

The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Bringing Background to the Forefront

By Bret Funk

Many writers labor to bring an element of realism into their characters, to breathe life and depth into beings who exist only in the mind of the author (and if that author is lucky, in the minds of some readers). Great effort is taken to ensure that each character has strengths and weaknesses, can be related to, and does not fall too completely into one or more archetypes or stereotypes. Yet in their quests to create believable, sympathetic characters, some writers overlook another area of their story that requires equal attention: the background.

Background includes a number of factors familiar to writers: setting, tertiary characters, culture, environment, level of technology, details of description, and a host of other things. Each of these items are important and deserve their own exploration, but when they are meshed together into the background of the story, they form something more powerful, and for that synergistic effect to work to an author's advantage, it must possess the same element of realism inherent in good characters.

Clarification of the term "realism" is required. By realism, I do not suggest that every work of fiction must conform to the environments found on Earth, or even to our understanding of the laws of physics. Nothing could be farther from the truth. If all stories had to be realistic in that sense, there would be little science fiction and no fantasy, no giant tree cities or underwater worlds, no interstellar travel or thousands of intermingling, procreating bipedal species scattered throughout the galaxy. More exactly, all works should be internally

realistic—conforming to the rules of the universe as laid out explicitly or implicitly by the author.

The explicit differences are often the easiest. This world has magic. This alien species has a hyperdrive capable of faster-than-light speed travel. This person is invulnerable to everything except for a rare radioactive material which seems to be strangely abundant on Earth. The author can set the stage or introduce these concepts in his own way, but the simple acknowledgement of them is enough; no detailed explanation or meticulous presentation is required (though, for the author, having such an intricate understanding of the functioning of his world can benefit the work immensely). Readers will suspend their disbelief because they understand that these items are integral to the story, and they will adjust their perceptions accordingly.

It is the subtleties, the details, the hidden nuances that threaten to weaken the work and detract from the believability. Often, these items are simply not considered when writing the story, or if considered, they are deemed unimportant. Taken individually, they may, in fact, be inconsequential, but if enough inconsistencies exist, then the reader will be drawn out of the story and the work will lose a lot of its power.

The key to creating successful background is to pay attention to every detail of description and make sure it conforms to the world in which it is contained. Though such a statement may seem numbingly impossible, catching the bulk of discrepancies is not that difficult, and when awareness is applied with a healthy dose of common sense, all but the most subtle inconsistencies will be exposed.

Rather than provide a lengthy but generic description, a few examples might better serve to illustrate this point.

Situation #1: Houses in the north (where I grew up) all have basements. Houses in the deep south (where I now live) almost never have them. Even when they do, the "basement" is usually at ground level (sometimes half buried beneath a mound of

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According to an article from World Culture Report, at the beginning of the twentieth century, ten percent of the world's population lived in an urban environment. Currently, half of the world's population live in cities. Also, there are 59 cities with populations over 5 million, 37 over 7 million, and 24 over 10 million. Six cities have populations over 20 million people: Tokyo 34 million, Ciudad de Mexico 22.3 million, Seoul, South Korea 22 million, New York 21.8 million, and Sao Paulo, Brazil 20 million. If the trend continues, soon most people will live in cities. With so much of the world's population in urban areas, it is interesting to speculate what the cities of the future may be like.

One of the trends in the United States is for cities to spread so that in certain areas there is almost one continuous urban area for long distances. For example, on the East Coast from Boston through northern New Jersey is practically one long city. Again according to World Culture Report, four problems beset cities at this time: high unemployment, inadequately maintained infrastructure, environmental problems and social conflicts such as crime and homelessness. These trends are reflected in my novel of the future, *Star Tower*. Here is an excerpt. The protagonist, John Huck, has just returned from the space war as a dishonorably discharged veteran.

His weight increased slightly as the pilot fired braking thrusters. There was the fiery descent through the upper atmosphere and finally an increase in cabin pressure that hurt his ears as the ship passed through the cloud layer. He glanced out of his window. From horizon to horizon was Federation City, a million twinkling rainbow lights, some moving, some still. Glowing towers split the sky like a macrogiant's fairy castle. It was so enormous and beautiful, he choked up. The thought came to him that the teeming multitude who lived in this sea of jeweled splendor would never see it like this -- rubies, diamonds, emeralds and topazes for hundreds of miles along the Atlantic shore.

A few hours later he emerged from a filthy subway station and thought how false was that vision from a mile up. If the megalopolis was a jeweled fairyland from the air, at ground level it was a garbage-strewn, dark and dingy, troll cavern. From an ugly gray sky a heavy sulfur-laden rain swept discarded scraps of paper, cigarette butts, orange peelings, wilted lettuce leaves, condoms and other garbage in torrential streams along the gutter. Like canyon walls dark chipped concrete buildings, lower floors covered with graffiti, rose for fifteen or more stories. Huck shifted his bag to his other shoulder. With his head down against the icy downpour, he hurried down the dingy puddle-strewn sidewalk past doorways where shabby women and men huddled from the rain to stare sullenly at each passerby. They

stood with arms wrapped around themselves and watched with hopeless eyes the dirty rain that fell into the gutter like their dreams. Others lay curled up or rested their heads on their knees with drug induced visions.

Some ragged children, a lone housewife and one elderly man with an umbrella braved the driving rain. Huck's eyes smarted and his nose twitched from the street's ugly odors, an unnatural fog of smoke, urine, bad cooking and other stomach churning fumes. He wondered how he had survived this awful place before he went to the space academy.

When he reached the more crowded commercial section, he was jostled by filthy, worn men and women some who had with open sores and dark diseased blotches on their faces, stumbled into by those who swayed with vacant drug-narrowed eyes and shoved aside by belligerent bands of youths who laughed at his grimace. He was well aware that these latter would like nothing better than for him to exhibit his annoyance. It would provide the excuse they needed to wield the iron pipes and bars they carried in clenched fists. He also knew that they concealed more potent weapons in their clothing.

But not everyone's vision of the cities in the future is so bleak. During National Engineer's Week, many cities hold a Future City competition. In a national competition, seventh and eight graders compete. Here are some of their ideas: A floating city complete with entertainment, recreation and medical center. A city powered by hydrogen. A domed city on Mars. Cities with environmentally friendly magnetically levitated trains. The things that these participants had to consider were water supply, public and private transportation local and long distance, entertainment and sport arenas, technology center, communications center, waste disposal and permanent open spaces such as parks and recreational facilities.

In my wandering around the web, I ran across two interesting sites. One was called The Venus Project where there was an article about Cities That Think. I have written short stories about a place called Automatia. In Automatia, everything was automated, and robots performed all the menial tasks. Of course, in my stories, when things went wrong, they went spectacularly wrong. In one, a man is trapped in his apartment when the machines stop working. In another, a misunderstood command causes robots to accidentally kill hundreds of people.

The most interesting web site I visited while researching this article was Future Past. It showed how futurists, visionaries, architects and science fiction writers in the twentieth century envisioned the city of the twenty-first. It's a hoot. Visit this site. You'll enjoy it.

Science Fiction Saves the World

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

I'm speculating about the future by reading Robert A. Heinlein's, *Time Enough For Love*, a classic. While enjoying the adventures of Lazarus Long from the future, gas prices in the here-and-now march over the four bucks a gallon mark. Slowly—oh-so-slowly—reading, the art and joy of reading, is coming back in vogue this Spartan summer as parents (moms, usually) grab the kids and head for the city library where a couple hours are spent searching for something to interest little Johnny, grab a video or use the community computer—all in the comfort of coolness and relative safety. And, it's FREE!

Odd that many survival ideas come to mind when I see what is *not* shipped to this area of Arizona due to diesel costs. I live smack in the middle of a conclave of descendents from Mormon settlers of these-here-parts and one of the curious and very intentional activities of Mormon families is that they stockpile enough food, medication, paper-goods and other items for two years. It's a science with them; LDS wives take it seriously. My reading material, of late, deals with unfortunate events and how societies handle them. Odd that I recently finished the S.M. Stirling series, *Dies The Fire*, which deals with a worldwide "disaster" that would make such a practice timely. If Need is the Mother of Invention, then Planning is the Answer to Mother.

Post-apocalypse novels at my house end up dog-eared and either shelved together, Just-In-Case, or with hasty notations on scrap paper stuck in the pages like bookmarks. How does a society protect itself if the formal government structure collapses? Where would someone get a gash stitched up, if no health care clinic or family doctor was available? Basics like food, water, medications (all the diabetic concerns come to mind), shelter... the list is endless. It may not be a moment's concern in less rural areas, but here "on the mountain", store shelves are slowly dwindling in certain stock, and variety is a joke. Our family has a trip planned to Phoenix, about 200 miles away, for items we no longer have trucked to the White Mountains. Just how much have I really learned by reading science fiction? Or, as my daughters are starting to voice, "Dad! Mom's losing it. She's hoarding again. Remember grandma? The moldy, crumpled boxes of four-year-old Cheerios stuffed in the drawer with the undies?"

In February, I found myself either in a manic phase or suffering women's intuition. I needed to start planning for *something* life-disrupting in the future. We planted a huge veggie garden, chopped cord after cord

of wood for our two wood stoves, revived the pressure cooker for canning, started composting, started a two year stash of provisions for my family, and started to feel like a modern pioneer.

What really gives me little chills on my arms is the memory of a bronze statue in Ponca City, Oklahoma of a pioneer woman holding a baby, dressed in layers of prairie attire, complete with squinted eyes and large bonnet providing dubious relief. Her sunburn is almost palatable, even in bronze. I superimpose that proud woman with a cover from some sci-fi book I read decades ago with the "Big Flash" in the background. I thought I was prepared for life. I didn't talk (too much) to strangers; I didn't take rides from someone I didn't know; I was even a Girl Scout! I felt fairly confident that my parents would protect me, if needed. They knew everything, didn't they?

But I was uneducated. When my Uncle Gordon took me through the Atomic Energy Museum in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, I received my real-life Education that included super-powers, politics, suffering and the tiny atom. The power of radiation and the implications of that terrible mushroom cloud slammed my quiet little life into my first panic attack. Radiation... no jewelry... no *metal*! No transportation, only horses with rope harnesses to guide them with. That meant no food stored in cans; no pots to cook it in. No flashlights or tent poles or grommets to put the poles through. After the shock wore off and I could breathe again knowing the threat to my person was possible, but not probable, I began speculating how to avoid a theoretical radioactive death. Reading, specifically science fiction, gave me education and alternative ways to challenge the issues different disasters pose and allowed development of strategies—choices—to survive them. Have I been a "Survivalist" ever since? Possibly.

S.M. Stirling wrote, *Dies The Fire*, a trilogy of how one people-group survived a "technology disaster". The first book (of the same name) is a How-To on survival for such an event in novel form that included everything already mentioned, and added religious/faith and culture considerations. When gas prices started limiting consumer goods, *Dies The Fire* immediately came to mind.

My kids call me a "Dream-Killer" because I see the pit-falls of an idea in minute detail. Internal orange warning flags gently waved in unguarded moments; Klaxons in my head woke me at night—I Need To

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Archetypes and the Villain: Towards More Complex Characterizations

by Rachel V. Olivier

A few weeks ago I took a writing workshop on archetypes and mythology at the Museum of Crafts and Folk Art here in Los Angeles. It was more of a private writing type of workshop – looking at yourself and your family for personal archetypes, etc., but several of us were there to work on our fiction as well. According to the woman who led the workshop, most people have knee jerk reactions to at least one or more archetypes, and this is probably where they need to focus their psychological and emotional healing. Fully integrated people (i.e. those rare and lucky people who have no psychological and emotional baggage) rarely have those same knee jerk reactions.

Now just to pause a moment – archetypes are not stereotypes, though they can lapse into stereotypes. Archetypes are basic personalities that are so ingrained in the collective psyche that they occur in most stories written or acted out. The Hero, The Villain, the Damsel in Distress are three very general archetypes that are familiar to everyone. The Father, the Mother, and the Child are three that exist in every single culture around the world.

The first thing that popped into my morbid brain during the workshop was the following thought: Serial Killers must really be fractured (not integrated) personalities because they actively seek out and hunt the archetypes they have knee jerk reactions to. Of course I didn't bring this up in the workshop, but I wrote it in my journal and got to thinking about all the different ways Villains (seeing as most Serial Killers are Villains, unless of course your name is Dexter...) behave and why. There are many books, films, RPGs, etc., where the Villain is simply the Villain. There is no explanation or analysis for why they are the way they are. They just are evil. That is the part – the archetype – they play. It works, but at best, it creates a two-dimensional character and at worst, it saps energy and tension from the story. If a writer is going to tell a tale with rich characterization the story will feel lopsided if they spend all their time showing why the Hero and his or her friends are the way they are and no time on why the Villain is the way s/he is. The writer needs to find out which archetypes the Villain is reacting to in his or her life, and why, thus creating a more complete and engaging character.

According to Tami Cowden (www.tamicowden.com) there are at least 16 separate villain archetypes: Tyrant, Bastard, Devil, Traitor, Outcast, Evil Genius, Sadist, Terrorist, Bitch, Black Widow, Backstabber, Lunatic,

Parasite, Schemer, Fanatic, and Matriarch. There are probably lots of others and a host of variables, but her list seemed a good place to start when looking at and understanding the Villain. Her descriptions are just 3-4 sentence explanations of what these Villains are and how they work. The Tyrant, for example, is a bully, craves power and hoards it, and will crush anyone who gets in his way. But why is he the way he is? Was he bullied? Was he powerless as a child, watching helplessly as his world was destroyed by the archetypes in his life (The Mother, the Father, the Bitch, the Traitor, etc)? This is an important part of not only making the story more rich and appealing, but also in showing how the Hero can overcome the Tyrant and in creating a more interesting plot. Typically, the seeds of the Villain's downfall are found in how s/he became what they are.

A better example may be illustrated by Lex Luthor, Superman's Nemesis. It may not be so obvious in the older Lex Luthor, but the younger one, as played by Michael Rosenbaum in the CW television show *Smallville*, paints a very complex character. This Lex is a Villain, no doubt about it. He's a Devil: charming, charismatic, able to exploit the weaknesses he sees in others for his own ends. He not only is able to rationalize other people into compromising their views and seeing his side, but he's also able to rationalize to himself why he does some of the things he does. He is also easily one of the more likable characters on the show. He is so good at justifying himself that it is easy find yourself conflicted when rooting for the "Hero" – Clark Kent – to win the day, because you almost, *almost*, want Lex Luthor to win the day. He just sounds so *reasonable*, which is a characteristic of the Devil Villain archetype.

Lex Luthor is a strong example of showing what can happen when writers choose to show what the Villain reacts to, why the Villain is the way s/he is. The writers have actively demonstrated the ambivalent relationship that Lex has with his father, both seeking his approval and competing against him. In fact, in every relationship Lex Luthor has had that a normal child would learn love and trust from, he has been betrayed in. Being the "good" son that he is, he has done his best to not only survive, but thrive, in the competitive environment his father keeps him in. Thus, the engaging Devil character who is able to charm and manipulate allies and foes alike becomes the engaging Villain that the audience now has sympathy for. The

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The word “writer” brings to mind a variety of romanticized images: a loner bent over a type writer or old computer, journalist dodging bullets in a war zone, student in a coffee shop pouring over their laptop, someone snatching bits of writing time between work and family life. Some images are darker, of course, opium-dimmed and hazy, and include such noted, and depressed, writers as Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton who felt the need to take their own lives. I myself have known (or know of) two or three writers who either died at their computer while writing or became physically incapacitated while at their computer (I also knew a writer who wrote from her hospital bed with her laptop until she deteriorated too much to do even that). While these are all perceived to be very romantic, they are also very true to life. Writing is a very risky business.

The health—mental, emotional, and physical—of writers is a very important issue, yet most writers ignore the very tools – their bodies and their brains – that keeps them writing in the first place. In addition, this is a profession fraught with contradictions, isolation, and rejection. I was recently with my writers group and asked various people what they thought of writers and their mental and physical health. Common observations were about needing to socialize, having to balance being told to be passionate about their work while also being told not to take criticism personally, or being told to write what you love but then being told to write to a certain market, and then finally, the constant rejections punctuated occasionally by positive comments and acceptances. These conditions are not going to change or go away anytime soon. The best thing to do, then, is to understand this environment we work in and figure out the best way to deal with it in such a way that it does not impair our mental, physical, and emotional health to such a degree that we can’t write anymore.

Oddly enough, writing is considered a very healthy way of expressing oneself and is a one way of working on one’s good mental health. According to an article in February 10, 2004 edition of *The Age* ([The Power of the Pen](#)), Dr James Pennebaker, professor of Psychology at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas, conducted a study to see the connection between writing and health. In that study he had people write about traumatic events in their lives. At first those people relived the emotions from that event by writing it down. It didn’t improve their lives at all, at first. Eventually, however,

having faced the memory and written it out, they were able to put that event behind them and move on. According to the article, the doctor is quoted as saying, “Writing about their deepest thoughts and feelings about traumas resulted in improved moods, more positive outlook, and greater physical health.” The exercise of writing out their stresses was good for them in the long run.

Natalie Goldman, in her book on writing, *Writing Down the Bones*, contends that writing is good for the body as well as for the mind (or soul). Writing is a very physical practice; writers are using all five senses, as well as their imagination and thought processes, to bring the article, book, story, poem, etc. to the page. She points out the kinesthetic connection from the brain, through the arms, hands, and fingers and out onto the page. When at their most intense, Goldman points out how writers reflect the physical effort. Their pulse is up, breath comes faster and deeper, they may be flushed and poised as if ready to take off.

If writing can be good for your both mentally and physically, why are writers seen as at risk in regards to depression? Why does their physical health deteriorate? You would think that this exercise of writing would help keep us healthier as a population, yet according to Dr. Andreasen on the [CBS website](#) in a study he did at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, the rate of mood disorders in those writers was very high. He pointed out that writers, or creative people, tend to be more open to experience, willing to open themselves up to emotional risks in order to explore ideas. Because they’re exploring different ideas, they also tend to be more tolerant of ambiguous situations and attitudes. “Those kinds of traits make you see and feel more, but they also make you more easily hurt and more prone to experience suffering. If you do that enough, it can make you feel depressed.” In other words, writers tend to open themselves up almost so much in an attempt to get the story, that it leaves them susceptible to depression.

If this depression builds up to a certain point, it can hinder a writer’s creativity. But, depression tends to happen in episodes. People who are prone to depression have periods when they are withdrawn and feel low and then they get past it and are ready to face the world again. When writers or other creative artists are feeling better, they tend to use the experiences they had during that depression to draw upon when they are creating. If the cycle is too severe, however, and too

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The Writer's Block: What I Learned From Bad Writers

by Charles Gramlich

Even as a kid I loved telling stories, to myself if not to others. But I first thought of becoming a writer in my late teens and of telling stories on paper for others to read.

Two experiences persuaded me to try my hand at the author thing. On the positive side, I wanted the chance to enthrall others the way I had been enthralled by Louis L'Amour, Ray Bradbury, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, John D. MacDonald, and a hundred others. On the less positive side, I figured I could do better, or at least put more effort into it, than some of the writers I was reading. I won't mention any names, but I was finding books that just didn't move me. The prose was leaden, the pace stagnant, the characters indistinguishable from the stiffness of the new jeans my parents bought me in the fall for school.

In some cases, it seemed that the poorer writers among those I was reading just didn't know how to tell good stories. But more often it appeared that these authors were writing too fast and not taking the time and giving the care to their work that being a craftsman required. To me, this became, and remains, the definition of a hack. In later years, however, I realized that I had learned quite a bit from the hacks, mostly, I hope, about the things a writer should *not* do.

I learned that well-written prose strikes the ear like music, not like the sound of a bell that has lost its clapper. I learned that description is boring unless it fires the imagination or sets a mood. I learned that good characters can't become chess pieces to be shoved around willy-nilly, that they have to have integrity of action and consistency in their behavior over time. I learned that fiction should give the illusion of reality even when it can't illustrate reality absolutely, as when dialogue sounds as if real people are talking rather than serving merely as a mechanical device to advance the plot.

One very important thing that I learned from bad writing is that when things come too easily for the characters there is no suspense or enjoyment for the reader. I'm still learning that. I just finished a book in which the villain had gathered a huge army and cornered the last remnants of the good guys. The villain had a great bomb but the hero managed to defuse the bomb, and as soon as the weapon was defused the enemy army suddenly just fled. Once upon a time I would have thrown that book across the room, but this time I kept reading, wondering what other gems of "thou-shalt-not-do" wisdom I might discover between the lines of a weak tale.

Of course, the most important thing that I've learned

from reading poor writing is that *good* writing takes concentration and effort, and there is no substitute for either. It's easy to tell a bad story. The good ones take time.

The Quiet Pools

Michael P. Kube-McDowell

Hardcover, ACE, May 1990

ISBN-10: 0441699111

ISBN-13: 978-0441699117

Review by Terry Crotinger

One reviewer asked, "Why read this?" Until halfway through the book, I wondered how prophetic that question was: the pacing was off, the subject matter took a side step from a guy with relationship problems to world political problems. Being the never-give-up type, I dutifully plowed through. The pacing throughout the novel continued to limp; the guy with relationship problems had a world of problems, now. In the end, it was a challenging read, but thoughtful. A novel that leaves me pondering what-ifs gets high marks, even if it takes a good portion to figure how all the literary bunny-trails connect. In *The Quiet Pools*, they quietly do.

Ultimately, this novel is about genetics, The Gene-Pool, and those who are excellent candidates for survival—on another planet, and enduring the generational ships to get there. How passengers are selected for this opportunity, how the science justifies the technology to get such ships built and launched, and the opponents who start a world-wide catastrophe to prevent it from happening comprises the body of the work. The main character, Christopher, finds that the unease he felt at home with his two contract wives was minor in comparison to the stiff foreboding relationship of father and son. Kube-McDowell was convincing me to keep reading and that I was not wasting my time.

If anything was unbelievable, it was how easily someone being watched by special government forces could slip away, and how quickly getting into orbit on a man-made monastery for women, uninvited, could happen when many, many people are looking for you. Science, aka Mr. Kube-McDowell, didn't even try to justify this.

Michael Kube-McDowell. An interesting name—Kube. While not flashy, his writing is grounded. The reader feels the weight of Christopher's situation, and there are a few surprise twists for the speculative reader. Was it worth reading? I'm still pondering...

Reviews

Prador Moon

Neal Asher

Night Shade Books, 2006

ISBN: 978-0-7394-7693-2

Review by Danielle Parker

Imagine you're in a crowded elevator that suddenly starts free-falling from the 101st floor. Imagine further that various villains in the press (you know them by their wide lapels and squinty looks) cut loose with the contents of those violin cases they carried on board. Imagine *further* that out of the control panel and other cracks and crevices burst ugly crab horror-monsters who rip off your neighbor's pinkie while you're still shrieking *Pinchers at four o'clock!*

Are you in your worst nightmare? Well, you might be, but if you read *Prador Moon*, you'll recognize the sensations. Thrills and chills? Pandemonium? You bet. Gore? Girls and boys, you gotta believe it.

I came to Neal Asher after his wonderful Bond-in-space *Gridlinked*, finishing less happy, but still greedy for its sequel, *Brass Man*. *Prador Moon*, too, is set in Asher's Polity future. *Prador Moon* is a far tighter novel than those two massive, sprawling tomes. It is, in fact, a simple novel. We have really nasty, totally unredeemable, cannibalistic, carnivorous aliens, in much the spirit of those early B (or do I mean D?) movies, where those big spiders, or ants—crabs, in this case—come over the hill in the dark and proceed to rip apart various extras. The hero and heroine, of course, miraculously lucky, fight back and win—end of story. There's no need to worry about all the gore—these crab critters are so *bad*, they deserve all the splattered guts they get. They're so unredeemable that when the hero of *Prador Moon* threatens a human traitor with torture of a particularly nasty kind, he's *still* the hero. How beautifully simple!

OK, so we don't have huge moral issues here (which there are in any real war). And we have aliens as cartoon villains (though not cartoons for kids, please). But the fun of *Prador Moon* is the same kind you find in Asher's aforementioned Polity novels. *Nobody*, and I mean nobody, does blow-up bam-wham battles in space better than Neal Asher. I know, having tried to craft some myself (and then file-13ing the results), that it isn't easy to write dreadnaughts-in-space conflicts as gripping as Asher's. There was a battle section in the otherwise somewhat uneven *Brass Man* that I read several times just for the sheer thrill and great writing of it.

I'm not, as a rule, a reader of military SF; I generally hate the stuff. I confess to liking Timothy Zahn, who can do pretty good space smashups, as well as few others, but I really think Asher takes the honors. Who needs caffeine to jump the heart rate? Grab an Asher book.

Asher's Polity universe of cooperative AI and human is equally intriguing. Asher's humans of the future and its AIs are morphing into each other—humans whose augmentations have made them super-computer cyborgs, and AIs who wear human forms and talk in nonsense quotations. That Asher has, tongue-in-cheek, given the AIs a cynical sense of humor adds to the fun. Who ever thought far-future artificial intelligences would be playful? I joke, therefore I am?

In Asher's best books he manages to show us fascinating characters (the mysterious Ian Cormac and playful Jabberwocky-style Dragon of *Gridlinked* being his best examples, though *not* the monster mech, brainless smasher Golem of its sequel *Brass Man*). There's no one of particular interest in terms of character in *Prador Moon*. We actually get closer to the hapless first and second children of the cannibalistic crab general Immanence than to the human protagonists. Poor tykes! I felt so sorry for first-child Vagule, torn limb-for-limb by angry father and gleeful siblings, that I would have honored him with my best crab salad dressing. If I could ever stand crab salad after this story, that is.

Still, if the human characters aren't particularly memorable, there *are* those space battles. *Please, Mr. Asher*, a fan is begging you. Bring back Ian Cormac and more of your roguish AIs in your next Polity story—and keep writing those space battles!

Science fiction is essentially a kind of fiction in which people learn more about how to live in the real world, visiting imaginary worlds unlike our own, in order to investigate by way of pleasurable thought-experiments how things might be done differently.

— Brian Stableford

Reviews

Iron Man (2008)

Directed by Jon Favreau

Starring Robert Downey, Jr.

Dark Blade Films

Paramount Productions

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

A line of dusty tan Humvees trails down a road in present day Afghanistan, melting into the dry landscape. Camera angle changes to a shot of a cut glass old-fashioned holding ice and liquid the rich amber color of a good scotch. Maybe a little darker. Maybe a bourbon. As the camera pulls away we see the hand, the arm, hear the voice, and finally we see Tony Stark, owner of Stark Industries, chatting up the soldiers who are escorting him. It takes a while, but finally the soldiers relax beneath the relentless charm of this modern day prince.

Flash of fire as the Humvee ahead of them explodes in a sudden attack, the convoy suddenly derailed by an onslaught of machine gun and missile fire. Stark is told repeatedly to stay in the vehicle. One by one his escort is cut down. In a panic he flees the Humvee, narrowly escaping as the truck explodes behind him. As he falls, he sees an unexploded missile land next to him. It reads ... Stark Industries.

Thus begins *Iron Man*.

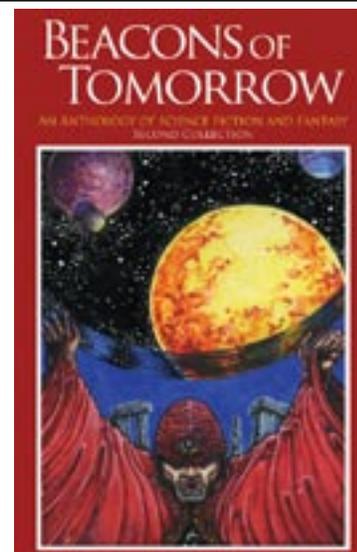
The plot for *Iron Man* is not surprising. It is a typical superhero origin story: Out of adversity and/or heart ache one man or woman is determined to use his/her special abilities to make a difference. What makes this superhero movie stand apart from many others, I believe, is in the quality of the acting and in how well the story is told. It felt like, to me, as if everyone, and I mean everyone, threw themselves into this movie wholeheartedly. They were willing to take risks and do their jobs well (I really liked that Favreau and his cast and crew were so willing to take the risk and make those shifts.) For example, because "what happens next" is not necessarily surprising, it is the mood shift between the witty banter of a comic hero flick and heart stopping action of a war film that is part of what creates the constant tension that pulls the audience through the story to the end of the movie. Robert Downey Jr., who plays Tony Stark, is a microcosm of what happens in the movie. He has the witty comeback and repartee of a Spiderman/Peter Parker type character, with the playboy, techno-savvy, scientist background of Batman/Bruce Wayne, plus a

little something extra that can only be said to be Robert Downey Jr. himself. (For any fans out there, there's a hot scene where he's all sweaty and dirty and banging metal with a hammer.)

Gwyneth Paltrow plays Stark's loyal assistant who knows more about his habits and schedule than he does. The friend I went with is not a Gwyneth Paltrow fan and confided in me that for once she was not annoyed with Paltrow. I thought Paltrow did a very good job of playing a restrained and controlled woman who obviously has a lot going on beneath all that reserve, particularly towards the end. Besides, you just gotta respect someone who can run in 3-4 inch heels and a business skirt.

Jeff Bridges plays Stark's business partner, Obadiah Stane (Great name for a villain!), also known as Iron Monger. Bridges plays the type of villain who can make a reasonable and logical argument, convincing you that he's actually doing you a favor, while stabbing you in the back. Although you know to expect something when he comes into a scene, you're never quite sure what to expect. He doesn't let the audience off the hook. He doesn't telegraph where he's going with a scene. It's fabulous.

Finally – Samuel L. Jackson. Yes, if you stay until the very bitter end, after ALL (and I mean ALL) of the credits have rolled by, then you will see the one, the only Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury. But you gotta watch the movie to see it.



Beacons of Tomorrow: Second Collection is available for \$8.00/copy (35% discount). Help us support these hard-working authors by clicking on the image above and ordering a copy.

Reviews

Tall Tales on the Iron Horse

Colin P. Davies

Bewildering Press, 2008

ISBN: 9780978744342

207 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

How is it that the British are the world's greatest practitioners of the art of the Literary Scumbag? I'm not talking Anti-Hero here, those Indiana Jones, Northwest Smiths, and John Taylors who are really stained knights in ripped jeans and muscle shirts. I'm talking the really, *really* despicable protagonists, those characters whose virtues couldn't be located by Sherlock Holmes with his magnifying glass.

Is it something in the national character? It's true we Americans have raised crude sophomoric humor to an art form equaled by none, from the early flashes of genius shown by the Three Stooges to the stratospheric glory attained by the cast of *Animal House*. But we just *can't* do Despicable with the glorious style the Brits attain.

The clue to the success of this peculiarly British art form might be found in George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman series. Flashman was a complete bounder, to borrow another Britishism. He was lecherous, lewd, traitorous, lazy, and most of all, *cowardly*. No one *ever* raised the Yellow Flag as high as Flashman. An unlikely candidate for worldwide fame, wouldn't you think? Yet when Fraser died, his obit made the New York Times and other newspapers and journals of note around the world. I read the Flashman series myself—I still remember how my jaw hit my chest with the first one—and the reason soon became clear. The stories are a riot, if you have a fine appreciation for black humor.

So, what *is* black humor? I don't know how the dictionary defines it, but I would say that when something nasty happens, and it's somehow *still* funny, even though it shouldn't be, *that's* black humor. It's no coincidence so much black humor takes place in the funerary parlor.

An even better example is a video that circulated among the police officers I worked with years ago as their Y2K project manager. The film that had these fine boys in blue in stitches (taken from life) showed a hapless delivery man hit by a car and

flipped head over heels—into his next incarnation, so far as I know. Why was it funny? Because it was *exactly* like those classic cartoon sequences shown on Wiley E. Coyote. Of *course* it was horrific. Black humor *is*.

Colin P. Davies doesn't do Nice Guy, either. If you're a ninety-pound, chinless weakling looking for a paper Conan to appease your secret fantasies (the real Robert E. Howard apparently being a mother-dominated loser in desperate need of Dr. Freud) or a nearsighted, romance-free female (like someone I know far too personally) secretly fantasizing dominant beefcake with well-developed abs and Harlequinesque dialog, don't look between these pages. There's nothing to identify with here in that sense.

Instead, we've got Mandi, an artificially growth-retarded child beauty contestant, whose burning goal is to Destroy Mother and Have Sex with Dad, if only she were quite mature enough to grasp the concept. Clifford is a hapless weenie in the grip of powerful pubescent hormones. *His* burning desire is to materialize the busty Zondra Amazon in the flesh from his perspiration-dabbled books. Richard, who volunteers for virtual reality in the form of a sensory deprivation tank, can't escape the throttling grip of the wife he killed in a car accident. In *Pestworld*, the biggest, baddest pest wins. On we go.

A few of the better stories edge into Ray Bradburyesque surrealism. One of the best in the collection is the title piece, *Tall Tales on the Iron Horse*. It is ambiguous and multi-layered enough to make you muse after you've finished the last page. *The Hay Devils* is another in the Bradburyesque vein. Being from the wrong side of the pond and thus not a true connoisseur of British Black, I admit these were among my favorites in the collection. Of course, since I once read, from cover to cover, a Bradbury anthology so thick that the book could have doubled as the corner post for a mobile home, I'm an obvious sucker for moody surrealism (also, very near-sighted).

It's great to find that Bewildering Press has brought out such a quality anthology. Congratulations to Jerry Wright and to Mr. Davies. Black never goes out of style!

Reviews

Solstice Wood

Patricia A. McKillip

Ace Books, 2007, \$14.00

ISBN: 9780441014651

Review by Rachel Olivier

Sylvia's world is very controlled, tidy, and cosmopolitan. Her West Coast life consists of the bookstore she owns, lattes, her cat, and a messy, musician boyfriend with a dog. She's become sleek and sophisticated since she left the small village where she grew up in upstate New York. When her grandfather's death, right before the Summer Solstice, pulls her back, all the way across the continent to the one place she doesn't want to be, Sylvia has to learn to face who she is and where she comes from.

Patricia A. McKillip has always been able to build a world where the fantastic and mundane commingle like autumn leaves and owl feathers on the forest floor. Usually she creates these worlds in another time and place. This time, however, McKillip has set her story in the present day in the United States. When I picked up *Solstice Wood* I noticed it was written in first person, like so many of the recent urban fantasies starring young single women who are fighting the "Other". So, I wasn't sure I would like this story as much as I like her others. I like the worlds she creates where the fisherman, the barefoot girl, and the wizard all walk the same cobbled streets. I like her melodic third person narrative that creates intimacy, while keeping the distance of the old-fashioned storyteller. I was afraid I would be disappointed.

I wasn't. The harmonies, melodies, and threnodies of her through lines did not disappear despite setting the characters in present day in our world. Instead, they became stronger, more complex, because of the setting. Each chapter tells the story through a different character's eyes; the first person narrative allowing the reader to understand the inner workings of people that appear opaque to one another out of their sheer survival attempt to keep their privacy in such a small town. As a result, the reader is allowed to see the disparate facets of their lives as they weave in and out of each other, the world, and the world of the Other that haunts them in the ancient woods. In the midst of this, McKillip's writing is still beautiful, poetic, capturing the essence of the world of the Fay and their magic. I really enjoyed this book. I felt like I was coming home.

Any road followed precisely to its end leads precisely nowhere. Climb the mountain just a little bit to test it's a mountain. From the top of the mountain, you cannot see the mountain.

— Frank Herbert

The Host

Stephenie Meyer

May 2008, \$25.95

ISBN: 9780316068048

Review by Harriet Klausner

They came from outer space without any fanfare. These parasites inserted themselves inside the human brain taking over the host. Disease and war are long gone, but some no infected humans insist this is not Eden as security for freedom is too high a price; the space 'Souls' control the body while the human brain activity ebbs. Seekers search for those still independent to turn them over for conversion by the centipedes from space. No place is safe.

In Chicago, one of these human insurgents twentyish Melanie Stryder wants these 'Souls' to leave her alone. When the Seekers capture her, a "Soul" is placed inside her brain. She learns the creature surprisingly has a name, Wanderer. Obstinate Melanie refuses to fade into the background. She as the Host persuades Wanderer to find her brother Jamie and her boyfriend Jared missing in the Arizona desert as long as they find the parasite's significant other too. When the coupling meets up with her loved ones in a secret rebel hideaway led by her uncle, the purebreds suspect both of them sharing her body, but soon Wanda as they start calling the parasite begins to win over the insurgents just like this Soul did her host.

Although first impressions is THE HOST is a futuristic Invasion of the Body Snatchers; in fact Stephanie Meyer's tale is a much more complex character driven thriller. Relationships are the key to this superb tale that focuses on Wanda-Melanie and those the Host cherishes like her brother and her boyfriend. Jared's thoughts bring perspective when he kisses Melanie he wonders if he is kissing her, Wanda, or both; geometrically adding to the complications is Ian. Fans who want invasion action and its consequences need to go elsewhere like The Invasion of the Body Snatchers; but those who appreciate a deep look at a personal level will enjoy this fine thriller.

Reviews

Rogue

Rachel Vincent

Mira Books, 2008, \$6.99

ISBN: 9780778325550

Review by Rachel Olivier

“Catch and release, my ass!” So begins Rachel Vincent’s second book in her *Werecat* series, *Rogue*. As Faythe continues her education as an enforcer under her father’s tutelage, she is beginning to learn there’s more to it than chasing stray werecats out of her Pride’s territory and back into neutral territory. At the end of Vincent’s first book in the series, *Stray*, Faythe had come to an uneasy truce with her father, the Alpha of the Pride, Greg, and her on-again-off-again troublesome boyfriend, Marc. Giving up her life among normal humans, including a boyfriend exotic because of his normalcy, a regular social life, and a post graduate degree and possible future career in academia, Faythe has promised the next few years of her life to her father so he can show her how important her participation in family affairs is. He would also like it if she would eventually capitulate to Marc’s wooing, get married, and have lots of kittens – er – I mean kids. In the meantime, however, she spends her time driving around the countryside with a serial killer kit in the trunk (Duct tape, rope, plastic sheeting, and a shovel) as she and other enforcers surreptitiously patrol their territory for the troublesome stray werecats that wander into Texas from time to time. It’s beginning to feel a little monotonous until they find their third dead stray tom in a row. Signs and scents are beginning to pop up that are almost too familiar in their connection with other murders from the too recent past. The investigation leads Faythe ever closer to revelations that will shake her to the core.

Though second in a series, *Rogue* also reads well alone as Vincent is good at subtly recapping events from the previous novel enough to clue in anyone who picks this book up on its own. Faythe has grown up a little since the previous novel. She has begun to understand the responsibilities her father labors under. She is a little less inclined to knee jerk reactions of insubordination whenever he makes a demand of her. She and Marc have come to an understanding as well, that includes many (ahem) benefits. And instead of being coddled and protected by the others on the ranch, she is training with them and has the bruises to show for it. Yet, for all that, Faythe still yearns for

more freedom and privacy, and a life among normal humans pursuing her education and career untethered to the Pride’s rules of conduct. She also has a knack for keeping silent just when she should be disclosing what she knows, and of course this gets her into trouble.

This book was a tighter read than the first one and had me sitting on the edge of my seat more than once. I think one of the reasons it’s a stronger story than *Stray* is that instead of just fighting her family traditions or the bad guy, she’s also having to fight herself. She has some specific ethical and moral dilemmas she has to face and they aren’t going to go away soon.

There are no dog-eared pages on my copy; I read it in less than a day. I was less irritated with Marc, the boyfriend, in this book than I was in the last (I am a fan of another possible love interest in Faythe’s life). I’m also proud that Faythe is taking responsibility for her life and her actions. I look forward to reading the next book in this series.

Halfway to the Grave

Jeaniene Frost

Avon/HarperCollins, \$6.99

ISBN: 9780061245084

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Halfway to the Grave by Jeaniene Frost is book one her *Night Huntress* series (the second book, *One Foot in the Grave*, is currently on the New York Times Bestseller List), which details the origin story of a very special vampire hunter, who is half vampire herself – product of a date rape her mother lived through. Her mother knew Cat was going to be different when she was born after a five month pregnancy in a relatively healthy state. As Cat grew up her other qualities surfaced – speed, strength, and the uncanny green eyes that light up whenever she got angry. Living in a small town in Ohio that still looks askance at women who have children out of wedlock, Cat is further removed from her community by these special abilities and her need to keep those abilities a secret. When her mother tells her of her origins when she turns 16, she also starts learning all about how evil and sinful she could be if she let her inner nature take over. By the time the book opens, at twenty-two she is jaded, friendless, psychologically traumatized by a mother and grandparents who could be seen as representative of your worst religious right nightmare, and taken to combing bars for other vampires in need of killing. Cat herself doesn’t think she’s worth much since she might

Reviews

Halfway to the Grave (con't)

"turn evil" at a moment's notice.

Then she meets Bones, Master Vampire. Though he's been around the block a few times, he has never seen a child born between a human and a vampire. She takes quite a beating before he finally believes that despite her beating heart, she is part vampire.

I really loved reading this book. I finished it in a day. I didn't want to put it down, until the end. The end dragged on. It does not end where it clearly tells you it is supposed to end. This is annoying. I kept checking to see how many pages were left.

One of the other reasons I did not like the end is that it was so obvious that she wrote it specifically to set up a series and not for the story that I was reading. It pissed me off. If a book pisses me off at the end, I don't feel inclined to pick up the next book in the series.

One of the other things that pissed me off is that as much as I love Cat (and Bones), I hate her mother. Her mother ruins everything, even the ending. I know the writer had a purpose to writing the story the way she did, but I just can't stand Cat's mother or the part she played. Frost could have had the same effect without doing what she did, in my opinion.

One of the things that Isaac Asimov pointed out was that science fiction was a way for people to "safely" examine concepts that they might not otherwise examine. In many cases, vampire/human relationship stories are thinly veiled stories that show up our racial, religious, and sexual prejudices and bigotry in the real world. One of the reasons I read science fiction is that science fiction/fantasy writers, when they do this, try to do it well and explore these issues with care and consideration. Typically, they show how much prejudice harms everyone involved unless it is overcome and people stand up for what they believe and love who they are going to love, no matter what. Jeaniene Frost did just that until the end, when she let her heroine give in to those prejudicial forces.

(*SPOILER ALERT*) In effect, Frost's heroine throws away true love in order to live within society's and her mother's expectations. As much as I enjoyed what I read, through most of the story, by the end I was so angry I could barely finish it. I couldn't believe she would end the story the way she did. It felt like a betrayal of everyone I've known who has fought society and their family's expectations so they could be with the one they love, no matter their race, creed, religion or sex.

Other than that, it was a good book.

Twilight

Stephenie Meyer

Sep 2006, \$10.99

ISBN: 9780316105849

Review by Harriet Klausner

Seventeen year old Isabella Swan leaves her newly married mother in Phoenix to live with her father Charlie, the police chief of Forks, Washington on the Olympic Peninsular; a four hour flight to a place she has never visited, but life starts anew for her. Her first day at Forks High School leaves her nervous as there were three hundred and fifty seven students yesterday who know each other. Today there is one more pupil who nobody knows; Bella knows no one.

On that first day in potential purgatory, Bella meets the enigmatic Edward Cullen. She is very attracted to him, but he acts schizoid towards her. One moment he seems to want her; the next he loathes her. She also acts out of character as she spit out her life to this stranger. However, she begins to unravel the mystery of the teen she desires who at times acts as obsessed with her as she is with him. Although she does not fully believe what she has found out, Bella realizes Edward and his adoptive family are vampires whose sustenance comes from animals. Other vampiric clans are not as regimented as they feel vampire superior should dine on inferior beasts including humans; Bella is fair game.

This is an exciting young adult romantic fantasy starring two teens besotted with one another in a taboo love. The story line is driven by the lead couple as their attraction causes problems for each of them and their families especially when outsiders intervene. Although the climax is rushed and too much of what occurred is passively explained instead of actively happening, readers will enjoy forbidden teen love between a purebred human and a purebred vampire.

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of because words diminish your feelings - words shrink things that seem timeless when they are in your head to no more than living size when they are brought out.

— Stephen King

Reviews

The Alchemy of Stars Rhysling Award Winners Showcase

Science Fiction Poetry Association, 2005

170 pages

Review by D. L. Parker

About a year ago, while I was still a librarian, I started a Poetry Appreciation Series. I really didn't expect much to come of it. The library I no longer work for refused to allow the premises to be used as a meeting place (and bad cess to them); the residents of the less-than-well-to-do county I live in are ranchers, loggers, retired or on a dole of some kind—mostly the unemployment kind. It didn't seem like a hotbed for fans of, say, Andrew Motion and T. S. Eliot. I taped up my notice of the first meeting and expected to find the undertaker and myself as the only attendees.

We're now up to six to eight die-hard, hardcore poetry regulars and about three or four now-and-then attendees. We grew too big for our first location and were asked to leave by the management (although that may have had something to do with ten people banging the table and singing various Kipling ballads at the top of their lungs. Do you know how irresistible those MARCH, MARCH soldier ballads are when you *really* bellow them?). We even survived the defection of our token male regular—only one other man ever visiting us. Perhaps neither man could have handled hearing mostly middle-aged ladies earnestly declaiming Harold Pinter poems, “f” words intact, not to mention hotly debating Pinter's decidedly anti-American political views.

In any case, the gals are still going. I'm proud of them. A classic (dead) poet one week, a modern (still kicking) poet the next, and Bring Your Own Poetry the third—we've chewed through a lot of poets.

It was in the course of searching for another to feed our voracious appetite for The Modern Muse that I found Mike Allen. He wrote—*what?* Science fiction poetry? There *was* such a weird animal? And they even had an association and an *award* for it?

They do, indeed. It's the annual Rhysling Award (brownie points for anyone who recognizes the reference without having to look it up). *The Alchemy of Stars* is a collection of both the long and short poetry winners from the very first (Gene Wolfe, speaking in computer tongues) to its most recent honoree, Mike Allen. After reading Mike Allen's surrealistic *Journey to Kailash*, I galloped right over to Amazon and bought both the collection reviewed here and everything Mike Allen has published.

When I tell you delicately that I now count myself a member in the most populous group in my county, that is, the newly unemployed, you'll realize I was enthused. *Ah*, but as the funds languish and my cupboard grows bare, I can clutch my poems to my chest, a true lover of the Muse (but don't worry: while one of those sedentary scary librarians, I gained some pounds that need to go anyway). But—enough about me. Let's get to those poems!

They were a surprise. First, very few of them are actually science related—we have fantasy, surrealism, philosophy and the sheer oddity more than verse that would fit under the awkwardly named umbrella of science fiction poetry. Second, (and wonderfully), many of them buck that annoying trend in modern poetry of *me-this, me-that*, naval-gazing introspection (I haven't yet read that epic about the poet picking the zit on the end of his nose, but I'm sure it's out there). There are actually *narrative* poems in the collection. Poems that, like the *Lady of Shalott*, tell *stories!* WOW!

Take, for example, Charles Saplak's and Mike Allen's *Epochs in Exile*, which they describe as *A Fantasy Trilogy*. It has great atmosphere (“Baleful sun fires the horizon the quiet sea; one moon/Alone, silvers the jungle at my back. Starfarer no more”), as well as a rather surprising narrator. Another I enjoyed even more is John M. Ford's *Winter Solstice, Camelot Station*—and there are many more story poems.

Some of the poems are creepy (*Octavia is Lost in the Hall of Masks* for one; *Egg Horror Poem* will put you off your breakfast). Others take earthlings to task in various ways (*Flight is for Those Who Have Not Yet Crossed Over* and *dear spacemen* are two). A few are comic or charming (*Spotting UFOs While Canning Tomatoes*, for example).

We even have poems that buck the modern non-rhyming trend (*For the Lady of a Physicist*, one of my personal favorites, compares love to the pull of a black hole: “Therefore, I have become for her / A dark, entropic murderer”). The preponderance of non-rhyming verse in modern poetry once caused a hot argument in my group about what *really* separates poetry from prose. We finally wore down the die-hards who insisted It Ought To Rhyme, but still, how refreshing to see real *craft* in a modern poem.

In short, if you, unlike me, have pennies left in the bank, go out and buy this collection. Science Fiction Poetry is a dreadful conglomerate name that no doubt purists sneer at, but the poetry collected here isn't awkward. And while you're at it, check out more Mike Allen. That guy's *good*.

Reviews

Empire of Ivory (Temeraire Series, 4)

Naomi Novik

Del Rey Books, 2007, \$7.99

ISBN: 9780345496874

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

When I first picked up Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series, I fell in love. I fell in love with Temeraire, the intelligent, earnest, and naïve dragon who had bonded with Will Laurence. I fell in love with Captain Laurence, despite his blustery British ways. Most of all, I fell in love with the English language all over again.

The *Temeraire* series, for those who do not know, is set in an alternative version of history during the Napoleonic Wars. In this alternative history, dragons co-exist with humans; sometimes as partners, sometimes as beasts of burden, sometimes not so peacefully as feral "beasts" (who just happen to develop languages of their own). This would be a really good idea in its own right, but Novik took it up a notch into the realm of marvelous and exceptional. She studied not only her history, but also her diction, grammar, syntax, and manners and came up with a novel series that combined the superb sentence structure and language found in the writing of Jane Austen, C.S. Forester (Horatio Hornblower), and Patrick O'Brien (Aubrey Maturin) with the fantastical world of the dragon, thus creating the compelling *Temeraire* series. *Empire of Ivory* is Book 4 of that series.

Empire of Ivory takes up where *Black Powder War* left off. Temeraire and Capt. Laurence are fleeing to England with a company of Prussian soldiers, feral dragons, and a newly hatched fire dragon in the face of attack by France's Navy and Air Squads. While they keep looking to the skies for help from their fellow Aviators in England, no such help arrives. When they finally land, it is to be advised of a plague that has downed most of the dragons in England, leaving only a handful to send on patrol; not nearly enough to turn back an invasion by Napoleon, should he take that next step. Britain is on the verge of collapse and her military does not know what steps to take next.

In the middle of this catastrophe, Temeraire hopes to present his ideas for Draconic Liberty to the British Government. Laurence, whose family has been fighting for the abolition of slavery in Parliament for many years, knows that this will not be an easy fight.

At best, most people in England think of dragons as super intelligent horses. At worst, they are bloodthirsty beasts, but a necessary evil in order to win the war.

When it is discovered that Temeraire has a resistance to this disease developed when he probably contracted something similar during his trip to China, he and Capt. Laurence are packed off in search of what may have brought about that cure. This adventure takes Temeraire and his crew to Capetown and the interior of Africa. What they uncover there I will leave up to you to find out.

New Moon

Stephenie Meyer

Little, Brown, Sep 2006, \$19.99

ISBN: 9780316160193

Review by Harriet Klausner

In Forks, Washington, after having recovered from a vampire assault (see *Twilight*), Isabella 'Bella' Swan celebrates her eighteenth birthday with her boyfriend and rescuer Edward Cullen and his family of vampires that are 'vegans'; never drinking human blood. However when Bella cuts her arm, Edward and his kin struggle to control their desire as the trickling red liquid is like catnip to them. They do not harm her, but he realizes they can never be together and ends their relationship breaking her heart.

Bella is depressed until she meets Ford High School sophomore Jacob, a sophomore from her school who belongs to a motorcycle pack. She begins to come out of her funk though she misses Edward. However, she soon learns what the pack truly is and what Jacob will become; a natural enemy of Edward; not just because they like the same girl.

The second Bella tale is a terrific paranormal young adult thriller as the heroine is sort of like Marshall Teller of Eerie, Indiana landing in one bizarre situation after another. This time the vampires show up towards the end of the tale as Bella learns there is a lot more species under the sun (make that the moon) than humans. Although Jacob behaves towards Bella identically the same as did Edward in *Twilight* even considering the first person filtering of the heroine in peril, fans will enjoy watching what happens on the *New Moon* on the Olympic Peninsular.

Reviews

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian

Directed by Andrew Adamson

Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Movies at the El Capitan in Hollywood are a treat, especially when they're magical movies like *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*. A showcase theater for Disney, the El Capitan has been refurbished showing up the rich workmanship on the walls and ceiling – the gold, burgundy and green cutwork design is beautiful. One does not simply go to the El Capitan to see a movie; one goes to the El Capitan for a film experience. When major Disney movies come to the El Capitan, there are usually props from the movie on display in the lobby as well as on the lower level in the waiting area for the lounges. For *Prince Caspian* these props included suits of armor, school uniforms, London Postal boxes, telephone booths, subway signs, and many props like jeweled boxes and cups that were probably in the background, because I don't remember them in the movie.

Entering the theater proper, we were greeted by an organ player sitting at a gold, filigreed (and in this case theme decorated) organ, playing a variety of Disney tunes. On either side of the stage were balconies that have been decorated for the movie being shown. For this movie, there were the statues of the Kings of Narnia on each side, with evergreen bows. On the stage was a dropdown screen that showed a young man in armor wielding a sword while standing in the woods. The theater manager came out to announce the movie, reminding everyone to turn off their cell phones. As he left, a pop sounded off and tiny green and gold paper leaves rained down from the ceiling. The house lights went down, the screen became transparent, showing the same scene behind it where a young actor in armor and holding a sword quietly hunted through the forest from stage left to stage right. Stage lights went off, curtains change and then – the previews and then the movie began.

Being an adolescent male is not easy. Boys have burgeoning hormones, youthful pride, and the desire to be in charge but not wanting to be responsible. It's worse if you're heir to a throne

under threat of assassination from your uncle in a land where most of the inhabitants probably hate you. But what if you were once a king, respected, loved, and obeyed by all as a grown man, only to be living once again the life of school boy in WWII London? What if you bring these disgruntled adolescent males together?

When the Pevensies land in Narnia this time, it's only been about a year in England time, but 1300 years in Narnia time. They've all been a little lost in England, not just Peter and Edmund. Susan prefers solitude and Lucy is ever hopeful that any day now they will go back. They're not quite sure they fit in England anymore. When they arrive in Narnia, although they don't know where they are at first, they do feel like they belong. Their rulership is a natural extension of who they are. Though in the bodies of kids, they have the experience and knowledge of adults, as well as some of the blindness. When they meet Prince Caspian, who is next in line as the King of Narnia, he and Peter have issues to work out in the natural course of things.

The movie is true to the spirit of the book, without being slavishly married to it. Lucy remains the touchstone and moral center of the group, while Edmund shows wisdom, restraint, and loyalty, even when he disagrees with Peter. Peter, who has been bored and frustrated in England, finally feels like himself in Narnia. Susan is still the practical one, but with courage and heart. Add to this the very hot Prince Caspian (something everyone, including Susan, notices) and it makes for a very enjoyable movie.

There are some grim parts that could be upsetting for young children (a massacre about halfway through the movie, etc) but even during the grueling duel scene, no blood or guts appear on swords, spears, helms, gauntlets, arrows, or shields. Although things get desperate, by the time Aslan comes to the rescue, the children and people of Narnia have shown how worthy they are. Battles have been fought and won, magic has returned to Narnia, and everyone understands, and is comfortable with, their rightful place in the world. In that sense, it's a very Shakespearean film, and well worth the trip to the theater.

Reviews

Time Enough For Love

Robert A. Heinlein

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Review by Terry Crotinger

Robert Heinlein's, *Time Enough For Love*, sports a curious and controversial cover—a fairly unencumbered (in the fashion sense) large gentleman has two women springing from his sides. As in sideways—they look up to him from a vertical position, one on each side. Adam's rib comes to mind. Using a folksy style, Mr. Heinlein seems to write from the hip on this novel, or so it seems, and the title of this novel seemed to typify from-the-hip mentality. However, the girls don't come until much later in the novel, and since it's Heinlein, there's always a catch.

Take the title. At first, it hints of some sexually insane meaning until partway through the book. Before long, it seems other, more futuristic meanings might have been Mr. Heinlein's intent. The end of the novel gives still another possibility for meaning via double-entendre. In fact, this book is so unconventional in structure as it bounces from time period to a future time, then back and before... confusing, but never tedious.

The narrator is ancient and has taken Lazarus Long's life and memoirs and tried to immortalize someone who, for all practical purposes, is immortal. The novel jumps around to memories Mr. Long carries that may be only a few centuries old, to yesterday, then to the early 1920's Earth. Perhaps, Mr. Long is a Charlatan, but he claims attendance at many of earth's oldest events, including ancient Rome. No one really buys that one, but it makes a good story, and Lazarus/Heinlein are excellent storytellers.

The book is filled with real-life parables that make sense; it's not surprising that several "quotable" websites made various versions of "Long's Book of Wise Sayings". They really are good. Since he is recognized as the oldest person alive, those parables are National Treasures.

The reader experiences Lazarus' life in flashbacks, short stories and through a small cast of major characters that turn out to be all relatives. Lazarus is the oldest man alive in the colonized universe—the very first, oldest man. After millennium or so, Mr. Long is despondent and ready to cash in the farm until one of the main historians of his time befriends him. It is discovered that the Long-nee-Howard family tree has a slew of ageless men and women who do not age (in the form of "Tuck Everlasting").

They've learned how to artificially age themselves for the non-everlasting people's comfort, but they've also had incredible breakthroughs in technology for age regeneration for those who can afford it. As a result, the cute 20-something guy you met yesterday at the coffee shop is not only over 200+, he is learning (and remembering) several careers before he finally gives up and dies, if he ever does. He also is your mother's third lover 80 years ago, and remembers when you were born, and by the way, your great, great-grandfather is fine and wants you to call on him and his 9th wife to have dinner next week.

The artificial family of real relatives Lazarus surrounds himself with by the end of the novel borders on profanity. In Heinlein's day, what he was writing for this character was pure bordello fantasy (today, culturally, not very alarming at all). The family Lazarus has includes several women who are all lovers to him, to each other, and to each other's lovers. Also in his family are his "keepers"—a couple who have been regenerated themselves—who watch over him and keep *him* regenerated and safe (and are his lovers—male and female), and Lazarus's own sisters, who are actually *him*. All find themselves cozy in bed with someone at sometime, including Lazarus. Sounds nutty, huh? The sisters, his sisters, are twins but they are actually created from his own male DNA. So, he is/has twin daughters, and they are him. He ends up in bed with them, too. Surprisingly, this novel does not have the smutty feel of porn or sexual/romance even though the partners are more sexually active than the Eveready Bunny on holiday.

Lazarus Long takes a quick trip back in time to the point where he is a young child. He gets to know his original family and falls in love/lust with his mother—risky material—even in the 1980's.

The chosen, universal family is not a new concept with Mr. Heinlein. *Friday* also had a blended and unconventional family system featured in the novel. But this time, he may have gone too far. He not only introduces same-sex couples when coming out of the closet was in its infancy, wife/couple swapping, but his character has sex with his mother and is able to conditionally justify it! (Yes, it's his mother, but he is over 1000 years older than she is.) Since the novel is over twenty years old, the contrast of cultural and sexual mores in American society, and in science/speculative fiction writing makes an interesting study and worth a second read. Heinlein always kept the reader off guard; there was always a catch. If you are immortal, there really *is* time enough for love.

SF Saves the World (con't)

Prepare. So I did, am doing, and I can sleep now with the semi-false sense of security that I have time (maybe?) to complete all my plans... Just-In-Case.

Curious... I wonder why I was able to study martial arts so late in my adult life? Kismet—an intuitive and timely thing?

Our illustrious Editor, Bret Funk—Scientist, Wunderkind, and awesome Publisher of the Beacons Anthology I/II, and his own series, *Boundary's Fall*,* (a most Excellent read) knows disaster. Hurricane Katrina forced changes on him, from immediate safety issues to long-term relocating. I'm sure he'd have a few choice thoughts on this subject!

In the future, the long-term, I'm not so worried. America survived The Great Depression, the Dirty Thirties and several wars. The survival instinct gene has seen pioneers, cancer survivors and natural and un-natural survivors through tough and horrendous times. I am awe-inspired by Holocaust survivors. My profession is geared to helping trauma victims make peace with their losses and move on. Education and experience is invaluable for survival. I have no doubt society will adjust—eventually.

For the short-term, I rely on my Emergency Preparedness badge from Girl Scouts, Red Cross First Aid courses and Fox Fire books, sprinkled with gleaned information from years of primitive camping, mega-week canoe trips... and a row of well-used fantasy and science fiction books.

Background (con't)

raised dirt to give the illusion of being a real basement). This amounts to a difference in environment and in culture, but if I were to write a horror story about New Orleans and had my protagonist exploring a number of very scary basements, anyone in the know would think me a fool.

Solution #1: By utilizing my knowledge of local architecture I can write a story that does not make people snicker at my stupidity. By applying that knowledge in a more general sense, I can apply similar architectural styles in similar environments, thus eliminating the need to devise a logical reason for why Culture X purposefully builds houses with flooded basements.

Situation #2: I don't remember the exact scene, but I believe in Star Wars 3: Return of the Sith, there is a space dog-fight that takes place with Anakin and Obi-wan. The scene included a great deal of amazing

Background (con't)

stunt flying, but I was bothered by the little robots that clung to the heroes' ships and slowly devoured them, while they could do nothing to shake them off. I mean, if Yoda can lift an X-Wing out of water, then surely someone as talented as Anakin can Force Push a little robot off of his spaceship, right?

Solution #2: If you create a magical force that enables your character to do amazing things, don't let them forget about it.

Situation #3: A writer wants to add a nomadic, alien species to his science fiction book, but being a city-dweller, he doesn't know where to begin.

Solution #3: Luckily, there are a number of great resources available. Native American Tribes, German Tribal Life as recorded by the Romans, accounts of Hun and Mongol invasions... All of these can be used to build a framework around which a new nomadic species can be constructed. Just make sure they don't build their houses out of stone... Too heavy to carry from place to place.

Situation #4: My son likes to watch Little Einsteins. The four youths travel on many adventures in their pal, the sentient rocket named Rocket, but are often waylaid in their time-sensitive missions by the villain when they get out of Rocket and try to reach their goal on foot. These delays prompt them to reboard Rocket and go "Superfast" in order to complete their mission on time. I am troubled by the fact that simply by staying inside of Rocket, they could avoid all of these problems, complete their mission, and be home a whole lot sooner.

Solution #4: I excuse their behavior by acknowledging that I am dealing with four small children and a sentient but non-vocal machine.

I included the last situation not only because it is a valid example of poor background elements, but because it illustrates the greatest tool an author has at his disposal when dealing with inconsistencies that slip through the cracks. As long as a plausible explanation can be found for the seemingly bizarre building/situation/action, that inconsistency can be explained away as "part of the author's greater plan." Even better, fanatical nit-picking SF fans (like me) will often go far out of their way to justify such inconsistencies on behalf of the author. By resolving such problems internally, readers reconcile themselves

Background (con't)

to the inconsistency and are able to resume enjoyment of the work. This fact alone should take the pressure off of any writer now fretting over whether the fact his unmatched duvet cover and pillow cases in chapter four will detract from a reader's enjoyment of the work as a whole. It will not; the reader will probably just assume that a man made the bed.

Knowing that the problem exists, how can a writer go about addressing it? The best way is to increase your knowledge. Want to know what a jungle looks like? Visit one. Need to understand the feeling of cresting the summit of a mountain after an arduous hike? Start walking! Want to envision a world of incredible overcrowding, with millions of people hurrying past like automatons? Visit New York at rush hour, or, if you're more adventurous, New Dehli. Want to get a feel for the cramped quarters on your spaceship? Visit one of the many national monuments made from decommissioned battleships, destroyers, or better yet, submarines and experience the confines yourself.

Firsthand experience is the best way to improve your presentation of background. It's the only way that employs all of your senses, so that you can accurately translate the sensations, smells, sights, and sounds to the page. But if constant world traveling is not in your budget, there are alternatives. Need to research a particular environment? Documentaries, particularly those produced by PBS or National Geographic (in HD, if possible), give viewers vivid images of our world and its many ecosystems. Want to understand what it feels like to be under fire, or to be cast overboard when your ship is destroyed by the enemy? Look for history books at your local library that include quotes, letters, or interviews with veterans. Need a basic understanding of astronomy or blacksmithing to give your writing that touch of realism is desperately needs? Search the Internet, check out a lecture series, or ask a friend with a passion for the activity in question. Find a technical expert willing to read your book and offer advice. Options abound for any writer willing to go the extra mile.

Finally, if gaining knowledge is impossible, then at least try to hide ignorance. Avoid throwing around jargon unless certain of its meaning. Don't go into great detail about a process, procedure, or—well, don't into great detail about anything!—unless you can back up your statements with knowledge. The more technical your discussion gets, the more likely it is to draw ire

Background (con't)

from someone who knows the truth of things, and SF readers rank at the top of the list of "people annoyed by inconsequential things that have no real bearing on the plot, theme, or morality of a work."

Background, as a general concept, is as important to good fiction as plot and character. If a writer cannot imbue it with believability, with internal consistency, then he risks watching his whole world unravel around him, leaving his other characters with no place to live. At least, no place real.



The Illuminata congratulates Danielle Parker on the release of her ebook. Click the image for a sample and ordering information

Archetypes (con't)

emotional conflict hooks the audience, pulling them through the story to the final outcome.

Some writers turn this idea on its head by creating an Anti-hero – the Villain as Hero, in effect. Examples are the short-lived series *Profit*, or *House*, or even *Dexter*. Stephen Donaldson did it with his protagonist in the *Thomas Covenant Chronicles*. These people are not nice people. They are NOT hero material. In fact, they are distinctively, disturbingly, unlikable people. The trick is, again, to explain why they are the way they are so that the audience has some sympathy for them. They are no better than the Villain, but having been put in the role of protagonist the audience wants some reason to think they might be redeemable. So, what archetypes were in the lives of such Anti-heroes as Jim Profit, Thomas Covenant, and Dexter? What archetypes from their past are they reacting to in such a way that they have become the inimical characters they are now? As the writer explores the whys and wherefores behind these questions, they better able to plot a story that is engaging, strong, and very readable. One that will grab the reader by the throat and pull them through to the end.

Writers and Health (con't)

manic, then that extremism can also inhibit creativity. According to Dr. Andreason, there is a lot of discussion as to whether writers and other creatives are less creative if they start on a regular medication to keep the depression under control, though Dr. Andreason points out that Robert Lowell himself says he was a better writer once he started taking lithium to help battle his own problems with depression.

Another point to make is that part of the mythology surrounding a writer's life is the romanticized view of the hard experiences of a writer. Dr. Andreason points out that writers tend to hang on to this romanticized view, but points out that depression is not the enriching experience that myths are built on, but is actually very empty and drab. Nancy Etchemendy, in her personal article on writers and depression on the Horror Writers Association website (<http://www.horror.org/writetips-etchemendy.htm>) points out that the incidence of depression and suicide in writers, besides being greater than in the general population, can be exacerbated by the lifestyle of writers. Besides opening up themselves to experiences, writers also tend to live very isolated lives. It's a dichotomy of experience as with everything else in their lives. They go out and have experiences and find experiences, maybe even stupidly think they need to get down and dirty and experiment with drugs and alcohol so they can truly understand it. Then they come back to their office or apartment and sit alone in the room with no one to interact with but their own low self-esteems and the many rejections slips from editors or "helpful comments" from workshops and forums online. This kind of lonely life, full of rejection, can lead to mental and physical ill health. Some of the signs that Etchemendy says to look out for is excessive isolation, major changes in sleeping patterns, not being able to find pleasure or hope, inability to concentrate, overuse of alcohol and drugs (prescription and nonprescription).

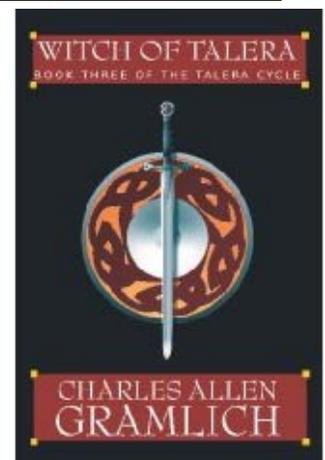
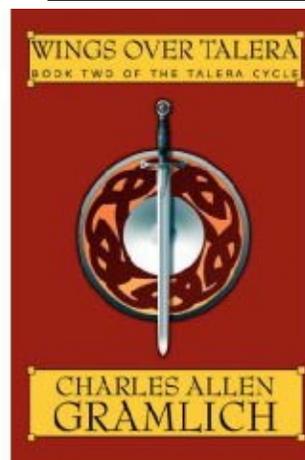
If all this sounds too familiar, then maybe it's time to take stock of your life. Etchemendy suggests taking very basic steps that also sound very familiar. Eat a well balanced diet from the food pyramid, get outside and get plenty of exercise, socialize more with both writers and nonwriters to give you a better perspective on things. Rita May Brown suggests in her book *Starting from Scratch*, to get up out of your seat, put some music on and dance. No one ever feels bad when they dance. She also suggests having a pet so that you don't take yourself too seriously and have another living creature

Writers and Health (con't)

to care for. Orson Scott Card in his book on *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy* has pointed out that "You can't do your best work when you're weak or in ill health. At times when I've exercised and kept my weight down, I've had much more vigor and stamina" (p. 132). I have one writer friend who goes for a hike every morning before he sits down to write (something I should start doing).

Most writers grew up with those romanticized views of other writers in the back of their heads urging them on. I used to think of the movie, *Julia*, where Jane Fonda plays Lillian Hellman, smoking and drinking whisky at the typewriter at all hours of the night. I have known other writers who glorified authors with other addictive habits, such as Charles Bukowski or Hunter S. Thompson. Sometimes we even try to push what we know (so we can "write what we know") to such a degree that it can kill us, forgetting to use that one other tool we have that we don't want to ruin either – the imagination. Our relationship with our writerly selves is finely balanced. We have to keep it a healthy relationship or it could kill us.

Writing is what we do because we must. We are compelled to sit down and write, even if no one else will read it. If we really want to keep writing, then we shouldn't let physical or emotional or mental ill health get in the way. Writers are no different from athletes. Our tools are our bodies. If we want to keep on writing, then we need to take care of ourselves.



Congratulations to Charles Gramlich on the release of the next two books in the Talera Cycle. Click on the images for a list of Charles's books. Remember that only by supporting authors like those who contribute to this ezine can you ensure that quality SF continues to be written!