tricky as it was to get hold of this title, and despite the challenge of reading a book that literally started falling apart at the end (sorry, Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore, but my level of distraction by the time I got to your story calls into question my objectivity as a reviewer), this has been an eye opening exercise for me and one which has definitely rekindled my interest in engaging more with older stories. I’ll not be making that shift at the expense of reading that represents an actual cross section of the human

experience, though.

Joe: Even though we know that awards are not the full marker of the importance or skill of a writer, it is notable that Judith Merrill has put together an anthology filled with writers who have racked up a significant number of awards and nominations. The writers included here have won 14 Hugo Awards and a total of 45 nominations, 3 Nebula Awards on 28 nominations, and 2 World Fantasy Awards with 6 nominations. There have been 3 recipients of World Fantasy’s Lifetime Achievement Award, 4 writers recognized as SFWA Grandmasters (an honor that can only be given when the writer is still alive), and at least three awards have been named after the the writers collected here. All that when we were nearly twenty years away from the creation of the World Fantasy Awards, almost ten years from the first Nebula Award, and the Hugo Awards were only five years old when this anthology was published.

There’s no real takeaway from noting this, but since we do like to talk about awards and looking back at Merrill’s debut Year’s Best anthology from a distance of sixty years, what Judith Merrill put together stands up to almost any metric we care to measure the success of an anthology by.

Also, she included a story originally published in Good Housekeeping and that has to be some kind of a first.

Thank you both for the conversation.

Review Roundtable: Avengers: Endgame

Adri Joy, Brian, Mikey N, Phoebe,
Vance K



At the end of April a little movie came out called *Avengers: Endgame*, which has been getting something of a buzz in genre circles, seeing as how it brings together ten years of big budget Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) storylines in one big action-packed conclusion. Here at *NoaF HQ*

we've been following the ups and downs of the MCU for some time (some longer than others), and have many capital-F Feelings ranging from excitement to confusion to mild bafflement about this culmination of an era.

Today I've gathered Brian, Mike, Phoebe and Vance to chat about our *Endgame* reactions: what made us punch the air in glee and what had us sliding down in our seats in frustration. Needless to say, all the spoilers are ahead and you really shouldn't be here unless you've had a chance to see the movie first.

Adri: So, *Endgame*! That was fun. Even more fun than I expected after, you know, all the dead people and the feelings about them.

Brian: First impressions are that I thought this was a great conclusion to all of the movies that

came before it. The MCU could stop here (it won't, but it could) and I would be completely satisfied.

Vance: The woman seated next to me -- and I've never experienced this in a movie theater -- started taking deep, centering breaths the moment the lights went down. And I love her for it. *Infinity War* was a gauntlet for fans, yet she was there opening day for whatever came next, no matter how gutting. Turned out the movie was a lot of fanservice, so she made it through. As did I!

Phoebe: I'm going to date myself by saying I was fifteen when *Iron Man* came out and I thought it was the coolest movie I'd ever seen (beside *Lord of the Rings* of course). I've seen every MCU movie in theaters except *Ant Man and the Wasp*, which I regret because I loved that movie. I grew up with these movies, and this just totally satisfied me eleven years later. I cheered, clapped, laughed, bawled, and said thank you.

Mike: I definitely enjoyed the movie and look forward to watching it again, but it felt very slow as they tracked down the stones in the previous movies. I felt there was too much humor and not enough action. Although I greatly appreciated Captain America joining the Hydra agents in the elevator in what I expected to be a brawl, only to lose it when Cap whispers "Hail Hydra" and proceeds to simply walk out with Loki's staff.

Brian: I'm with you on the plodding pace. I can string together the important moments in my mind, and they don't really add up to three hours of movie. But I watch at least three hours of ter-

rible TV weekly, so I'll take "great but a bit slow" without much complaint. Agree that the elevator scene is a great subversion of expectations, and also just the tiniest hint at the *Secret Empire* story. Not that I want them to put that story on screen.

Adri: I thought the combination of humour, emotions and action built into something incredibly cheesy, but I don't mean that in a bad way at all: it really works. There's quite a long first act of feelings which is mostly engaging and builds off dynamics that are a decade in the making. With the exception of expecting us to care about Hawkeye's family which is... hmmm...

Vance: Hawkeye's dumb farm family is the thing I have always hated the most about the MCU. Asking us to care about it all of a sudden is akin to asking us, in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, to suddenly care about one of James Bond's bedfellows. The ship has sailed, I don't buy in. That said, I at least believed it as a motivation for Hawkeye going batshit before we get into the real meat of the movie.

Adri: Farm family out of the way, we get into TIME TRAVEL, which lets us go on a mostly-greatest-hits tour of some of the other films, underlining how far some of the Avengers have come along the way. Once things start to coalesce into a climax, there's a really satisfying pay-off to each of the beats. Yes, it means you can see some of them coming from a mile off (time travel plus Captain casually stopping by Peggy's office in a midpoint scene adds up to a pretty obvious decision for his "retirement") but that just makes it even more gratifying when those moments hit.

Obviously I have lots of time for subversion in fiction too, but it's so enjoyable to watch a story that's already had its twists and turns and is now going to milk every moment out of the one path to its conclusion. It also makes it feel like an actual movie structure - despite the fact it starts in the immediate aftermath of *Inifinity War* - with well-managed tensions, rather than the big messy action-fest that was its predecessor.

Brian: The choice to immediately deal with Thanos and then flip to undoing what he had done was more interesting than I expected out of the film. It's also a little funny that, in a world where magic exists, the solution was scientific, even if the science is pretty magical. But wow, how many cans of worms did they open with the introduction of time travel to these movies? I appreciate that the basic premise is things changed in the past can't affect the future, and they spin off their own timelines. But if the Sorcerer Supreme (thank you for returning, Tilda Swinton) controls the Eye of Agamotto and knows Strange isn't around until five years after the New York invasion, wouldn't she also know that Thanos is going to dust half of the galaxy's population? Time travel always opens a lot more doors than it closes.

Vance: Hat tip to my friend Caroline for sharing this article that offers a really game explanation of the time travel dynamics. TL;DR: the time travel actually does kinda makes sense, but just go with it. It's fun. It's fine. Leave it alone.

Mike: While I was expecting this to be emotional, I was not surprised for how powerful it was for the characters to travel back in time and

connect with individuals they had previously lost. My favorite of these meetings was Thor and his mom. I love the way she talked about his current condition and wanted him to make things right for himself and not to worry about her. I also love that other Asgardians call Rocket Raccoon 'rabbit'.

Adri: Remember how I told you all I'd seen all of the canon movies except the second Thor and I hoped that one didn't turn out to be in any way important to the plot here? All I can say is OH COME ON. His Mum died? Natalie Portman went to Asgard? I still appreciated this moment - Full use of Chris Hemsworth's comic abilities was appreciated, and despite the fat jokes I actually thought Thor's arc was probably the most satisfying of the core group, given he didn't have quite as obvious a place to go as Iron Man and Cap did. But I did spend ten minutes squirming and hoping not to be spoiled.

Brian: I am a *Thor: The Dark World* hater and I guess, yeah, it's a little important to the complete narrative. Still wouldn't recommend anyone pressed for time to watch it though. *Ragnarok* is a lot better and literally sets up *Infinity War*.

Vance: I like *Thor 2*, and don't apologize for it (because like what you like, folks! It doesn't matter if your co-contributors think you're dumb!). Kat Dennings is a joy in it. But that aside, from *Ragnarok* through *Infinity War* through *Endgame*, Thor's story is truly, deeply moving. My heart breaks for the character. Again, it would be better if his weight weren't played for laughs, but his descent into oblivion is a) a strong choice by the

filmmakers b) totally understandable, and c) fertile ground for setting up his final confrontation with Thanos.

Phoebe: I love all the Thor movies due to the Norse mythology (one of the reasons I started researching Norse myth was because I saw *Thor* and thought, hmm, that's not right.) I'm also a HUGE Loki fan--which was one way that *Endgame* disappointed me honestly. They did so little with Loki, didn't resurrect him, and didn't let time travel Thor interact with his dead brother who he'd reconciled with at the end of *Thor: Ragnarok*. To follow up on the fat phobia, while I was disappointed the few times it was obvious we were supposed to laugh at his fatness, I actually wonder how much of the fat phobia comes from the audience. It was immediately obvious to me that it was a symptom of PTSD and, surprisingly, he never returned to washboard abs Thor, the usual end to such a trope. He remained "fat Thor" even when he fought Thanos, and he looked way more badass and viking-y. If anything, the audience response showed how much farther we need to go as humankind to accepting different types of people and recognizing suffering.

Vance: I'm with you. I wondered how much of the fat-shaming was more on the audience than the filmmakers. I thought it was a strong choice and I appreciated it.

Adri: I mean, to me having one fatphobic joke is one too many and I completely understand why many people don't want to "look past that" to whatever the filmmakers intended, even if it sort of came good in the end with the Viking aesthet-

ic and his arc, and eventual alignment with the Guardians of the Galaxy, which has been a few movies coming.

Adri: While I'm on the complaints train: the "scene of women" does not make the lack of representation over ten years right, Marvel. Especially because the vast majority of those women just show up with no emotional arcs at the very last minute. I also had no time for the sacrifice of Black Widow, and while I know Scarlett Johansen is a bit frustrating as an actor it's such a shame Natasha Romanoff never truly got the development she deserved up to this point, even though she turned into a brilliant character without that focus. It's really telling that what we've lost by the end is mostly women and a robot, and the funeral we end up going to isn't Romanoff's.

Phoebe: I'm going to jump in here to comment on the "women assemble" scene as I've been calling it. I totally agree that it doesn't end the bad representation throughout the series, but to be honest, I cried during that scene. Was it patronizing? Probably.

Brian: Thank you for articulating better my complaints about that 5 second scene, Adri. I've seen a lot of people (idiots) bandying about that Marvel ruined the movie by going full SJW, and this is literally not it. Those characters and the women playing them deserve better.

Mike: My biggest gripe was Black Widow's death. My wife disagrees with me, but I felt it was cheapened by her and Hawkeye fighting over who would sacrifice themselves (obviously it was going

to be her because of his family). Her death hit me a bit harder when Hulk talked about trying to bring her back when he wielded the stones.

Adri: What I hated most about this - and there are many aspects I hate - is that this movie really drives home the fact that Natasha's family are the Avengers, and that of all the characters she is the one that has poured the most into relationships with the rest of the group over and above any outside attachments. I think we're supposed to accept that Hawkeye has more reason to live because he has a flesh-and-blood family but, in a narrative that's about the Avengers where those characters are completely on the side, it feels cheap and unearned and utterly disrespectful to her character and the things that are important to her, undermining the actual sense of sacrifice which this scene was supposed to set up.

Vance: I'll push back a tiny, tiny bit here. I don't take issue with anything you've said at all, but just offer a slightly different read. I think Hawkeye is willing to sacrifice himself for his flesh-and-blood family, but Nat is willing to sacrifice herself for her adoptive family. I'm not certain the audience is asked to accept that one has more right to go on living than the other. It's certainly a valid read of the scene, but what the filmmakers *intended* is murky. I think whatever an individual audience member takes away from it is 100% valid. I just don't want to step on the landmine of saying "the filmmakers intended zyx," when that really can't be known without talking to them. For me, I hated to see Nat go, and I very much questioned why we were being asked to accept that, but the movie itself didn't give me a clear-enough an-

swer to really speak to it. I felt like both Nat and Gamora going off the Soul Stone cliff made me uneasy...but it's hard to unpack, personally, what I thought the movie was asking of me. I mean, I think the farm family is dumb, so for sure I'd rather Nat have stayed topside.

Adri: I guess the thing is, in the genre which literally coined the concept of "women in refrigerators", setting up a subplot like the unavoidable Soul Stone sacrifice and then having two women go off that cliff with similar lingering death shots shows, at the very least, a disappointing lack of self-awareness of this trope and its impact on female representation.

Mike: My favorite arc over this epic event is Nebula's. She grew a great deal in a limited number of films from a villain with a troubled past who would stop at nothing to please her father to someone who confronted her demons from her childhood, made amends with her sister, and finally got closure from her father only to have Thor ruin the moment by chopping his head off.

Adri: I agree that Nebula's a great character here. She also gets an interesting arc with Gamora and her past self, which really underlines how far Nebula has come (although underscoring that by killing her past is... hmm) while also suggesting that Gamora's development over the past movies, and especially her role in Infinity War, never mattered to her as a character? I guess I see where that's coming from, but it drives home the fact that Nebula is really the only Guardians of the Galaxy character with any interesting emotional depth. More Nebula!

Vance: I love how they've taken Nebula from a 100% baddie to a 100% empathetic central character. I'm curious to see where they take Gamora going forward. I loved the TV show *Chuck*, which ended with one of the two love interests having their memory wiped, and the open question of "What happens next between them?" There are no more *Chuck* episodes, but I like the narrative space created by the question of "Will these two misfits fall in love again under different circumstances?" Again, I had problems with the Gamora/Soul Stone element in *Infinity War*, but I'm intrigued by the narrative possibilities this suggests for *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*.

Adri: Any other favourite moments people want to share? Captain America making full use of Thor's hammer got a loud "WHAAAAAAT" from one particular lad at the back of our cinema, joined by the rest of us cheering in appreciation. I'm still not quite sure how it happened, but in the moment it's so epic I don't really care. (Insert *Doctor Horrible* Captain Hammer joke here). Also, Wakanda turning up first in the ending battle was a big hit!

Mike: My favorite moment in the entire film may have been old man Cap passing his shield to Falcon. I went into this film expecting Captain America to die and prepared myself for that reality, but loved the fact that after returning the Infinity Stones he went home, had his dance with Agent Carter, and lived a normal life.

Another moment that really hit me emotionally was Iron Man hugging Spider-Man after they

reunite. I often don't like humor during certain emotional scenes, but Peter telling Iron Man "this is nice" during the long hug was very sweet and hit close to home as a father.

Brian: Yeah, I'm pretty heartless and this moment really hit me. It was a nice wrap around from Tony watching him turn to dust in his arms to returning to finish the fight.

Vance: I told my daughter, "You know how *Infinity War* starts on Earth with Tony telling Pepper he wants a kid...and you know how through the whole movie he calls Peter 'Kid'?" And her eyes bugged way out. I thought this moment was a really nice moment for both of them. It's the kind of fanservice that I feel like we've all earned...and I guess the characters have, too.

Brian: Iron Man was the beginning and the end of this cycle of movies, and my favorite Iron Man moment, possibly my favorite MCU moment, is the bits in Iron Man 3 where Tony has to come to terms with the fact that he threw himself into a gaping void with a nuclear weapon to defeat an alien invasion of Earth and survived. Selfless acts weren't Tony's thing but he did it, and again, in the conclusion of *Endgame*, he did something he knew could end badly for him personally without hesitation. He came out of a very comfortable, happy retirement to save the world one more time. The whole Tony Stark arc is well done.

Vance: Seconded. Tony Stark's last words are, "I am Iron Man," which is such a perfect punctuation mark on these 10 years of filmmaking for all of the reasons Brian just pointed out.

Brian: Also, I was very excited when Captain Marvel came out of the sky to punch holes in Thanos' giant spaceship. She's very good at that. I expected and did not get more Ronan the Accuser, which is weird because *Captain Marvel* seemed to go out of its way to make that character cooler than when he was just some bland antagonist in *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Adri: So, now that it's over (except that it's not): any last thoughts? Mine is that I now have to round off my MCU "first ten years" experience by catching up on, er, *Thor: The Dark World*...

Vance: Do it. Kat Dennings is hilarious, and it's the buffest Hemsworth ever got, which is really saying something!

Mike: Overall the movie and all of the movies in the MCU were a monumental success. I loved the simple twists this finale provided, learning early on that the Infinity Stones were all turned to dust by Thanos, Loki making off with the cosmic cube, Thor's current state, and was truly not sure what to expect next. I even enjoyed how they managed the time travel and had some funny jabs at *Back to the Future*. I'm not sure where I would rank it among the MCU films, but it is likely in the top 5. It provided a fitting end that my entire family enjoyed.

Brian: Looking forward, I guess we know some of the direction of future MCU movies with *Spiderman: Far From Home* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* on the horizon, but nothing about the overall future of the series. I'm guessing some

of that is up in the air as Disney now owns the X-Men too and could integrate them and their rich history into these stories. I'm excited for that future.

Vance: If I can be permitted to wander a bit into the weeds, I would like to address how we have never in the history of cinema seen anything like this. I distinctly remember sitting in the theater during *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, when the armies are massing at the Black Gate, and thinking, "I have never, ever seen anything like this." Like all works of artistry that move a

medium forward, those innovations, once realized, become relatively easy to copy. We see scenes like that *Lord of the Rings* moment routinely now. But I had the thought before *Endgame*, "I wonder if I'll have another moment like that?" I did, kind of, but it wasn't visual -- it was narrative. This is essentially the season finale of the most expensive TV show in history. *Endgame* is the coherent final product of 16 directors and at least 35 writers. The script alone for *Infinity War* and *Endgame* (which were reportedly shot simultaneously) would've had to be around 400 pages long. The scale of the production is mind-boggling.

So while there was certainly visual spectacle on display in *Endgame*, I do want to take my hat off to the complexity of the undertaking that Marvel just delivered. Universal Monsters died on the vine after only one film, and DC's best movie (by far) has been *Teen Titans Go! To the Movies*. Marvel has moved the goal line for cinematic storytelling, and I'm just glad as a fan I got to see *Iron Man* opening day, and now *Endgame* all these years later.

Adri: Thanks for joining me today, all, and I look forward to our next chat!

LET'S FRIGHTEN CHILDREN! Bonus Conversation Edition

Vance K, Chloe



Welcome to a lovely punctuation mark at the end of the *LET'S FRIGHTEN CHILDREN!* series, in which I look at how to share horror with our offspring. Today's guest is Chloe N. Clark, an author and educator who has taught far more folks about horror than I have children. So let's

talk scaring tiny people!

VK: Thanks for agreeing to chat about this!

CNC: Of course, I'm excited! Thank you for asking me!

VK: In your book recommendations for this series, you talked about how you got into horror at a very, very young age. I'm spending a lot of time thinking about how I roll this type of stuff out to my kids. But do you think, in the end, it matters? I mean, you seem to have turned out ok.

CNC: I honestly think it depends on a lot of factors: openness of the family in general and the kind of other media the child is consuming (as a child, I was also watching shows like *Homicide: Life on the Street* and talking about it with my parents, so there was certainly a level of my

parents allowing me to be comfortable talking about adult matters); it also deeply depends on the child — I'm an immediate coward, I jump at jump scares like nobody's business but I also don't carry fears over. So as a child, I didn't get nightmares, for example. So I think a big thing is knowing that the child feels really safe in their surroundings. If they do, then I feel like horror is more manageable. There's also just the fact that a lot of children's entertainment is inherently scary — in Disney films and fairy tales, fucked up stuff happens, too.



VK: That's very true. I didn't realize how twisted even *Snow White* was until I re-watched it as I was getting into animation more generally as a late teenager. So much of that stuff just missed me as a small kid. Maybe it was because evil step-mothers and those fairy tale tropes felt so foreign. They didn't touch my life.

CNC: That's true, definitely — like they are based out of specifics that, in a way, are true to all genres of terror. There's a quote I love that I can't remember which Italian folklorist said, but is along the lines of "Don't believe fairy tales, they're true." Because at the time of their writings, they were the issues that people dealt with (where

women died in childbirth way more frequently, etc), so there were stepmothers aplenty. Or where children did have to act as scullery maids (a la Cinderella)

VK: Right. For me, as someone who has always had very vivid dreams, as a kid the idea of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies was too much for me, and I steered clear of them for a very long time. It wasn't a burned-up guy with razor knives that did it, it was the idea of my dreams turning against me. When I talked specifically about *Coraline* and *ParaNorman* in this series, I discussed how it's given me an opportunity to talk with the kids about othering in very specific terms. It's easy for me, and my kids, to identify with Norman, or Coraline, as a kindred spirit with outsider interests. As those characters are othered and rejected by those around them, we've been able to have great talks about empathy, and how we don't want to make the mistakes of the crowd. Do you think that's a central part of the horror narrative overall?

CNC: Definitely, I can see that (fun side fact, *Nightmare on Elm Street* is how I realized I was a lucid dreamer as a child). And that's what horror does so well: it links into that idea of base primal fears (our own mind going against us, or the beach being dangerous, or whatever), but I almost think those are *good* lessons for kids to learn early. And yes, I think empathy is a key to horror. Obviously I think about othering and horror a lot — it's literally what I teach about. It is how we view monsters as others and how that shapes the narratives of fear told culturally. Horror is actively telling us to listen to those we might not listen

to, and that's one of the biggest, most valuable lessons I think it can offer to us.

VK: This is one of the big reasons why I was looking forward to you participating in this series: *Monster Theory*! Can you talk in general terms about that?

CNC: So in general, *Monster Theory* is the critical lens of examining how monstrosity is used by different cultures in order to perceive of othering or social constructs, etc. I more specifically use it to talk about constructions of privilege and how horror is often a lens to examine that. This is something *Get Out*, for example, does exceptionally well. Making groups we fear into monsters has been a tactic since the beginning of storytelling. It's the most effective tactic for controlling a populace. And it's one, more and more, that we see horror narratives questioning in ways other genres are not.

VK: Right. Because there's an understandable, natural aversion to something that's different. But what separates humans from, say, my cats with new people in the house, is that we have an intellect and empathy and ways to synthesize those into an understanding of others. But routinely we see those impulses weaponized by leaders who want to divert someone's gaze away from where they should be looking. I feel like that's one of the most important lessons I can pass on to my kids, because it's a fundamental mechanic of the world. And you're right — I don't know other genres that consistently explore that theme.

CNC: Yeah, that exactly sums up why I teach

horror in a rhetoric class. If there is one skill I want college students to have, it is to see the world with empathy and to understand the way fear is used to promote rhetorics of violence. Horror is the perfect genre to combat and explore that.

VK: Is the “what you thought was the monster isn't the real monster” (ie, *Frankenstein*, etc) a sub-genre in monster stories, or is it sort of the home key, do you think?

CNC: I think for the most part, it's the home key. I mean look at zombie movies — the whole premise is often, Oh shoot, wait! The humans are the ones we should be fearing after all!” The same goes for even things like *Jaws* — the shark is following its natural instinct, but it's the money-grabbing mayor who is actually the villain by not allowing the knowledge to spread/closing the beach. Like at their hearts, most horror stories operate on someone-did-something-awful-and-it's-created-a-monstrosity.

VK: That winds up getting perverted in the slasher genre, though, right? Because the “something awful” gets colored almost entirely by conformity/regressive morality. The promiscuous teens get chopped to bits, the virginal Final Girl lives on. I'm not showing the kids slasher movies. I mean, it's just something else that exists in the genre waters.

CNC: Definitely. Though I'd argue that in some ways those also have at least one, perhaps unintentionally, progressive bent — the premise is “listen to women.” In almost all of them, the Fi-

nal Girl susses out what's up and then absolutely no one takes her seriously. Which again becomes a people-in-power-not-doing-anything-to-help-stop-the-issue.

VK: Yeah — it's hard to imagine if Kevin McCarthy got pod-peopled in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and Dana Wynter was the one who went to the next town over for help, that anyone would take her seriously.

CNC: Yes! That exactly! In the remake with Donald Sutherland, we even sort of see that a little bit with Veronica Cartwright versus Donald Sutherland's character.

VK: And it's so, so great.

CNC: It is one of my favorite films.

VK: We talked about the dangers of othering and how horror can provide a powerful (however bloody) window into that, so I guess we should talk about the other side of the same coin, which would be to keep a healthy skepticism of the uber-normal. I don't want to wander into the weeds of “Stranger Danger” or anything, but there's a consistent thread that connects *The Stepford Wives* and *Body Snatchers*, *American Psycho*, and even *Get Out*, I suppose, where the ultimate villain is someone who appears super normal on the surface.

CNC: Yeah, definitely. The veneer of normalcy needs to be interrogated in horror movies a lot of the time. Which I think is important — we idealize certain qualities, right? From “nuclear

families” to “perfect marriages,” etc, but we don’t question enough what goes on beyond the surface of that. Horror helps us to push the idea of, “We can never know what secrets lurk beneath the surface.” In horror, it’s extreme, right? “Oh no! That successful businessman is a psychotic killer!” or, “Your neighbor is actually an alien!” But on a less extreme level, we do find that out all the time. The perfect husband is actually abusive, the business that seems so environmentally sound and respectable is actually using slave labor. Interrogation of ideals is a good skill to have.

VK: Yeah, and a perfect message for kids. Bruce Springsteen tells a story in his autobiography that he can’t stand wind chimes to this day because when he was a kid, the husband in the next house was an abusive drunk, but the wife hung up these wind chimes to try to make the house appear peaceful and “normal” on the outside. You can

see how that same lesson informs his entire career, and it’s so easy (it’s the norm, probably), for people to encourage their kids to be “like” somebody else. What’s that really teaching them?

CNC: Yeah, it’s teaching them this horrible lesson that if things aren’t like everyone else then it’s their fault. So many people don’t report abuse because they don’t want to be seen as being outside those cultural norms, too. Which is much more horrifying to me than a horror movie is.

VK: Agreed. Horror allows us a lens through which to process our own fears, and I’m thankful we’ve had so many generations of genre storytellers helping us all out.

CNC: Yes, that exactly! It also, I think, helps us to think about the ramifications of those fears. Like, we get the safety of asking “what would I do”

before we ever have to actually face that question in real life. What would I do in a dangerous situation? Who would I be and who would I want to be?

VK: “Who would I want to be?” It’s a perfect question, and one I think we should be encouraging our kids to ask (be they small, or in college).

CNC: Definitely. It’s a lesson it’s never too late to learn, but I wish we’d all learn earlier.

Posted by Vance K and Chloe N.
Clark – in agreement about horror
movies at nerds of a feather
since at least 2016.