



Nerds of a Feather Flock Together

2021 Hugo Award Voter Packet
Best Fanzine

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Introduction

The G, Co-Founder and Publisher, Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together

If ever there was a year when genre mattered, it was 2020. What we just lived through – what we continue to live through – was once the stuff of science fiction. Think about it. A zoonotic, aerosolized virus. Global pandemic. State-enforced lockdowns. Mask mandates. Contact tracing via digital apps on your mobile devices. The spread of misinformation, echoing the spread of the virus itself. And video conferencing – so much video-conferencing – taking the place of person-to-person interaction.

Meanwhile, so many of us found ourselves cut off from our usual support networks and activities, isolated at home or working essential jobs in challenging circumstances; starved for entertainment; in need of an escape. Genre offered us distant worlds and far-off lands, magical creatures and the endless wonder of space. Genre could help us momentarily escape from what was going on around us. And it could help us work through the pain, fear and stress of what was going on around us – what is still going on around us.

Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together exists in a virtual space. It is powered by a group of editors and writers scattered across the world. Our purpose is to share, review and critique works of science fiction and fantasy that we feel are worthy of discussion. We have never sought to be comprehensive in our coverage, but rather well curated. And we neither charge nor seek advertising to underwrite this endeavor. We do it out of love for the subject matter, and because we all, individually and collectively, want to cast our opinions and viewpoints out into the ether, where they become part of the digital community – and conversation – that is fandom.

We are not alone. There are many others, including our fellow nominees in the Best Fanzine, Best Fan Writer and Best Fancast categories, who ride alongside us. We all share this same passion for genre and for fandom, that same need to express ourselves through critical exegesis. I feel fortunate to ride alongside them.

Still, I think there is something special about *Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together*. Nine years ago, almost to this day, it began with a phone call to my co-founder Vance Kotrla. We had long been neighbors and friends, brought together by a shared love for science fiction and cult cinema.

I knew that he, like me, had a lot to say about it too. Would he want to put that to page? As it happens, he did.

Fast-forward nine years and we have just received our 5th Hugo Award nomination. We have one writer (Paul Weimer) nominated in the Best Fan Writer Category, and an editor (Adri Joy) co-nominated in the Best Related Work Category. What's more, an alumnus (Charles Payseur) is nominated both in the Best Fan Writer and Best Fanzine categories. We have a wonderful group of editors and writers, led by our Managing Editors Adri Joy and Joe Sherry, who produce thoughtful, engaging and sometimes provocative material five-days-a-week. (Vance and I still write for the site too!) And while books are our bread and butter, we also cover comics, games, film and television. Quite the value, right? A broad selection of what genre has to offer in one convenient place.

With that in mind, I'd like to present you with a curated sample of the work we produced in 2020. I am immensely proud of the work our team has produced – particularly in this year of years, when we needed genre more than ever. I am grateful for the opportunity to share it with you, and for your consideration in the Best Fanzine category.

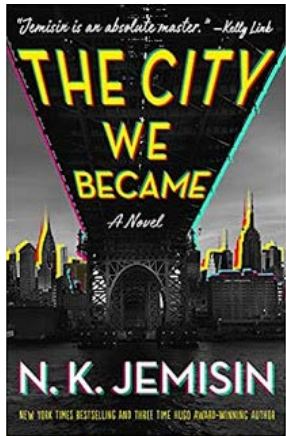
Fiction Reviews



Microreview [book]: *The City We Became* by N.K. Jemisin

Adri Joy

Cosmic horror, invisible parasites, sentient city avatars and a whole lot of New York attitude collide in this accomplished new trilogy opener



The City We Became is the first in N.K. Jemisin's new urban fantasy trilogy, and the first where the "proof of concept" short story (a technique Jemisin says she has used for her previous universes as well) picked up a lot of hype before the novels came around. "The City Born Great," originally

published on Tor.com, was a Hugo finalist in its eligible year and here it forms the prologue of an expanded, more complicated version of the "birth" of New York as a living city, coming together Captain-Planet style from the representatives of its five boroughs to protect the version of the city which they hold collectively dear.

I hope the idea of living cities, born once their locations reach a certain critical mass of people and culture and identity, makes sense to you, because there's not much more explaining within *The City We Became*. While in its genesis story, New York's birth involves an epic one-off battle between its avatar, a homeless Black kid living simultaneously

in the heart of the city and on the margins of its respectable society, *The City We Became* complicates that birth significantly, giving the avatar a partial victory but leaving him still weak while the cosmic horrors trying to destroy it are still on the move. Enter the Planete- sorry, the Boroughs: Manny, a grad student who forgets his previous identity while on the train in and is immediately thrust into a new supernatural role; Brooklyn, rapper turned politician; Bronca, a queer indigenous woman and art gallery owner; Padmini, representing Queens, a mathematical genius and recent immigrant from India stuck in a corporate finance job in order to fulfil her family's ambitions for her, and Aislyn, a sheltered white woman whose cop father has instilled in her some intense prejudices and a fear of the unknown. We follow the gang as they start to understand their new role and (mostly) come together over their shared enemy: a force represented by a changing Woman in White, who appears to be infecting the people of New York with cordyceps-like spores which compel them to lay the groundwork for a far more narrow-minded and unpleasant vision of the city.

The City We Became took a while to warm up for me, perhaps because of the lack of connection or attachment I have to New York itself. The main characters, representing the different boroughs of the city, are all introduced through the mythology and culture of these respective neighbourhoods, and while it's all explained well enough to grasp on an intellectual level, I found it hard to care about their personalities as defined through those neighbourhoods, especially as almost all of them represent millions of people (sorry, Staten Island) and distilling each one into a single human per-

sonality is a hard sell indeed. Although there are plenty of universally recognisable human factors at play, some of the questions about New York City's specific identity and boundaries become central to the plot in ways it's hard to really feel the impact of. Luckily, the fact that these moments are backed up with human characters whose existing relationships and personalities are very much worth paying attention to even when their city-personifications don't mean much to an outsider, means that there's always something to root for. Bronca is the standout character here, whose relationships with her colleagues - particularly young Jersey City resident Veneza - and their artistic community is full of entertainingly sharp edges and fun scenes, and I would have loved to spend a little more time with Padmini and her neighbourhood, as she feels like the character who gets least to do this time around.

It's in the characterisation of the enemy forces that *The City We Became*'s blend of the supernatural and the mundane really shines. The Woman in White, a mouthpiece that seems able to possess any woman in the city at any time in order to speak to our Heroes, is played both with an unknowable alien-ness and a very recognisable sense of white woman conviction in all of her beliefs (and her reception is quite different in dealing with Aislyn, the only white borough-avatar, compared to the others). And alongside highway-crushing tentacles and creepy invisible mushroom growths, the Woman's forces also include people whose agendas would be deeply unpleasant even without alien interference making them into the worst versions of themselves. The take-down of alt-right talking heads, repre-

sented by an artistic group attempting to get their hate-art displayed in Bronca's gallery and calling out "discrimination" when they refuse, is both hilariously on point and unpleasantly sinister in its portrayal of how much support these groups can get, and how far they can go. The corporate interests which threaten Brooklyn in particular provide a faceless counterpoint that's all-too-human, despite also being proof of how long the alien invasion has been planned. Although it veers into outright cosmic horror in its finale, there's something even more unsettling about the portrayals of human nature here, and Jemisin brings together a compelling microcosm of the social and cultural factors of New York in late-stage-capitalist-America, creating something unflinching in its look at power dynamics, race, class, queerness and (to a lesser extent) disability.

This being Jemisin, of course, the cosmic horror angle to *The City We Became* also has enormous stakes with no easy answers. While it's difficult to talk about without spoilers, and there is still a lot that remains to be explained in future books, the birth of New York, and the presence of living cities in general turns out to have repercussions that go well beyond maintenance of the water table and development of appropriate transport networks. The revelations about the city's place

within a wider multiverse of beings, and what their actions mean in unknowable dimensions, provides the characters with an interesting but necessarily brief moment of introspection before they go back to the work of securing their own survival. It's a little surprising how far off the hook the characters seem to be by the end of this volume, given some of the precedents explained to them by older cities (São Paulo puts in further appearances after his role in "The City Born Great," and Hong Kong also shows up), but I have no doubt the reality of their new status is going to cause plenty more adventure, heartache and introspection for the gang as the series goes on.

The City We Became is a book by a master of her craft, and while its focus and story didn't grab me by the throat in the same way as the Broken Earth trilogy, this is still a fantastic opening to a new series with a lot of new elements to explore. I'm definitely ready to find out more about the wider forces at work here, and although New York is never likely to be more than a very occasional foreign holiday destination to me, the characters it becomes in this volume are people I would very much like to spend more fictional time with.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 Fascinating blend of social factors and cosmic horror, especially on the antagonists' end

Penalties: -1 the borough-first personification takes a while to work its magic if you don't know your NYC

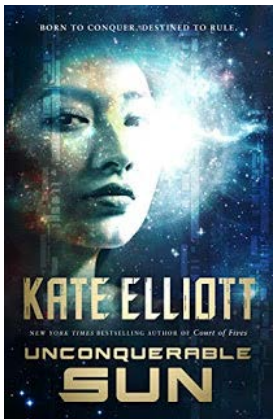
Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

POSTED BY: Adri, Nerds of a Feather co-editor, 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]: Unconquerable Sun by Kate Elliott

Paul Weimer

A triumphant and fully measured return to Space Opera by one of the Empresses of Fantasy



In Kate Elliott's long career, her work has mainly conquered vast realms of fantasy. From the Crown of Stars series, treading ground familiar to readers of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to the Crossroads series (including the recent *Black Wolves*) with Demons, intrigue and Giant Eagles, to the gonzo

Icepunk Alternate History Fantasy Spiritwalker series featuring delights such as lawyer dinosaurs, the inventiveness of Elliott's fantasy work is unmistakable. Oh and then there is the YA Court of Fives Trilogy, too, with a fantasy world inspired by Ptolemaic Egypt. However, she has written Space Opera too, earlier in her long and storied career, in the Jaran Tetralogy and the Highroad Trilogy.

Now, in *Unconquerable Sun*, Kate Elliott returns to the realm of Space Opera with perhaps one of the best elevator pitches I've ever read: Gender-flipped Alexander the Great, in Space.

Readers of Elliott's work know that her world-building is deep and infused with real world inspiration, given a fantasy turn and Elliott's eye for societies that either are more egalitarian, or look long and hard at the role of marginalized members of society, particularly women. So what does a Genderflipped Alexander the Great story in space actually MEAN in a Kate Elliott novel? We are introduced to the Republic of Chaonia, ruled by Queen-Marshal Eirene. The titular Sun is her daughter. In this, Elliott genderflips the relationship between Philip II of Macedon, and his son, Alexander. Sun's father, Prince João maps in some ways to Olympias, Alexander's mother, especially in being a relative outsider to the Republic's court. Given that he is not Chaonian, Sun's status as Heir to her mother is something that could be under theoretical threat if, say, Eirene were to marry a full blooded Chaonian and have a child by them. Even with her heroics at a recent battle, Sun is keenly aware of the political threat when her mother does indeed announce that she is going to take a wife, Manea Lee. The Lee Family, in addition to having a long and storied place in Chaonian history and power, also are the spymasters of the Republic This allows Elliott to use Sun's considerable temper, a notable and well used character flaw in the novel, to help propel the plot.

The use of Manea as a stand in for the real life Cleopatra Eurydice of Macedon, and the apparatus of Lee House gives Elliott a chance to use her other main point of view, Persephone Lee (or as her chapter titles call her, The Wily Persephone). Persephone is, when we meet her, under a false

identity at a military academy, having gone on the run from her own family, not wanting to be part of their endless political machinations, and as a way to honor her dead older sister, Ereshkigal Lee. (see the name parallel?) . Persephone soon finds that her family has known where she was for some time, and "just when she thinks she's out, they drag her back in" to Lee House and their machinations. Persephone provides an interesting contrast to Sun, both in her own individual thread and when events bring them together. Sun is confident, bold, strong, dynamic and grasping and very wilful. Some of the DNA of her Highroad series protagonist Lily Ransome (as well as of course Alexander himself) are definitely within Sun. By comparison, Persephone is a child of her House even when she is trying to make it that she is not--educated, calculating, intelligent, cerebral, and cunning, living up to her author-given epithet of Wily. Sun has understandable trouble in trying to trust Persephone, given events. While Sun is definitely a Sun in that many characters orbit her (especially her Companions, a way to rework the Companion Cavalry into a Household system of giving important nobles official "friends"), Persephone, too, proves to be a leader and pole for the novel, although in a lesser way.

And while a lot of the personal plot and conflict are forged in the Eirene-Sun relationship and that provides a lot of the drive of the novel, the Chaonians are not alone in this universe. On their borders are the Phene Empire. The Phene once vassalized Chaonia (as the real life Persian empire did so to Macedon) and seek to put the bootheel back on the Chaonians once more, and perhaps go further and avenge their defeat at the hands of

the Yele League (the Greek City State analogue). Their machinations, both the overt military threat and more subtle plots and plans they have in motion are the external pressure on the characters and the plot.

And there is just so much goodness here in the world that Elliott has built. There are some things about Alexander and his world that seemingly would not map well onto a FTL interstellar civilization. Elliott gives us multiple methods and challenges of interstellar travel, finding a solution to the problem of how fleets of ships can plausibly have conflict in the vastness of space. The Beacon system reminds me of the Alderson Points in the Pournelle/Niven Empire of Man verse, although Elliott's universe has additional surprises in store in how her beacons can work, their origin, and how they can be circumvented. The space battles themselves are not Star Wars dogfights, and they are not the hard SF relativistic space battles of *The Risen Empire*, but occupy a middle ground that gives somewhat of a WWII Carrier fleet action feel, with broad tactics and strategy emphasized over individual broadsides and single ship actions (More Jack Campbell than David Weber). There is also ground actions and tactics, and again, Elliott is either interested in the personal costs and struggles, or the broad strategies than so much individual unit tactics (although there is a very clever use of an improvised weapon that helps save the day in one situation, it must be said).

Elliott's worldbuilding goes far beyond the warfare and into every sphere of the world that she has created. One I want to mention is her use of the idea of Channel Idol. How does one try

and come up with an interstellar idea of Arete (excellence) in a way to mirror Alexander's rise to power, fame and reputation? Easy. Create an interstellar network of news and entertainment called Idol. Add in a Eurovision like contest called Idol Faire. The fact that Handsome Alika, previous winner of Idol Faire, is one of Sun's companions makes the next steps obvious--of course Sun would manipulate Idol to burnish her reputation. It's a fascinating mirror at our own society, sometimes obsessed with celebrity, gossip and trivia, and shows how someone as driven as Sun can and would use such a system to her own advantage. In some ways, Sun's relentlessness makes her a character that often pushes very hard indeed, even into spheres where you would not suspect. And there is much more, the novel having plenty of references and allusions outside of Alexander's life that bore into the worldbuilding to various depths, from the role and use of religions, to the history of how man got here and plenty more. I could write an entire review just focused on all of the bioengineering, genetic manipulations and how they are used to worldbuild, create characters, and drive the narrative. (Really, that in itself is a whole strand of the novel that intersects in very different and interesting ways with Sun, and with The Wily Persephone).

Going in I wasn't sure where in "Alexander's life" that Kate was going to set this. Even in a short life such as Alexander's, I think the woman on the street's conception of Alexander the Great, if dimly remembered from school or maybe the Oliver Stone movie is that he "conquered Persia." There is plenty of life before then and setting it in the time frame she does, Elliott provides plenty

of interpersonal conflict and character interaction for the reader to sink their teeth into, The novel proves that an Alexander the Great story doesn't have to be about the tactics and battles (although they certainly there) and that Sun's personal life, drives, goals, desires and how they mesh with her family, her Companions (really a form of found family--another theme the novel works with) are as compelling as fighting the Phene.

A new Kate Elliott novel for me is always a moment of joy for one of my heart authors. 7 IS the first in a series and doesn't provide any easy escapes for someone who wants to try Kate Elliott and have a complete story in one go. It would make an intriguing place to start your reading of Kate Elliott, though, if you have not tried her work before, but do know that it ends on a note of "more to come" and you will have to wait impatiently like me for the next volume in the series (on the other hand, you will have time to dive into her oeuvre in the meantime).

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10.

Bonuses: +1 Strong use and understanding of tropes and genre conventions; +1 Clockwork plotting and page-turning layout of events

Penalties: -1 No offramp for readers who want a one book experience (which is something that Elliott doesn't generally write, to be fair)

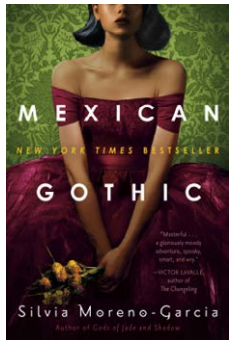
Nerd Coefficient: 9/10 very high quality/stand-out in its category (Sorry, Princess Sun! Not quite perfect)

POSTED BY: Paul Weimer. Ubiquitous in Shadow, but I'm just this guy, you know? 2020 Hugo Award finalist for Best Fan Writer. @princejvstin.

Microreview [Book]: Mexican Gothic by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Sean Dowie

Mexican Gothic asks for your patience and rewards you with gut-punches



Mexican Gothic is a serpent of a novel that slithers through its proceedings. It takes its time as it moves with a predatory glint in its eye, looking like it's ready to strike until it doesn't, and you're left with paralyzing dread, waiting for the attack to finally come.

And it sloughs its skin again and again, continuously giving you a new outlook of what it looks like as you wonder when it's finally going to stop and you can see its eventual form. It's a slow burn with a petrifying veneer covering something even more terrifying.

The novel begins with protagonist Noemi Taboada, a young socialite who receives a distressing message from her cousin, Catalina, in which she speaks of being haunted by preternatural forces. Concerned for her mental health, Noemi travels to High Place - the quintessentially Gothic abode that Catalina moved into after marrying Virgil - to find out what is going on.

But High Place domiciles more than just Virgil and Catalina. Almost all of the members of

Virgil's family - the Doyles- live within. There's Francis, Virgil's softhearted, sensitive brother—Florence, the older, stern, and no-nonsense cousin—and Howard, the invalid, quiet, near-putrefying uncle. There's an ineffable sense of connection between the family that feels stronger than a familial bond, but hard to put your finger on what exactly that is until later reveals. And moving in and out of the story unobtrusively are the compliant, one-dimensional servants whose lack of personality adds to the foreboding atmosphere.

Atmosphere is something *Mexican Gothic* relies on during its slow build, and Silvia Moreno-Garcia incorporates a familiar dread endemic to the genre, while also deviating away from its dreary trappings and static moments in which the novel could be aimlessly going around in circles. While *Mexican Gothic* may be the antithesis of an action-packed thriller, the moments in which it moves at a slow pace are infused with dynamic dread. Some Gothic novels tread water in a placid lake, while *Mexican Gothic* treads water in a stormy sea with sharks and piranhas circling around you, as your heart races and sweat beads.

Another horror trope that it uses skillfully are dream sequences. A lot of horror novels use dream sequences to pepper the story with shocking imagery that bears no import to the themes or plot. But every single dream sequence in *Mexican Gothic* either foreshadows or fills in information for the story. Even a couple dream sequences that may seem pointless at first will reveal itself to cleverly hint at or build on the secrets of the novel.

Covering a story in a location like High Place

where often mist envelops the area, robbing it of vivacity, is a liability to overfilling your story with dreariness. But *Mexican Gothic's* rich color palette comes more from the characters than the setting. Each character keeps the story alive, whether it be through endearing sensitivity, biting and witty remarks, or full-forced malevolence. Every major character is fully-drawn and distinctive as they bounce off each other in ways that will make you vacillate from feeling sympathy to distrust to dread for almost all of them.

Images of an ouroboros eating its own tail is a motif in *Mexican Gothic*. Family figuratively eat each other in this novel—over-relying on each other to a degree that breaches conventional boundaries. Characters kind of eat other in ferocious ways, as they attack in the confines of High Place—like an ouroboros has circled around them, trapping them, and they're forced to tolerate each other in a confined, irritating place. But *Mexican Gothic* offers shreds of hope that when you're confined, feeling unable to escape your situation, there are morsels of good and holds to pull you out of there. *Mexican Gothic* may slough off its skin constantly, like a serpent, but through portraying fully-formed humanity, it doesn't reject the idea that its final skin will look less dreary and hopeless as the setting of a Gothic novel.

The Math

Baseline Score: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 For having some of the most well-written sentences I've read this year; +1 For having crippling (in the best horror-like way) character development and emotional complexity.

Negatives: -1 It's not quite as scary as it could be.

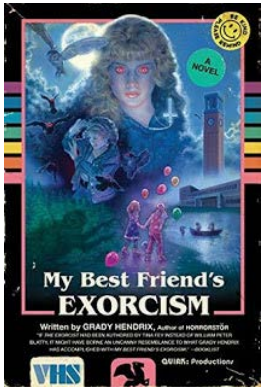
Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

*POSTED BY: Sean Dowie -
Screenwriter, stand-up comedian,
lover of all books that make him
nod his head and say, "Neat!"*

Microreview [book]: My Best Friend's Exorcism by Grady Hendrix

The G

What if Stranger Things and The Exorcist had a child? A book child.



Grady Hendrix is probably best known for *Paperbacks from Hell*, a nonfiction tribute to the outlandish and fun world of horror novels in the 1970s and 1980s. But he's also an accomplished horror novelist in his own right. *My Best Friend's Exorcism* is, in essence, Hendrix's

attempt to write his own "paperback from hell" - an endeavor you might expect to go the full hipster route, complete with all the winks, nudges and avalanche of pop culture references that weigh down similar exercises, like Ernest Cline's *Armada*. Credit Hendrix for instead threading the needle, and producing a novel that is both loving paean to the paperbacks of yesteryear and a legitimate horror novel with a solid emotional core.

My Best Friend's Exorcism tells the story of Abby Rivers and Gretchen Lang, teenagers and best friends in late 1980s Charleston, SC. Both attend a prestigious private school, but whereas Gretchen comes from a wealthy family with a sought-after address, Abby is a latchkey kid on scholarship.

In their review, the AV Club offers this succinct synopsis of the plot:

Abby Rivers and Gretchen Lang are entering their sophomore year of high school, part of a four-girl clique both popular and academically successful. Abby and Gretchen have been besties since grade school, possessing the kind of near-telepathic communication and her-before-me selflessness that characterizes the most intimate friendships. So naturally, Abby is the first to notice when Gretchen returns—after disappearing for the night during a sleepover—a little... different. Soon, she barely recognizes her oldest friend, as Gretchen begins executing progressively more malicious schemes that rain down disaster upon everyone in her orbit. Surely, Abby reasons, this can't be the work of her friend. Someone or some thing has taken hold, and is twisting her, forming her into someone fearsome and new. After a school assembly visit from a bodybuilding troop of Christian brothers, Abby suspects her worst fear might be true: The devil has taken her best friend.

This is not a YA novel, though it has a certain YA sensibility. At its core, *My Best Friend's Exorcism* is a novel about friendship, and more specifically, about the kinds of friendship you only make when you're young, still forming as a person and so struggling to make sense of the world and your place in it. It feels emotionally authentic, which is not something I take for granted with genre fiction. Honestly it's pretty rare for me to feel to wholly invested in a genre novel's characters when you discount the plot and setting. But I'd honest-

ly read this novel about Abby and Gretchen and their lives even if it didn't have anything to do with demonic possession.

Of course it is also a novel about demonic possession, and it's here that Hendrix really threads that needle between serious horror and campy retro fun. The story of Gretchen's possession is unnerving, unsettling and at times pretty shocking - but it's also peppered with elements of humor, especially when the '80s-tastic exorcist comes into play. The result isn't exactly funny and isn't exactly scary, but by blending the two, he does capture the feel and thrill of those old paperbacks.

It's worth noting that this isn't a gory book - it certainly has its moments but, in the aggregate, it's pretty low on the gush and splatter. Instead it burns slow, amping up the creep factor and occasionally venturing into the macabre. A lot is left to the imagination, which as often is the case, ends up in a darker place than the book itself.

Next comes the question of who the book is for, and I imagine some people will bounce of the retro '80s concept. That, in turn, begs the question: could someone less invested in '80s nostalgia enjoy the book as much as I did? I think so. You will get more mileage out of the book if you've also sung the wrong words to "Against All Odds," but the story and emotional core are strong enough that your enjoyment doesn't hinge on it. And this is what sets *My Best Friend's Exorcism* apart from many other entries into the '70s and '80s nostalgia cottage industry - the nostalgia is pretty well backgrounded.

There are also lots of little details I appreciated as well, many of which suggest things but don't outright say them. For example, we know Abby's family is struggling financially but she attends an elite school on scholarship - we get hints throughout the novel that her family has fallen on hard times, and *might* have once been prominent in the community, but it's never stated outright. It may not be true at all. I always like this kind of approach, the kind that leaves questions to be answered by your imagination.

Bottom line, this is a fun book that delivers

mood, thrill and more than its share of heart. It's also hard to put down, and leaves enough questions unanswered that I'm already contemplating a re-read. One complaint: it's too short. I would happily have spent another one or two hundred pages with Abby and Gretchen.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

Bonuses: +1 for this is how you do nostalgic art; +1 for copious references to Phil Collins

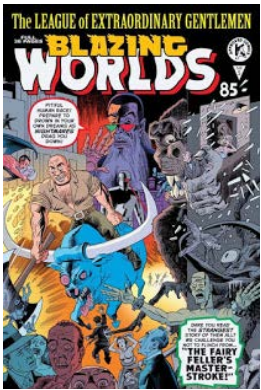
Penalties: -1 for it's too short

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10. Well worth your time and attention.

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

Microreview [comic]: The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Tempest

Spacefaring Kitten



Alan Moore is finished with comics. A scent of nostalgia in the air suggests that he may have announced something similar before, but this time it seems final. The British comics writer legend and his co-creator, illustrator Kevin O'Neill, are both ending their respective

careers with the final six-issue instalment of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* saga which hit the stores last year and is about to be published as a graphic novel any time now.

In short, the series goes out with a headscratching boom – a nice way to end anything, be it comics or careers.

It's incredibly hard to sum up the 20 years of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* in any meaningful way for those who are not familiar with it. The crossover steampunk adventure comic with established Victorian characters and literary jokes quickly evolved into a tale incorporating scenes of harrowing sexual violence, wild experimentation and the most abysmally awful film adaptation of a comic in living memory. (Speaking of confusing ways to end careers, the movie was the last screen

appearance of Sir Sean Connery who took the job after feeling bad for not agreeing to play Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*.)

In 1999, the first miniseries Volume I laid the foundation for an intriguing storyworld: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and numerous other Victorian fictions are actually situated in the same alternate history. In this steampunk world, the British government assembles a team of operatives with extraordinary abilities to deal with exceptional threats to the empire. Wilhelmina Murray (or Harker), Captain Nemo, Allan Quatermain, the shapeshifting Dr. Jekyll and an invisible sex criminal form something of a Victorian-era Justice League to fight off Dr. Moriarty, an invasion or Martian tripods and what have you.

Along the way, the comic commented on Victorian attitudes, played with metafictionality and propagated Moore and O'Neill's distaste for authorities and superheroes. The first two miniseries published in 1999-2000 and 2002-2003 were mainstream successes – even if the metafictional play becomes quite complex sometimes, they are highly accessible stories. After all, reading Moore's episodic prose bonus features describing wonders from different corners of the storyworld and weaving together elements from hundreds if not thousands of myths, stories, novels and other sources from *Moomins* to *House of Leaves* were not necessary for enjoying the main storyline.

After Volumes I and II Moore and O'Neill could probably have kept milking the steampunk cow for a long time, but they chose to move the story in new directions instead. In the graphic novel *Black Dossier* (2007), they jumped to Britain in the fifties after the downfall of Orwell's Big Brother government, and in the album trilogy *Century* (2009-2012) they race through the 20th century, visiting Jack the Ripper years, the trippy sixties and ending up in the 2000s with computers, endless wars in the Middle East and Harry Potter who has become Antichrist.

In addition to the crazy plot points, *Black Dossier* and *Century* experimented with the comics storytelling. For the *Black Dossier*, Moore wrote a "disappeared" Shakespeare play in Shakespear-ean pentameter and recorded early faux rock and roll songs for a vinyl record to come with the album, whereas O'Neill's drawings representing the magical dimension of Margaret Cavendish's proto sci-fi novel *The Blazing World* have to be read with red-and-green 3D glasses. For the first *Century* album, they decided to go with a comics adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's socialist agit prop musical *The Threepenny Opera* – you may want to read *Century: 1910* in case you're interested in why one of the characters is called Pirate Jenny in the new *Watchmen* TV series (but don't fall off you chair when the comics final apocalyptic fight scene turns into a burlesque cabaret show).

So, this sets the scene for *Volume 4: The Tempest*, the final volume in the series.

It starts where *Century* trilogy ended up: satanic

Harry Potter is defeated, the misogynist MI5 agent and *Black Dossier's* antagonist James Bond is old and debilitated and the last remnants of the League – Mina Murray and genderbending Orlando from the Virginia Woolf novel of the same name – are adventuring together again. They are joined by MI5 leader Emma Night (from the British TV show *Avengers*) who chose to switch sides and team up with the good guys instead of government spooks.

To sum it up, all seemed to be more or less in order in the storyworld, all thinkable storytelling fireworks were shot in the previous volumes and the contents of most of the classics of imaginative fiction have already been crammed somewhere in the series. The obvious question was “is there anywhere left to go now?”, but it seems that we didn't really have to worry about that.

After going through Victorian adventure fiction in Volumes I and II, a mishmash of earlier cultural history, Orwell and detective fiction in *Black Dossier* and occult stuff and children's fantasies in *Century*, Moore and O'Neill tackle the history of comics and superheroes, especially British ones.

It's an interesting choice for sure. Mostly *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* has steered clear of the cultural history of its own medium, even if it has taken a deep dive in the cultural history of practically everything else. Of course much of Moore's bibliography has been thematizing comics history extremely hard – think of works like *Watchmen*, *Miracleman* (formerly *Marvelman*), *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, *Supreme and Tomorrow Stories* – and a great

chunk of Kevin O'Neill's body of work consists of brutal, polemic satires of superheroes and comics heroism like *Nemesis the Warlock* or *Marshal Law* (frequently created with writer Pat Mills). There is no shortage of comics going through the history of American superhero comics with some kind of a meta sensibility, but outside US there's still new ground to be covered, it seems.

Also, it turns out that discarding the super-misogynistic “Jimmy” Bond as a key threat was too quick a conclusion. Agent 007, even if he is barely alive and glued to a wheelchair and a breathing apparatus, is able to take back control of MI5 and raise some serious hell. He tracks the hero trio's journey to Africa where they take a dip in the magic pool of R. Rider Haggard's stories restoring their youth. With his henchmen (who are actually the Bond actors from different James Bond movies), Bond follows them, regains his young and able body and, being the murderous and sleazy character that the original Bond is, blows up the pool with a nuclear bomb, butchers Night's allies within the agency and gets ready to attack The Blazing World with weapons of mass destruction.

The plot is again a convoluted mess with Murray, Orlando and Night visiting different magical realities, meeting fictional characters like Prospero from Shakespeare's *Tempest* and teaming up with original Nemo's great-grandchild Jack Nemo. We see fairies performing the fictional Shakespeare play of *Black Dossier*, have to again tinker with 3D glasses and get to try to make sense of extremely obscure intertextual references. Which is what one would expect of the finale of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, I guess.

On the one hand, it's hard to not think that the comic goes a bit overboard with this stuff if you practically have to read it with a commentary website open, but the weird storytelling levels actually work out quite well and the series stays enjoyable if you're not allergic to scratching your head here and there.

The best parts of the narrative are not the plot twists – Prospero and the fairies might actually be out to wipe out humanity turning everything that came before in the series into a perplexing hoax scheme – but different comics pastiches. Some Bond sequences are presented as James Bond newspaper strips whereas other scenes are meticulous parodies of British girls' comics magazines and children's comics à la Beano. The last issue where we leave Earth takes the form of a *2000AD* issue – it's the legendary British science fiction magazine which was instrumental in launching both Moore and O'Neill's careers, so it's a neat meta way to finish their time in comics business. In order to really get the meta levels up, the creators also enter the story in the last issue to attend a wedding ceremony with the art swiped from the Fantastic Four annual in which Stan Lee and Jack Kirby tried to get in to see Invisible Girl marry Mister Fantastic.

This time we don't get bonus prose features at the back of the comic books. Instead, there's a black-and-white comic-book-inside-a-comic-book thing which mimics a cheap British rip-off of early American superhero comic with characters who are actually real British rip-offs of early American superheroes. It's harder to explain than to read

and enjoy, really, and I can't believe nobody had told me about the ice-cream powered superhero Tommy Walls who is actually a thing. Well, now I know!

I'm not sure if they will be included in the graphic novel but the comic books begin and end with editorials and letter columns by "Al and Kev" who shed light on forgotten British comics talents and answer letters (probably 99% of which are ghost-written by themselves). It's fun stuff in its own right and if it is dropped from the graphic novel I suggest you try to hunt the original floppies.

Twenty years from now when the present culture wars have been long forgotten, future readers will scratch their heads with letters like this but maybe it goes with the rest of the confusion:



"Dear Al and Kev: As a middle-aged conservative incel sitting wedged behind my keyboard, trolling Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez with my Batman T-shirt covered with Pringles, can I just ask, with a straight face, why you're leaving the comics business? Yours,

Hiram J. Comicsgate III"

The Math

Baseline: 8/10

Bonuses: +5 for weird, weird, weird pastiches and other irresistibly crazy things from the dustbins of comics history.

Penalties: -5 for the fact that trying to spot references and obsessing about it takes a toll on the reading fun.

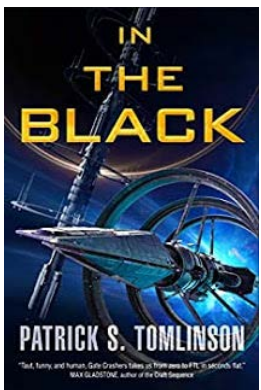
Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 – "well worth your time and attention"

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

Microreview [book]: In the Black by Patrick Tomlinson

Paul Weimer

Patrick Tomlinson's *In the Black* turns Tomlinson's penchant for science fiction into full bore Mil-SF Space Opera, starting a new series with space battle, corporate intrigue, and his brand of dry humor.



Captain Susan Kamala of the Ansari has a problem. Sure, she's the captain of a class name ship in the CCDF, and she's worked hard to get that position. But now a second defensive recon drone has "failed" in the 82 G Eridani solar system they are patrolling, and it does

look like the Xre aliens are up to something. The seventy year old cold war between the two species may yet turn hot once again, with Captain Kamala on the grill.

Thuk has a problem. Sure, Thuk is the Derstu, the chosen leader of the Xre warship Chusexx, new and fresh, and it is probably a ship better than anything the humans have. But being Derstu is not quite like being a Captain, and Thuk has to see to the crew, as well as the orders from above. Poking at the humans, testing their defenses is a tricky thing to navigate. It's enough to want one to molt their shell. And so when the poking

at the human defenses provokes a confrontation, that shiny new ship might get its real shakedown in a shooting match with a human warship.

Tyson Abington has a problem, too. Sure, he's the CEO of Ageless, Inc. Sure, he has a kickass AI, Paris, which helps him keep on top of running one of the corporations that dominate Human Space. But his company's colony over on a planet around Teegarden's Star has a very nasty virus, and news of that when it gets out to the public is sure to hit stock shares. And there are intimations and rumors of other things, other threats to Ageless in the offing. The corporate sharks are circling, and Tyson is getting the sense that these are moves for high stakes--stakes enough to threaten not just him, not just his position, but worse, his entire corporation.

Their three stories may start, or stop, or even hasten interstellar war in Patrick Tomlinson's *In The Black*.

The beginning of the novel, the dedication of the novel, is to David Weber, Walter John Williams, Marko Kloos, and James S. A. Corey. The novel stakes out right away that this is squarely pitched at readers of, and playing in the Military SF Space Opera quadrant of the galaxy of SF. The novel is traditional enough and so well within the boundaries of that subgenre that if Mil-SF doesn't interest you, this is, full stop, not going to be the novel that is going to give you the most in your reading bang for the buck. This is the novel where Tomlinson decides to see what he can do with a storied portion of SF, but it is not transcendent of that subgenre.

So what do we have here?

The social worldbuilding and the setup intrigued me. The corporate dominated Earth and how the Corporations have taken us to the Stars and run planets and fleets feels somewhat like a variation on the Corporate future of Martha Wells' Murderbot series, but with the dials turned much more heavily to a militarized and military focused presence in space. I somehow get the sense that the Xre-Human war started off much like the Kzinti and Humans in Niven's *Known Space*--the Xre thinking the humans were going to be easy prey and the Humans, caught on the backfoot, nevertheless got to parity and a cold war.. The Xre are much more crafty than the "Attack before they are ready" Kzinti. Tomlinson's characterization of aliens, as seen in his previous novels, often shows far more nuance and craft than some of the stereotypes seen in Niven's *Known Space*. Frankly, I would rather face a Kzinti force than a Xre force any day if I were given the choice between the two. Tomlinson avoids the twin pitfalls of "starfish aliens" that are incomprehensible and "rubber forehead aliens" who really are just humans with a dye job. The Xre are winningly described and characterized and by the back portion of the novel, their actions are comprehensible.

That leads us to the characters that Tomlinson populates his world with. There are archetypes, standard models of characters, basic variants that one finds in a lot of Military SF, Space Opera or not. Tomlinson subverts this from the get go with Captain Kamala and the crew of the Ansari. Kamala is no Smurfette on the ship--the ship, and indeed most of the fleet is crewed by women, be-

cause women handle the rigors of space better. It's a poke in the eye of mediocre Mil SF which has Manly Men doing Manly things in Space, backed up with a logical reason as to why the crew of this ship, and most ships in fact, is mostly women. Tomlinson's captain and crew are professional soldiers, with quirks, and full fledged personalities. This extends to the Xre, and to Tyson and the characters around him as well. This is not a novel of deep character arcs and development. However, Tomlinson gives a good dynamic range and inner life to his characters, human, alien and also the AI Paris. Like his previous novels, Tomlinson understands character, especially the absurdity of characters' lives, and that is a real joy to his writing. And there are other fine notes of dry humor, another staple of Tomlinson's writing that leavens the proceedings. I was expecting the Packers humor, but not the poke at a sit down restaurant chain, just to name two bits.

But it is the nuts and bolts of the Military SF that the novel really focuses on, and where for the most part it shines brilliantly. The FTL is the Alcubierre drive, frame dragging FTL with interesting limitations and restrictions. There is no An-sible (which means that the transmission of information between solar systems has to be by ship, which proves to be something that parts of the plot turns on) There is a definite sense of a cold war arms building up and testing on both sides. Like the 1970's and 1980s as America and the USSR developed better weapon systems of various kinds, a Balance of Terror, there is a corporate cast to the weapons development, making profit motives an interesting tweak to how the Military tech development and execution proceed. There is

plenty of space action as the opposite sides square off, and Tomlinson delivers what Mil-SF readers are looking for in terms of well described action and adventure. At the same time, there is an not so explicit criticism of the corporate military industrial complex (complexes if you count the Xre too) and a real sense of the potential costs of war and who war ultimately benefits.

My major beef with an otherwise high quality novel is the ending. The novel builds up, introduces mysteries, conflicts and sequences, and comes to a conclusion that really isn't one. There is a final Mil-SF battle and set piece confrontation that is really spectacular, but there is a frustrating lack of finality to this novel, providing no off-ramp for readers who don't want to read a second novel (or, worse, if a second novel should never happen). I was hoping for something more self contained along the lines of, say, Gate Crashers. I do like the world, the tech, the action and the characters and I would read a sequel, but I was hoping for something a little more self contained. Hopefully there will be more books in the series, so as the cliffhangers bits of this novel won't itch quite so much.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 for an excellent cast of characters; +1 for excellent Military SF action beats right down the center of the pitch.

Penalties: -1 for not sticking the ending.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 Well worth your time and attention

Microreview [book]: Harrow the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir

Adri Joy

Can Tamsyn Muir's queer gothic necromancy series get any better? Yes it can.



All right, limber up folks, because today we're diving into one of 2020's most anticipated sequels: more lesbians, more space, more everything. As you'd expect, this will have spoilers for *Gideon the Ninth*, but I will keep the description of *Harrow the Ninth* as spoiler free as its

possible to be in this riddle-wrapped-in-an-enigma of a book - save for one thing, which I will call "The Big Question." If you have read *Gideon the Ninth*, you probably already know (and are possibly quite desperate to find out about) the Big Question. This is a safe space and I won't anybody who comes here needing to know *spoiler spoiler spoiler* before it gets naturally unravelled within the text. However, in order to help you out while making sure that this page is free of Harrow spoilers, all I can do if you want the answer to the Big Question is offer you a link to the most accurate way I can answer it. I'm sure this clears everything up and we can now all move on, yes? Good.

Harrowhark Nonagesimus, last surviving child of her insular death-worshipping family, has

survived the trials of Canaan House and come out the other side a Lyctor: one of the Emperor's deathless servants, able to work with apparently limitless amounts of necromantic power and fulfil what she feels is her ultimate purpose in life. Unfortunately, she's also a complete mess, incapable of doing anything except screaming and vomiting for the first several weeks of her Lyctorhood - and once she reattains consciousness and finds out the whole deal with the empire and why her presence is now needed, things don't get much better either internally or externally. See, it turns out that in order for the Resurrection ten thousand years ago to have created the House system and restarted the sun, the Necrolord Prime and Emperor of the Nine Houses (a man also known as "John") needed to effectively kill the planets on which the nine houses are based and modify their energies into those on which necromancy itself is based. Only in the same way that murdered humans can end up as vengeful revenants, so too can murdered planets turn into planet-sized undead cosmic horrors, who can only be defeated by humans through complex and equally horrific acts of magic. The Emperor and his surviving coterie - all of whom have been around since the start of the process as well - have managed to take down some of the beasts, but now one is on its way, and Harrow and fellow baby Lyctor Ianthe need to train up to become part of the battle to vanquish it.

Harrow's present is interspersed with scenes from the house, and from the trials she faced... except these don't match up with our own experience of the events, particularly when it comes to the necromancer at her side. Because what Harrow

remembers is undergoing the trials with Ortus Nigenand, the indolent, cowardly cavalier who fled the scene early in *Gideon the Ninth* and ended up making space for Gideon to join. Though Harrow doesn't have the information to figure this out, as readers we're pretty sure that these weird memories probably have something to do with why Harrow's Lyctor powers aren't working properly. Because - and this is your last warning for *Gideon the Ninth* spoilers - Lyctors need to take in and absorb the souls of their dead cavaliers in order to power parts of their magic, in particular their uncanny healing abilities and the ability to remain physically adept at self-defence while mentally battling in "the River": aka the weird necromancy subdomain which also allows for instantaneous space travel as long as you can survive all the ghostly horrors and the weird metaphors your new colleagues will use to explain it to you. Without Gideon's presence in Harrow's mind or memories, she apparently has no access to the most important weapons she has to stay alive, meaning there's no point in worrying how good a necromancer she is because she's not going to be able to survive to tell the tale.

The apparent development of a Gideon-free Ninth House adventure could outstay its welcome in other hands, especially if we weren't pretty sure from the very start that this absence is a mystery to be solved in the text. Instead, the combined present-and-not-quite-past narratives allow *Harrow the Ninth* to expand on some of the mechanics of necromancy through Harrow's eyes, and offer a better sense of just what this millennia-old system of houses has been set up for and what's behind the Emperor's mysterious

disappearance from his own empire. There's also the introduction of The Sleeper into the past narratives, a deadly mystery force who appears to be unrelated to all the previous deaths, and who starts picking off the characters of Canaan house in a different order to the one we originally saw, though with similar effect. All of this is told in a style that, while less overtly irreverent than Gideon's running commentary, still doesn't skimp either on the loving descriptions of human anatomy (this time around, the bones usually have specific names, because of course Harrow wants to tell you exactly what bone a construct has come from) or the occasional deployment of metatextual memeage used without knowledge by the characters (though there's at least one who knows exactly what they are doing). These moments regularly come at a point where they kick a scene from poignant and/or brutal to "I am now feeling all of the emotions", and reader, I did feel all of the emotions, messily and out loud.

As in *Gideon the Ninth*, the characters are delightfully human and also delightfully awful to each other. Because the First House has been pared back so brutally, and is comprised entirely of people who have killed their loved ones in order to ascend to their current powerful states, the dynamics and interactions between its members

are claustrophobic and excruciating, and Harrow's weakness and... Harrow-ness... means that she very much becomes part of the negative dynamic as a written-off walking corpse. That claustrophobia makes it almost a relief to escape into the past Canaan, and to see the ways that relationships start developing differently in the murder house - particularly with Abigail Pent taking the fore, a character who only had the briefest time to shine in the first book. It's difficult to talk about the Canaan plot without giving too much away, but I will note that the way the dead characters are handled ends up being an advancement of plot lines rather than a relitigation, and this alternate reality ends up dovetailing with Harrow's present to build to a glorious climax.

And that's the real big question, with a book this dense and complex and self-contradictory: is Muir going to pull it off? In a word: fuck yes. It's that payoff to a deeply ambitious structure that really puts Harrow over the top, even when compared to its juicy but more classically-plotted predecessor; it takes serious talent to turn part of your sequel into a nonsensical retcon of the events of the previous book without completely losing your audience, let alone to turn that retcon into a vital strand of the plot and a vehicle for character growth in its own right. Even when it's

refusing to take itself and its own genre seriously on the surface, every twist in Harrow's tale draws the audience deeper into its terrifying, ridiculous, mystical world and the people within it. This is a rare series that lives up to its hype and then some, and *Harrow the Ninth* one of the best books I've ever read.

The Math

Baseline Score: 10/10

Bonuses: +1 a split narrative that knocks it out of the park in terms of character development and timeskipping mystery solving; +1 bones

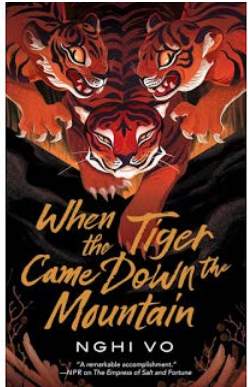
Penalties: -1 Hard to put down before the Big Question gets resolved, may impact on sleep and other basic life functions (but it's OK, it's a necromancy book); -1 Harrow's lack of upper body strength

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10

Microreview [book]: When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain by Nghi Vo

Sean Dowie

History and storytelling make a proficient pairing in this gorgeous novella



It's hard to pen a story in which the lines are blurred but the narrative is always clear. Ambiguity and warring perspectives can hurricane into incomprehensible pandemonium. However, *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain* manages to have characters who not only inhabit

both the bodies of animals and humans, but have characters performing oral storytelling that's just as fluid. What kept me engaged wasn't rigidity and linearity, but a narrative voice that always had control with a grip greater than any rigidity.

This story takes place in the same world as Nghi Vo's other novella *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, but it can be enjoyed without reading its predecessor. It follows Chih, a travelling cleric who has a run-in with three tigers of seemingly malevolent intent. At the tigers' request, Chih tells them the story of Ho Thi Thao, a figure

with a complex history. The tigers' interest of the story lies less in Chih's retelling, but in seeing the differences between the human recounting and their own specie's recollection. With death by tiger-mauling perhaps on Chih's horizon, the story is infused with a sense of dread. But Nghi Vo expertly mitigates the horrors with the tigers' flavorful, humorous personalities. It adds zest to the novella but not overly so to rob it of dramatic stakes.

I was a fan of Nghi Vo's lyrical writing in her first novella, but with *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*, she takes it to the next level. It's a tricky feat to have poetry worthy of admiration without losing the momentum of the story, but Nghi Vo infuses every sentence with ornate lyricism while still being pacier than most fantasy novels. And best of all, reading it is a lot of fun.

If there's one complaint, it's that a lot of the events in the first chapter seemed minor compared to what succeeded it. Characters are introduced at a breakneck pace, but many of them play an inconsequential role. The writing at the beginning certainly sets a mood, but the story would've felt more satisfying if some characters weren't stripped of importance in the latter portions.

Mutability is the key word in this novella. Characters change forms, from human to tiger. Interpretations of stories are colored based on the teller's disposition, history, and predilections. The

right thing for the character to do in a story depends on the teller's upbringing. Ferocity can be seen as a sign of villainy or strength. Submissiveness can be seen as a sign of weakness or necessity. The way we tell our stories and the things we take away from them is the most powerful window into someone's values. And each culture is unique—there is no mutability that can morph into a carbon copy of our own.

When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain doesn't have an earth-shattering conclusion. The stakes aren't so dire that if Chih fails, the world will end. But its message still has weight. It offers an array of perspectives of one story. And by looking at every permutation, you can look at the distinctiveness of people. Like how sometimes a perspective that seems malevolent on the surface is actually conceived in good faith. The understanding of that mutability can prod you to cross a blurred line and find level ground to share with others.

The Math

Baseline Score: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 For writing my favorite tigers in fiction.

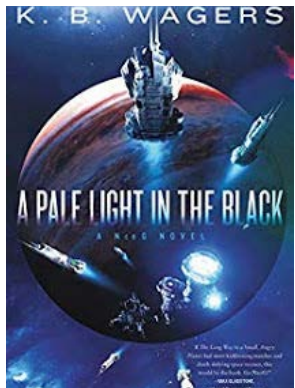
Negatives: -1 For a first chapter that feels a little disconnected from the rest of the story.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

Microreview [book] *A Pale Light in the Black*, by K.B. Wagers

Paul Weimer

***A Pale Light in the Black* brings the talents of K. B. Wagers from far future to nearer term and nearer to Earth Space Opera, telling the story of the NeoG, the Space Coast Guard of the 25th Century.**



In the 25th Century, Space is still Big and Scary. The Navy is concerned with large scale issues, especially given that Humanity, bouncing back from the Collapse, has spread by means of worm-hole technology to the Trappist system. The

25th Century humanity is actively colonizing and terraforming the solar system, too, with all of the issues--bandits, pirates, and the vagaries of space travel come into play. And just as in the modern day, a force is needed for when one's spacecraft is floundering between Earth and Mars. And THAT is the story of the Near Earth Orbital Guard--the NeoG.

The story of *A Pale Light in the Black* runs along two Hoffmann Transfer Orbits. The first is the Boarding Games. From the beginning of the novel, we learn about the Boarding Games, a

multievent physical and mental competition between various branches of the armed forces (Navy, NeoG, Army, Marines, Air Force) that is watched by millions. At the beginning of the novel, we learn the NeoG, led by the crew of Zuma's Ghost, has suffered a tragic close loss to Navy, and is looking forward to trying to get back in the finals next year, training hard for it in between their regular job.

Which leads us to the other orbit.. Lt. Commander Nika Vagin, one of the best swordfighters (did I mention swords are very useful in a world where projectile weapons are a hideously dangerous idea in space?) in the NeoG and an anchor for Zuma's Ghost is getting a promotion and a transfer out to the Trappist system. For a found family and tight knit family, it's bad enough, but there is additional stress. For you see, transferred from a desk job by her request, Lt. Maxine Carmichael is her replacement. Yes, she's one of THOSE Carmichaels, THE family in the solar system, since they have the patent and controls on LifeX, the treatment that has allowed post-Collapse humanity to have longer lifespans, and greater resilience to radiation during space travel. LifeX makes interplanetary (and beyond). So when in the course of their investigations, the NeoG stumbles upon what might be a dangerous knock off of LifeX, the new Lieutenant of Zuma's Ghost suddenly has a case of divided loyalties, with healthy doses of intrigue, family secrets, and danger. The NeoG is often derided as "Space Cops" and for a Carmichael to join them instead of service to, say, the Navy or the Company, that is simply Not Done. So there are all sorts of crossed wires and tangled threads that eventually encompasses the entirety

of the crew as well.

There is a lot to love in the novel, and it starts with the characters [Rosa, and Jenks Jenks Jenks]. Captain Rosa is a nicely complicated and well rounded character, she is happily married to a loving wife and two daughters, and she has a complicated relationship with her mother, her faith (which keeps her from accepting promotions that would send her to Trappist) and managing her found family on the Ghost. Rosa's personal thread is a minor theme compared to the major themes of the novel, and it shows the range of things going on among the crew, and develops Rosa's character nicely. However, the real star of the novel, often overshadowing even Lt. Carmichael is Petty Officer Atlandai Khan, better known as Jenks. A kid from the streets, adoptive sister to the aforementioned Nika, Jenks strides across the page with verve and strength like a latter day Lieutenant Starbuck. A wounded bird who doesn't want to give up her heart, she's feisty, fierce, fun, determined and the best person at individual combat not only in the NeoG but in all the forces, and has the wins in the Boarding Games to prove it. Whenever she is on the page, explosions and action and adventure are almost always quickly on her heels--except for those times where Wagers explores Jenks' emotional beats, again making what could have been a one note character into a character with nuance and depth and the potential for growth.

The action beats are where the novel shines, too. Not only in the training sequences and within the Boarding Games themselves, but in the day to day job of the NeoG, the novel has a lot of

fun with people in Space, including a harrowing spacewalk set piece. The author's Indrana novels are set in the far future, on alien planets, ships and stations, but this novel has a much more cheek by jowl feel about Space and how people interact with it, giving it a different sort of feel than those novels in this regard.

The novel is delightfully geeky. Jenks is an enthusiast for our time period, and is definitely a Hoppy Frood who knows where her towel is. I laughed out loud when she made, of all things, a Babylon 5 reference. The novel knows and respects the traditions it is working in, and it leavens the novel with an even greater sense of fun, especially around the rambunctious Jenks. Too, the novel is optimistic. Yes, the Collapse, in the rear view mirror of their history was bad, an near extinction level event. But this is a society that has survived it, albeit by the skin of their teeth, and is now moving forward. The author does a great job throughout the novel as they seed bits of world-building and information about what the world is like after the Collapse, and what has been lost. It makes for a sketched in enough future history for readers to fill in the gaps and imagine the rest, although history does play a role as a minor theme of the novel in another way as well.

There is a bit of a plotting issue that annoyed me. As mentioned above, there are two major

plot threads that dominate the novel--the story of Lt. Carmichael, her family, LifeEx and the mystery that surrounds it, and the mystery that the NeoG works at through the entire book. This plot thread starts and resolves satisfactorily, even as there are hints that there is much more to be uncovered regarding what is uncovered when the NeoG turns over stones in the course of that plotline. It is the other plotline, though, the Boarding Games that does not resolve anywhere near so satisfactorily. This plotline starts off in the first chapter and the chapters are all labeled and titled in relation to the next Boarding Games. And yet, the absolute finale of the Games as depicted in the book doesn't hook up with the beginning and the burning question posed at the beginning of the book, and so I was left vaguely dissatisfied as a result with that plot.

With that aside, however, *A Pale Light In the Black* is an entertaining and rollicking mid-term future Solar System Space Opera novel with excellent action beats, a wide variety of characters, a message of hope and resilience. The novel, as noted above, may take place "In space" like the Indrana novels do, but unlike those novels, mostly planet bound or set on huge spaceships, space stations and the like, *A Pale Light in the Black* gives a real and palpable sense of people who live and work and deal with the cold hard vacuum of space.

As a side note, I consumed this book in audio as well as print, and the audio narration by Marisha Tapera is excellent, throughout. This is definitely an audiobook that lends itself to long drives to eat up the miles.

A Pale Light in the Black shows the burgeoning strengths and wide ranging talents of one of the most exciting SF authors writing today. I look forward to reading more of their novels set in this verse and am hoping to see much more of the solar system. Space is Big, and we've only seen the tiniest fraction of this verse. More, please!

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 for a rich and diverse set of engaging characters with strong personal plotlines and growth; +1 for excellent action beats, depicting what it is like to work in space evocatively.

Penalties: -1 The Boarding Games plot thread did not end and resolve quite satisfactorily for me

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10 well worth your time and attention

Nerds on Tour



Introducing Nerds on Tour

Adri Joy

Friends, I had this year's *Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together* project all planned out. Using the considerable wealth we have amassed from running a nerd culture fanzine, I was going to hire a slightly terrifying but capable inventor-genius, ply them with baked goods and book reviews until they came up with an energy efficient global teleportation system, round up the nerd flock from our respective homes and spend three months touring the world, hitting up all the nerdiest, weirdest and most awe inspiring parts of the world, visiting all our fandom buddies, and most importantly eating a lot of very good food. Sure, there would be problems with this plan: I might have to hire a second inventor-genius to build robotic facsimiles that could fool our respective families, pets and day jobs, and the jetlag involved in instantaneous teleportation might be hard to deal with. But overall, I thought we had a plan to make 2020 the best year yet for our flock and for our content. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, unfortunately, none of us are living in the reality we expected right now. 2020 has laughed in the face of our ridiculous plans, and it has also laughed in the face of many of our real ones, both big and small. For those of us who had planned to travel - including the members of our flock who cancelled trips to New Zealand to hang out at Worldcon - the possibility of any physical trip has become as near-impossible as my group teleportation scheme. And for many of us, living through months of global crisis without an end in sight

has changed our relationship to media and to what we're able to critically engage with and how. Perhaps the stories that sustain us have changed, or perhaps we're not able to read or watch as much as we used to.

In true speculative fiction style, though, we're going to be imagining our way out, armed with our Netflix subscriptions and bookshelves and a sense of armchair adventure. Welcome to Nerds on Tour!

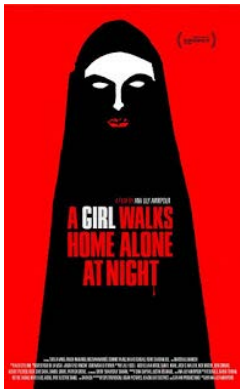
From the comfort of our own homes, we're going to be striking out into the world of international genre fiction: for our team of Europeans and North Americans, this means anything not from our own countries (the UK and the USA are right out), and we're going to be doing our best to seek out work from countries and regions that are underrepresented in English speaking science fiction and fantasy markets. We'll be checking out some classics (both old and new), diving into gems from smaller presses, and seeking to broaden our own horizons with the wealth of . For the first time, we're also offering a bingo challenge for this year's project, with 20 prompts for you to read or watch along to! Anything goes, from TV to books to short fiction to musical concept albums; the only catch is that each square has to be filled with media from a different country. The card is below, and if you do play along, be sure to keep us updated on Twitter using #NerdsOnTour so we can check out what you're up to!

Speculative fiction is, by definition, a global phenomenon, but the Anglophone science fiction and fantasy community has often sought to

define its boundaries in ways that exclude much of the work being created in the rest of the world, even as it adds the "World" label into its own events and awards. At a time when it can feel like our own worlds are narrowing, we think its more important than ever to push back, to remind ourselves why we love genre in all its forms and to go beyond the narrow window of culture, language and geography that shapes most of the media we get to watch. Nerds on Tour will be running on Mondays from now until December, and we hope you enjoy everything we have in store.

Nerds on Tour: A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, Ana Lily Amirpour, dir. (2014, film)

Vance K



Dossier: A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT

Location: Iran (Persia)

Package Type: Film

Itinerary: Here in Bad City, there's a ditch where the town dumps its dead.

That should tell you a lot about Bad City. Arash lives in Bad City, but he's a good dude. In a city full of drug dealers and worse, Arash works hard, and has worked for years to save up in order to buy a classic car. His pride and joy.

Arash also takes care of his widower father, who is addicted to heroin. It feels like a pain-pills-gave-way-to-worse situation. But Arash's father, Hossein, is nevertheless in deep to a drug dealer, who takes Arash's car as partial payment. This dealer guy sucks a lot. So none of us feel too bad when he picks up an innocent-looking Girl, tries to convince her to become a prostitute, but instead she grows fangs and murders the dealer for his blood. Not a huge loss, and when Arash comes by to try to get his car back and finds the dealer dead and mutilated, it's the easiest thing in the world to take his money, and his unsold drugs, and

dump his body in the ditch where these things go.

Turns out, Arash isn't a great drug dealer! He tries to offload some of his stuff at the club, but a pretty girl instead convinces him to ingest some of it himself. So Arash gets blitzed. Stumbling around, lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood, dressed in a Dracula costume, Arash comes upon The Girl. An actual vampire. He assures her that he is not to be feared. It's only a costume. He is harmless and charming, so she takes him home.

That's where things get more complicated, and where they begin to unravel.

Travel Log: *Let the Right One In* is the character-driven, off-the-beaten-path vampire movie par excellence, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* owes a lot to that earlier, Swedish film. While the plot points and age-ranges differ, the vibe is decidedly similar.

And in a low-budget film with only a small number of characters, it must be said, it's pretty easy to predict the ways in which these few characters might intersect. That doesn't take away, however, from the charm of this film.

For a movie where people have their limbs bitten off, bodies are routinely dumped in ravines, and drug addicts are used as prey, it's a super-charming adventure! Throughout, the audience knows more than the characters, so one of the most interesting balancing acts the movie pulls off is the shifting of perspective between Arash and The Girl. The ways in which they come to see each other, and to interpret one another, are the areas

in which this movie really shines.

It was a little disappointing to learn that, though the film was written and directed by Iranian-American filmmaker Ana Lily Amirpour and billed as "the first Iranian vampire movie," it was actually shot in California. It's set in a fictitious Iranian city, though, and the actors all speak Persian. The Iranian life it depicts is one of nightclubs, music, drugs, prostitution, and wealth disparity. It's probably a vision of Iran that many Westerners wouldn't expect, and a depiction that would make it dangerous, if not impossible, to actually shoot the movie in Iran. Hence, the California stand-in. Walking into this sphere of decadent nightlife, wearing a traditional chador covering, The Girl presents as something very different from what she really is. She looks like a modest, possibly devout individual, when in fact she is the most powerful — and depending on your definition, unholy — being in the film. It's a clever redirect that plays on cultural codes and expectations.

Also, it must be noted that the movie has an all-time great movie cat, and the black-and-white cinematography is gorgeous.

Analytics

The Adventure: 4/5

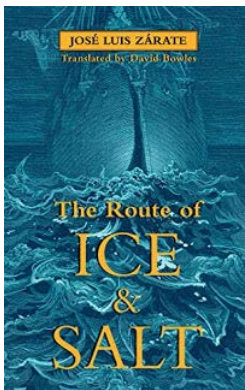
The Scenery: 4/5

NerdTrip Rating: 8/10

*POSTED BY: Vance K — cult film
reviewer and co-editor of nerds of
a feather since 2012, fan of vampire
movies since the local channel
showed that blue-tinted print of
Dracula one Halloween, lo these
many years ago.*

Nerds on Tour: The Route of Ice and Salt by José Luis Zárate (1996 Novella)

Adri Joy



Dossier: *The Route of Ice and Salt* (La Ruta del Hielo y la Sal) by José Luis Zárate, tr. David Bowles (1996/2020)

Location: Mexico

Package Type: Novella

Itinerary: *The Route of Ice*

and Salt fills in a piece of the narrative of the original *Dracula* novel, by Bram Stoker, springing out of the journey that Dracula takes from Istanbul to England by sea. As vampires are notable for not being particularly good sea-travellers, this voyage involves a lot of large crates full of earth, and the crew of the Demeter all meet mysterious fates, ending with the captain, who is found lashed to the wheel, his log telling the story of how he had tried to keep the ship and its monstrous passenger from landing. The novella expands on the voice of the Demeter's captain during the voyage, imagining the character as a repressed, traumatised and lonely gay man attempting to maintain his position amongst his crew, while grappling with erotic fantasies about the other men around him.

Once the vampire comes on board, these fantasies - and the Captain's dreams - become progres-

sively more disturbing, but it's not until the crew members start disappearing that the Captain, and his dwindling circle, begin to investigate their otherworldly cargo and the curse it's brought upon them, that the scope of what they are up against becomes clear. The monster on board - whose identity is known to us, but not to the crew, and presented here in a way which fits with the original mythos while leaning even more on psychological manipulation abilities which, in the Captain, find a very easy mark for most of the book. However, While we know the Captain's ultimate fate from the outset, however, *The Route of Ice and Salt* does justice to his fight against the monster and his eventual act of sacrifice, providing him with an arc that offers him a renewed understanding of himself and his desires, and the ability to harness them against the much greater evil he faces.

Travel Log: *The Route of Ice and Salt* was published in translation for the first time this year by Silvia Moreno-Garcia at Innsmouth Free Press, who has noted its cult status in Mexico and its importance particularly as a queer horror novella at a time when Mexican culture was conservative and hostile to queer people. While it's impossible, as an English language reader in 2020, to fully appreciate the context in which this story was originally published, the themes it tackles and the fact that it riffs off a text that is very well known and very accessible to English speaking audiences makes it an important book on multiple levels, one that I'm very glad has been made available. Indeed, *The Route of Ice and Salt* literally lifts the log of the Demeter, as presented in the text of *Dracula*, and while it's definitely possible to read

the entire novella without getting that reference (I read *Dracula* long enough ago that I don't remember its detail super well) I think it adds a layer of enjoyment just to know that this is a novella in conversation with a significantly older and more culturally entrenched piece of media.

Vampires, of course, come with a long history of exploring taboo sexualities and societal transgressions, and that very much includes queer desire. In *The Route of Ice and Salt*, male homoerotic desire is front and centre of the narrative, with early chapters almost entirely taken up by the Captain's fantasies about his crew's bodies, their presence around the ship and what he'd like to be doing with them. He also fantasises about a prior lost love, one who apparently met a terrible end. Even as the Transylvanian soil gets loaded up and we start to worry about what's coming down the line for the Demeter's crew, it's already clear that the Captain's life is one of trapped horror, the combination of homophobia and trauma from his past making his narrative painful from the outset. These parallels only get more overt as we learn more about his past, and particularly the fate of his lover, who as a queer man faced violence of the sort that, in a less thought-provoking vampire story, would only be levelled at monsters. Zárate uses the Captain's acute awareness of his forbidden sexuality to push these parallels, especially the parallel of hunger and appetite (as when the Captain fantasises about licking salt off his crew members' skin) and the question of what we become when we give into fantasy, especially those involving people we hold power over.

The language of this translation of *The Route and*

Ice and Salt is consistently poetic and evocative, conveying the sense of desperate fantasy transmuted into psychological horror extremely well. While the Demeter's eventual end is a fixed point, there's a lot of suspense here as well, particularly once the crew start being picked off. There's also some business with rats which is very convincingly squicky, and I don't normally say that about small fuzzy mammals no matter their reputation. While it's the Captain's fight - first against his own desires, and then against the vampire - which takes up centre stage, there's a sense of a convincing dynamic on the Demeter, and the fact that

the crew only really start becoming more than objects of desire once the threat is already on board makes the impact of their disappearances much more felt.

But really, what I want to say about this book - the reason you should pick it up - basically boils down to this: it's interesting. It's an interesting book, with an interesting premise, with a really interesting context surrounding it, and it held my attention from start to finish. The depiction of homophobia and the painfully unfulfilled erotic opening scenes will mean this isn't for everyone,

but if those aren't a problem and you're interested in picking up some horror this winter, this is not a book you will regret. Highly recommended, for sure.

Analytics

The Adventure: 4/5

The Scenery: 5/5

NerdTrip Rating: 9/10

Nerds on Tour: Black Orpheus, by Marcel Camus, dir. (1959, film)

Vance K



Dossier: BLACK ORPHEUS (or, ORFEU NEGRO)

Location: Brazil (via France)

Package Type: Film

Itinerary: The top-line summary of *Orfeu Negro*

is simply that the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice plays out against the backdrop of the Carnival celebration in Rio de Janeiro. In this film, Orpheus is a singer who works as a tram-car driver and lives in one of the favelas of Rio, high up on a hillside surrounding the urban center of the city. His girlfriend, Mira, is determined to steamroll him to the altar before he fully realizes what's happening, but stepping into the 36-hour window between Mira rushing Orpheus to the marriage license office and any potential ceremony, is Eurydice.

She is the cousin of Orpheus' neighbor, Serafina, and has fled her family farm in terror, convinced that a man there is trying to kill her. Orpheus, Mira, Serafina, and the entire favela are preparing for Carnival, where their samba school will be performing for thousands of people. Even though

Eurydice has arrived with nothing, Serafina decides she needs to participate in Carnival, with a beautiful costume and as a part of the whole experience. It is during the run-up to that night's massive rehearsal that Orpheus and Eurydice begin to feel a profound attraction for one another, almost like fate, that they cannot explain. But at the rehearsal, a dark force looms up out of the crowd in the form of a masked man that we immediately understand is the reason why Eurydice fled her home.

Thus begins the race of Orpheus and Eurydice against the inevitable. If the viewer is at all familiar with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story beats will be familiar: Death will take Eurydice, Orpheus will descend into the Underworld to try to bring her back, he will be met with the bargain that she can return with him, but only if he never looks at her again. He will not be able to resist, and in turning, he will lose his love forever.

These familiar beats are rendered here in a combination of bureaucratic nightmare and indifference, a poetic blurring of the real and the supernatural, and traditional African religious ceremonial practices. That the film ends in tragedy is a foregone conclusion, but the journey getting there is a visual delight.

Travel Log: Discussing *Orfeu Negro* is challenging because there are a number of issues in tension, not all of them on screen. By this I mean 1) the quality of the filmmaking and the performances, 2) the cultural impact of the movie in 1959 and beyond, 3) the attitudes and contributions of the people involved in the movie, and

4) how each individual viewer reconciles these tensions.

To start with, the film is a visual and sonic marvel. With the exception of Marpessa Dawn, the American expat who plays Eurydice, the other performers are Brazilian, and most belonged to an experimental theatre group in Rio. The performances are wonderful, exploding with life and movement, and the colors of the film are lyrical and poignant. It is simply a joy to look at. Similarly, the soundtrack, created by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luiz Bonfá, essentially created what would become known as Bossa Nova music by simplifying the traditional samba forms of Brazilian music. From a filmmaking standpoint, *Orfeu Negro* more than earns its classic status.

Especially in the music world, the impact of *Orfeu Negro* was profound and far-reaching. Antonio Carlos Jobim is a composer and songwriter best known for his collaborations with guitarist Jao Gilberto, which in 1959 were still yet to come. For instance, the two of them went on to write, shortly after this movie, "The Girl from Ipanema," now one of the most-recorded songs in history. The movie and its soundtrack helped kick off an explosion of interest in Brazil and Brazilian culture that swelled the Brazilian tourist economy and led to bossa nova-inspired explosion in the American jazz world. Albums such as *Getz/Gilberto*, featuring American saxophonist Stan Getz alongside Jobim and Gilberto, became some of the best-selling albums of the 1960s. I must confess that I am not an unbiased observer here. When I was working on illustrating my children's book, *Getz/Gilberto* was my go-to soundtrack. So

experiencing the proto-bossa nova in *Orfeu Negro* was, for me, deeply wonderful.

It is crucial, I think, when discussing this movie to point out that it is not a Brazilian film. It's a French film, directed by a Frenchman, featuring a Brazilian cast and Brazilian locations. The Orpheus myth at the time seems to have been something of a French staple, with Jean Cocteau's surrealist masterpiece *Orpheus* hitting screens earlier in the decade. And film historians, Brazilian artists, and scholars have pointed out since the movie's release that the director, Marcel Camus, seems to fetishize Blackness in the film in a way that Brazilian society did not, and that in his comments outside of the film, he explicitly equated Blackness to a kind of primitivism. So what we have onscreen, then, is a view of Rio, Carnival, and the all-Black cast filtered through the lens of a White, continental, and undoubtedly biased Frenchman. The source material for the movie is a Brazilian play that places the Orpheus myth in the favelas, not specifically situating it within Blackness. The interviews included on the

Criterion Collection edition of the movie shed a lot of light on the various conversations that have taken place around the film in the decades since its release. Charitable interpretations hold that, despite his ugly personal beliefs, Camus made a film that was in fact more respectful and humane than he was, himself. So these onscreen representations of Brazil, Carnival, and the favelas take on a distinctly outsider hue. The same joyful, effervescent performances that are so endearing have also suggested for many a fundamental misunderstanding of the movie's subject. As one Brazilian scholar put it, "how happy can you be living in a house made out of cardboard?"

What we are left with, then, depends I think on us, as audience members. How we synthesize these different tensions will shape our experience of the film, but I believe, personally, that it's a movie worth watching and thinking about specifically because all of these elements are locked in a tug-of-war. It speaks to colonialism, appropriation, celebration, mythmaking, opportunity, and representation, and it does so in complex

ways that go beyond the intentions of the filmmakers themselves. For instance: Camus focuses his camera on the favelas and the ecstatic crowds at Carnival, but in the frame we also see the high-rises and commercial centers of 1959 Rio de Janeiro. Whatever his intention, what we are able to perceive is a complex city navigating modernity and tradition, alongside massive inequality, awash in celebrations of life while engaged in a tooth-by-nail struggle to hold onto it. So this film from 1959 winds up having something to say about a myth that has been with us for nearly 3000 years, while also speaking into our present moment.

Analytics

The Adventure: 4/5

The Scenery: 5/5

NerdTrip Rating: 9/10

Conversations



Adri and Joe Talk About Books: 2019 Locus Recommended Reading List

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry



Joe: It's not that I consider the publication of the Locus Recommended Reading List to be the start of any particular awards season (because, as we all know, Hugo Awards Season is eternal) - but perhaps moreso than any other publication releasing their Best of the Year list at the end of 2019 or even putting together my own list in January, the Locus Recommended list is really the impetus for a wider conversation about the shape of the genre. As such, I am very glad you are able to join me again this year for that wider conversation.

What are your initial impressions about this list?

Adri: it's long! Was it this long last year? And once again there are so many great things that I can confirm, and even more that I've been eyeing up and haven't made it to.

But yeah, it feels long. Particularly the number of novella choices. So many books!

Joe: The overall list feels about right compared to previous years, but novella is about twice as long as last year with perhaps a wider range than in recent years past.

My count might be slightly off, but I read a smidge more than 60 books published in 2019 - a number which does include novellas, nonfiction, and non-genre works - and I generally consider myself reasonably well read in the genre, but the Locus Recommended list reminds me just how much I haven't read. I've owned the book since publication early in the year, but I still haven't read Elizabeth Bear's *Ancestral Night* and Alix E. Harrow's *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* is a major gap in my reading.

Adri: *Ancestral Night* is excellent and will probably be on my Hugo ballot! My own likely-shocking-to-you omission is *Middlegame* by Seanan McGuire, which I'm very unlikely to read before nominations close. *Storm of Locusts* and *The City in the Middle of the Night* are on my physical TBR and I am going to do my best to make those happen.

This year I had some preparation for discovering how much brilliant stuff I haven't read through my participation in developing a niche awards shortlist - but this is still the moment that really drives it home. I'm proud, though, that this year I can spot my occasional experiences and favourites through more of the list (aside from art books, non-fiction and reprint anthologies), instead of being concentrated in the longer fiction. All that short fiction I stuffed in my eyeballs in 2019

seems to have paid off! That said, paying more attention to those lists means looking at more things I want to read and haven't, including Aliette de Bodard's *Of Wars, And Memories*, and *Starlight*, and Ted Chiang's *Exhalation*, as well as oversights in our own longlist picking process - i.e. how did I miss that Sarah Pinsker's amazing novelette "The Narwhal" is a 2019 original?

Joe: There's only so much time to read everything. I didn't read *The Future of Another Timeline* until after our longlists went up and it absolutely would have made the list. I am, of course, naturally distressed that you have not read *Middlegame*. My love and appreciation for Seanan



McGuire's fiction is well established the last few years, but *Middlegame* is a major level up for McGuire. It's impressive.

The Locus lists are fairly robust, I'm still a little surprised not to see *The Dragon Republic* from R.F. Kuang on the fantasy list. *The Poppy War*

was a monster debut and *The Dragon Republic* is just as good. I haven't read either of the next two, but *The Rage of Dragons* from Evan Winter was a very buzzy debut, as was Megan O'Keefe's *Velocity Weapon* (buzzy, but not a debut). It's hard to find real fault with the breadth of the list, but the omission of those three are somewhat surprising.

Adri: I agree that *The Dragon Republic* felt like a very strong continuation of Kuang's series, so I'm also a bit surprised that it's not included. The same goes for *Turning Darkness Into Light* by

Marie Brennan, which is an absolutely delightful continuation of the Lady Trent universe with a great new protagonist. Frances Hardinge's new novel *Deeplight* surprisingly doesn't make the young adult list.

An omission that I'm perhaps less surprised about, but that maybe indicates the US bias of the list, is the lack of Jen Williams' *The Poison Song*: this is the close of her Winnowing Flame Trilogy, which has already won British Fantasy Awards for books one and two despite the fact neither of those made it onto the list in their respective years either. I've only read the first in the series but it's one a lot of UK people love (I know, because I'm being compelled to read it for SCKA), and given that the Hugo nominators are going to have a higher-than-usual Brit contingent thanks to Dublin I wouldn't be surprised if it broke the Hugo Best Series longlist, at the very least.

Joe: I'm not sure I've heard of Jen Williams or her series. If I had, the books just rolled right past me. I'm not saying I'm representative, because Elizabeth Bear's lack of Best Novel Hugo nominations proves that I'm not - but usually I think I'm at least aware of what's out there. I found a blindspot.

Adri: It's one that's well worth checking out, international availability notwithstanding.

We did this last year but I'm almost afraid to ask this year, with so many amazing books out there. What do you see making the awards shortlists this year?

Joe: I've thought about this more than I'd like to admit, so I put together a Build-a-Ballot for the Hugo Awards this year.

Start with *Gideon the Ninth*, *The City in the Middle of the Night*, *The Light Brigade*, and *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*. Select between two and four of these novels. I would be shocked



if only one of them hit the Hugo ballot.

Next, consider *The Future of Another Timeline*, *A Memory Called Empire*, *Middlegame*, *A Song for a New Day*, *The Raven Tower*, and *Magic for Liars*.

Pick one to two of these, depending on how many you

picked from the first category.

Then - look at the final list and if you still have an empty spot on your ballot, pick one: *The Testaments*, *Ancestral Night*, *Black Leopard*, *Red Wolf*, *The Dragon Republic*, *The Empress of Forever*, *Gods of Jade and Shadow*, *The Rage of Dragons*, *Storm of Locusts*, *Wanderers*, and *Velocity Weapon*. I would consider these longer shots at the ballot, but they are reasonable long shots.

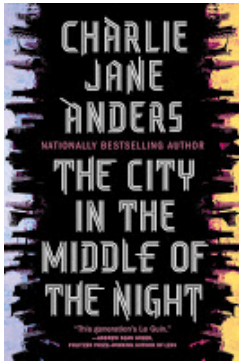
I don't have a lot of opinions of the shorter fiction categories, but I fully expect *The Deep* and *This is How You Lose the Time War* to be on the ballot for Novella and something from Sarah Pinsker in a shorter category. *A Song for a New Day* might be a bit of a stretch in the second category above, but Pinsker has been so popular at shorter lengths with Hugo voters that I can't discount the novel (also, I adored *A Song for a New Day*, but history

tells me that appreciation is not enough to get my favorite on the ballot.)

Adri: I... can't argue with much of this. I would rate *A Memory Called Empire* at a higher probability than *The City in the Middle of the Night*, but that may be me only paying attention to buzz from books that I've read.

Song for a New Day is a magnificent novel (and it's so much fun to catch up with Luce Cannon in her younger days!) but I think it's got a stronger chance at the Nebula ballot than the Hugo one, for nebulous (ha) "it just feels like a Nebula book" sorts of reasons. I feel similarly about *The Future of Another Timeline*, although since reading that last week it's shot up my consideration. I haven't read *The Testaments* in order to make sweeping comparative statements about the future of feminist SF, but I'll make a sweeping objective one: *The Future of Another Timeline* is where I want it to be going.

In short fiction, I think *To Be Taught, if Fortunate* is also very likely to break into novella, and I'm also keeping a curious eye on two "tie-ins" whose respective series have been represented in short fiction before: "Glass Cannon" by Yoon Ha Lee (in *Hexarchate Stories*) and "Of Birthdays, and Fungus, and Kindness" by Aliette de Bodard (in *Of War, and Memories, and Starlight*). Both would have an uphill battle given the novella category is so dominated by standalone works these days - and the de Bodard collection is a Subterranean Press book with limited physical availability - but I'm interested in how it plays out nonetheless.



Joe: I could be wrong about *The City in the Middle of the Night*, but Charlie Jane Anders was on the ballot in 2017 for *All the Birds in the Sky* (an admittedly buzzier book, I think), but as good as that book was, I think *The City in the Middle of the Night* is better. It might even be more appealing across the

board for nominators, but as mentioned before, what the heck do I know.

I completely agree with you on *A Song for a New Day*. It's not the perfect Nebula book the way *Blackfish City* was last year, but it may well be far more of a Nebula book. And I also just checked Pinsker's previous nominations and even though she's been a three-time Hugo Award finalist, it was her Nebula nominations I was thinking about - she's a seven-time Nebula finalist, including a win for "Our Lady of the Open Road", the story Pinsker expanded into the novel. Well that's interesting and if I had a do-over, I'd move it down into the long shot category.

The Future of Another Timeline is so good! It's another novel I feel the author leveled up to write.

Adri: Yes, let's pretend that there's no way you can edit that prediction list now. It's set in stone! Your future in genre punditry now hangs in the balance!

One thing I noted in last year's list was that

representation of Black authors was concentrated in YA (which is just as important but has different barriers to entry to adult SFF) and short fiction. This was not fully accurate on my part, as there were several Black authors in the first novel category for adult books who I didn't pick up on (C.L. Polk, Bethany C. Morrow and Rebecca Roanhorse) - but I'm still happy to see progress this year with Black authors represented across the novel categories. Drayden is back in Science Fiction alongside Tade Thompson; Karen Lord and Helen Oyeyemi's books are in fantasy; *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* by Marlon James is, somewhat bizarrely, in horror (I note that the horror list is otherwise all white, and hope that this book wasn't moved in there just to prevent that from being the case); and Namwali Serpell, Cadwell Turnbull (whose debut, *The Lesson*, comes very highly recommended by the Skiffy and Fanty team and has been on my TBR for a while) and Ta-Nehisi Coates in First Novel. And, of course, there's another very strong showing in YA, including LL McKinney, Akwaeke Emezi and Tochi Onyebuchi.

Of course, a skim through for one author demographic is no substitute for a full assessment of the diversity of a recommendation list, especially one as extensive and influential as the Locus List. But it is good to see.

Joe: YA does still seem to have the widest range of representation, but you're right - there is a range of representation across all of the categories, to the point at least that we don't have to say #LocusSoWhite - so that's a good thing. It would be interesting to do a deeper dive in the numbers

for each category of the Locus list, but that might be beyond the scope of this conversation though I'd love to see that report.



I am a bit surprised at the inclusion of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* in Horror. That's a straight up fantasy novel and while James is working with different traditions and it's fairly bleak and you can make arguments about its literary

merits compared to, say, Joe Abercrombie - it's no more horror than any other grimdark fantasy (to the point that I care about *that* label). At least not that I was thinking about while I was reading it. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* was certainly marketed as fantasy, which is really where we come up with most of these categories anyway.

I think we've come to the end of another episode of Adri and Joe Talk About Books. Do you have any final thoughts to wrap up this year's Locus Recommended Reading List?

Adri: Well, as ever there's a lot of reading to be done! My main takeaway from this year that we haven't discussed yet is how wide a net this list casts: there's a significant overlap between literary fiction with speculative elements and the "core" SFF scene and I'm glad this list offers a broad tent which incorporates the literary works whose SFF is worth celebrating (even as I smirk behind my hand at the non-inclusion of the likes of Ian McEwan). *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell, *Gingerbread* by Helen Oyeyemi and *The Testaments* are all sitting in my library pile right now and I'm

grateful for the extra nudge to read them.

Likewise, there are a couple of really cool pieces in the short fiction section with unusual publication histories: “I (28M) created a deepfake girlfriend and now my parents think we’re getting married” by Fonda Lee originally appeared in the MIT Technology Review, and Ted Chiang’s piece “It’s 2059, and the Rich Kids are Still Winning” from the New York Times’ series of editorials from the future. Alongside entries from Slate’s *Future Tense* series and the *Ocean Stories* anthology by sustainable technology foundation XPrize, I appreciate that speculative short fiction by excellent authors is out in these more “non traditional” sources, and that those who compile the Locus list make it easier for the likes of me to know a little more about what’s going on.

What are your takeaways from this year’s list?

Joe: I don’t read enough nonfiction within the genre, though to be fair I don’t read quite enough nonfiction in general, and to be even more even after reading more than 60 books published last year and 150 books overall I still don’t feel like I’ve read quite enough. I want to read all the books.

What was I talking about? Oh, right. Nonfiction books. Or, as we like to say when talking about the Hugo Awards: Related Work.

I had to double check the Locus list to see if there was another Ursula K. Le Guin book from last year to see if I can make an assumption about one of the slots on the Hugo ballot, but there is

not.

What is on the Locus Recommended list for nonfiction is a number of very interesting works - *Modern Masters of Science Fiction* volumes on Joanna Russ and Kim Stanley Robinson, a Heinlein biography (reviewed by Paul here), Nnedi Okorafor has a short memoir, and a couple of books on the pioneering women of science fiction (*Monster She Wrote*, and *The Lady of the Black Lagoon*). I don’t know where I’ll find the time, but I want to read at least half of the nonfiction books on that list. It is also selfishly worth noting that we also recommended a number of those same works in our own Hugo Awards Recommended Reading List.

After all of that, if we’re still feeling the loss of Ursula K. Le Guin on the Hugo Awards ballot don’t worry, the *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin* documentary is eligible for inclusion in Related Work (nonfiction films are generally considered Related Work rather than Dramatic Presentations). So there’s still hope that we won’t have a year without Le Guin being recognized at the Hugo Awards.

Adri: Stand by for the Ted Chiang sequel editorial: “It’s 2059, and Ursula K. Le Guin is still winning Hugos”...

That’s all for this time! I look forward to talking again once the shortlists start dropping...

The Modern Nostalgia of Dragon Quest XI: A Conversation

Joe Sherry, Aidan Moher



*I've been mulling over the idea of writing *something* about Dragon Quest XI for several weeks / months now without having a firm plan of attack. Should this be a formal review, an essay, something else? I've appreciated and enjoyed*

Aidan Moher's video game writing, in particular, his focus on the nostalgia and legacy of older and classic RPGs and that's what had me almost inspired to write about Dragon Quest.

Adain and I go way back to the ye olde days of blogs, to a time when single author blogs were on the rise and starting to make a splash in genre conversation, long before we could even dream one of our blogs could actually win a Hugo Award (first SF Signal, and then Aidan's A Dribble of Ink in 2014 - has it already been six years).

I'm not sure how this conversation started, but I can only imagine that I made the mistake of mentioning that I wanted to write about the nostalgic of Dragon Quest XI where Aidan could see it and he thought it would be a great thing to talk about. How could I resist? Aidan's perspective and writing about the same video games I loved growing up has been top notch and it was time we had a proper chat like we did oh so many years ago. This may not be dueling

essays in conversation with each other, but we each have some thoughts about Dragon Quest XI, a 2017 release from SquareEnix on the Playstation 4 and last year released on the Nintendo Switch.

Joe: At the moment I'm some 70-75 hours into *Dragon Quest 11* and it's a nostalgic delight. It's been a long, long time since I've really sat down and played a classic JRPG on a console and it is everything I didn't know that I was missing. I believe you said that you were right around the same point, just about ready to finish up the game.

Aidan: Yeah. I've just finished up the majority of the post-game content (which, really, is the game's third act and adds a ton of necessary context and story) and will face off against the final boss soon. About 95 hours for me.

"Nostalgic delight" is an understatement. I'm flip side of the coin because I've been playing a TON of classic console JRPGs over the past 2-3 years--from *Chrono Trigger* to *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* to *Final Fantasy VII*--and *Dragon Quest XI* feels like the natural evolution of those 16- and 32-bit JRPGs. It's like it just ignored everything that happened in the space during the past decade or two, which is totally up my alley. I'm fascinated by the way I can feel nostalgia for something brand new.

Joe: Recently (and by recently I mean over the last few years) I've played through *Dragon Quests 1-3* on my iphone and that's really rekindled my interest in JRPGs. I used to LOVE that style of game, but as my family has grown and the

amount of gaming time I have has decreased, I'm really not up on today's JRPGs. I've followed the genre, but the move to games like *Fallout* and *Skyrim* (let alone *Dark Souls*) has passed me by. Until *Dragon Quest XI*, I would have told you that I don't have the time nor the inclination to sink 100+ hours into a video game anymore. Give me a nice 15 hour story, preferably action packed and not excessively difficult and I'm there. And then *Dragon Quest XI* came along and hit every button I didn't know I still had.

The thing, I *like* turn based and menu driven combat. Maybe it's because I've been playing video games for 30+ years and as such don't play at the same level I did 15-20 years ago, but it's reassuring and it is comforting and for how I am playing *Dragon Quest* right now - it's the right speed for me.

Does the silent protagonist bother you? I love so much about *Dragon Quest XI*, but with every other character with voice acting and having the hero just nod and wave his hand is not my favorite thing.



Aidan: Silent protagonists come under a lot of heat, but they've never really bothered me in older games. As the level of fidelity and detail

grow, however, they make less and less sense, and it feels particularly odd in *Dragon Quest XI*. With so much voice acting in the game, every time the protagonist (who I'll call Eleven) responds by awkwardly staring into space or making a weird little gasp feels uncanny. The characters all behave as though he's this magnetic hero type, but so much of that is personality and charisma—and Eleven has none of that.

I recently replayed *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* (and a bit of *Grandia* before that) and one of the things that really stood out to me in those games was the personalities of the protagonists really shining through. By emphasizing their personalities, they felt like much more engage and proactive heroes, compared to, say, Crono from *Chrono Trigger* or Eleven from *Dragon Quest XI*. Those silent types require others to push the story forward and they act as sort of a... defining element for the protagonist's actions and motivations. It's almost like they're the splash of paint revealing the invisible protagonist.

So as we're talking about nostalgia, I think there are some elements that work in older games, where the player is already doing a lot of heavy lifting to visualize the game world thanks to less detailed pixel art graphics, but falls apart in a modern game like *Dragon Quest XI*.

It's interesting to me that you brought up *Fallout* and *Skyrim*, though, as those aren't JRPGs, but are western-made. There was a major dearth of JRPGs during PS3/Xbox 360 era outside of the handhelds, and though I spent a lot of time playing games like *Skyrim*, it was also the con-

sole generation that I spent the least amount of time gaming during. Even now, with kids, a full time job, etc., I squeak out the time to play long JRPGs, even if it takes me months.

Another thing I've noticed is that 100+ RPGs are more of a modern thing. Going back and playing a bunch of SNES JRPGs, I found that they're all generally less than 40 hours, and even something like *Chrono Trigger* took me less than 20 hours on a fresh, non-New Game+ playthrough. They started getting longer during the PlayStation era, but even then, I just finished *FFVII*, did most of the optional content outside the Weapons, and it took me 45 hours. Those were different times, though, and we didn't have resources like the Internet to help us power through something like *Final Fantasy VI*, causing it to take longer to beat then than now. The length came more from the unknown and having to figure out everything on your own or with the help of your pals on the schoolyard, rather than just pure content.

Joe: See, that's why I brought up *Fallout* and *Skyrim*. They are two of the most prominent "western style" RPGs that defined that PS3 and early PS4 era. I tend to think in terms of Playstation because that was the console road I went down. I missed out on a lot of Mario and Zelda, but that's a separate conversation.

Stylistically, I don't enjoy playing them. I'm basing that on *Fallout 3*, mostly - and the whole concept of the 100hr game. I think some SNES and early playstation games felt longer because they *could* be longer. If I only get two games a year because I'm a kid with limited (at best)

income, I'm going to do EVERYTHING. I'm going to level all characters to 99 and max out my Espers and find all the secrets because what else am I going to do. My impression of modern RPGs, right or wrong, is that they require 100+ hours and I don't have time for that.

But even that is apparently wrong as I close in on 75 hours of *Dragon Quest 11*, a game that while long does not feel excessively padded.

I think that's part of what is getting to the nostalgia we're talking about. It *feels* like a game made twenty years ago but - silent protagonist aside - is far smoother in gameplay mechanics. This *Dragon Quest* plays like our best memories of many of those older games.

It also feels like a *Dragon Quest* game. That's not something you necessarily get as *Final Fantasy* has evolved. *Dragon Quest XI* has the bones of every *Dragon Quest* that has come before. I'm shocked that it is ten years old at this point, but *Final Fantasy XIII* at best uses the wallpaper of the series. With all of that said, and to loop back to the silent protagonist - where I completely agree with you is that Eleven seems to have none of the charisma of other silent protagonists and definitely lacks that of characters who have a defined personality. I don't want to map myself on the hero. That's not how I play anymore, if it ever was.

Aidan: Thanks to stuff like *Final Fantasy 7 Re-make*, *Trials of Mana*, and *Link's Awakening*, I've been thinking a lot about remakes, reimaginings, and remasters. And how as a generation of older gamers, many of us now with kids, developers

and publishers are using nostalgia as a marketing tactic. Though *Dragon Quest XI* is an entirely new game, in a lot of ways it utilizes nostalgia and our affection for the older games we used to play as kids in the same way as a remake.

What's particularly remarkable about *Dragon Quest XI* is not only does it feel like someone time warped a classic *Dragon Quest* title into a modern wrapper, but they actually included a full-fledged 16-bit version of the game with the Switch version. It's like you get the original game and the remake in one package. It reminds me of how Square Enix finally, after over two decades, finally released a localized version of *Seiken Densetsu 3* in *Collection of Mana*, only to release a from-the-ground up remake the following year. You get the fuzzy golden feeling of the original, and the polished modern version of the remake all wrapped up in one.



Without going too far into spoiler territory, the game's true ending, which you get after beating the option content in act three, really doubles down on the nostalgia by basically implying that, without realizing it, you've just played through a bit of series lore that stretches all the way back to the series' earliest days on the NES. The way it's

split into three distinct parts also replicates the trilogy structure used by the older games in the series. Sure, it's 100 hours long, but it's also like three games in one. Or six games, if you count the 3D and 2D versions separately.

Joe: The thing about nostalgia as a marketing tactic is that it's effective. Despite somehow never playing *Secret of Mana*, I've played the less successful sequels (not to mention similar games like *Secret of Evermore* and *Illusion of Gaia*) and I'm just about as excited for *Trials of Mana* as I am for any modern game - notwithstanding the new Spider-Man game calling my name. I need more Mana in my life. Hell, *Kingdom Hearts 3* works solely on nostalgia for the first two games because the story makes no damn sense and the gameplay mechanics are not significantly improved in the fourteen years since the last main line game. If I had a Switch, I'd be ALL OVER *Link's Awakening*.

I'm less excited about *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and it's entirely because the gameplay mechanics are not a polished modern version of what we knew before, but a complete revamping. It's an expansion of the story, but it's not the same sort of game. Not really.

Dragon Quest XI, to get back on topic, is exactly that. And since I haven't finished the game yet, I will say that I've been suspicious for quite a while about "Erdwin" and how close that name is to Erdrick. It's not a road we need to go down right now, but it's one of those echoes that is similar to how *Final Fantasy* re-uses names except that right now *Dragon Quest* is using the nostalgia more

effectively. Or, more accurately - *Dragon Quest* is using nostalgia more purposefully and with greater intent.

We're both steeped in the traditions and the history of JRPGs, you perhaps a little more deeply than me, but we've grown up with these games and they've been formative in our lives. How do you think a game like *Dragon Quest XI* works for newer and younger players? My son likes watching me play, but he's 5 and the colors are bright and the monsters are relatively cute and less frightening - so I'm not sure he is representative of anything beyond a boy who likes to spend time with his dad.

Aidan: Oh, dude, Joe. Hang onto those thoughts about Erdwin/Erdrick for a bit longer, and then maybe we do a sequel to this conversation.

My eldest is also five, and we've spent more time playing games like *Pokemon Sword* and *Animal Crossing* than we have *Dragon Quest XI*. That being said, gaming is interesting because it's such a new medium compared to theatre, books, music, and even film. Within our lifetime (or at least that of our parents, with *Bertie the Brain* in the late 50s), we've literally experienced the entirety of videogaming history. And what I take from that is that even our modern games, including remakes like *Final Fantasy 7* and games that aren't quite remakes but are built of the same stuff like *Dragon Quest XI*, is very much built on the same foundation as the games we grew up playing 20 or 30 years ago.

Like a lot of people our age, my parents weren't into videogames as anything more than a novelty (besides my mom's GameBoy *Tetris* obsession), but they supported us when we wanted to rent an NES and *Marble Madness* from the video store for a weekend. Back then, games were like toys, something for kids, and I picked out whatever seemed cool at the video store. Nowadays, as kids are raised into families that have a long history of gaming, we, as parents, inform what they're exposed to, and that in itself starts to build bonds and nostalgia. I have fond memories of watching *Star Trek* with my mom, and my daughter will have fond memories of playing Pokemon with me. Nostalgia's huge right now, but it's still only a generation old, and there's so much more room for it to find its place in the market. What's going to happen when these kids who grew up playing *Animal Crossing* with their mom become game developers? What sort of heights of love and creativity will they reach? It's cool to think about.

I didn't actually discover the *Dragon Quest* series until *Dragon Quest 8* on the PlayStation 2, but even that game (though it was the last non-MMORPG, home console game in the series) is already 16 years old. So I think what I'm most impressed about when it comes to *Dragon Quest*

XI's use of nostalgia is that it makes me feel like a kid again. It doesn't look like the SNES games I used to play, but it does look like the adventures as they played out in my head. It's particularly interesting to play the Switch version because it includes the SNES-style "demake" of *Dragon Quest XI* right on the box. It really doubles down on nostalgia, and highlights how structurally similar the game is to 16-bit JRPGs.

Joe: My five-year-old also likes playing *Lego Jurassic World* with me, which is nice.

I do find it very interesting that you came to *Dragon Quest* so late in life. On one hand, you missed out on *Dragon Quest* (then *Dragon Warrior*) on the NES - which means you missed out on having your saved game erased ALL THE TIME. Though, to be fair, was the case with so many battery based games. I'm not sure there was a battery based game that didn't have erasure issues. If there was, I don't remember - probably because it didn't cause my childhood eternal pain.

With that said, I also jumped from *Dragon Quest 1* to *Dragon Quest 7* on the PSX and never made it that far with 7, then stepped back to 4 on the Nintendo DS. It's just that *Dragon Quest* has been

so ever present in my life - always at least somewhere in the back of my mind or just looming as a game I want to play.

Dragon Quest XI has brought all of that together - the memories and the nostalgia, and wrapped it in a just-modern-enough package that, at least for me, it works.

You know what, though? I really like the idea of our kids having those fond memories of playing games with us - whether is *Pokemon*, *Dragon Quest*, *Animal Crossing*, or whatever Lego game. I remember watching *Matlock* and *Columbo* with my father, and a show that nobody remembers called *Brooklyn Bridge* with my mother - and those are really nice memories. Much better than the memory of watching *White Men Can't Jump* with my parents when I was 13, only for everyone to be very uncomfortable with the ONE partially nude scene in the movie. That's a different conversation, though. But the thought that Andy will look back on playing games with me as a formative part of his childhood - that's really nice. I like that.

The Hugo Initiative: Blogtable (1983, Novelette)

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry, Paul Weimer

Adri: Hello, and welcome to another Hugo short fiction category round-up! This time, we're moving forward into the 1980s and into a longer category, with the 1983 Best Novelette nominees all up for our [re]-consideration. With Paul returned from the roof of the world to join Joe and me, it's time to get stuck in to this intriguing line-up...

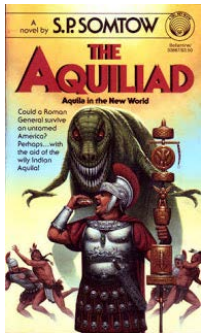
•“Fire Watch” by Connie Willis [Asimov’s Feb 1982]

•“Nightlife” by Phyllis Eisenstein [F&SF Feb 1982]

•“Pawn’s Gambit” by Timothy Zahn [Analog Mar 1982]

•“Aquila” by Somtow Sucharitkul [Asimov’s Jan 1982]

•“Swarm” by Bruce Sterling [F&SF Apr 1982]



Joe: I'd like to start off by looking at Somtow Sucharitkul's "Aquila".

Adri: I suppose we have to, don't we?

"Aquila" is the first story in Somtow Sucharitkul (who

later wrote as S.P. Somtow)'s Aquiliad universe. On the surface, it's a story which takes all the cultural touchstones of violence and excess from the Roman Empire (crucifixions as public enter-

tainment, snacking on peacock brains, fixation on the legion and military campaigns) and transposes them into a context whose time period is hard to pin down, and whose characters all speak more or less like Bertie Wooster, for reasons which seem unrelated to their Romanness.

The narrator of "Aquila" is Titus, a disgraced official who is sent off on a doomed campaign, and ends up being reinforced by a group of New World "savages" - that is, Native Americans led by the titular Aquila. Aquila is introduced with "it" pronouns for several lines, then goes about destroying the narrator's pro empire ideology and espousing the importance of Disney's-Pocahontas style Native American cliché traditions. But, wouldn't you know it, despite not fitting in with the regimented Roman way of life, Aquila and his men save the day! And if you're noticing a hint of disapproval in this allegedly objective story wrap-up... well done.

Joe: I just want to see what Paul has to say because everything about "Aquila" on the surface is right up Paul's alley. We had a bit of an offline conversation about the story several weeks ago and I'm just baffled by "Aquila". It seems like it is set in an 18th or 19th century alternate history, but Paul read ahead and doesn't think that's what Somtow is doing here.

My thoughts can really be summed up as follows: "Oh, what the everlasting fuck was that?"

My even shorter response is: Not for me.

Paul: Oh boy. Both of you thought that this was

up my alley...but this was not what I expected. To read this story, I read the collection "The Aquiliad", which includes three subsequent Aquila stories, "Aquila the God", "Aquila versus Bigfoot" and "Aquila the Final Conflict". To try and understand just what was happening in "Aquila", I read them all.

But let me talk about this story first and what we have in it. I was flat footed from the get-go, because the name of the Emperor (Domitian) really was at odds with the relatively advanced technology that we were seeing (not to mention the whole New World angle). I wondered for a bit as I was reading if the Domitian wasn't just another Domitian, a future Roman Emperor who was using that as part of his name. But, no, I caught a reference that the high technology was invented by one person and that there was a limited amount of it. So I began to wonder even in this story just what the setup was.

And then there is the titular Aquila himself. Oh, we can and have done better with cultural depictions since 1983, yes we have. I cringed every time Aquila appeared on the page, and while Titus is putatively the incompetent hero, it is Aquila and his men who saves him from the Parthians. (And I think the Bertie Wooster observation is spot on, Adri.)

And that's what is really strange about this story. It's meant itself to be a satire on Romans and Roman ideas and beliefs, especially in regards to how they regarded "savages". (Side note: that itself is a stereotype of lazy scholarship, the relations between Romans and their neighbors was com-

plex from the get go). The story is supposed to have us identify with Aquila, seeing how he shows up the glory hogging Romans who couldn't get along without him and his men. And, in the same hand, Aquila himself is a stereotype and an example of bad characterization of Native Americans that we have (I think for the most part) have moved far past.

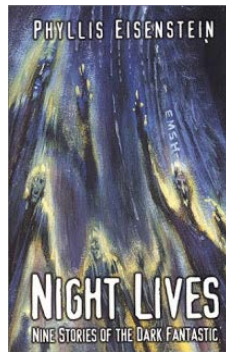
So, having read this thing, I was bugged and wanted to know more. So for my sins, I read all of the subsequent stories to make sense of the world and what was happening. They make it absolutely clear that it is late 1st Century, early 2nd Century A.D. Rome. Why does Rome have some motor-cars and "better ships" so that they can conquer Terra Nova? It turns out that Interdimensional travelers are a thing, with Titus and Aquila running into them again and again in later stories. They travel in flying saucers, and meta-comment that the world Titus inhabits is all screwed up from a historical point of view, and that is actually a problem thanks to a cross-dimensional villain. But it gets even sillier and more satirical as things happen, including Jews transformed into Sasquatches with a liking for circular bread with cream cheese and smoked salmon. Yeah. Oh, and a female character does show up in the third story, but she is not written well at all.

Adri: Yikes. I agree that this story hasn't aged well, if it was ever a good idea in the first place. Clearly there's an effort to separate the textual racism and Roman-centric views of the narrator from the actual views of the author, but the stereotyping means that doesn't work well at all. Beyond that, I'm struggling to see what even

voters of the time would have found in this story beyond some confusing initial worldbuilding, and a fun but silly plot. I don't think any of us found our favourite series here.

Joe: It's pretty awful.

Adri: From Aquila, let's move on to Nightlife, by Phyllis Eisenstein. Featuring Jane, a 32-year-old 80s Power Exec Shoulders Lady who goes home alone every night in order to live out her uniquely fulfilling dream life, Nightlife becomes a romance when Jane meets a young man called John (during a sexy saved-by-cowboys scenario) and discovers that he may be real, able to control his dreams in the same way as she is. The rest of the novelette is dedicated to Jane finding John in reality and trying to find the best way to be with him, given the complex circumstances they uncovered.



So, maybe I spend too much time on the r/relationships Twitter account, where a significant age gap between romantic partners is almost always a red flag for the problem being discussed to involve creepy power dynamics, but the way the romance plays out here between Jane and 20-year-old John, who she watches in dreams from the age of 8 so that she can seduce him at 16... actually, you know what, I'm not going to pretend that's just me being judgemental about these people. It's weird. The whole romance is unbalanced and uncomfortable and nothing makes

it less creepy just because it's a reversed power dynamic with a stronger woman.

I also had a problem with how boring Jane is. The perfect exec career woman by day, early bed-time by night thing is bearable, but Nightlife also doesn't pull off anything that makes her actual dreams into interesting adventures which are worth passing up the rest of her life for. Her initial desert dream is obviously intended to be sexy wish fulfilment but the story barely commits to it, and the less said about her slice-of-life stalking mission, the better. Perhaps the issue here is that the concept of dreaming is really hard to make interesting in this way - we all know how weird and boring it is to listen to other people's actual dreams - but there's nothing which makes it really seem worth letting go of engaging with the rest of the world for?

Joe: I think it's more that she seems to view her job as less than just a job, it's the bare minimum of what she needs to do to have that comfortable and vivid dream life. I was more willing to accept that Jane's dreamlife was so vivid to *her* and given that we're talking magic dreamworld here... sure.

Adri: Likewise, when Jane realises that John is also a real person, the story becomes entirely about how they get together and whether that uniting takes place in the real world or in the dreams that they control. My problem with romance in these contexts is that the question of whether or not two particular people end up together really doesn't seem more important than the literal rest of their lives? Maybe it's because

I'm not big on the wish fulfilment element of romance plots, and I understand that it may not be intended as a "happy" ending, but there's nothing in the text that indicates the resolution is about anything other than them finding a way to be together in dreams without John dying. There's also a HUGE ableist element to the resolution, and to the fact that Jane accepts his reasoning and does nothing to argue his mother's points of view or bring anyone else into the conversation other than the two of them.

Joe: It's not that "Nightlife" is *good*, per se, but it was the last story of the five which I read and it was far more interesting and compelling to me than either "Aquila" or "Swarm" - which probably says more about the state of this ballot viewed from 2019 than it does the relative merit of "Nightlife".

Paul: Okay. This one was not really to my taste and I am not sure why. The narrator has an active dream life, and manages to connect to someone through those dreams, and finds what is missing in her life all this time and rearranges her real life so that she can continue the nightly dream life with the man he loves. It felt and feels really shallow even to summarize it in that way, but that's basically how this goes.

So the speculative element is the sharing of the dream? I can't seem to find anything else that makes this a genre story. Unless of course you go with the idea that a genre writer's story is by definition a genre story. I don't buy that argument but I have seen it as an argument for people classifying and filing books before.

Joe: I'd call the sharing of the dream the speculative element - but I think because "Nightlife" was published in a speculative magazine and was on the Hugo ballot, I also assumed from the start that there was *something* going on with Jane's dreams that made them more than just a dream.

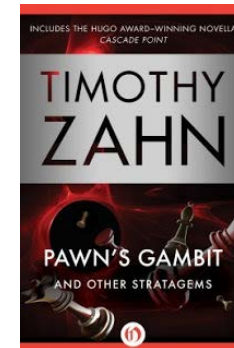
Paul: I was reminded of better versions of this idea, particularly the *Black Mirror* episode "San Junipero". Maybe my heart is too hard but the love story did not really compel me. Or am I missing something key here and I am missing the subversion here--this sort of story would usually have the genders reversed--the male being the active character, the female the relatively passive one, and the man traveling to meet the woman he loves. The past is a different country, and maybe in 1983, having a female protagonist take the lead as she does in this story was mind blowing enough to launch the story into the top tier of interest for awards. Which is a damning environment of past genre readers, to be honest.

Adri: Yeah, I didn't see much in Nightlife, although the proto-"San Junipero" is an interesting comparison.

Next up, we've got a story that definitely isn't about prawns: "Pawn's Gambit" by Timothy Zahn.

Joe: I primarily think of Timothy Zahn as a Star Wars writer because *Heir to the Empire* launched the Star Wars Expanded Universe (RIP) and he has been such a prominent part of that for almost thirty years with his Thrawn novels and introduc-

tion of Mara Jade and this is about to turn into an entirely different conversation, so I'm going to have to step back. Anyway, his prominence within Star Wars has me continually forget that he had a notable career outside of those tie-in novels. "Pawn's Gambit" was the first of three Hugo Award nominations, and in successive years at that! Not bad.



Paul: Definitely went "Wait, the Star Wars writer?" when I saw this was slated for us. The ebook I read mentioned in the afterword that Zahn did win a Hugo the following year for the novella "Cascade Point", which takes a different classic SF trope, the FTL drive, and works it over as he

does with this one.

Adri: I didn't know that Zahn was a Hugo winner! He's definitely a rare example of a writer who is not just well known, but generally most well regarded, for his work in a tie-in space, with Thrawn being one of relatively few Legends-only characters to make the jump to Disney canon.

Joe: "Pawn's Gambit" is the story of an alien race which abducts other races and tests them to find out how dangerous they might be. It's told through memos regarding the experiments and through the perspective of a human, we see the gamesmanship which the aliens are looking for and what the true purposes of the abductions are and what the consequences of their tests truly are. It's an apt title, really - though I did think

the ending was bit too neat with the Scooby-Doo explanation for how everything came together.

Paul: The “aliens test us to see if we are worthy” is a trope that goes all the way back to the 1950’s, and probably earlier in the pulps as well. I was pleased to see that Zahn put a then-fresh spin on it--to test humans to see how dangerous they were, rather than if they were worthy for inclusion in a Galactic civilization.

I did like the variety of games--humans are the species that invents and makes games at the drop of a hat. And you can learn a lot about someone by the way one plays. This was a not very subtle lesson that goes as a throughline in the story, but it worked for me. I wouldn’t mind trying a game of Four-Ply or especially Skymarch. The reversible pawns bit was an interesting addition to Chess, too.

Adri: I do love speculation on “in a world of diverse species, what is humanity’s One Defining Trait?”, and “Pawn’s Gambit” is a fun take on that, especially with the memos from the Stryfkar which go from a sort of understandable concern about humanity’s capabilities, to pre-emptive genocide. I was also pleasantly surprised by Kelly: I’m predisposed to dislike or at least be sceptical of the “everyman” protagonist type figure but Kelly came across as smart and confident but without overrating his abilities and his thought processes are explained in a way that makes sense, even if we might not personally take the same risks that he does. The way that the history of the Stryfkar’s experiment and its impact on other races unfolds to the audience and Kelly is satisfying and while,

as Joe says, the ending is a little convenient, it didn’t dent my overall positive experience with this story.

Joe: On the whole, I liked “Pawn’s Gambit”, but there’s an aspect to this type of story that I’m just drawn to whether or not it is a top tier story. It’s just one of my things.

Paul: I did notice, though, that younger me might not have noticed or complained, but dismissing what Kelly was eating while captured as “the food was bland but comfortably filling” felt way too anachronistic in this day and age. How DO the Stryfkar feed their human, or their other subjects and keep them alive for any period of time. Biology degree me was screaming inside about that one throwaway line.

Adri: The fourth story is “Swarm” by Bruce Sterling. Set in Sterling’s Shaper/Mechanist universe, which features two rival factions of advanced humanity. The protagonists here are the Shapers, who seem to use genetic editing to make themselves into “perfect” humans, with very high IQs and other state-of-the-art modifications (like... not having an appendix, which, OK). The protagonist of the story is Captain-Doctor Afriel, who joins his Shaper colleague Mirni in researching an ancient alien object called the Swarm, a colony of non-sentient creatures who adapt into niche roles to keep their society going. Against the requirements of his trip, Afriel has devised a way to smuggle out some of the alien pheromones for use in the war against the Mechanists - but his plans come to an abrupt halt when he discovers the Swarm’s defence mechanism against creatures

of his type.

Joe: I first encountered “Swarm” more than a decade ago when I read *Schismatrix Plus* for a book club. I didn’t much care for it then, and I sure don’t care for it now. Nor anything else in the Shaper / Mechanist Universe.

The story is something something about the humans meeting particular alien race and trying to infiltrate the alien “hive” and the aliens are semi accepting of this because they are each working for the advantage of their own race but things go weird and sideways and I really don’t know what the what any of this is.

I know that Bruce Sterling had a strong run on the Hugo and Nebula Awards but I’ve read a small handful of his stories and he’s just not for me.

Paul: I read Shaper/Mechanist stuff years and years ago, and had forgotten all the details in this one, which is pretty early in the sequence, because what I kept focusing on was the anachronisms or the ideas that Sterling discarded as he went through the sequence. In this story, the Shapers and Mechanists are not the only two factions, none others are mentioned by name, but its clear that there are a swarm (pun intended) of factions that the Shapers and Mechanists are just far and away the top tier of. That surprised me, and it definitely did not correspond with my memory.

This story does and did feel like pulling the curtain to show that the aliens were not what they seemed and had the upper hand all this time

because they have engineered themselves to last hundreds of millions of years(!) which feels really not a possible thing. That seemed to be a thought back then, because I recall that Niven has some aliens in his stories having been around for really implausible lengths of time. I think the “aliens have the upper hand” is better executed, much later on, in Vinge’s *A Deepness in the Sky*. Here it feels like pulling the rug out from under the reader.

Adri: I liked “Swarm” OK - clearly better than Joe did - and I actually appreciated Sterling’s style, which is a mix of terrible and also rather evocative. An example from early in the text:

“No doubt you are right,” Afriel said, despising him. “We humans are as children to other races, however; so a certain immaturity seems natural to us.” Afriel pulled off his sunglasses to rub the bridge of his nose.”

That “despising him” slipped into the speech tags is really direct and shouldn’t work, but somehow brings the scene into focus - and then you’ve got the repetition of the name in two sentences which to my ear sounds irredeemably clunky. It’s bad, but it’s also kind of the opposite? Anyway.

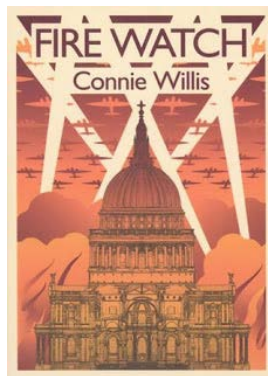
I agree that the contrivances of Afriel and Mirni’s mission are all a bit weird and arbitrary, and things like their two-year mission and the realities of their life in the Swarm with no human comforts whatsoever are glossed over in an unsatisfactory way. There’s also plenty of gender nonsense going on here, particularly the fact that Afriel’s agenda immediately takes precedence even

though Mirni is considered the better Shaper (with a higher IQ... and yes, let’s not go into the problems with using IQ as a proxy for human evolution), and that she’s ultimately killed in order to further his development.

As Paul says, though, I ultimately feel like unknowable aliens come in more compelling forms than this.

Paul: Also, this bit made me think that Babylon 5’s elder races were inspired by a note in this story:

“They have passed beyond my ken. They have all discovered something, learned something, that has caused them to transcend my understanding. It may be that they even transcend being...for all intents and purposes, they seem to be dead. Vanished. They may have become gods, or ghosts.”



Adri: The final story on our list is the category winner: “Fire Watch” by Connie Willis.

Now, I really like Willis but I have to be increasingly careful to be in the right mood for her version of England, which can be generously described as “have you actually had this read by an English person before publishing, Connie”. Everything seems to be going fine, but then the weird references to the Tube by Oxford-based characters start piling

up (Bertie Wooster-voice is back, incidentally), and before you know it the characters are “taking the Tube” from Oxford to London and you know she doesn’t mean the very specific bus route (which was three years away at the point of this story) and there’s already a perfectly serviceable overground train line which is called “the train” and would have no reason to be underground in future, and it all gets a bit distracting to say the least. It hasn’t got much better by Blackout/All Clear, either, despite the author’s status as a multiple-Hugo winning master by that stage.

Joe: I’ve been an on and off reader of Connie Willis for years, but never read “Fire Watch” until now and I might not have done that if I hadn’t also read *Doomsday Book* for The Hugo Initiative.

“Fire Watch” is the first of Willis’s Oxford Time Travel stories and this one introduces the whole concept, though verrrrrry loosely. A historian travels back in time to “The Blitz”, the bombing of London in 1940 and 1941 by Germany, to help save St Paul’s Cathedral - except that he’s not really sure why he’s been sent to this location since he’s spent 4 years preparing to travel with St Paul. Oh, time travel jokes.

Adri: Bartholomew - who despite studying at the time travel department at Balliol, reputationally one of the most champaign-socialist Oxford colleges, has never heard the word “bourgeois” before - finds himself out of his depth thanks to being given vague and inadequate, and entirely personality-driven, instruction for a life-changing exam, due to the whims of the academic system... which is actually very believable. He also

doesn't know about cats, because in the future all the cats are gone, and the fun asides about interacting with the one that lives with them (trying to lure it with water, complaining it "makes a noise like a siren") are wonderful.

Joe: "Fire Watch" is a somewhat pyrrhic story, because the protagonist knows that St. Paul's Cathedral will be saved by the Fire Watch (they put out fires and smother bombs that get too close to the cathedral), only to be destroyed decades later in a terrorist attack. You know, I don't know if this gets covered in later novels, but I want to know more about this future history.

Adri: Yes, this is a key element of *Blackout* and *All Clear*!

Joe: Anyway, one aspect of the story that reads very much "of its time" is that Communist is used as a nasty epithet regarding the rise and domination of the USSR and the atrocities performed on a global scale by the USSR and Communists - suggesting that the timeline in "Fire Watch" goes in a very different direction past the mid-1980s (and by extension 2019) than what we actually saw happen. That's one of the perils of a story written in the midst of the Cold War.

Paul: I agree with you, Joe, that the Communist as epithet and danger felt really anachronistic in this day and age. I saw her resonance with how a future Brit in a world where Communism exists would have a horror of being called a Communist and worse, being thought as the threat himself to St. Paul's.

Adri: If Bartholomew lives in a Britain that's still indelibly shaped by hatred of Communism, that's even more reason for him to have known the word "bourgeois" though, isn't it? I feel the reason this moment felt so anachronistic was the combination of a very Cold War sensibility with the lack of a really fleshed out vision of what's happening in the future to make that feel like a logical continuation, right up until the end. It reflects a general sense of fluidity in "Fire Watch" that's not present by *Doomsday Book*, with the rules of time travel still up for debate in a way that they aren't in later stories. Having read the novels in which things are clearer, it becomes hard to separate out the unknowns in this prototype version of the world from the constant niggles of implausibility around Bartholomew's knowledge and understanding as a mid-21st century British history student. (Other words he doesn't know include "tart" and "Tommy", and no I'm not going to let this go.)

Joe: "Fire Watch" is a little looser than *Doomsday Book*, with more flitting back and forth between the protagonist's memory and his time directly in London. *Doomsday Book* puts together more of the ideas Willis introduces here. It feels like the time between this story and the novel gave Willis time to more solidify the ideas she's working with.

Paul: Yes, this definitely felt like a "dry run" for *Doomsday Book*, which is not fair to *Doomsday*, but in retrospect, it does feel like its set up. I misread and perhaps had the false expectation that it occurred before, but it seems more like that Willis decided to expand Kivrin's experience into the

novel qua novel, although she does retcon a few things in the process.

I also do see some *Blackout/All Clear* notes here as well, not only with the wartime London setting but also the questions of making sure history happens as it should and the efforts of someone to make sure it does, and also the unreliability of knowing when things happen when. The whole question of when the Marble Arch bomb hits kind of reminded me, oddly, of Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love*, and Lazarus Long trying to figure out how much longer World War One had yet to run.

Adri: A lot of the time, "Fire Watch" reads more as a historical story, and it's not always clear what the value is of having a time-travelling protagonist rather than someone of the time, event uncertainties aside. Aside from his little linguistic trouble, Bartholomew doesn't seem to have had trouble convincing others he's supposed to be there, and being positioned in the Blitz doesn't actually offer much scope for exploring the morality behind time travel: regardless of one's position on killing Hitler, burning down cathedrals is something people generally feel is not a good thing and would want to prevent. Where the story starts to excel, though is in the slice-of-life elements of a character trying to live through bombardment and fear - the sleep deprivation and fear, the things it does to Bartholomew's memory and priorities, and what that means on his return, are all very well realised and it's ultimately his growth as a character and the realisations he comes to thanks to his time in the past that turned this story around for me.

Paul: I found the small note that St. Paul's would eventually be destroyed to be poignant and reminded me particularly of the recent damage to Notre Dame.

Adri: Now that we've gone through the entire ballot, it's decision time. This is a tough set of stories to make a decision on, mostly because none of them did as much for me as I'd have hoped. While we've had some duds in our previous chats, part of me expected as we got a bit closer to the present day and to still-writing authors, we'd end up more in line with the tastes and aesthetics of current Hugos, but I guess that's a lot to ask when this selection is still over 30 years behind where we are now.

At the top of the heap for me are "Fire Watch" and "Pawn's Gambit", both of which were enjoyable diversions, if not stories that set my world on fire. Of the two, I think I prefer the science fictional aspects of "Pawn's Gambit" to the historical diary of "Fire Watch", which doesn't fully tap into the potential for connection between the past and the near future that the later novels of the Oxford Time Travel series capitalise on. "Spawn" doesn't really trouble those two, but I liked it well enough and I'd rank it third on a hypothetical ballot.

On the other side, while of course I can't predict how I'd feel if I was voting back in 1983, but I hope that neither "Aquila" or "Nightlife" would have been above "No Award". "Aquila"'s bizarre storytelling and casual racism was a real let-down for me from an author of colour whose work I've been interested in trying for a while; I had fewer expectations about "Nightlife" but its dream romance came across as more creepy than anything else.

Paul: None of these really set the world on fire, sadly. Today me, I think that Pawn's Gambit is the best of breed, with the Fire Watch (the actual winner) in second place. Swarm would get third, Aquila fourth (only because there were Romans) and then Nightlife in fifth. I would not No Award any of them--that's a tactical nuclear weapon I only really use with care.

13-year-old me (as I would have been at the time). I had just seen *Return of the Jedi* in the movie theaters that previous summer, the second movie I ever saw in a theater (the first being, weirdly, *Metalstorm 3d: The Destruction of Jarred-Syn*). I would have voted Pawn's Gambit, then Swarm, Aquila (since 13-year-old me would have missed the problematic elements and went for ROMANS), Fire Watch and then Nightlife.

Joe: Depending on the year, my mood, the moon, and what's going on in the genre - I tend to only use No Award very surgically, where I reacted very strongly against a particular work. Otherwise, I rank a category in order and leave No Award off my ballot.

With that said, "Aquila" would have fallen below No Award on my ballot. I can't say if I would have been as refined in 1983 as I like to pretend I am now - but that story fails me on almost any measure I'm willing to consider.

I suspect at the time, I'd have voted "Pawn's Gambit" as my top pick with "Fire Watch" second. Today I would reverse that. "Fire Watch" is the class of this field, though I was very pleasantly surprised by "Pawn's Gambit". Given my general dislike of Bruce Sterling's Shaper / Mechanist stories, I'd honestly place "Nightlife" third, followed by "Swarm", No Award, and "Aquila" in that order.

Adri: On that note, it's time to bring our conversation to a close, and with it our Hugo category round-ups - for now, at least. Thanks, friends, it's been fun!

Interview: S.L. Huang, author of the Cas Russell series

Andrea Johnson



SL Huang is an Amazon-bestselling author who justifies her MIT degree by using it to write eccentric mathematical superhero fiction. She is most well known for her Cas Russell books – *Zero Sum Game* and *Null Set*. The third book in the series, *Critical Point*, hits bookstore

shelves later this month. If you like math geniuses with memory issues who typically solve problems by punching people, found families, and gray morals, these are the action packed and snark filled books for you!

Her short fiction has appeared in *Nature*, *Analog*, *Uncanny*, *Daily Science Fiction* and in multiple anthologies and Best Of collections, and she recently wrote three episodes of the shared world series *The Vela* on Serial Box.

Huang is also a Hollywood stuntwoman and firearms expert, where she's appeared on shows such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Raising Hope* and worked with actors such as Sean Patrick Flanery, Jason Momoa, and Danny Glover. Follow her online at www.slhuang.com or on Twitter as @

sl_huang.

She kindly answered my questions about the newest novel in the Cas Russell series, how Cas has developed over the years, the journey from self publishing to getting picked up by Tor, scientific werewolves, how much fun it was to work on *The Vela*, the arcane magic of outlines, and more.

NOAF: What do you enjoy most about writing the Cas Russell books?

S.L. Huang: The snark! Nothing gives me greater joy than banter between my characters.

I also really, really enjoy writing characters who are often not nice or who make tremendously bad decisions - but in ways where we want to root for them anyway. They're very flawed but I love them so much. Cas's impulsivity makes the books speed along, because she's so very likely to try to "solve" a problem by punching people, and then have a fifty percent chance of making things WORSE...

NOAF: Book 3 in this series, *Critical Point*, hits bookstore shelves at the end of April. What's the elevator pitch for *Critical Point*? Without giving us any spoilers, can you tell us what scenes was the most fun to write?

SLH: The real elevator pitch: "FAMILY! This book is all about family—the family you live with, but also the family you find along the way. And my very prickly main character has a lot to learn about it. Oh and LOTS OF EXPLOSIONS. Truly a staggering number of explosions."

The elevator pitch in my head: "THE ONE THAT IS SUPER GAY!!! Oh and also lots of explosions." As a queer author, it's delightful to me that it fits this book to put my characters' queerness on the page a lot more than it has in the previous books!

The elevator pitch according to my first reader: "THE PILAR BOOK." I confess this is also something I love: Pilar has been working up in her gun-toting skills since she was introduced, and this is the book where she and my main character become an action duo in a lot of scenes. Two women of color, kicking ass and taking names, one of them who shoots too many people and one of them who is too nice to everybody.

As for the scene that was most fun to write... I adore a lot of the family scenes to the point where I had written many of them before I finished Book 1, because I knew this was where I was headed. Also the explosions. I am fortunate enough to have explosives and fire experts among my friends and family, and there's one rollicking fun explosion near the end that came from my sister, who is a firefighter, telling me: "Use this. This'll be fun!"

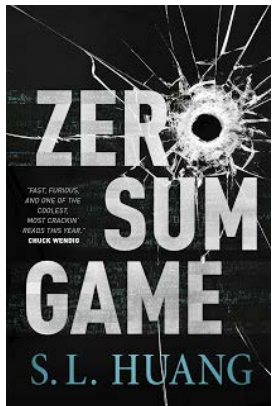
And it's SO fun. Well, not for the characters. They're not so happy about it.

NOAF: These are fast paced, action thrillers. While outlining and drafting, how do you keep the pace of the story so fast? How do you know when to give the characters a break from the action?

SLH: Outlining, ha! I cannot outline. I wish I could. It is arcane magic to me.

I have to “write through” things to figure them out - but after that I’m pretty good at putting together the book by feel. I can usually sense when it starts to stagnate, or when the characters need a breather, and I’ll go back and rewrite if the pacing feels like it’s starting to skew.

Then, once the book is done, my editor, Diana Gill, has a fabulous sense of pacing and thriller tension. She totally keeps me honest. If the stakes aren’t quite high enough, she makes sure I raise them! I love how great she is at seeing that, and it makes me feel very secure at the publication stage that there’s no way the excitement will sag for readers.



NOAF: You originally self published this series, and then the series was picked up by Tor. What changes, if any, were made to your original self published versions? How was working with Tor different than going the self pub route?

SLH: The first book was changed a lot less - we added a chapter and then I rewrote most of the climax and ending from there, but the first 2/3 were mostly the same. The second book was originally the fourth book, and we tore that one apart pretty thoroughly - largely to make it stand alone more - though the general plot is the same and the characters start and end

in the same place. The third book is brand new!

Personally, I love being with a publisher, especially with the fabulous people at Tor. My editor really “gets” the books and her comments only make them better - I’m so much more proud of the Tor versions! I also love not being an island; being with a publisher means a whole team is supporting me, and they’re utterly fantastic.

NOAF: As the Cas Russell series continues, Cas has more friends and allies. But that makes her more vulnerable to the emotional weight of those relationships. How does her character change and evolve through this? Did you always plan for her to eventually be less of a lone wolf in this way?

SLH: Oh, yes, that was always exactly the plan. She’s very much two steps forward, one and three-quarters steps back when it comes to her relationships with people, but I always wanted her to improve incrementally on this front. The character relationships are what make the books for me, so those awkward friendships are some of my favorite bits.

And yeah, her lack of emotional skill - and the conflicts it introduces - was always planned to be a big source of difficulty for her, but at the same time a huge source of growth. Er, very slow growth.

NOAF: Are you planning more novels and/or short stories in the Cas Russell universe? Where do you see the story going from here?

SLH: As long as readers keep buying and reading them, I will keep writing them! Without giving away the end of *Critical Point*, the “powered” people in this universe and their intersection with society have so many terrible possibilities to explore. This is all getting bigger - way bigger than the conspiracies in the shadows the characters have dealt with so far.

Not to mention the unanswered questions we still have about the characters’ backstories... I know readers have been champing at the bit about learning more of Rio’s history in particular, since I’ve only been doling out bits and bobs of it. You learn more about all the characters in *Critical Point*.

Oh, and I really want to do a novella in which Rio starts becoming a werewolf. (Scientifically, of course.) That’s been noodling around in my head for ages.

NOAF: In 2019, you wrote a number of episodes of *The Vela*, a work of serialized fiction from Serial Box Publishing. Other authors involved in the project were Yoon Ha Lee, Rivers Solomon, and Becky Chambers. How was it different to write in a shared universe? Because the episodes are a standard length and are full audio, were there word or time limits that you had to take into account, and how did that effect how you wrote your episodes?

SLH: I LOVED doing *The Vela*! The writing team was just so fabulous and I can’t say enough good things about them.

Writing in a shared universe - with such fantastic co-authors - was marvelous. Like eating cake. They all had such good ideas, and we would build on each other in ways I could never do as a solo writer. I'm so very proud of the story we wrote. It's jam-packed full of topical themes like migration and climate change even though it's set in a far-flung solar system, and the characters we drew up are such an incredible cast.

The process was certainly more structured than when I'm writing alone - it had to be! - but not in any way that I felt was limiting. I'm pretty good at knowing what will fit into wordage of varying lengths, as I write enough short stories to have a feel for it, so it was never an issue for me to pick a chunk of story that would work out for the size of an episode.

NOAF: You also have a forthcoming novella

coming out from Tor.com, called *Burning Roses*, where Rosa (Red Riding Hood) and Hou Yi the Archer join forces. What more can you tell us about this?

SLH: Two old queer ladies fight magical things together and angst about their families! In a mix of Chinese and Western folklore!

Also starring:

Goldilocks as an abusive con artist

Beauty and the Beast as a human trafficking story

The Jade Rabbit as a threatening dream guide because it's fun to make rabbits scary

And Puss in Boots because why wouldn't I throw in a cat in boots.

Also morally ambiguous dragon slaying, attempted matricide, birds MADE OUT OF FIRE and two very complicated families.

NOAF: Thank you so much! And consider me first in line to read *Burning Roses*!

POSTED BY: Andrea Johnson lives in Michigan with her husband and too many books. She can be found on twitter, @redhead5318 , where she posts about books, food, and assorted nerdery.

Interview: Andrea Hairston, author of *Master of Poisons*

Andrea Johnson

When I started seeing promotional material for Andrea Hairston's *Master of Poisons*, there was a turn of phrase that caught my eye: "Poison desert eats good farmland". Something to know about me is that I live in a college town that is surrounded by farm land. And we're pretty protective of our farm land and fresh water sources around here. Anything that harms the land and the water, that harms how we feed ourselves, them



fightin' words. With its sorcery, floating cities, empires on the edge of collapse, powerful storytelling and deadly storms, *Master of Poisons* is obviously about much more than protecting the land. But, if we don't have land to live on, land to farm to feed our-

selves, then what? Come for the "save the farmland!" basics, and stay for the fact that this book pulls together research and stories that the author has been collecting for her entire adult life.

Hairston's previous novels include *Will Do Magic for Small Change* (finalist for the Mythopoeic, Lambda, and Tiptree Awards), *Redwood and Wildfire*, (winner of the Tiptree and Carl Bran-

don Awards) and *Mindscape*. (winner of the Carl Brandon Award).

Of her newest novel, *Master of Poisons*, Hairston says:

"Master of Poisons is about denial and the empire of lies we're willing to believe. It's about decolonizing the mind. I wanted to write myself out of the hopelessness we feel facing devastation. This is a book about the stories we tell and the communities we make to do the impossible. . . . I am an Afro-Futurist in league with Indigenous-Futurists. I want to bring the wisdom of recovered ancestors into conversation with the future."

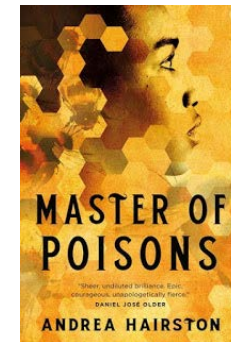
Not one to limit her artistic endeavors to just ink on a page, Hairston is a playwright and Artistic Director of the Chrysalis Theatre in Western Massachusetts, which has produced everything from sci-fi comedies to musical workshops, to radio shows and more. To learn more about Hairston's fiction, essays, and stage work, you can visit her website at andrea hairston.com, and follow her on twitter at @AAHairsto.

After learning about *Master of Poisons*, I had about a million questions for Hairston, from her inspirations for this novel, to her worldbuilding methods, how music and language plays into her storytelling, to her work on the stage. She was able to take some time out of her schedule to answer many of them. Let's get to the interview!

NOAF: On a Tor.com post announcing the book, you talked about how you "wanted to write myself out of hopelessness we feel facing devas-

tation". Can you tell us more about this? Was writing *Master of Poisons* emotional for you, because of the feelings of hopelessness? (as someone who lives in a small city surrounded by beautiful farmland, the idea of farmland dying makes me want to cry!!)

Andrea Hairston: Some days a wave of despair inundates me. I feel like a brief speck of dust, struggling to survive the whirlwind, the hellfire. Writing is like prayer. Writing challenges me to feel the world, to find myself in relation to the dirt, the people, the rain, the bees, all living things.



That's how and why I wrote *Master of Poisons*. My emotions are fuel for activism, not a drain.

We all use our emotions as fuel to create and sustain the changes we want to make, have to make. So, when writing, I don't feel alone. I don't

feel helpless, hopeless, useless. I know that what I do matters. What we all do matters.

NOAF: What were some of your inspirations for the novel?

AH: The films of Guillermo Del Toro—he shows us the other worlds, beautiful and terrible, in our world. Frans De Waal's books on animal emotion and intelligence—De Waal asks are we smart enough to know how intelligent animals are or wise enough to sense how much they feel?

The plays of Pearl Cleage, Alice Childress, Anna D. Smith, and Tess Onwueme—these women recovered lost history, reinvented the present, and reached to the future. The novels of Octavia Butler, Michael Ende, Ursula LeGuin, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tad Williams. They made me feel at home in Science Fiction, and Fantasy.

NOAF: I love these kinds of epic, lush, complicated worlds, how did you create and design the Arkhysian Empire?

AH: I tried to write a novella, tried to squeeze the story and the world into 40,000 words or less and it just didn't work! The characters demanded backstories, geographies, their own particular languages, histories, and cultures. The conjure system demanded a full cosmology. Each language had words that didn't translate, that had to be explained by stories, myths, and experiences. Nobody ate the same food. Even the trees and rivers wanted to tell their story!

NOAF: What kind of research did you do for this novel?

AH: I've been researching this book since the ninth grade so that's a very long time! I read history, cultural studies, novels, poems, plays. I love going to museums-- and looked at art, maps, sculptures, clothing, pottery, weapons, fabric, tapestries—all sorts of material culture. All praises to the Smithsonian Institute, particularly the Museum of the American Indian and the Museum of African American History and Culture.

I've learned several languages. Learning a new lan-

guage offers a particular way of seeing the world. Truly, every language makes a different world.

Decades of doing theatre and performance was also good research. Theatre is great practice for getting inside characters and worlds that aren't your own. I play balaphon—a West African Instrument with wooden keys and gourd resonators. The polyrhythmic West African music transports me, changes me. Like speaking a particular language, playing music offers me a portal to a new realm.



NOAF: What is your writing process like? Are you a pantster or a plotter?

AH: So I do both! It's a polyrhythm. I plot and then fly off with my muse, and then I settle in and plot and then fly off again until I find the end and then I can get the beginning to work.

NOAF: Without too many spoilers, can you tell us if there was a particular scene that was your favorite to write? Was there a scene that was more difficult to write than you expected?

AH: I loved writing stories from the point of view of the animals, of the non-human characters in the novel. These were some of the hardest scenes

to write, but also the most fun. I'm allergic to bees and becoming a swarm of them was thrilling.

NOAF: You are the Artistic Director of the Chrysalis Theatre, a cross-cultural performance ensemble, and you teach theatre and playwriting. How has your experiences in live theater and playwriting informed how you write short stories and novels?

AH: Doing live theatre means you have to rehearse and rehearse yet be ready to improvise with whatever comes up during the performance. Writing for theatre, I've rewritten lines after the show has opened. Performers wanted to kill me, but if the lines I handed them were better than what they'd been struggling to get behind, they'd cuss and fuss and then change. So I am a champion rewriter. I revise and revise until I get the story I want.

I love dramatic storytelling—finding the action, the mystery that propels the story. As I playwright, I love finding the voice of each character, the idiom of their thoughts, the idiom of their world. I bring all that into my novels.

NOAF: How is telling a story on the stage different than telling a story on the page?

AH: On stage you have actors, sets, lights, costumes. A novelist has to conjure all that setting in the minds of the reader. No designers or performers to the rescue! No music to underscore or illuminate intentions, motivations, mood. In the theatre, the audience can breathe the same air as the performers. They can taste the actors' hunger and

joy, feel the music of the actors' voices in their bones. Sitting in your seat, taking in the play, you sync up heartbeats with the rest of the audience and send your energy up on stage to support the performers as they reach beyond themselves. But playwrights don't write the interior landscape of a character. Word by word, the novelist maps that often complex and always intriguing interior and invites the reader on an intimate journey from self to other. Hours can go by and lost in the book, in the setting and music that the writer has conjured, the reader forgets everything else.

NOAF: Thank you so much, Andrea, for this enlightening interview!



Essays

Beauty, Dragons, and Isometric Horror: Revisiting Breath of Fire IV

Aidan Moher

My story's a familiar one.

Back in the late '90s, I was in high school and obsessed—OBSESSED—with Japanese RPGs. I first discovered them on the SNES thanks to *Final Fantasy VI*, and *Chrono Trigger* remains my second true love after my family to this day. But it was the PlayStation era, thanks to games like *Suikoden 2*, *Chrono Cross*, and *Final Fantasy IX*, that my love for the genre really flourished.

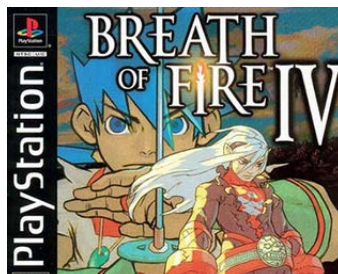
Most of the time, me and my friends all picked up the same games at the same time. We all played through *Final Fantasy VII* together, comparing notes the next morning on the way to school, and I even went so far as to haul my Commodore 1702 monitor and my PlayStation to my friend's house so we could sit side-by-side and play *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* all night long.

Every once in a while, though, one of us would go off the beaten path and pick up something new. For me, the one I remember most was *Breath of Fire III*. The communal aspect of playing JRPGs with my friends was one of the big draws, but I have immensely fond memories of popping that *Breath of Fire III* disc into my PlayStation, cranking the volume up way past what was acceptable in a house with four other

occupants, and losing myself in an experience that was all my own. Eventually I hit the game's infamous desert and, thanks to a translation bug that reversed two directions, never made it to the end of the game.

Maybe it was bitterness at this falling out, or maybe it was because by April, 2000, I only had eyes (and so much money) for *Final Fantasy IX*, but despite my fond memories for *Breath of Fire III*, I didn't play its sequel until many, many years later when it arrived on the PlayStation Store and was playable on the PlayStation Portable.

And I didn't like it at all.



The visuals and sprite work were gorgeous, the story seemed interesting, and I loved the battle system, which are generally the selling points for JRPGs, but, many other technical flaws kept me from being able to enjoy the game. I dropped it about five hours in.

But, here I am, a few years later, and, thanks to my deep dive back into retro gaming, I've got my PlayStation hooked up to a PVM monitor and I decided NOW was the time to give *Breath of Fire IV* another shot.

I'm about seven hours in. Here are my impressions.

The Good

The Sprites

The sprites.

Oh, god.

The sprites.

I mean. Just look at them.



By the time of its release, *Breath of Fire IV* was competing in a JRPG genre that had changed drastically in a very short period of time. *Final Fantasy VII* ushered in a new era of 3D worlds with visuals that focused on cinematic storytelling and unique set pieces. In contrast, *Breath of Fire IV* feels like the continuation of 16-bit style JRPGs from a universe where *Final Fantasy VII* was never released. Its use of brilliantly drawn and animated 2D sprites is nearly unrivalled even today, and they manage to convey a broad range of character and emotion that reminds me of Square's best work from the 16-bit era—like *Chrono Trigger* or *Super Mario RPG*, which really showcased how talented pixel artists could leverage their work for storytelling—but upgraded to the nth degree. This is pixel art perfection.

Over on OneZero, Richmond Lee takes a deep dive into the impressive library of 2D games on the PlayStation, and singles out *Breath of Fire IV* for its impressive sprite work and some bold artistic styles.

He said:

These are some of the most sophisticated 2D sprites ever made for an RPG. They largely avoid having obvious outlines, which up until this point had been a basic tenet of sprite art. Because of this, the artists on Breath of Fire IV had to be far more deliberate with their shapes and shadows. Most 2D games up until this point had very formulaic shading. You work outside to inside, dark to light, in bands of color simulating a gradient. But without outlines, this style is illegible, meaning it was

never optimal to begin with. The shading in Breath of Fire IV raises the bar by being planar rather than broadly spherical. It's not afraid to have large swathes of flat color, which, as it turns out, can be even better for legibility and visual appeal. The complexity isn't in the amount of information being thrown at you, but in the decisions behind them.

What sets *Breath of Fire IV*'s spritework apart isn't just the brilliant concept art from Tatsuya Yoshikawa or the obvious talent of the sprite artists and animators, but the way it helps define the world as something unique. As Lee points out, there's a careful deliberation to the sprites, each pixel perfectly chosen and each frame meticulously animated to the point that you as the reader feels like these characters live inside your TV screen.

Just one look at Ryu's sprite sheet on The Spriter's Resource shows the level of effort and care that went into a single character.

As tech continues to evolve, we're reaching ever closer to the point of photorealism, but in many ways I've never felt so disconnected from the visuals in my games. Instead, I think one of the main reasons I'm drawn to older games is that they require a marriage between the game designers and the player. These games hold whole worlds within them, but you can only display so much detail at 240p resolution. And so the game reaches out to the player by offering a level of abstraction and asks them to bring their own interpretation of what they see on screen. The sprites here are not photorealistic, but they're realized, and that, to

me, is more immersive than photorealistic models and animations that teeter on the edge of the uncanny valley.

Fou-lu

I always find it challenging to talk about 32-bit JRPGs without bringing up *Final Fantasy VII*. It's the meteor-sized elephant in the room because it so fundamentally changed (and popularized) its genre and its impact can be felt in nearly every game that followed. One of the most notable elements to come from *Final Fantasy VII*'s popularity was the empathetic anti-hero. Golbez was a bad dude. Exdeath was an evil tree. Kefka was straight-up insane. Sephiroth? He was traumatized and abused, he was torn apart and reassembled. He held pain and sorrow. Outside of a handful of games from the 16-bit era (like *Lunar: The Silver Star* and its wonderful antagonist, Ghaeleon), not a lot of games from that era attempted to make the player care about the antagonist. *Final Fantasy VII* changed that, and many games rode in its wake. *Breath of Fire IV* is one of the most successful.

Early in *Breath of Fire IV*, the scene fades to black and the player takes control of a woken god emerging from a tomb. Fou-lu, first Emperor of the Fou Empire, is the game's antagonist, intricately tied with its hero, Ryu, and is controlled by the player throughout the game during specific moments. As a storytelling technique, this sets the stage for the coming together of the two nations fighting an endless war, and offers a perspective on the concept of duality. By seeing the conflict through Fou-lu's eyes, the player gains a new understanding of the magnitude of the game's

events. No longer is it simply a story of a young amnesiac hero saving the day—instead it becomes something much more complex than that, and fits in nicely with the more politically intricate games of the era like *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Tactics Orge* (though with not nearly the level of complexity as those two games.)

Almost immediately upon taking control of Fou-lu, the player knows that something is different. Instead of fighting rats and slimes like Ryu, Fou-lu takes down enormous dinosaurs with a swing of his sword. The music isn't the usual scrappy battle theme, but something melodic and evocative of the western continent's Asian stylings. It's a twist on an otherwise fairly straightforward take on the JRPG genre, and showcases a level of ambition rarely seen outside of Square's offerings.

The Palette

I'm gonna take a mea culpa here. In the past, I've written about how *Breath of Fire IV*'s muted colour palette was a negative for me. I'm drawn to bright, colourful graphics—like *Breath of Fire III*—so the soft pastels and predominance of brown in *Breath of Fire IV*'s first several hours felt flat to me. However, as I've played more, and now reached the western continent, I've noticed my attachment to the world is growing. More colour is appearing here and there, and though the saturation remains muted, it gives the world a different feel than almost anything else I've experienced in a JRPG and I've really begun to dig how it helps to establish the world as its own thing, rather than just another carbon copy faux-fantasy world like the earlier games in the series.

In his OneZero piece, Lee comments on the game's unusual palette. "The color palette of the game is incredibly subdued," he said. But then goes on to explain why it's so effective at conveying the game's mood. "It's full of earth tones, but never comes off as muddy or dreary because there is so much warm/cool contrast going on."

And once you reach the Wychwood outside Ludia, you're hit with a burst of beautiful colour, and the effect of spending so much time in the desert areas becomes more pronounced. Many games of the era (and especially the following era, which hit not long after *Breath of Fire IV* was released) directed players through several distinct biomes. A desert, a volcano, the snowy place, etc. With *Breath of Fire IV*, it feels like the world is more deliberately subtle and intertwined, and therein lies a certain beauty.

Breath of Fire IV was released to a post-*Final Fantasy VII* world, and the JRPG genre had changed immensely. It didn't rely on big, sweeping set pieces like Square's heavy-hitters, but instead chose to go in a different direction, one in which the characters and flavour of the world was brought to life through subtle touches of colour—conveying an impressive amount of emotion and connection to the game world through its brilliant art design and sprite work.

The Music

Breath of Fire III features one of my favourite soundtracks on the PlayStation. Just like the game's graphics, it's fun and full of colour and wears its jazz influence proudly.

Like the visuals, Yoshino Aoki's score for *Breath of Fire IV* stands in stark contrast—but is no less brilliant. It's moody and vibrant in a way that feels more natural and aged than its predecessor and adds to the game's wonderful visual texture.

I particularly like the main battle theme.

And then, in contrast, there's Fou-Lu's battle theme, which steps away from Ryu's more traditional sound.

The Asian influence here immediately signals to the player that they're somewhere new, and that this isn't your typical JRPG fare. Coupled with Fou-lu's power level in battle, it immediately helps establish him as a threat, and signals to the player that they're in a different part of the world from the main quest.

And then about seven hours in, you reach the Fou Empire with Ryu and his party. The battle theme you've associated with Fou-lu up to that point kicks in the first battle, and immediately you feel your tension rise. By the music alone, you know that things are about to change. You're not in Kansas anymore. It's an effective long-game approach to using music to define the world as much as the graphics.

The Worldbuilding

As important as the graphics and music are for adding atmosphere and texture to *Breath of Fire IV*'s world, the game's writing also contributes heavily to its effectiveness and uniqueness. Of the many elements that come together to form the world, two things stand out above the rest: the

western localization and a groundedness to the characters and cities.

The PlayStation era was very hit or miss when it came to game localizations. They range from *Final Fantasy VII*'s barely comprehensible gobbledygook to *Vagrant Story*'s baroque brilliance. *Breath of Fire IV* falls somewhere in between on a technical level, but uses one trick to separate itself from its peers. While the base writing in the game is serviceable, and the translation itself lacks the personality of, say, *Paper Mario* or *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete*, the western localization team swung for the fences by adding a Korean influence to the cultures and characters of the Fou Empire. This is absent in the Japanese version of the game, and does wonders for creating a feeling of divide and singularity to the two warring nations. A less adept localization might have painted both sides with a single brush, reducing the effectiveness of a story that revolves around xenophobia and pointless war.

But perhaps the most effective worldbuilding element isn't how the people populating the world talk, but what they do. The towns in *Breath of Fire IV* are small and labyrinthine, and absolutely packed with people. As you flit from NPC to NPC, chatting with them along the way, you discover a world that's populated by blue collar workers, tradespeople, merchants, nuns, orphans, soldiers, travellers, and everything in between. This is a world that feels vibrant and alive, with real people populating even its deepest corners.

The Battle System

To this point, *Breath of Fire IV* hasn't offered

much in the way of challenge, but what the battle system lacks in complexity, it more than makes up for in visual style. In many ways, it feels like an ultra-refined version of the turn-based battle system featured in games like *Lufia 2* or *Suikoden*, all through a UI that's clear, snappy, and stylized without feeling like a gamified visual element. The player enters commands for all of their party members, and then the turn commences while the player and enemies trade blows. *Breath of Fire IV*'s twist on the formula is that it gives you access to all of your characters in battle, but only allows you to use three on any given turn. This allows you to strategize as the battle progresses by swapping characters in or out based on how the battle's going. Sitting out of battle in the back row lets characters recover their magic points, which adds another layer to the mechanic. It's fun, fast, and several hours in I still look forward to jumping into battle, but that's mostly because...

Battles. Are. So. Beautiful.

Your party faces off against the enemy on gorgeously drawn battlefields, shown from an isometric perspective reminiscent of *Ogre Battle* and the earlier *Breath of Fire* games. It makes the game feel more active and cinematic than the more typical side-on or behind-the-back view many other sprite-based JRPGs used even on the PlayStation, and I prefer its level of polish and detail versus something like *Final Fantasy IX*'s slow-as-molasses 3D battles that take so long to load you can go to the kitchen for a coffee refill and get back before ever having to enter a command.

If I were to conceptualize my perfect JRPG proj-

ect in 2020, I'd start with *Breath of Fire IV*'s look and feel for battles, which I think is about the highest praise I can hand out.

The Bad

Breath of Fire IV is hardly perfect, though, and there are a lot of little peas in this bed.

So. Many. Minigames.

Mini games were the de jour thing during this era, and *Breath of Fire IV* is packed full of them. Way too full. Like. Fuller than me after a trip to the candy store. While some of them offer a moderately fun diversion from the main quest, they're too frequent, regularly interrupt the story's momentum, and, in the case of my attempted playthrough a few years ago, actively forced me to quit playing. The game controls like a beached shark, making even the minigames with potential more frustrating than fun. If I have to chase another beast through the forest again in my life, it'll be too soon.

Little annoyances

Speaking of these minigames, *Breath of Fire IV* is also littered with a lot of little quality of life annoyances. None of them are too egregious on their own, but added together they really take away from the experience. For instance, a lot of those minigames and puzzles require you to run around an environment to chase a thief or track a beast. For whatever reason, *Breath of Fire IV*'s team decided they'd spice these sections up with random encounters. It makes something that should take moments take much longer than necessary, even if you're successful in the first try or two. Couple this with the disorienting camera,

and it can be tough to regain your bearings after a battle, often leading to the need to start over again. One little design decision, so much frustration.

The Ugly

Sigh. So close.

The Dragons and Polygonal Baddies

I've gushed at length about *Breath of Fire IV*'s sprite work, which makes its dragons even more disappointing. The game's artists and designers deliver a beautiful polygonal world for the player to explore, but its true beauty lies the detailed characters and monsters. Instead of delivering enormous, intricately animated dragons, which are central to its plot and represent many of the most terrifying moments in the game, the artists instead used polygons for the dragons. The result would be laughably dated in any other game, but when put up against the 2D artwork, it becomes clear there was major pressure on the artists to compete with the 3D battle engines and summons featured in many other popular JRPG franchises at the time.

It's not even that the Capcom artists didn't have the resources to produce large animated sprites. Early in the game, Fu-lou faces off against this monstrosity:



Only to face off against... this not long after:



The Zaurus is a regular enemy faced in random battle, while the Kham is meant to be an imposing and powerful boss. The difference is staggering and unfortunate—especially since *Breath of Fire III* had some truly impressive 2D dragons.

Marlok

If the dragons are visually ugly, the whole Marlok sub-plot is ethically and morally ugly. Needing to get across a desert traversable only by sandflier, Ryu's party seeks help from a merchant creep named Marlok, who agrees to help them, but only if they can apprehend a thief that stole some of his stuff. Ryu and co. agree, but not before Marlok insists that Nina stay behind as collateral. It...goes down hill from there. As Ryu and his companions head out, Marlok commands Nina to do his housework. Once that's done, he adamantly requests a massage, and then he forces a massage on her—with a literal wink of his eye and a yelp from Nina as the screen fades to black.

It's gross, sexist, and, unfortunately, totally of the time for JRPGs (something that, sadly, hasn't

changed enough in the 20 years since.)

My understanding is that the manga adaptation of the game alters this scene so that Cray bursts in just as Marlok is forcing himself on Nina, which is a better (if still unfortunate) handling of the scene. Unfortunately, we don't see or hear from Nina again in the game until the quest with the thief is over and she shows up at the sand cruiser dock in Marlok's tow. Nothing is said of the massages.

Isometric Horror

And, oh. How I've saved the best worst for last. Generally when I write a piece like this about a game I'm enjoying, I like to sandwich the bad stuff in the middle so I can course correct before the end and wrap up on a positive note.

Breath of Fire IV's camera and controls are so mind-bogglingly bad that I can't do that.

For all its many accomplishments—its brilliant art direction, god-tier sprites, terrific story, fun battlesystem—nothing, and I mean nothing, defines your time with *Breath of Fire IV* more than the way you view and move around the world.

I'm sorry, but what the hell? Who approved these? At what point did the designers come up with this system and think, "Yeah, this is great." What were the playtesters drinking when they played this and didn't immediately flag this as an issue?

Released contemporaneously with *Final Fantasy IX*, which featured full 360° movement, *Breath of Fire IV* is set to a rigid four-directional grid-

based system reminiscent of much older JRPGs. It's jumpy, unintuitive, and reduces navigating the cramped environments to more of a guessing game than any experience found in other late-era 32-bit JRPGs. You have to leap frog the SNES JRPGs (which generally controlled really nicely) and go all the way back to the NES and beyond to find RPGs that feel as rigid and unintuitive as *Breath of Fire IV*. And at least those games didn't feature an isometric perspective, a camera you can barely control (and only turn in rigid 90° increments, when you can control it at all), super cramped dungeons and cities where you literally can't see anything, or time-based puzzles that specifically rely on the bad controls and camera for their challenge.

It's like trying to control *Final Fantasy Tactics* in real time.

Woof.

Conclusion

takes a deep breath

Despite all that. I'm nine hours into this play-through of *Breath of Fire IV* and it's going to be the first time I complete it. Maybe it's playing on a CRT monitor, which really allows those sprites to shine. Maybe it's sheer grit and determination. Maybe it's a growing understanding of how to appreciate games within their context, rather than expecting them to be something more modern.

Nah. It's the sprite art.

Breath of Fire IV is a gorgeous experience with

a great cast of characters, a simple but effective battle system, and one of my favourite worlds in any PlayStation JRPG, but it's ultimately knocked down a few notches by easily avoidable design decisions and technical elements that hold it back from being a true classic on a system that produced many of the genre's most famous and lasting games.

Aidan Moher is the Hugo Award-winning founder of A Dribble of Ink and author of Tide of Shadows and Other Stories. He continues to write about video games with his column, Insert Cartridge.

Major and Minor: On Speculative Fiction as Canonical Literature

Phoebe Wagner

Hi all, unfortunately my PhD work has kept me from reviewing, but I will be back with reviews in 2021! I have a few essays to show for my time away, and the following essay is inspired by conversations around why speculative literature is not respected as a genre in the US literary world, particularly when teaching English literature. I hope you enjoy!

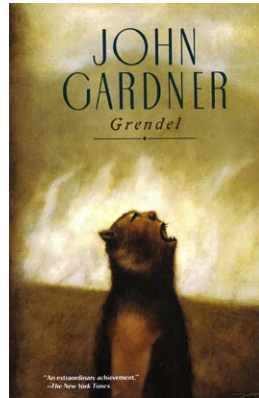
-Captain Renaut, Casablanca

Major and Minor: On Speculative Fiction as Canonical Literature

Speculative literature is often cited and criticized for escapism, a critique used to dismiss much popular or “low” literature from westerns to romances. Indeed, the speculative literature that rises into a more literary market usually undercuts the idea of adventure for a slow or more meditative text, such as some of Samuel R. Delany’s work. That being said, all fiction is, at some level, escapist (even if not escapist to every reader’s taste), and plenty of canonical literary fiction features escape into adventure or romance, such as Ernest Hemingway’s work. This leaves the unreality—the otherworldly nature—of speculative literature as the main cause for it being labeled “low,” yet that becomes complicated by magical realism or Indigenous realism, suggesting that speculative literature might be less “low” litera-

ture and more a representation of a wider reality, as Ursula K. Le Guin said in her National Book Award Foundation Medal acceptance speech.

Ultimately, I argue that this otherworldly nature is why speculative fiction writers are rarely recognized as canonical literary writers whereas authors of other genres from mystery writers to historical



fiction writers are recognized as canonical: their work takes place in some form of the real world, something recognizable if not familiar. This unreality of speculative literature does not support the nationalizing goal of American Literature, particularly when shaping the canon. As Delany argues, this familiarity reaches to the sentence level, so the literary reader already knows how to engage with the text, even if not in an accustomed genre. Yet, these readers are in the minority as the popularity of speculative literature continues to grow with each generation. Indeed, many canonical writers of American literature have written speculative fiction, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Mark Twain to Toni Morrison. Contemporary authors continue to blur the lines between speculative and literary genres. For instance, where does one shelve Marlon James’s *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019)? Or Kelly Link and Carmen Maria Machado? John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971) is often shelved in the speculative section, but the rest of his novels are in the literary section. As suggested by such authors, the separation by genre makes little sense, particularly

among such important writers. Indeed, I believe that speculative literature should be included in the American literary canon as it has as much cultural relevance as a literary text even if not set in the real world.

“Low” literature and popular culture has always been associated with the masses. Particularly with speculative fiction, the genre has grown from dime novels, followed by the pulp era of the mid-1900s. While different speculative writers have tried to separate themselves from this history (particularly during the Golden Age of Science Fiction when authors were trying to raise the genre’s status), it’s worth noting that Conan the Barbarian remains in the popular consciousness while the average person could not name a character from James Joyce. Yet, the canon values James Joyce over Conan. Fredric Jameson suggests that this gap cannot be overcome because speculative fiction has a “dialectical relationship” with high literature:

It would in my opinion be a mistake to make the ‘apologia’ for SF in terms of specifically ‘high’ literary values—to try, in other words, to recuperate this or that major text as exceptional, in much the same way as some literary critics have tried to recuperate Hammett or Chandler for the lineage of Dostoyevsky, say, or Faulkner. SF is a sub-genre with a complex and interesting formal history of its own, and with its own dynamic, which is not that of high culture, but which stands in a complementary and dialectical relationship to high culture or modernism as such. (283)

I would argue that, as part of the dialectical relationship, that speculative fiction undercuts the conditions of modernity and high culture. Certainly, literary writers have undermined and are undermining white supremacy and the heteropatriarchy, but less of those texts have been canonized in American literature. Whereas, the speculative canon—even a more conservative list—contains many novels and writers undermining the status quo, such as Robert A. Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr./Alice Bradley Sheldon, Samuel R. Delany, William Gibson, Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, among others. Due to these elements—working against canonical ideas, writing unfamiliar worlds, and a separate writing tradition—even the immense popularity of speculative literature would not afford it entrance to the canon, particularly when the nationalizing goal of creating and teaching the canon of American literature is taken into account.

As Jameson argues, there are specific differences between speculative fiction and literary fiction. Initially, there are the types of stories that can be told—though this is not a hard rule. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) could have been marketed as literary fiction in a different day, and, indeed, is treated as one of the most literary examples of speculative fiction. Following Delany, though, it should be noted that speculative fiction requires a different way of reading than literary fiction. In his essay "About 5,750 Words" (1978), Delany takes a semiotics approach to speculative fiction. He argues: "Any serious discussion of speculative fiction must first get away from the distracting concept of SF content and examine precisely what

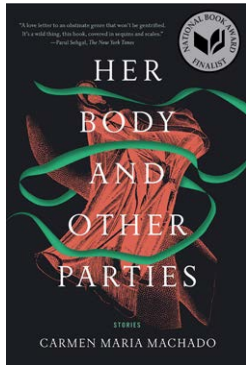
sort of word-beast sits before us" (15). To that end, he breaks down a sentence that could appear in a science fiction story to demonstrate his theory about the act of reading, which he describes as correcting a picture. He writes: "A sixty-thousand word novel is one picture corrected fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine times" (5). He breaks down the following sentence word by word to demonstrate when the image corrected could no longer be realism: "The red sun is high, the blue low. Look! We are worlds and worlds away" (7). In Delany's theory, the picture was not fully corrected until the word "low" transported the reader to a different planet, one with two suns. This example leads to one of his more well-cited critical thoughts: "'The door dilated,' is meaningless as naturalistic fiction, [...]. As SF—as an event that hasn't happened, yet still must be interpreted in terms of the physically explainable—it is quite as wonderful as [Harlan Ellison] feels it" (13). Therefore, a certain affect can be achieved in speculative fiction that cannot be achieved in literary fiction.

Ultimately, Delany writes: "I can think of no series of words that could appear in a piece of naturalistic fiction that could not also appear in the same order in a piece of speculative fiction. I can, however, think of many series of words that, while fine for speculative fiction, would be meaningless as naturalism. Which then is the major and which the subcategory" (12)? From a stylistics approach, I agree with Delany that speculative fiction offers more sentence-level possibility than literary fiction. Indeed, other genres also meet this criteria for literary fiction—any sentence appearing in a western, mystery, romance, could also

appear in a literary novel. But, if creativity was the main value of "major" literature, then certainly the lines would be redrawn. This issue speaks to larger question of why speculative fiction is not considered literary while other genres have been elevated, such as historical fiction. Because speculative literature has the potential—and often is—totally separate from reality, its unfamiliarity regulates it to a separate shelf.

Indeed, literary writers that straddle the line between speculative and literary careers often play with this issue of language. For example, take Machado's collection *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), which combines literary fiction and speculative fiction throughout, usually within a story. Yet, this collection would be recognized as a literary offering (even if one of the previously published stories appeared in the genre magazine, *Strange Horizons*). That being said, her stories dip into outright speculative fiction, not even soft fabulism that authors like Karen Russell or Kevin Brockmeier achieve. In her short story "Inventory," Machado switches mid-story from traditional literary fiction to science fiction, particularly dystopian fiction. Indeed, the format—a list of sexual encounters—would play better to a literary audience than to a speculative audience. Similarly, the slow pacing and lack of fantastical elements also suggests a literary purview. As the narrator reaches adulthood, the speculative element comes to light: "We watched as the newscaster vanished and was replaced with a list of symptoms of the virus blossoming a state away, in northern California" (Machado 36). Even this comment would not necessarily remove the story from the realm of literary fiction as an epidemic is certainly not

a fantastical idea. Yet, this dip into low literature allows Machado to expand the range of her story, quickly settling it within a survival dystopia narrative familiar to speculative readers. Indeed, it's the dystopian setting that turns the story from cheeky to moving.



At first, the story's structure intimates it will be a list of sexual encounters, each paragraph introducing who the narrator engages with, such as "Two boys, one girl. One of them my boyfriend" (Machado 33). After the virus begins spreading across the US, the narrator's or characters' movements are included. Early during the epidemic, she flees from people rather than the virus: "When [sex] was over and she was showering, I packed a suitcase and got in my car and drove" (Machado 37). Once she settles in Maine, others start coming to her: "One man. National Guard. When he first showed up at my doorstep, I assumed he was there to evacuate me, but it turned out he'd abandoned his post" (Machado 40). Many of these lines remain staunchly in realism, though comments about the narrator "check[ing] their eyes" or asking "how far behind the virus was" err toward the speculative (Machado 40, 41). Yet, readers familiar with the genre and tropes—such as the religious leader and her flock or the fact the narrator allows anyone near her hideout—can sense what will happen, which makes the final paragraph of the story even more moving as all three styles of narrative lists come together. First, a new character appears:

"One woman. Much older than me. While she waited for the three days to pass [to demonstrate she was negative for the virus], she meditated on a sand dune" (Machado 43). The list structure means the narrator will have a sexual encounter with this person. Yet, as represented by this section being the longest, this woman is different.

Quickly they form a connection: "I couldn't remember the last time I'd smiled so much. She stayed. More refugees filtered through the cottage, through us, the last stop before the border, and we fed them and played games with the little ones. We got careless" (Machado 42). As to be expected in such a dystopian narrative, what the narrator cares about does not survive. Indeed, her lover dies from the virus, and the narrator gets "into a dinghy and [rows] to the island, to this island, where I have been stashing food since I got to the cottage. I drank water and set up my tent and began to make lists" (Machado 43). Thus, the story's form and the genre are united as the dystopia epidemic genre becomes the occasion for the making of the lists. Returning to Delany, many of the sentences in this short story could appear in a realist text, yet the story's impact would be undermined without the dystopian setting. In other words, the story is first speculative, then literary, as this story would not exist without the speculative element.

For a literary reader unfamiliar with speculative literature, many of Machado's short fiction would still be palatable, even if perhaps misunderstood. This is why Marlon James beautifully muddies the water with *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. Not only must literary readers learn a new way

to read (which is why I believe critics struggled to see parts of the fantasy as anything more than metaphor), but they must also consult a different literary history. A critic's ability to recognize allusions to Shakespeare or classical mythology or Faulkner would not be (much) help in this novel. Rather, knowledge of Tolkien, Delany, Saunders, and Howard is necessary to untangle the multi-layered narrative. For instance, a literary reader could interpret when the main character, Tracker, travels through a forest called the Darklands as a metaphoric quest. Rather, a speculative reader recognizes a familiar trope in a quest narrative: when the party must travel through an area they know better than to enter. Indeed, the scene where Tracker and the others discuss whether to enter the Darklands is reminiscent of Tolkien's Fellowship discussing whether or not to enter the Mines of Moria:

"Through the Darklands in one day. Around the lands is three days. Any man with sense would make the choice," Fumeli said.
"Well, man and boy, choose whatever you want. We go round," [Tracker] said. (James 228)

Because James so directly engages with a fantasy trope, a speculative reader can expect the Darklands to be full of danger. Indeed, Tracker and his companions barely escape, but they are rewarded with a magical door that leads them straight to their destination—even if they are chased into it by a monstrous monkey. Yet, nothing really "happens" in this section other than the adventure. Little new information is revealed about the characters. Tracker's prowess as a warrior is established

again, but that has not been in question for the reader. Indeed, like many epic fantasies or sword-and-sorcery narratives, this section is action for the sake of action.

Unlike in literary novels, reading metaphor or symbols into magical moments is doing a disservice to the writer. In speculative literature, James's shape-shifting leopard and Tracker's lover is truly a shape-shifting leopard, not a metaphor about queer love. In one of the more sentimental sections, Tracker and the Leopard save children from being murdered for their magical abilities. One of the children, a girl who turns into smoke, has nightmares during her sleep, shifting from her human body to intangible smoke, but Tracker learns how to comfort her, thus earning her lifelong friendship (James 56-7). While it may be tempting to write about these shifting bodies such as the girl and the Leopard as metaphoric, these characters should be read as actually possessing such abilities. While the shifting body maybe a theme evident in James's worldbuilding, in a speculative novel, the critic must approach what's on the page as part of that world's reality as created by the author. By accepting what's on the page as that novel's reality, a literary reader must engage with the text in a very different way than they might engage with a literary text. Indeed, I

argue this otherworldliness is one of the major reasons that speculative literature maintains a "low" literature.

As for the inclusion of speculative fiction in the canon, I wholeheartedly argue that it should be included as ideas present in speculative fiction have had tremendous impact on the popular imagination and are thus part of the fabric of US culture and national identity. While Jameson would argue that places speculative fiction too close to high literature while ignoring the genre's own interesting history, I wish the canon was not divided by shelves in the bookstore but rather kept together, "major" and "minor" literatures all on the same shelf. While reading deeply within a genre or mode provides certain insights, I argue that the canon of a country should not be limited to one genre: literary fiction. First, the archive should be recovered and those canonical authors who have written speculative literature should have such texts taught, such *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman or "The Comet" by W. E. B. Du Bois (1920). Once these texts have been recovered, hopefully it would be easier to read and understand other foundational texts of speculative literature. For example, *I, Robot* has had a large impact on the popular understanding of robotics through Isaac Asimov's Three Laws. Does not this

text comment on modernity and Enlightenment ideals in a way that might be useful to compare to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)? Similarly, does not Delany's *Dhalgren* demonstrate racial tension in urban cities during the 1960s and 70s in a unique way? What insights and revelations could be gleaned by teaching *Dhalgren* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) back to back? Even though speculative literature might not represent the reader's reality on the page, it does offer different critical lenses for viewing cultural issues.

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Tor.com Publishing, First Become Ashes, and the pretty pastel packaging of abuse

Adri Joy

Imagine: you're on the internet one day, and you hear about a book. It's a new standalone, by an author with one previously published novel, and it looks gorgeous! Pastel blue cover, vibrant yellow birds, bold white font, all pointing to something romantic but maybe sad and thoughtful, a bit like *All The Birds in the Sky* or *This Is How You*



Lose the Time War. The tagline promises a book that “blends pain and pleasure and will make readers question what is real, and what is magical.” If you frequent Edelweiss, you may also have checked out the author letter, saying that “during a time

when we are all struggling with isolation, *Ashes* asks what it means to support those we love when it's hardest.” It's a lovely sentiment, one that pushes a lot of the right emotional buttons. There's some pretty dark stuff in the rest of the blurb - abuse and cult thinking - but on the whole, the book seems to promise something gentle and healing.

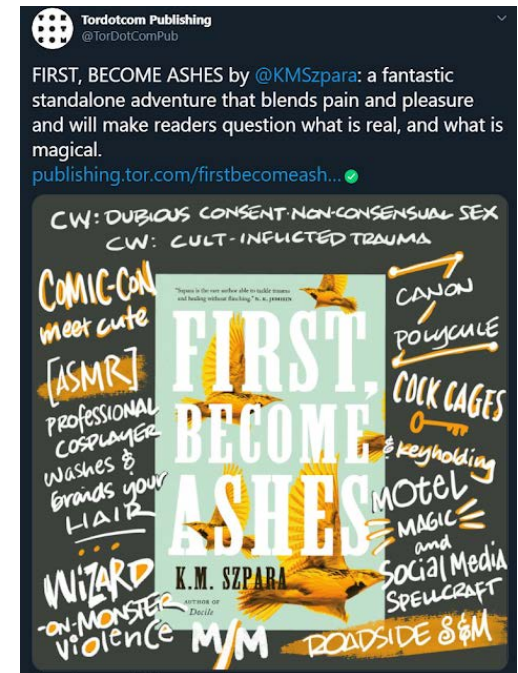
Perhaps, if you were around the internet for a few glorious hours on August 19th, you saw the

publisher's next marketing image for this book, which surrounded the cover with a bunch of cutesy chalkboard “tags” - elements of the book's plot and main tropes pulled out to showcase its content, a device used extensively in fanfiction - and maybe, from that, you started to get a bit confused. Oh, so the pastel bird book has “cock cages and keyholding”? And “roadside S&M”? Huh, well it did say it would blend pleasure and pain, but that's a spicier variety of that concept than I might have expected from that cover! It also promises “[ASMR] Professional cosplayer washes and braids your hair,” and “motel magic”, and you know what, OK, books can be cute and spicy, and as long as this one remains very far away from YA, then, well, fine.

And then, maybe, you also notice “CW: Non consensual sex” at the top of the image, cut off by Twitter preview, in the same cute font as all the other tags. “Non consensual sex”, to be clear, is a mealy-mouthed synonym for rape. It's the kind of wording you use when “rape” is absolutely the thing you mean, but, you know, it just seems so harsh, do we really have to say it? Can't we think of a less confrontational way to talk about the rape, so it doesn't interfere with the tone we're going for? The book's still pastel and still looks like it's full of gentle magic and it's still, apparently, about a heartwarming combination of BDSM and cute romantic tropes, but also rape. And, from the reactions of early readers, it's not a little bit of rape either, but multiple graphic scenes of rape, abuse and torture. Including the cock cages. Sorry to anyone who wanted consensual, cute-fun erection denial play to finally have its moment in mainstream speculative fiction publishing. Your

princess is in another castle.

Of course, if you're familiar with this particular publisher's history with this author and their previous book, you might skip straight to thinking “for fuck's sake, not again.”



The book is *First, Become Ashes*, by K.M. Szpara, coming out from Tor.com Publishing in April 2021. It's a lead title, which, for the uninitiated, means it's got lots of marketing behind it and is expected to do well accordingly (in other words, expect them to keep banging on about it until next April and beyond). It follows on the heels of Szpara's previous novel *Docile* - a book about debt slavery which is also pastel, and also involves repeated, graphic rape which both text and marketing dance around calling out as such. *Docile* takes its premise to some pretty morally grey, un-

pleasant places, some of which are inherent in the clearly signposted slavery aspects, and some which definitely aren't. Both characters in the central, abusive relationship end up in a "reciprocated feelings with an open door for later romance" state by the end. If you know about *Docile*, your expectations for *First, Become Ashes* are probably quite different to if you're just scrolling through Book Twitter.

Side note: I want to avoid talking in detail about my feelings regarding the text of *Docile*, because it's irrelevant whether I think the book is good, or if it's "for me" (though, if you must know, it wasn't). These could be the best, most groundbreaking books ever and my frustrations with the marketing would still exist. However, I can't let it go by without pointing out these two critiques, from *Stitch's Media Mix* and *Strange Horizons*, of *Docile's* use of the slavefic trope without any critical engagement with the racial history of slavery in the USA.

Let me be entirely clear here. I have no issue with dark, troubling stories of abuse, rape and violence being told, when that telling is done thoughtfully and offered to the world in a way that minimises any potential for harm. There are difficult, painful stories that people - both writers and readers - find worthwhile things to take from. And by "worthwhile" I don't necessarily mean deep, exquisite life truths: maybe you occasionally read unpleasant things in the same way you occasionally get drawn into googling unpleasant symptoms of rare diseases at 1am. (If you don't like that sentence, substitute "you" for "I" and then if you still have a problem come fight me on Twit-

ter). There are limits: when it comes to depictions of white supremacy, for example, there are stories that those who haven't experienced racism simply can't tell responsibly and thoughtfully. But, ultimately, there aren't objective moral boundaries on what human experiences can be depicted in fiction, whatever personal feelings and limits people have about their consumption of that media.

The responsibility to minimise harm, and to get the story to the right people while signposting it for those who know they won't benefit it, is still a bloody important part of the process, and one which different fiction mediums have developed different ways of dealing with, including the normalisation of content warnings particularly in short fiction, and of tagging in fanfiction spaces like Archive of Our Own (AO3). This is a process with both moral and practical imperatives to get right, because unless you're a deeply unpleasant person who gets off on hurting others, nobody benefits from having their story inflict unwanted pain and the loss of trust and future readership that causes (unless you're a publisher reaping sales money from an author you're comfortable with dropping if you don't think you can sell further books, but even then your reputation is at stake). Different spaces have developed different ways of dealing with this. AO3 uses a very different method than book publishers, in part because the act of choosing a book to purchase involves different expectations and investments than clicking a fic to read, from the time and money investment to the expectations of professional publishing versus unedited or "unbetaed" fanfiction on the internet. No system is perfect - AO3 may have clear, non-negotiable requirements for tagging rape/

non con and other "major archive warnings", but it falls down when it comes to racism and other fandom language (like "dead dove: do not eat", the warning for an unapologetically horrible fic) requires insider knowledge to understand. But that doesn't negate anyone's responsibility to try.

The question of foreknowledge, and of the harm that stories can do in a particular context, is something that has particular challenges to negotiate when it comes to queer literature. With queer tragedy, and tropes like "bury your gays" and queer-coded villains having been deployed so constantly and thoughtlessly by non-LGBTQIA+-identified creators for so long, it's understandable that many readers who seek out queer stories do so wanting assurances that stories will contain queer joy, happy endings, or nuanced personal growth, for queer characters. But suggesting that the world is objectively saturated with queer pain because the straights have already written enough of it is a deeply unfortunate stance for all of the queer creators who want to tell those stories themselves, in all their tragic, painful, heartbreaking glory. We may have opinions as readers about the balance of such stories; I do think it is still much more difficult to find stories celebrating queer joy than queer pain, and a lot of books still end in queer tragedy with minimal prior signposting. But, fundamentally, the problem with balance is not an inherent problem with the individual stories that exist on the imbalanced side of the scale, particularly when they are by marginalised creators who have the opportunity to take on tropes that have defined their own identities.

In a way, it's hard not to read the marketing of *Docile* and *First, Become Ashes* as a giant middle finger to that "purity" discourse. Everything about it seems to push back against the idea that there is something inherently wrong with queer books with dark themes being celebrated and given the all-star treatment as a hot new must-read title. *Docile* is unapologetically not a tragedy, despite all the terrible things that happen in it, and from what I know about *First, Become Ashes*, the same seems to be true. Certainly, watching some of the individuals involved celebrate the branding of *Docile*, I think the transgressiveness - yes, it's queer, it's a BDSM book, it's anti-capitalist (available exclusively in hardcover for £21.99!), it has a happy-ish ending for survivors and rapists alike, and it's PINK and TEAL in just the right shades for a matching manicure - is a huge part of the attraction. It's also, for those who know what to look for, making a point of aligning itself with known fanfiction tropes, which in itself can be seen an act of transgression for those who see fanfiction as an inherently disreputable form of writing (the *Strange Horizons* review I link above, for all its strengths, does rather fall into that trap). By making that cuteness into a point of transgressive pride, and tying together the queerness and the kink and the rape and the social commentary into one inextricable package, it becomes nearly impossible to challenge the appropriateness of any part of this without it feeling like a challenge to the whole thing. For those of us who consider ourselves vehemently on the side of queer pastel glitter pride, that's a deeply uncomfortable position to be in. And, hey, *Docile* had a content

warning for rape! Not originally, but at some point between September 2019 and the next Wayback Machine capture in March 2020, that content warning became a thing, just like we all wanted! So what's the problem?

The thing is, though, the desire to celebrate the transgressive blending of rape and happy endings (pleasure and pain!) plays out rather differently in an unmonetized fandom space than it does when backed up by a significant portion of a Big 5 Publishing imprint's marketing budget and social media reach. The use of tags in fanfiction can be playful, but they are ultimately there to inform readers of the exact content of a piece of media (however imperfectly), and let them make their own choices. When turned into a marketing tool, the incentives for "tagging" completely change to become about what will sell, and that completely changes what is appropriate and what is trustworthy. Likewise, the choice to pair your dark stories with an unexpected pastel aesthetic is one thing when you're choosing a Tumblr theme or commissioning an artist to draw your fic, but it has an entirely different weight behind it when you're printing 75,000 hardbacks to go out to major stores and sit on the shelf alongside all the other pastel aesthetic SFF books which are almost entirely not about rape and BDSM. Once you've started writing about the traumatic, abusive cock cages in your book in cutesy handwriting font, it's possible you've lost the plot entirely... but even if there is an audience that would be good for, it's certainly not all 25,000 Twitter followers of Tor.com Publishing! These are not responsible

choices; they deliberately obfuscate and misrepresent the book, and in doing so prevent potential readers - particularly those who aren't clued in on the past pattern via Twitter - from making fully informed choices about their reading. For other books, that might be annoying, especially at hardback price point; for one with this combination of sensitive topics, it's frankly dangerous.

At the time of writing this, the marketing image has quietly disappeared, and an extra line has appeared on the *First, Become Ashes* page on the Tor.com Publishing website: "*First, Become Ashes* contains explicit sadomasochism and sexual content, as well as abuse and consent violations, including rape". (Here's the Wayback Machine's archive of the page without that line, for reference.) It's a welcome gesture - and a lesson that could perhaps have been learned from the previous book - but it's not one that addresses the deeper issues with this whole pastel package. Painful, dark, queer stories deserve to exist. They deserve to have traditional publishing deals and be lead titles. Most importantly, they deserve to be taken seriously, and treated carefully, and delivered responsibly into the right hands. Tor.com Publishing does a lot of great work, and I am glad that they are willing to take a risk on the kind of story that Szpara is telling here, regardless of my feelings about the execution of *Docile* - but we need to demand better when it comes to how these stories are presented to the world.

Imagining Beyond the Climate Crisis

Phoebe Wagner

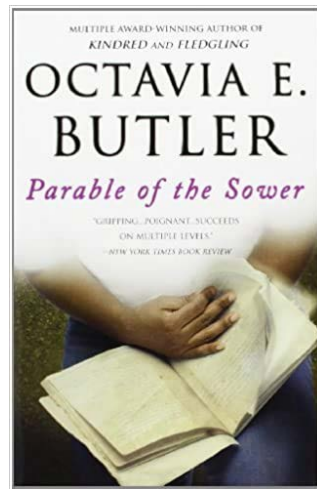
It was the best of times; it was the blurst of times...

Hi all, I've got another essay installment for you! This essay was born out of my frustration with the gap between environmental literature and speculative literature. As a reader, critic, and writer of both, I wish the communication wasn't so one way, with speculative literature embracing environmental themes while environmental literature struggles with the SF genre.

Imagining Beyond the Climate Crisis

Like any serious critical pursuit in relationship to speculative literature, ecocriticism and speculative literature studies is not as intertwined as it could be. Yes, ecocritics are quick to mention authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, and Jeff VanderMeer, maybe Octavia E. Butler and Paolo Bacigalupi, but my issue with the attention paid to these authors is that critics are picking out the environmental themes in their work, not necessarily exploring how the genre impacts the environmental conversation. The speculative fiction genre as a whole is environmental in a way that is separate from literary fiction. The place or environment of the story is often what clues the reader to the speculative worldbuilding. The fantastical worldbuilding is one of the key ways speculative literature differentiates itself from the literary genre as organic space ships or cosmic

forests can only exist in speculative literature.



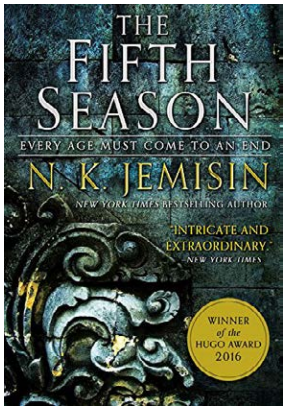
Part of the history of speculative literature is imagining new technology or new worlds that become actualized, whether it was *Star Trek* communicators inspiring the inventor of the cell phone or the social unrest in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). The power of speculative fiction to

imagine different futures (and remember forgotten pasts) is perhaps the greatest gift possible for ecocritics, particularly as the change needed to survive the climate crisis, let alone thrive, becomes seemingly more insurmountable. This type of applied scholarship and forward-looking theorizing is not normalized in scholarly work, so I argue that part of pushing the conversation forward is changing how a critic approaches a text. Imagining new ways of living and, even more importantly, fleshing them out in narratives, are some of the early steps toward that wide-reaching change that ecocritics and scholars of speculative literature can make together.

Speculative literature—and more specifically, dystopias—have always been an important part of environmental writing. From Rachel Carson's dystopic chapter in *Silent Spring* (1962) to Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) to *Animal's People* (2008) by Indra Sinha, canonical environ-

mental texts have embraced the speculative. On the genre side, the list is much longer because worldbuilding inherently requires an understanding of interconnected systems. N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015) offers a good example.

The novel is not a traditional environmental text, but I would argue that it offers a lot to an ecocritical reading because it demonstrates how environmental disasters and systems of oppression interact. Indeed, the first line reads: "Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we" (Jemisin 1)? The inciting incident is an enormous earthquake that sends the world into catastrophe. Yet, the end of the world is caused by one man, and through the course of the first novel, the reader realizes why he wants to destroy humanity. Even more so, the novel demonstrates how to survive such a disaster, mainly through community and adaptation. The main character Essun, an orogene that can control earth and stone, is on a quest to save her kidnapped daughter during the apocalypse, but she must take a layover with a community trying to survive underground in a geode. Essun describes the community as "people and not-people," of which Essun is a not-person because she is not given human rights as an orogene (Jemisin 332). Yet, the Castrima community does not see themselves separated in such a 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" (Jemisin 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 social structures depicted throughout the novel, “innovate” means the destruction of their normalized ways of dehumanizing orogenes. No longer are orogenes feared by humans as

only together can all—human and nonhuman—survive the apocalypse. While I’d hesitate to call *The Fifth Season* an environmental novel, the environment and living world are part of this epic fantasy in a way unique to the genre.

Similarly, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* is set entirely on a secondary world, a planet and its moon. While such a separation may seem to distance the novel entirely from contemporary climate concerns, Le Guin uses the freedom of a secondary world to demonstrate an anarchist society, what many people would consider pure fantasy but is an increasingly viable solution as at least a partial response to the climate crisis. For example, when Le Guin’s main character, Shevek, visits the large, anarchist city of Abbenay, he describes a city that does not use excess: “No heat was furnished when the outside temperature went above 55 degrees Fahrenheit. It was not that Abbenay was short of power, not with her wind turbines and the earth temperature-differential generators used for heating; but the principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics

profoundly. ‘Excess is excrement’” (Le Guin 98). This small example is one of many that Le Guin provides throughout the text to demonstrate how one might live in an anarchist community and what such a planet might look like. This premise does not seem inherently environmental, but ultimately Le Guin links this anarchist worldview to an environmental ethos.

As part of the denouement, Shevek seeks refuge in the Terran (Earth) Embassy. The Terran ambassador is moved by how Shevek speaks of his anarchist society and says: “My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, then we died. [...] There are no forests left on my Earth” (Le Guin 348). The ambassador’s speech continues and displays how social issues are inevitably connected to environmental issues and vice versa. Combined with the imaginative ability of speculative fiction—whether how to survive a natural disaster of epic proportions or to invent and convincingly write about an anarchist secondary world—the genre should be recognized for its ability to imagine drastic change. This interconnectedness and ability to imagine new futures has been embraced by some important critics, most notably Donna J. Haraway and the relationship between Jeff VanderMeer and Timothy Morton. Ecocritical work on speculative texts is certainly welcome in those scholarly circles, but there’s a lack of depth and understanding of the genre that limits the engagement with the truly world-changing aspects of speculative literature. When considering what combinations of these two critical approaches is most useful, the focus of ecocriticism to use inter-

disciplinary tactics to analyze the environment and climate change concerns in a text can combine with the imaginative, worldbuilding power of speculative fiction to scope out new ways of understanding the living world. Speculative fiction scholars can use ecocriticism as a way to consider how authors seemed to predict our current moment in the climate crisis and seek out what solutions are offered on the page.

Some of the most recent scholarship is already moving in this direction, such as the work of scholar-activists adrienne maree brown and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who make theory around Octavia Butler’s work, particularly her created religion Earthseed. In *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism* (2018), Shelley Streeby specifically examines the world-changing possibilities of speculative fiction. Streeby founds her text on the imaginative possibilities of speculative fiction to play out different worlds and discourses. While a literary study, she also includes activism as part of that imaginative process, particularly with a focus on #NoDAPL. Ultimately, Streeby decenters whiteness in speculative fiction to argue “that people of color and Indigenous people use science fiction and other speculative genres to remember the past and imagine futures that help us think critically about the present and connect climate change to social movements” (5). By acknowledging the connection between activism and speculative fiction, Streeby provides a foundation for more theory-making in regards to making change through speculative fiction.

Streeby openly views speculative fiction as a tool

for present unrest. While it is difficult not to call speculative fiction predictive at times, it does help readers and writers imagine what is possible. Indeed, in a discussion of Butler, Streeby writes:

This [globalization in the 1990s] led Butler to predict that the 2020s would be the decade of collapse in which humans would witness sea level rise, dryness, heat, crop failures, institutions no longer working or existing only to collect taxes and fees and to arrest people to exploit their labor: "This is the story of 'The Burn,'" she wrote, "a period in history when old ways of life were dying as the climate changed, food and water became scarce, expensive, unsafe, and the focus of much criminal activity and new ways were being born." Calling Parable [of the Sower] the "story of one woman who builds her 'new way' upon the ashes of the old," she imagined the near-future 2020s as "the Burn" and the Earthseed community as "the head of the Phoenix, rising." In other words, Butler imagined neoliberal globalization from above as a kind of scorched earth disaster, one to which her imaginings of different worlds and communities and other, more sustainable ways of living responded. (98)

Indeed, Butler's theorizing even led to the rise of "Make America Great" slogan in *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which currently haunts 2020. If Butler and other writers, knowingly or not, predicted elements of the current future, perhaps the current narrative can be reimaged. By treating speculative literature as hypotheses of what comes during climate crisis—a playing out of different futures—then readers can prepare for a future

of their choosing. If these writers can so clearly imagine our current moment decades before to the point that it feels uncanny, perhaps there is more to be gleaned from their work.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler includes plenty of practical advice. In trying to teach a friend how to survive, a teenaged Lauren gives her friend instructions. First, she has to think differently:

[Lauren's friend] held herself rigid, rejecting. "You don't know that! You can't read the future. No one can." "You can," I said, "if you want to. It's scary, but once you get past the fear, it's easy. In L.A. some walled communities bigger and stronger than this one just aren't there any more. Nothing left but ruins, rats, and squatters. What happened to them can happen to us. We'll die in here unless we get busy now and work out ways to survive." (Butler 55-6)

After changing how one thinks and considering the worst options, Lauren's next step is survival knowledge. She offers her friend several books on wilderness survival, shooting, and first aid and even advises her to take notes so she will remember more clearly (Butler 58-9). Finally, Lauren instructs her friend to pack a bugout bag with "money, food, clothing, matches, a blanket" (Butler 58). In these few pages, Lauren has provided vital survival information for anyone in a part of the world experiencing extreme climate events or social unrest. This information is solid and real, even if the world of *Parable of the Sower* is imagined. Indeed, this example is one way that Butler's work resonates with activists: "[adrienne maree brown] explains that in this context, 'Octavia

Butler appeals to me because she wanted to prepare us' for the changes that are now inevitable: 'Change is coming—what do we need to imagine as we prepare for it'" (Streeby 101)? By mapping the way characters adapt to new systems of living, ecocritics can pivot to applied scholarship: can humanity implement these ideas and how? Yet, this pivot will require speculative texts and writers to be taken seriously.

As the climate crisis defines this century, another ecocriticism text is the last thing we need. The popularity of speculative authors like Le Guin, Jemisin, and Butler suggests a cultural connection to this environmental era, but the change these stories depict must be translated from the page to practical action. Indeed, in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren enacts one of the vital functions of speculative literature as cited by Samuel R. Delany: "Like Delany, here Butler suggests that science fiction is not really about predicting the future but is rather about the present—how we in the present shape the future that is to come by thinking about it and foreseeing it. In other words, science fiction can help us take hold of the present and think about where things are heading rather than just letting time pass by as our unconscious surround [sic]" (Streeby 25). Shaking a reader into awareness rather "than just letting time pass by" is a powerful effect of speculative fiction, which is why environmental writers have invoked grotesque dystopias in order to encourage environmental change. As studying speculative fiction becomes a more serious endeavor, ecocritics and speculative fiction scholars have the opportunity to combine their knowledge of the current climate crisis and how characters survive

fictional environmental collapse.

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Features

Westworld Wednesday: Other People's Gods

Dean E.S. Richard



It's hard to know where to start with the Season 3 finale - I usually watch each episode a couple times before/during writing these. I don't like knee-jerk reactions to them, and as I've said before, I don't want this to just be another recap. You can find those anywhere. We earn our perpetual Hugo silver medal, thank you very much.

This probably isn't the post that puts us over the hump, but damn if the season didn't end with a bang. Literally, anyway, but the flavor of the episode was much more in line with the season. It sort of... happened. There are a lot of people unhappy about that, and several other things. Delores apparently changing her worldview, William being killed post-credits - but I think there are a few important things there.

First of all, anyone worried about William's death is forgetting last seasons post-credits scene, that is obviously in the future, with zombie-William undergoing 'fidelity' test, so my money is on a really good chunk of Season 4 taking place decades in the future - As Bernard waking up covered in dust

seems to indicate.

Which is, to me, what this season was - a bridge. Lacking was much of the mystery of the first couple seasons, when we find out Bernard is a host, William is the Man in Black and time is a play-thing. By jumping ahead with at least a portion of the show, they will be able to re-introduce a lot of the things that seemed lacking. The show just had to get there, so in a way season 3 just takes up space - but space that must be occupied.

The million-dollar question is what becomes of Delores. Her memory is wiped and she seems completely dead. From a meta standpoint, it will be interesting to see how that is handled - Delores is the heart of the show. I would doubt she is gone from the show, though - which brings us full-circle to last week's topic, and one at the core of the show - memory. It's the loss of her memories that damn her - as a host, as long as she has those, she can be put into a new body with relative ease.

It was the hosts gaining access to their memories - real ones, not backstory - that lead to their achieving consciousness in the first place, so Delores losing hers is an apt symbol for her death. Will it make her a martyr to other hosts - especially if Bernard retrieves the other hosts. Speaking of full circle, William is now a host - but only the Man in Black portion of him, which is now all of him. What memories does he have? He would clearly have access to Young William, who was much more caring and less violent, but as we well know, violent delights have violent ends and MiB certainly delighted in violence.

All in all, an interesting if not flawless turn for a show that has abandoned its eponymous park. It's been a blast to write about, and I plan on doing so again for season 4.

-DESR

Thursday Morning Superhero: Comic Con at Home

Mike N

Comic Con at home has come and gone and from my perspective it was quite successful at capturing the appeal of Comic Con and delivering it to my home. While social media impressions were down over 90%, I don't think the goal was to ever replace the in-person experience. My family had a great time printing out our badges, setting up our signs, and pouring through the schedule to identify what panels we wanted to "attend". We even secured some exclusive merchandise and my daughter scored swag from Lego in the form of a comic book that they printed on demand and mailed to our house.



The Panels:

While it doesn't capture the excitement of actually being in Hall H during one of the big-time panels, the panels that I "attended" felt like a traditional Comic Con panel without the traditional series of bizarre question and answer sessions that normally wrap up each session. As I noted, the ability to watch panels at your convenience was welcome and it also ensured that I would not miss out on any content I wanted to see.

Of all of the panels I watched either by myself or with my family, the four that stood out were the panels featuring *Phineas and Ferb*, *Marvel's 616*, Amazon Prime's *Truth Seekers*, and the return of Bill and Ted. After attending the tear filled farewell to *Phineas and Ferb* panel years ago, I was delighted to hear that a new movie, *Candace against the Universe*, will launch on Disney+ on August 28! Disney+ also highlighted a new docu-series, *Marvel's 616*, that looks absolutely delightful. The series will focus on the history of Marvel comics as told from the perspective of various creative talent. Each episode is unique and the two that were highlighted focused on women in comics and obscure villains. *Truth Seekers*, a new comedy from Simon Pegg and Malcolm McDowell looks like an absolute delight, and the return of Bill and Ted next month is most excellent. There were many other phenomenal panels that you can still check out! See the full schedule and YouTube links here!

The Merch:

In preparation for online drops I did my usual



research into what Funko was offering and how to scoop the new *Lord of the Rings* figures from The Loyal Subjects. Despite seeing rumblings on Twitter about how fast everything was selling out, things ran smoothly from my end and I should be getting some Pops, Action Vinyls, and even a dumpster fire in the mail shortly via 100Soft! I am most excited about the Lord of the Rings figures from the Loyal Subjects and they will even feature a "Covid-19" foot stamp to note the bizarre comic con experience of 2020.

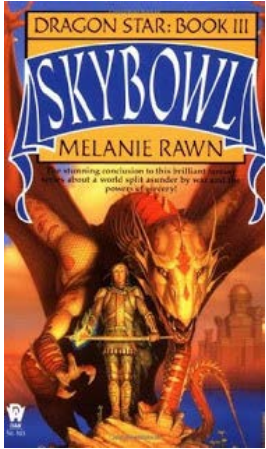
Final Thoughts:

I am curious how Comic Con at Home will impact future conventions. I am sure some studios didn't get the buzz they wanted due to online panels, but others probably benefited from more exposure. It will be interesting to see a cost/benefit analysis for movies and television shows, along with the merchandise vendors who had no issue selling out of exclusives. From a selfish standpoint, I loved being able to customize my SDCC schedule in a way that worked for me and it was also very easy to share panels that were of interest to my kids with them. While the difference between the in-person convention and the virtual one are huge, it really felt like I was back at SDCC and quite enjoyed my experience.

*POSTED BY: Mike N. aka Victor
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raising nerdy kids, and Nerds of a
Feather contributor since 2012.*

The Dragon Prince Re-Read: Skybowl

Joe Sherry



Welcome back to my Dragon Prince re-read! We've come to the end. *Skybowl* is the concluding volume to Melanie Rawn's Dragon Star trilogy, which is ultimately the culmination of six novels worth of world-building and storytelling. As always, I maintain the story arcs across all six novels more accurately complete a single trilogy with a much more unified story than one might otherwise expect. I go into a little bit more detail about that in my write-up of *Stronghold*, if anyone is inclined for a refresher.

When I wrote about *The Dragon Token*, I noted that it was the one entry in this reading series where I've moved from a re-read to a straight up first time reading because nothing in that novel was familiar. We are back on familiar ground with *Skybowl* as this is a novel I've actually read - though not nearly as many times as the three Dragon Prince novels or even *Stronghold*.

For previous essays I have included a disclaimer that each essay will contain spoilers of the story so far, though I attempted to limit those for the books we had not yet gotten to. Now that we've reached the end of the series, all restrictions are off. This essay will contain spoilers of the full

series. You have been warned.

I had forgotten how *Skybowl* ends. I remembered the death of Meiglan and that of the High Warlord, but I did not remember the aftermath. I didn't remember that Andry died, and definitely did not remember that he died from putting too much of himself into a major weaving of sunlight and, in the end, lost himself to that sunlight.

I never thought I'd cry for Andry. He was never my favorite character. When I wrote about *Sunrunner's Fire* I remembered "the sweet boy who loved his brothers so much it hurt in The Star Scroll" and somewhat lamented how that boy was gone, buried under the pressure of being the new Lord of Goddess Keep and consumed by his unwavering belief that his visions of the future were absolutely correct and justified any course of action he might undertake, no matter how murderous. It was so very sad to watch and his growth into Pol's main antagonist has been difficult. He's not the most pleasant of characters to read - though his visions have ultimately been proven correct, as noted by the existence of the Dragon Star trilogy (this does not mean that all of his murder or tightening up the religious aspects of Goddess Keep were even remotely correct, of course).

Andy is a difficult character to love and even though I can't remember his death the first time I read *Skybowl*, I feel reasonably certain I never cried for him. The thing is, and this is the thing about so much in literature these days, I'm the father of two small children and any sort of parental grief is a novel is just too damned difficult for

me. Watching Tobin have to let another son go, her third - another child, no matter how grown Andry was, no matter how powerful - it's too much. I had to look away from the book. Seeing Chay there at the end, when Andy finally lets go into the sunlight...I'm glad that I finished *Skybowl* at home because I ugly cried as Tobin and Chay lost another son. It's not Rohan. It's not Sioned. It's watching a parent lose a child. I just can't.

There is a song from Tori Amos on her *To Venus and Back* double album, "Cooling". It's a live track, and it must have been one of the songs she used to close shows with because she introduces the song by saying "and this is sort of my goodbye to you". There's not even an indirect link that I can make between *Skybowl* and "Cooling", except that the song (and that intro) ran through my head a number of times reading *Skybowl*. It was the knowledge that this was the end of Melanie Rawn's Dragon Prince. Rohan was dead. Sioned was soon to be dead. The war was going to end and it was going to be time to say goodbye and even though this re-read has reminded me that I don't love the Dragon Star novels nearly as much as I do the Dragon Prince books (three volumes of near ceaseless brutal war which costs the lives of so many and breaks the rest, can't imagine why), it's bittersweet. Rawn offers tantalizing hints as to the futures of various characters (Sionell's son Meig, for one) and even though I'm not done with this world, Melanie Rawn is. So this is goodbye.

So much of *Skybowl* feels like a chase to rescue Meiglan from the High Warlord and the Vel-lan'tim. He wants her, we only half understand

why until it is clear that he plans to sacrifice her to crush the High Prince and break the power of the dragons. It's a little convoluted, but it becomes clear that the reason for this plan is superstition and the altered dragon books Sioned had left behind to confuse the Vellant'im and to not let them know the secrets of the land. Unfortunately, one of those alterations had to do with virgin sacrifice and even though Meiglan is a) married and b) a mother - she's a mother of girls and apparently that doesn't count for the Vellant'im, so sacrifice it is.

Rawn wraps the story in her usual multi-pronged storytelling, but there is a relentless drive to get back to Meiglan - for Pol to save her somehow (when he's not obsessing over Sionell, being an ass, and feeling guilty about it) - she's the centerpiece of this story. It doesn't end well.

As much as I love Dragon Prince, I think what I most loved about these novels is the early interplay of Rohan and Sioned and building the dream of peace. *Skybowl*, perhaps more than *Stronghold* or *The Dragon Token*, was more of a slog (though at least Sioned here is an active character again). I'm generally a fast reader and I was a long time reading *Skybowl*, and not because I didn't want it to end or to truly say goodbye - though there was a certain element to that. Even though I don't love Pol and Andry, reading the Dragon Prince novels is like slipping into comfortable socks and reading under a blanket. Despite the war with the Vellant'im, this is a pure comfort read for me. These are old friends and most of my old friends are dying - and maybe that's my biggest "problem". I'm left with the children of my friends and

even though they're related, they're not the same people. I'm stretching that analogy a little farther than it can realistically go. Pol and Sionell at each others throats is not Rohan and Sioned and it's not Chay with Tobin. It's not supposed to be, and I take Dragon Star on its own merits - but one trilogy I love and the other I like.

Skybowl is the culmination of the Dragon Star trilogy, three books where Melanie Rawn seemingly set herself the goal of breaking every beautiful thing she built in Dragon Prince novels. It's rough and it is unrelenting, even granting the moments of levity and the standard statements of all the great things a Prince can do for his friends and vassals when they come through in the clutch. There was darkness and nasty moments in Dragon Prince a plenty, but Dragon Star sees that and raises it once more.

Thank you very much for coming on this journey of re-reading one of my all time favorite fantasy series with me. It was a delight to revisit some old friends and meet a few new ones along the way.

We Rank 'Em: New (Retro) Adventure Games!

The G

Since the first time I played *King's Quest* at a friend's house, I've been in love with adventure games - or "point and click" games as they'd come to be known once every computer came with a mouse. Adventure games are puzzle-based, in most cases featuring little to no twitch action. They also emphasize character and story - hence their appeal to this here book nerd.

The best iterations of the style feature challenging but intuitive puzzles, immersive and atmospheric worlds, relatable characters and gripping narrative arcs. Unfortunately, many of the '80s and '90s classics used cheap and unforgiving puzzle design to paper over the fact that they were very short and simple games. Plus if you wanted to know how to proceed, you'd need to call the handy - and expensive - hint line provided in the manual.

The style fell by the wayside with the emergence of 3D rendering and the more immediate thrills provided by FPS and RTS games in the late 1990s. But now, thanks to Steam, GOG, mobile gaming platforms and our seemingly unquenchable thirst for all things retro, adventure games are back!

Here are a few of the best new adventure games on the market:



6. *Thimbleweed Park* by Terrible Toybox (2017)

Do you like weird what is even real anymore mysteries like *Twin Peaks* or *Wayward Pines*? How about the LucasArts model for point-and-click games? If the answer is yes to both, then I'm guessing you'll dig this *Twin Peaks*-inspired entry by the creators of *Secret of Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion*. It also happens to be very good. Oh, and play it on Hard - it's not an authentic retro experience if the puzzles don't feel cheap at times.

5. *Stasis* by The Brotherhood (2015)

Unlike most of the entries on this list, *Stasis* is not an homage to the glory days of Sierra and LucasArts. It's more like a puzzle-based take on *Dead Space*, where you wander around a spaceship trying to make sense of what happened and not get killed by scary-ass shit. Atmospheric and gripping, *Stasis* features absolutely gorgeous environments, solid gameplay and intuitive puzzles.



4. *Oxenfree* by Night School Studio (2016)

Oxenfree is arguably the most stylish and high concept adventure game ever made. It centers on a group of teens in a weird Pacific Northwest town notable for its supernatural and just plain weird activity. Sound familiar? That's because this one also falls into the what is even real anymore category of game fiction. But it's not a retro game the way *Thimbleweed Park* is. Rather, like *Stasis*, *Oxenfree* represents a wholly modern take on this retro genre. Featuring gorgeous graphics, memorable characters and inventive gameplay mechanisms, *Oxenfree* stands apart from the pack. But it does fall short in a few areas - the dialogue can be quite tedious at times, and the game feels too short for another. It's still great, though, and well worth your time.

3. *Whispers of a Machine* by Clifftop Games (2019)

My two favorite literary genres are science fiction and crime noir. *Whispers of a Machine* has the honor of being both (full review here). The game takes place in a future Sweden, where anything remotely close to AI (including computers) has been banned. You don't know exactly what happened, only that it was bad - this serving as metaphor for a fairly sophisticated meditation on our relationship to machines. The game also features smart, Sierra-esque graphics and some cool gameplay innovations, courtesy of protagonist Vera's cybernetic augmentations. Oh, and there are multiple endings - each of which you'll want to experience. The downside? There are other games that do all this better, like...

2. *Primordia* by Wadjet Eye Games

It's no understatement to say that Wadjet Eye Games rule the roost of new (retro) adventure gaming, and *Primordia* encapsulates exactly why that is. The game takes place in a post-apocalyptic junkyard; its protagonist, Horatio Nullbuilt, lives peacefully with his robot Crispin until his power core is stolen. Their quest to get it back serves as a vehicle for exploring what happened to the humans who once populated the dead world. *Primordia* features a deeply compelling narrative, great characters, beautifully rendered retro graphics and a haunting atmosphere. And the puzzles are highly intuitive - no cheapness here. All in all it's an extraordinary adventure game, one highly recommended for fans of the genre. It's melancholic tone will give you the feels for sure.

1. *Gemeni Rue* by Wadjet Eye Games

Like *Whispers of a Machine*, *Gemeni Rue* is also a cross between science fiction and noir, but in this case, features alternating hard SF and SF-tinged neo-noir narratives. These come together brilliantly at the end, but not before presenting gamers with one of the most seamless, artful and pleasing puzzle-based adventures ever made. *Gemeni Rue* is a near-perfect example of what the genre has to offer, simultaneously paying homage to and surpassing the Sierra and LucasArts classics. I can't recommend this one enough - it may be the most gratifying adventure game I've ever played.

