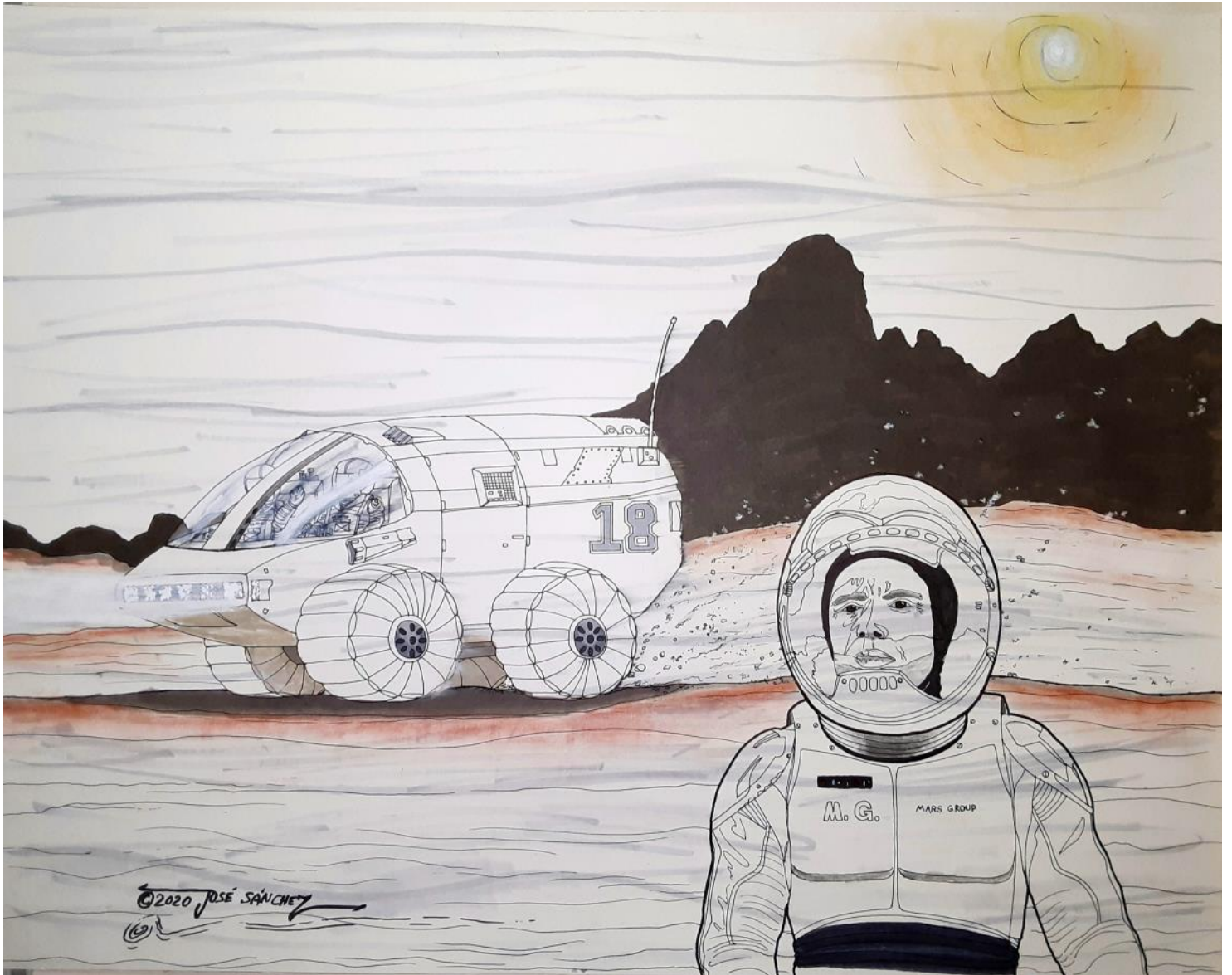


Tightbeam 319

April 2021



Mars Through Wispy Winds
by Jose Sanchez

Tightbeam 319

April 2021

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Some contributors have Amazon links for books they review, to be found with the review on the web; use them and they get a reward from Amazon.

Tightbeam is published approximately monthly by the National Fantasy Fan Federation and distributed electronically to the membership.

The N3F offers four different memberships. To join as a public (free) member, send phillies@4liberty.net your email address.

To join or renew, use the membership form at <http://n3f.org/join/membership-form/> to provide your name and whichever address you use to receive zines. Memberships with The National Fantasy Fan (TNFF) via paper mail are \$18; memberships with TNFF via email are \$6. Zines other than TNFF are email only. Additional memberships at the address of a current dues-paying member are \$4. **Public memberships are free.** Send payments to Kevin Trainor, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 . Pay online at N3F.org. PayPal contact is treasurer@n3f.org.

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Letters of Comment

Editor:

Tightbeam 318 March 2021 is a production and artistic success. The layout, editing, production, and illustrations really enhance everything. The N3F can certainly be proud of this.

I am personally impressed with the front cover. It is refreshing to see an end to repressed censorship, and the excitement of seeing a scantily clad young woman armed with weapons. She's certainly ready to assert herself, while showing off her physique.

Alan White, Angela Scott, and the other artists do a fine job of providing visuals for those who are appreciative of this (including me). The N3F is growing and becoming what it has always been: A fantasy fan organization with quality publications. I appreciate the opportunity to participate.

Jeff Redmond
redmondjeff@hotmail.com

Dear George and Jon:

Thank you both for Tightbeam 318, and it is always time for a letter. A ton of new zines just arrived via eFanzines.com, so time to get moving.

Gotta love Alan White's artwork...I've been seeing a lot of it lately, and he's been doing it for so long, too. My letter...the only benefits we might have gotten from having had COVID-19 is the fact we both lost about 10 pounds each, and have been able to keep it off, and for Yvonne, instead of losing her senses of taste and smell, hers have actually been enhanced. I have finished my letter of comment on the outstanding Outworlds 71/Afterworlds, and I think there might be a special publication produced that will list all responses.

The Fanac.org Zoom sessions...one is on today! I will get to it as soon as I am done here. I look forward to seeing the Benfords, and I plan to see the Zoom with Ruth Berman and Devra Langsam on early Trek fandom, mostly because Yvonne and I had small roles with the good old Star Trek Welcommittee back then.

Jon, you've hit another bio-bibliography out of the park. I knew nothing of the life of Daniel Keyes outside of Flowers for Algernon, and as always, there is so much more to learn. Many thanks.

Well, it is the weekend, but outside of the Fanac.org Zoom event today, not much is happening. It's gotten a little cold, so we might be doing more relaxing than anything else. We've got to be putting more time into planning things to do; the pandemic is making sure we go through our extensive list of things we could be doing. While we cook up more activities, many thanks for this issue, and I look forward to what you have the next time.

Yours,
Lloyd Penney

Anime

Spring 2021 First Impressions – Mars Red

By Jessi Silver

Streaming: Funimation

Episodes: 13

Source: Stage Production



Story Summary: Major Maeda returns to Tokyo after several months and is assigned to the task of interpreting whether a captured vampire might somehow be recruited as an ally in tackling the country's quickly-emerging vampire crisis. Misaki was an actress, killed in a freak accident during a rehearsal, then mysteriously revived as proven by the stigmata on her tongue. Her mind appears to be frozen in place at her time of death, as she portrayed

the titular character in "Salome;" her communication is mostly limited to recitations of lines from the play, though she seems to take an occasional direct interest in Maeda. Maeda encounters a mysterious, youthful actor named Deffrot before learning that Misaki has escaped her confinement. He encounters her just as she speaks her final soliloquy and allows herself to be burned to ash in the morning sunlight.

Impressions: I have very little experience with live theater, limited to a few plays I attended in school and fewer still that I've watched as an adult. But one thing that always strikes me about stage productions is just how intentional each aspect of them must be. Aside from major musicals and the like, most sets I've seen are very minimal, with locations and settings simply suggested through the use of a few props, movable doorways, lighting, and character staging. This philosophy appears to have been extended to Mars Red, which despite being animated feels very much attached to its stage roots. The Taisho-era Tokyo backdrop is suggested through distant industrial smokestacks, the occasional passing street car with its ubiquitous accompanying power lines, and a few iconic landmarks that speak directly to the place and time. It seems like this is no accident, as the creator of the stage play had a direct hand in developing the feel of the animated version. For what it's worth, I find these kinds of media crossovers to be really interesting.



I think vampires are an interesting focal point for the narrative. Traditionally vampires tend to represent the anxieties of a community, and a character remarks early in this episode about the continually-encroaching Westernization that Japan has experienced in the years leading up to this story. Anxiety over change, about potential loss of culture... it's interesting that the vam-



A relationship is suggested through the use of light and shadow on a poster.

part, but just the fact that so many elements are at play already has made this episode a compelling watch.

pire in this episode is represented by Salome, a character from Western literature, but one in some incarnations said to value her virginity to the point that she delights in the destruction of men and their sexuality (to the point of having them beheaded).

Is Salome meant to be the predatory West, spreading its culture across the globe through threat or act of colonization? or is she Japan, wishing to be untainted and willing to act out in violence to preserve that state of being?

This may be a completely bad read on my

The visuals are a blend of hyper-detailed backgrounds complete with recognizable landmarks, distant, distorted backgrounds that, as I mentioned previously, seem to be there to give a feeling of general time and place, and character designs that seem to follow a kagenashi (shadowless) aesthetic, more focused on detailed linework than depth through color. Those elements, along with the wide letterboxing, make the series feel historical, and like we're peering through a window into a different space. It's a very cool aesthetic and I can't wait to see how it further supplements the creeping supernatural elements of the story going forward.

Pros: Cool aesthetic details, and an interesting interpretation of the effects of Westernization in the late Taisho Era of Japan. The framing and presentation make it clear that the story originally comes from the stage, but it's not so overbearing as to feel directly like a stage production.

Cons: There's an odd feeling of slipping from one scene to the next without being able to sit and ponder things that have just happened. This isn't something I minded but I think it's disorienting at first and could be off-putting.

Content Warnings: Violence (including gun violence resulting in injury, and physical violence). Depiction of bleeding and blood pooled on the ground. Depiction of suicide.

Would I Watch More? – I've already added this to my Funimation queue. I can't speak for the entire series, but the first episode reminds me a bit of parts of *Mouryou no Hako*, which I also liked quite a bit for its creepiness and philosophical bent.

Comics

Western Comics: Capsule Reviews Stephanie Souders

Because I only covered the Big Two last month, this month's column will focus first on the independent comics currently sitting on my desk (though I have comments on two DC books to offer at the very bottom).

Kamen America, vol. 3
Writer: Mark Pellegrini
Artist: Timothy Lim
(Iconic Comics, Superhero)

The young ladies who make up the Kamen Corps are just as adorable - and layered! - as ever in this, the third entry in the crowdfunded Kamen America series. Once again, Pellegrini and Lim demonstrate that they are consummate pros when it comes to delivering a product that is both entertaining and of high quality. I didn't feel quite the same emotional punch with this book as I did with volume 2 (see my first column for Tightbeam), but there is still much here to inspire my happy recommendation, including a twist in the final pages that will make you want to read the first three volumes again — and an on-point-yet-subtle commentary on the chaos envy can wreak in many female relationships. PS: My own prediction regarding Carly's rival turned out to be 100% accurate. Go me!

Flying Sparks, vol. 1
Writer: Jon Del Arroz
Artist: Jethro Morales
(Amazon, Superhero)

Yes, I know: I'm incredibly late on this one — and I regret that because the concept that animates this book is a super fun spin on a classic trope. I've always been a big fan of what some on the net term “identity porn.” I love, for example, all those scenes in my classic Marvel comics in which some other Avenger openly praises or longs for Tony Stark's engineering expertise while Iron Man is standing right there.

Well, in Flying Sparks, Del Arroz takes the identity porn to a whole new - and delicious - level. You see, in their ordinary lives, Johnny and Chloe are boyfriend and girlfriend — but in their secret lives, they are, respectively, a budding supervillain and a budding superhero. The irony this sets up as we jump between competing narratives definitely makes for an excellent read.

Stillwater, vol. 1
Writer: Chip Zdarsky
Artist: Ramon Perez
(Image Comics, Fantasy — Real World Setting)

As you may have noticed, Zdarsky is a writer I trust and like, so when I saw this series up for sale, I didn't hesitate to pick it up. The eponymous town in this book is one in which, thanks to a mysterious event years ago, no one ever ages and no one ever dies. To protect the secret of Stillwater, the town judge has locked the place down and barred any of its residents from leaving — or communicating with outside friends and family.

But not everyone is happy with this state of affairs; some are chafing under the judge's tyrannical rule and are assembling to challenge his authority so that they may live ordinary lives. It's an interesting premise - particularly in this day and age - because it highlights the tension that always exists between a population's security and its liberty. The first issues here haven't really gotten to the meat of the story just yet, but I absolutely see its potential and will be following this series in the future.

Wrath, #1-2
 Writer: Scott Kysh
 Artists: Emi Utrera & Drew Smith
 (Wikid Publishing, Fantasy — Real World Setting)

The main character of this new crowdfunded comic is a survivor of childhood abuse who learns that his anger at his biological father can escape his body and take physical form in the real world. The story has only just begun, so I don't know yet where the author intends to take this idea. However, I'm intrigued already that the protagonist does not have perfect control over his spirit monster — and that he seems to get a possibly corrupting rush from using his new ability. This could be a really strong exploration of the negative impacts of unprocessed trauma depending on what happens next. As with *Stillwater* above, there is potential here, and I'm genuinely eager to buy the next issue. I just hope I don't have too long to wait!

And finally, a word about two “political” comics from DC:

While I count myself among those who are frequently annoyed with how comic publishers handle political topics, I do think it's possible to, every once in a while, write an okay - or even good - comic that tackles a controversial social issue. As a matter of fact, I read just such a book this month: *Superman Smashes the Klan*, an all-ages graphic novel by Gene Leun Yang and Gurihiru.

The message of *Superman Smashes the Klan* is not especially subtle -- but unlike most other books in its niche, it avoids Manichaeian demonization - or sacralization - of entire subgroups of people in favor of treating its characters as individuals. Roberta, the lead, resents the pressure she feels to assimilate -- but her older brother Tommy is more easy-going and willing to joke about his Chinese heritage, and her father (also eager to fit in) repeatedly demands her mother refrain from speaking her native Cantonese. I strongly suspect the author favors Roberta's point of view -- yet at no point are Tommy and Dr. Lee portrayed as anything but sympathetic. In other words, Yang reveals that Chinese-American views on assimilation are not monolithic, and he does so without unfairly vilifying approaches with which he does not agree.

"But what about Yang's white characters?" you may ask next. Well, they too vary in their beliefs. The clergymen who founded the Unity House are clearly racially progressive, and the white kids who hang out there are also well-meaning (if occasionally insensitive). And then you have Chuck; his family members are mixed up in the activities of the local Klan, but even he is depicted as a confused, misguided boy who fundamentally wants to do the right thing. The upshot? Yes, there are over-the-top Klansmen here, but they are definitely outnumbered by the white characters who are principled, moral, and/or capable of redeeming themselves.

In every way, *Superman Smashes the Klan* outclasses the recently released *Nubia: Real One*, another graphic novel targeted to young audiences that attempts to address racism in the US. Yang's work allows for layers and nuance; L.L. McKinney's hateful book, on the other hand, does not.

In *Nubia: Real One*, every white character is racist and evil -- and every black character is a saintly victim. According to McKinney, white society would largely reject a young black woman with superhuman abilities -- even though, once again, Storm (just to take one example) has been a central X-Man since Claremont (who, by the way, is white -- as was Jack Kirby, who

created T'Challa). According to McKinney, BLM-associated riots are the fault of white outside agitators -- even though plenty of real-world cases demonstrate that this is not wholly the truth. According to McKinney, a black girl would obviously be blamed for a convenience store robbery regardless of the surveillance footage or the many witnesses who could provide evidence in her defense -- a contention even black reviewers have challenged as patently ridiculous. According to McKinney, there's nothing a black girl needs to do to develop herself and become a better person -- even though wise people would say that self-improvement is an obligation for every human being.

In short, *Nubia: Real One* insults the reader's intelligence with flat caricatures and nonsense premises that fail the test of verisimilitude, whereas *Superman Smashes the Klan* gives us, for the most part, actual human beings. Moreover, while *Superman Smashes the Klan* is blessed with visually appealing art, *Nubia: Real One* assaults our eyes with atrocious Tumblr-style drawings that make Diana Prince look like a pug-nosed hag and similarly rob *Nubia* of her beauty and femininity. No one should be satisfied with such a deliberate destruction of the heroic. The entire point of a superhero comic is to give the reader something to aspire to -- not to wallow in the base and prosaic.

As long as comics like *Nubia: Real One* continue to be churned out by open racists and segregationists, people will continue to chafe at the idea that we should talk about race in our comic books. It's an infinitely better choice to produce books like *Superman Smashes the Klan*. It's an infinitely better choice to hire people with actual talent and hold everyone to the same exacting editorial standards.

And by the way, I still take requests! If there's a particular review you'd like to see, please contact me at hobsonphile@gmail.com and tell me the title, creators, and - most importantly - point of sale. Assuming the comic in question is available for immediate purchase, I will respond in the following issue!

Fanzines

FanFaronade 9

Some landmarks here, needing extra space to discuss; so, plunging right in—

Pablo Lennis 400 (that's not too many). (March, 2021 (the masthead says May, 2021, presumably a typo. John Thiel, 30 N. 19th Street, Lafayette, Indiana, 47904). [Full disclosure: I have a story in this issue.]

Pablo Lennis first appeared in 1976, which means that it has been being published for just under half the history of sf fanzines; even allowing for such a span of time, a 400th issue is a landmark reached by very few fanzines, especially those with but a single editor. Consider for a moment what this entails. Assuming an average length of just ten pages (almost certainly low), the run of PL includes 4,000 pages, each set up and approved by the editor. Assuming a distribution of just twenty copies per issue, this means that some 80,000 pages of print have been sent out over the last forty-six years, carrying work by more than five hundred contributors (this last is not a guess; one of the features in this issue is a list of contributors). Nor are these mere statistics; they indicate a level of commitment which deserves acknowledgement in and for itself.

The 400th issue, appropriately, has the feel of a salutation to the whole history of science fanta-

sy. Eric Thiel gives a brief overview of his long involvement with computers and the computer industry, ending with a charming salute to his brother: “I do wonder,” he writes, whether computers would have developed so quickly for home use without our grounding in science fiction, which made us believe it was a possible and logical development. I have my brother and his SF fanzines and books [to thank] for introducing me to those possibilities. Alan White’s cover (alas, more fuzzily reproduced than it deserved) evokes the spirit of Virgil Finlay and magazines of the 1940s such as *Planet Stories*. The chapter of Celine Rose Mariotti’s *Time Traveler From 1911* is set in 1942 (it would be amusing to see an encounter between the Traveler and Hugo Gernsback or John W. Campbell in some future episode). “Putting on Heirs,” by Jeffrey Redmond, takes place in “the city of Apart-Hed,” suggesting the South Africa of a few decades ago (although if the character Ru-Pert has a similar historical resonance, it is lost on me). Joanne Tolson’s Society of Disinformation segment, although extremely brief, suggests aspects of 1960s political satire. My own story could almost be from *Galaxy* in the 1950s or even, with a few tweaks, *Wonder Stories* in the 1930s. Lawrence Dagstine’s “The Panda With the Golden Tongue,” the longest piece in the issue, would, minus a couple of historical details, scarcely be out of place in an issue of *Argosy* from the ‘teens or ‘twenties.

Yet nostalgia does not wholly dominate; nor is the issue lacking in contemporary resonances. Poems by Dr. Mel Waldman, Betty Streeter, John Polselli, and Will Mayo are, both stylistically and expressively, solidly grounded in present concerns (even though Waldman’s is a response to Langston Hughes). Editor Thiel provides his usual idiosyncratic overview of current fan activities, and the lettercol, though not extensive, is typically conversational.

As always, the sense here is of being cordially invited to join a long-running family gathering, one in which you will soon feel quite at home.

Wild Ideas 8 (January, 2021; Henry Grynnssten; efanazines.com)

This fanzine, each issue of which is devoted to an extended analysis of some particular topic, is something of a descendant of Jack Speer’s *Full Length Articles* but with a wider range and less emphasis on matters sfnal. Here, for example, Grynnssten takes on the nature of genius, specifically as connected with the music attributed to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Grynnssten doesn’t think much of the idea of genius, “an antiquated one that doesn’t take account of modern research on expertise.” Nor does he think much of Wolfgang; “he wasn’t even a genius in the ordinary sense of the word. He’s just a genius by convention, we just like to call him that. Because we like miracles.”

Having dismissed Wolfgang’s standing as a genius, Grynnssten then develops an extended argument to suggest that, in fact, Wolfgang was not even the composer of the music attributed to him. As Grynnssten correctly points out, “We also can be fairly certain that Leopold wrote some of his son’s early works.” Because these earlier works were often edited, or indeed rewritten, by his father (a fully trained professional musician), the argument runs, it is at least reasonable to be suspicious of the provenance of the later works as well. In fact, it may well be the case that many of those pieces were created by his sister Nannerl (Maria Anna): “at least there is a possibility that some of her compositions were mistaken for Wolfgang’s, in the most cautious interpretation. A more daring interpretation is that she wrote a lot of the music.”

Certainly there are plenty of women whose work was subsumed into that of their husband, brother, or father. Yet the argument here is rather thinly developed, resting often on the absence of evidence to the contrary rather than factual support. Wolfgang’s praise for his sister’s music (none of which is known to have survived for examination) is taken as gospel, rather than sibling hyperbole, whereas praise of Wolfgang’s talents is too often explained away. Malcolm Gladwell’s claims about the time it takes to master anything are accepted without quibble (“It takes 10,000 hours of focused practice to become an expert, according to research by among

others Anders Ericsson, that Malcolm Gladwell popularized in his successful book *Outliers*”), even though there have been many serious objections raised to the methodology underlying the claim and to the claim itself. Nor does Grynnssten offer any hint of an explanation for Nannerl’s compositional silence after her brother’s death; she outlived him by nearly forty years but not so much as a note by her exists.

Grynnssten’s argument could justify a substantially longer response. It’s intriguing at the very least, if not persuasive, and his conclusion, warning of the dangers of idolatry, is spot on: “if you depend for your appreciation of the music on an antiquated, semi-religious view of the composer, then you’re in trouble.” The cover, also by Grynnssten, is striking: it presents a heavily redacted document from which we can read only the zine’s title and date.

Outworlds 71/Afterworlds (November 2020; PoD from Amazon, 20.00)

Bill Bowers, one of the most respected fanzine editors of the latter part of the twentieth century, died in 2005, leaving issue 71 of *Outworlds*, his best-known fanzine, near completion. Jeanne Bowman, Rich Coad, Alan Rosenthal, and Pat Virzi finished editing it and then, for good measure, attached a memorial volume, *Afterworlds*. The result is an enormous, and compellingly readable, fanzine some 500 pages in length and much greater in depth. Everything here is on a colossal scale, and deserves to be. The lettercol to 71 alone is longer than most fanzines; some of the letters are longer than many fanzines. There are untold amounts of art, ranging from the full color Ditmar cover through pieces by artists still active, artists gaffiated, and artists now dead: Atom, Sheryl Birkhead, Grant Canfield, Kurt Erichsen, Brad W. Foster, Terry Jeeves, Linda Michaels, Peggy Ranson, William Rotsler, and Taral Wayne are only a few of those represented. Articles large and small proliferate, by Bowers; by Gregory Benford, William Breiding, Bob Tucker, Harry Warner, Jr., Joe Haldeman, and others; *Afterworlds* contains, besides a collection of Bowers’s own writings, a series of memorial essays, by Cy Chauvin, Leah Zeldes Smith, Denise Leigh, Geri Sullivan, Andy Hooper, and, again, others.

No short review could do this justice; it is not merely a memorial to a specific person but to the very idea of fanzines in the grand manner, an idea birthed in a world very different from today’s. If you have any interest in fanzines and/or fannish history, you should purchase this; it is more than worth the price and will continue to be readable and moving when many a contemporary book, more expensive and less interesting, has been long forgotten.

The Obdurate Eye 8 (February 2021) “is what Garth Spencer does at 4240 Perry Street, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5N 3X5 if nobody stops him. You can send complaints and kudos and rants to him by mail, or by email to garth.van.spencer@gmail.com.” (also at efanzines.com).

This issue is a bit choppy, and already somewhat out of date (the calls for voting on the FAAn awards and Hugo nominations). The opening comments about the limited range of ideas within which most people operate are certainly apposite to contemporary events (and could have been expanded usefully). There is a bizarre call for new members in e-APA from “Someone posting Facebook notices under the name “Garth Spencer,”” about which Garth Spencer comments dryly that “One awaits further developments.” (Shades of Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*!). There are also a short lettercol and a quick overview of some recent fanzines.

Mark Time 136. (February, 2021. Mark Strickert, PO Box 1171, Rialto CA 92377; busnrail@yahoo.com -- \$2 cash/stamps/trade/LoC).

Since much of this fanzine traditionally has to do with Mark Strickert’s voyages, and since extended voyages are pretty limited these days, this is “A short MarkTime, but anything to keep in touch with zinesters and other pals.” It’s mainly a tale of “a long weekend of sightseeing and

relaxation” in the Coachella Valley, copiously illustrated with photographs of sights ranging from Frank Sinatra’s grave to a Marilyn Monroe sculpture to a pink dinosaur and Dole Whip Floats. Pleasant, chatty, and charming.

This Here ... 40 (Nic Farey, editor; available at efanzines.com)

The “Egotorial” is a rambling affair about erotic dreams and the need to invent a time machine in order to make the dreams come true. It has the feel of a dream itself: easier to experience than to explain. The typically wide-ranging lettercol dominates this issue (sixteen pages out of twenty-five pages of text, plus a further page containing a reply to a letter sent in conjunction with a FAAn ballot). Farey’s avowedly “acerbic” interlineated comments are the usual entertaining mix of responses both brief (“tincture of pure bollocks”) and at length (he goes into some detail on his philosophy of editorial interventions).

There are several lovely pieces of art by Ulrika O’Brien tucked in amidst the goings-on. Best of all is a photograph of his friend Jen (who, readers may recall, suffered considerably in an accident some time ago) beaming happily and displaying her dental work. Good news is always welcome.

The “Indulge Me” section contains the best joke I’ve seen recently, one which would lose its impact were it to be spoken: “A priest, a vicar and a rabbit walk into a blood bank. A nurse asks them what blood groups they are. “I’m probably a type O,” says the rabbit.”

* * *

Editors desiring reviews: If you have a print zine, send it to me at 308 Prince St., #422, St. Paul, Minn. 55101; if you have an e-zine, send the link (or a PDF) to jeab@musician.org.

Interviews

An Interview with Robert Hobart By Tamara Wilhite

Most of Robert Hobart’s writing has been in the tabletop RPG field. He ran the organized-play campaign for L5R, also known as “Heroes of Rokugan”, from 2000 to 2010. He wrote for L5R RPG as well. He’s currently writing the conclusion to his fantasy samurai series, “Empire of the Sun & Moon”.

Tamara Wilhite: You said that you started writing scenarios for the Role Playing Gamers' Association, eventually writing fiction based on said games. What is involved in writing scenarios for the RPGs?

Robert Hobart: In the glory days of the RPGA (early 90's up through early 00's) they sanctioned and distributed adventures for many different RPG systems and campaigns. Since the whole thing was voluntary and the appetite for adventures was limitless, they accepted submissions from anyone. The RPGA was owned by TSR and, later, Wizards of the Coast, after they bought out TSR. They would actually pay a modest amount of money for adventures in their own game systems -- mainly D&D, of course. For other game systems, they didn't pay and didn't claim any rights. For example, some of the Call of Cthulhu scenarios I wrote for them I later sold to Chaosium, the publisher of Call of Cthulhu. The RPGA thus provided in excellent venue for aspiring RPG writers to get their material out there and, hopefully, to attract positive attention from the games' publishers.

It was the RPGA that pioneered the idea of organized "living" RPG campaigns that ran at conventions and allowed people to play their characters at cons all over the country with hundreds of other players. They created the first one, Living City, at the start of the 1990's. It is set in a city in the default D&D campaign setting. It became very popular, leading to other campaigns for different game systems. It was through that avenue that I ended up writing and running "Living Rokugan" for the Legend of the Five Rings RPG. They had a competition for "best new living campaign" and we won it.

In the early-to-mid-00's, things changed. The RPGA was reworked into an explicitly marketing organization and eventually went into decline. As a result, campaigns such as mine split off (renamed "Heroes of Rokugan") and teamed up directly with the game publishers. These days, the RPGA is gone; there are still "living" campaigns, but they are directly run or sponsored by the companies publishing the games.

In recent years, the gaming industry has been changed by the rise of self-publishing. This is done primarily through a website called DriveThruRPG. DriveThruRPG is to the RPG industry what Amazon is to self-published authors. They are hosting and selling PDF and Print-on-Demand products from hundreds of smaller publishers and independent writers. Many RPG companies also use DriveThruRPG to sell the back-catalog that they can no longer afford to keep in print. So that has become the primary venue for aspiring RPG writers to get their materials out for others to see. And perhaps it lets them attract attention from the two or three relatively big companies in the industry.

Tamara Wilhite: You've written a dozen books for Alderac Entertainment Group as well as edited many more. While it is easy to find out many people play an RPG game, whether it is World of Warcraft or Warhammer 40,000. But how many books do they buy?

Robert Hobart: Tabletop RPGs are a very small industry, though gamers often don't realize that. D&D, the eight-hundred-pound-gorilla of RPGs, sells at best tens of thousands of its books annually. Smaller games usually sell only a few thousand physical copies over the history of a game, about the same or a little better in PDF. This, incidentally, is why most games end up having new editions every few years. Once you've sold all the copies you're going to sell, the only way to make more money off the game is to do a new edition, re-work the design, and sell it all over again.

For example, at Alderac Entertainment Group, I was co-designer and line editor on the fourth edition of Legend of the Five Rings (L5R for short). The original edition had released in 1997, the second edition in 2000, and the third edition in 2005. Fourth Edition's main rulebook (always the most successful product for an RPG) was published in 2010 and had an initial print-run of 5,000 copies. This sold out within four-five months, which AEG considered a great success. It went back to print for another 3,000 copies, which took quite a bit longer to sell, and then a third time and a fourth time for about 2,000 copies each. That put us at about 12,000 in print. The final printing was poorly timed (AEG ended up selling the IP six months later). So, we probably sold about 11,000 altogether.

The supplement/add-on books always sell less. We did 5,000-copy print runs on the first four. These had the most hype and interest. We sold 3,000 copies on each of the subsequent ones. Most of those were only reprinted once for 1,000 copies or so.

A side-effect of this is that very few people make their living in RPGs. Only a few companies, those publishing the largest and most successful games like D&D, have full-time writers/designers. Even they only have a modest number of them. AEG, which also published a collectible card game and many board games, had only three or four full-time employees and a dozen or so form-1099 part-timers of which I was one. Most of the writing in RPGs, even for D&D, is done by freelancers who typically get 3-5 cents a word.

Tamara Wilhite: And how does this reader market differ from the general market for science fiction and fantasy?

Robert Hobart: Gamers are a funny bunch, because they tend to not be very picky about writing quality as such, but very picky about accuracy/canon of their fictional worlds and about the quality and clarity of their game rules. Also, some of them are more interested in the world-building aspects of the game (which is referred to as "fluff") while others are more focused on game mechanics ("crunch"). You have to try to create products that will please both groups. With an established game like L5R, where you're doing a new edition of something that's been around for 15 years, this means a lot of time and effort has to go into research to make sure you're getting the world-details right, and a LOT of work has to go into designing the game rules. And you'll still never make everyone happy.

I'm personally somewhat unusual among gamers for actually caring strongly about the quality of the prose writing. In fact, one of the things that drew me to L5R specifically when it originally came out in the late 90's was the quality of the writing. The company lucked into several notably good writers and a solid editor on their original edition. There was also the depth and detail and verisimilitude of their setting -- a Japanese-themed samurai fantasy world. I had been fascinated by samurai ever since reading James Clavell's "Shogun" (probably at far too young an age), so the game drew me in at once. I was rather disappointed when the writing declined in later editions. Once I started working for the company, I made it my mission to restore the earlier quality. This was more for my own satisfaction than out of any commercial motive, since as far as I could tell, most people didn't notice the difference.

Tamara Wilhite: How has your experience writing fiction based on role-playing games affected your own fictional universe?

Robert Hobart: In practical terms, the main impact was that I was constantly writing and had continual deadlines, so I learned to overcome inertia and get stuff done.

In terms of the impact on my own fiction work... Between the living campaign and actually working for AEG, I spent 15 years writing for L5R, constantly developing ideas, imagining characters and scenes and stories. In many cases, these were specifically L5R ideas. But there were also plenty of "samurai" ideas that were not L5R-specific, simply because I was constantly thinking about the topic. Some of these I could adapt into the L5R setting, but some clearly didn't belong there. Those ideas got filed away in my head, and over time, they grew and coalesced into the loose outlines of a samurai epic that was very much not set in the L5R world.

Once L5R was sold off in late 2015, I was left with this other loosely developed world still in my imagination. I took about a year to decompress. Although I had enjoyed working on L5R, the pace was pretty relentless, and the work had to get done in between my real job and my family life. I realized that if I didn't make myself sit down and start writing the damn thing, it

would never be anything but a vague fantasy in my head.

Tamara Wilhite: Can you tell me more about your Empire of the Sun & Moon series?

Robert Hobart: It's an epic fantasy series set in a "samurai world" -- a world based (sometimes loosely, sometimes very closely) on the culture and history of feudal Japan. I've always been a fan of epic fantasy, ever since I read Tolkien as a kid. In recent decades, I've greatly enjoyed the "big fat fantasy" genre in works such as Jordan's Wheel of Time. I've even enjoyed Martin's Song of Ice and Fire, though I don't care for the element of nihilism that's so strong in that work. So this is my attempt at the genre, but using my knowledge and love of samurai history and fiction as the base of inspiration, rather than the more typical Tolkienesque European default.

The Empire in the story -- it is simply "the Empire" to the people living in it -- enjoyed a long period of peace under the rule of the Emperors. Four centuries ago, something went terribly wrong. It is an event referred to as the Dread Eclipse, and the last Emperor died without an heir. Since then, it's been centuries of civil war. You have the various samurai Clans grinding each other down in relentless conflict. What were once 12 Clans is, at the start of the first book, now only 6. The problems are spiritual as well as political, though. The Dread Eclipse also seems to have weakened the protection of the Sun Goddess, so that the ancient Demons who were defeated centuries ago are now awake and threatening the world.

The most obvious historical influence here is of course the "sengoku jidai" era of civil war in feudal Japan, though I've also incorporated influence from the classical Heian period, the later Tokugawa shogunate era, and from the style and themes of modern Japanese pop culture. For example, while the story is set in a samurai culture, the morality it expresses is closer to that seen in modern Japanese fiction. Realistically, feudal samurai didn't have much in the way of morality at all, though they placed a great deal of value on appearances and aesthetics. But I wanted the story to have a strong moral core, and in particular to be built on the themes of selflessness, forgiveness, and redemption that one sees in a great deal of contemporary Japanese storytelling.

There are a lot of characters, since this is an epic fantasy. The two central ones are Ookami Akira, who is the heir to the rule of the Wolf Clan, and Kenji, a sellsword (ronin) and criminal. Akira has been raised by Monks to be a master of warfare, but the experience has unfortunately left him with very poor social skills, a huge disadvantage for a noble in a samurai world. On top of that, in order to unify the divided Wolf Clan, he has been ordered into an arranged marriage with a young woman (Kuroi Kaede) who hates him. Kenji initially seems to be a straight-up villain, a wandering killer and drunkard, but we get hints from the beginning that there is more to him than the surface.

I've sometimes described the series in shorthand as "Game of Thrones with katanas" since, like with Martin's work, there's a ton of war and political intrigue, an underlying supernatural threat that gradually moves to the foreground, and a fairly realistic and gritty overall tone. However, I also feel annoyed with myself at making that comparison, since as noted I dislike the nihilism of Martin's work. Empire of the Sun & Moon, while it may sometimes be dark, rejects nihilism.

Tamara Wilhite: When does the final book in that series come out?

Robert Hobart: The series will be four books total, and I am currently working on the fourth and final one. The stress of the COVID lockdowns has made me less productive than I'd like, but I'm about 3/4 done at this point, and I'm hoping to finish the initial draft in January 2021. It is also when my cover artist is supposed to start working on the Book 4 cover. I'll still have to do editing and revisions after that, so actual publication would be best-case February, more likely March 2021.

Tamara Wilhite: What else are you working on?

Robert Hobart: At the moment, my focus is on finishing up the fourth book. After that, I may go back to some RPG design work I was working on for L5R before they sold off the IP. I can't make any money off that, obviously, but for my own personal satisfaction I'd like to finish it up and make it available for free download off my website (www.robhobart.com). I've already posted all my old L5R "living campaign" adventures there for people to freely use.

Longer term, I do have some ideas for other fiction set in the Empire of the Sun & Moon universe, and for potentially another series in a different, quasi-Western fantasy world, but whether those ideas come to fruition... well, we'll just have to wait and see!

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Robert Hobart: I hope people enjoy the books! This is a labor of love far more than a commercial venture -- I wrote them so they could live and exist out in the world, rather than just remaining a vague outline in my head that would die with me. (Hopefully not for a long time yet, to be sure -- I'm only 51!)

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Movies

Space Sweepers

Review by Thomas E. Simmons

Fans of the cult-favorite short-lived *Quark* television series – which aired 1977-1978 – fondly recall its eponymous leading man, Captain Quark. Quark piloted his United Galaxy Sanitation Patrol Cruiser (i.e., a garbage truck) along the galactic curbside, collecting trash. The half-hour comedy show suffered from a cast that never quite came together and, it seems, the world was not quite ready for a comedy sci-fi program. *Spaceballs* was still undreamed of. *Galaxy Quest* was decades away.

The new feature-length film *Space Sweepers* has a premise similar to that of *Quark*, but it is less a comedy than a dromedy. *Sweepers* has the same mood as *Guardians of the Galaxy* and a similar team-like orientation – a ragtag crew, each with a compelling backstory, with mild doses of slapstick and one-liners. Captain Jang (played by Kim Tae-ri), helms the spaceship *Victory* on its space junk mission. She and her crew roam an Earth orbit, scanning for valuable tidbits to scavenge and using every dirty trick in the book. Imagine their surprise when they come across a seven-year-old girl stowaway in one of the derelict wrecks they're scouring.

Dorothy is not a little girl, precisely. She's an adorable android who has been outfitted by ter-

rorists with a tiny H-bomb. Of course, she's played by a little girl (actor Ye-Rin Park). So, it's easy for the audience (and the film's characters) to fall in love with her – especially as she crayons the likenesses of the crew members for them. One recurring gag involves Dorothy almost sneezing as the crew takes cover – anticipating an “Ah... Ah... Ah-*BOOM!*”

Before long, the members of the crew begin to doubt their original plan to ransom Dorothy back to the terrorists who spawned her. The plot proceeds to thicken in a predictable fashion.

This is sci-fi without much science. It's a film that doesn't take a lot of risks or experiment with anything truly innovative. It could have been edited down to a leaner run time. But it's a competent effort and unique in assembling a sci-fi cast of mostly people of color. It's also a Korean film and, as such, it has a different feel than a Hollywood offering. Somehow, the syrupy sentimentality is tolerably charming, probably on account of the filmmaker's deft use of theme.

The film's theme is a tried-and-true redemption arc. In the dystopian setting of the film, mankind has been divided – with a nod to Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* – into citizens and non-citizens. Our rag-tag crew, of course, are the disenfranchised have-nots. Earth has become poisonously unlivable. (The nighttime rainy street scenes recall *Blade Runner*.) Only the privileged few can ascend to the sparkling clean utopia marketed by a multinational corporation led by a “savior” with an evil core.

In *Space Sweepers*, the team of scavengers will forge a heroic ascent of their own – but not via the path mapped by a corporate conglomerate; not by the path favored by the general population. Rather, their climb will follow a trajectory quite alien to a consumerist throw-away culture. It's a pathway in which they abandon the potential for profit in favor of sacrifice with a promise of salvation. Bottom Line: 3.5 out of 5 plastic toys from McDonald's

Novels and Other Books

One Long Ago Read Review by Will Mayo

I didn't get around to reading C. S. Lewis's children's fantasy series *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* until I was in my mid-20s, the summer of 1985, to be exact, but something about that long ago drunken summer, leaning my head against a tree and pulling my long brown hair from my eyes as I embarked on another exciting turn of the page stirs my membrane like nothing else in my brain. Just lying in that grass outside the library in the then country town of Owings Mills, Maryland, a good day's walk from Baltimore, and reading about talking lions, wizards and children on all manner of adventures excited me to no end. I never looked at a wardrobe the same way again and always wondered if just beyond that closet door in my lonely rooms if there waited new lands to be discovered. Perhaps there were. One never knows.

Question Everything Review by Will Mayo

And there was that novel by Aldous Huxley called *Brave New World* about a conforming society of the future with its own set of rules that is suddenly surprised by a naked savage who emerges from the wilderness, quoting Shakespeare and questioning their way of life. I don't

know about you but I always identified with the savage though my Shakespeare's a little rusty and there's not much wilderness left to call one's own. I suppose that's another book that made me the man I am today.

Of Sex And Rockets: The Occult World Of Jack Parsons

Review by Will Mayo

I think often of Jack Parsons, the man whose rocket fuel would send men and their machines to the Moon and beyond but also the man notorious for the black masses and orgies held at his house in California. When L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the Church of Scientology, stole his girl Betty something died in Jack right then and there and when Parsons's life ended in a mysterious explosion a few years later it was said that Jack rode that rocket for all it was worth. To this day, you can hear people say, "Ride, Jack, ride." And all look at the stars in the night sky in wonder.

Mary Roach's Stiff: The Curious Lives Of Human Cadavers

Review by Will Mayo

And so this book entails the curious nature of research on what remains of us after we're gone from shooting the bodies out of cannons as human cannon balls to using them as car crash dummies to all the tests that involve teaching young medical students about the nature of the human remains that are uniquely ours. I have to say this book was a joy to read and I can almost remember every page decades later.

Sercon

Edmond Hamilton Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph. D

N3F Historian

Edmond Moore Hamilton (October 21, 1904 - February 1, 1977) was an author of science fiction (SF), fantasy (F), and horror (H) stories. Born in Youngstown, Ohio, he was raised there and in nearby New Castle, Pennsylvania.



Something of a child prodigy, he graduated from high school and entered college at the age of 14, majoring in physics. Unfortunately, he was expelled during his third year of college because he skipped the required chapel attendance.

Hamilton's career as a SF writer began with the publication of "The Monster God of Mamurth," a short story in the August, 1926 issue of *Weird Tales*. He became a member of a remarkable group of *Weird Tales* writers

that included H. P. Lovecraft and Robert Howard.

Weird Tales published nearly eighty works of fiction by Hamilton from 1926 to 1948, making him one of the magazine's most prolific contributors. He became a friend and associate of several regular Weird Tales contributors; most notably, he struck up a 20-year friendship with genre author Jack Williamson -- as Williamson records in his 1984 autobiography *Wonder's Child*. In the late 1930s, Weird Tales printed several striking SF/F/H tales by Hamilton, including his memorable "The Man Who Evolved."

Representative Genre Novels

The Time Raider (1927)
 Within the Nebula (1929)
 The Comet Drivers (1930)
 The Cosmic Cloud (1930)
 The Sun People (1930)
 Conquest of Two Worlds (1932)
 The Horror on the Asteroid (1936)
 The Lake of Life (1937)
 Tiger Girl (1945)
 The Monsters of Juntenheim (1950)
 aka A Yank At Valhalla
 Tharkol, Lord of the Unknown (1950)
 The City at World's End (1951)
 The Star of Life (1959)
 The Sun Smasher (1959)
 Battle for the Stars (1961)
 The Valley of Creation (1964)
 Fugitive of the Stars (1965)
 Doom Star (1966)
 The Harpers of Titan (1967)

Captain Future

Some critics have stated that Hamilton would have done more in SF if he had not been derailed by Captain Future. Captain Future was a SF hero, a space-traveling scientist and adventurer -- originally published in his namesake pulp magazine from 1940 to 1944.

The character was created by the magazine's editor, Mort Weisinger, and authored by Hamilton. Genre historian Sam Moskowitz, for example, has written: "Hamilton . . . wrote all but three of the 21 novels and novelettes in the series to a hard-and-fast formula."

Hamilton found himself labeled as a writer of "blood-and-thunder juveniles" when other SF writers were writing the new SF that was coming into vogue and would make their reputations.

Pseudonyms

Over the years Hamilton's stories were published under a variety of pen names, including Robert Castle, Hugh Davidson, Will Garth, Brett Sterling, S. M. Tenneshaw, and Robert Went-

worth.

Marriage to Leigh Brackett

On December 31, 1946, Hamilton married fellow SF author and screenwriter Leigh Brackett, and moved with her to Ohio. Afterward he would produce some of his best work -- including his novels *The Star of Life* (1947), *The Valley of Creation* (1948), and *The Haunted Stars* (1960).

In this more mature phase of his career, Hamilton moved away from the fantastic elements of his earlier fiction to create some realistic stories, such as “What's It Like Out There?” (*Thrilling Wonder Stories*, December, 1952), his single most frequently reprinted and anthologized work. Leigh Brackett, shortly after she broke into SF writing, wrote her first screenplays. She helped the 1949 Nobel Prize laureate William Faulkner write the script for *The Big Sleep* (1946), considered one of the best movies ever made in the detective/mystery genre. After marrying Hamilton, Brackett took a long break from screen writing. When she returned in the mid-1950s, she wrote for TV and movies, including several films starring John Wayne.

Comic Book Work

In 1946, Hamilton began writing for DC Comics, in particular stories about Superman and Batman. One of his best known Superman stories was “Superman Under the Red Sun,” which has numerous elements in common with his 1951 novel *City at World's End*. Hamilton was instrumental in the early growth of DC’s Legion of Super-Heroes series, as one of its first regular writers. In addition, he helped create Chris KL-99 for DC’s *Strange Adventures*. He also did some work for Standard Comics (e. g., *The Black Terror* character) in the 1940s - 1950s. Hamilton retired from comic book work in 1966.

Honors/Awards/Recognitions

Hamilton’s story “The Island of Unreason” (*Wonder Stories*, May 1933) won the first Jules Verne Prize as the best SF story of the year. This was the first SF prize awarded by fan voting, a precursor of the later Hugo Awards.

GoH, Metropolitan Science Fiction Con, New York, 1954. [with wife Leigh Brackett]
GoH, Worldcon (Pacificon II), 1964. [with Brackett]
First Fandom Hall of Fame, 1967.
Alcor Award, 1989/1990.

On July 18, 2009, Kinsman, Ohio, celebrated Edmond Hamilton Day, honoring “The Dean of Science Fiction and Kinsman resident.”

Hamilton is credited as the author of the first hardcover compilation of what would eventually come to be known as the SF genre, *The Horror on The Asteroid and Other Tales of Planetary Horror* (1936).

Critical Comments

At the 1964 Worldcon Hamilton was eulogized as “pioneering the concept of interstellar adven-

ture, the notion of a galactic empire and galactic police force, the use of complete darkness as a weapon, employing a time machine to recruit an army from the past, and introducing Fortean themes.”

Before World War II, he was known as “World-Saver Hamilton” because of his many stories in which he used this theme as a plot.

Concluding Comments

Hamilton and his wife were good friends of Ray Bradbury, and all of them belonged to the Los Angeles SF fan club, the LASFS. Hamilton was also a member of the Mañana Literary Society, and one of the main characters in Anthony Boucher’s famous SF/mystery, *Rocket to the Morgue*, was based upon him. Boucher dedicated this book to the Society.

The Hamilton Memorial Award, later known as the Hamilton-Brackett Award, was created in 1977/1978, originally to honor Hamilton, and then to honor both Hamilton and Brackett after her death in 1978.

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Short Stories

Sean McGuire’s Incryptid Series: The Short Stories Reviewed by Tom Feller

I came to the author’s Incryptid urban fantasy series in an unusual way. Most fans discovered it by reading one of the novels and then seek out the stories the author has published on the Internet and elsewhere. I, on the other hand, started with the stories that the author graciously allowed to be included in last year’s Hugo Award packet. Most of them involve the Healy/Price family. Sometime around 1900, Enid and Alexander Healy defected from an organization known as the Covenant of St. George. As the name indicates, the members seek out and kill monsters. However, the Healys concluded that most of the worst monsters are humans and that many of the creatures the Covenant has declared to be monsters need protection rather than persecution. The Healys eventually moved from their native Great Britain to a small town in Michigan and had one son, Jonathan. They were accompanied by a colony of Aeslin Mice, a talking, intelligent species that worships the Healy family.

The Flower of Arizona—

Jonathan is investigating a series of gruesome murders in 1928 that correlate with the travels of the Campbell Family Circus. It is performing in Tempe, Arizona when he catches up with it. The star performer is Frances “Fran” Brown, aka The Flower of Arizona. Her act is throwing knives from horseback, which makes her a prime suspect. After she is cleared, she helps him in solving the murders, and they fall in love.

One Hell of a Ride—

Jonathan, Fran, who has left the circus, and the Aeslin Mice are taking the train from Arizona to his home in Buckley Township, Michigan to meet his parents. However, the train enters another dimension, where they are attacked by hungry imps. Fortunately, Jonathan has packed silver bullets for his revolver, Fran has a couple of silver knives for her knife throwing act in the circus, and the dining car has silverware made out of real silver. Obviously they survive, because they are still alive in the next story, and they are assisted by Clark, the train’s conductor, who just happens to be a gorgon who passes for human.

No Place Like Home—

Three months and several adventures after they meet, Jonathan and Fran finally arrive in Buckley Township. Fran’s first meeting with his parents starts roughly, but then she is made to feel like a member of the family. This is not really a stand-alone story and requires that you have read at least one of the previous two.

Stingers and Strangers—

In 1931, Jonathan and Fran, accompanied by the Aeslin Mice, visit Colorado to investigate anomalous behavior by a species of intelligent wasps called Apraxis wasps. Now these wasps are the size of shoes and when they sting someone, they do not immediately kill the person. Instead, they inject the person with larvae that later hatch. The larvae copy the host’s memories. Their investigation is successful, but the showdown with the story’s villain felt rather rushed.

Married in Green—

Jonathan and Fran were so busy having adventures that they never got around to getting married until Fran was eight months pregnant. It takes place at their home in Buckley Township, which includes a large field in lieu of a back yard. As a surprise for Fran, Jonathan invites the remnant of Fran’s old circus, which has become the Campbell Family Carnival. Fran’s old friend Juniper, a witch who makes a living as “Madame Geneva” telling fortunes, is introduced to the Aeslin Mice and serves as her maid of honor.

Sweet Poison Wine—

By the next year, Jonathan and Fran are married, living with his parents Enid and Alexander in Buckley Township, and have a two month old son named Daniel. Since they never had a chance to go on a honeymoon, they leave Daniel and the Aeslin Mice with his parents and travel to Chicago. They stay in the Hotel Carmichael, which is run by gorgons named Hector and

Lanya Kalakos. Prohibition is still in effect, and the hotel's alcohol requirements are supplied by a bootlegger. Unfortunately, another gang is muscling in on the first bootlegger's turf. The Healys get involved because the gorgons drink a special kind of wine that is poisonous to humans so they are concerned that some of the bottles will inadvertently get distributed to the Chicago's human population.

The First Fall—

This story begins with the sad story of Daniel's funeral. He was murdered in their home in the middle of the night by an intruder, who got away. Afterwards, Jonathan and Fran travel by horseback from Michigan to meet up with the Campbell Family Circus which is touring Ohio. Fran is seeking the comfort of her old friends, especially Juniper, the maid-of-honor at their wedding. Fran is hoping that Juniper will tell her whether Daniel has actually passed on to the next stage of life or is lingering in our world as a ghost.

Loch and Key—

Two years later, Jonathan and Fran are finally coming to terms with Daniel's death when they accompany his parents on their annual fishing trip to White Otter Lake. Besides the fishing, the main attraction of the lake is a colony of plesiosaurs living there. (The story implies that the Loch Ness Monster is also a plesiosaur.) The plesiosaurs are quite friendly and two of them have been named Bessie and Goliath by the Healys. The villains of the story are Eloise and Paul, the niece and nephew-in-law of Herbert Wilson, owner of half of the shoreline around the lake and protector of the plesiosaurs. Unlike their uncle, Eloise and Paul want to capture one of the plesiosaurs and transport them to the civilized world, as in King Kong. Herbert is missing, so besides protecting the plesiosaurs, the Healys look for him as well.

We Both Go Down Together—

Jonathan and Fran are expecting another baby when they get a post card from Gentling, Maine asking for help. Gentling is populated by human/mer-people hybrids known as "finfolk". The lifecycle of finfolk is to first be human, then amphibian, and finally true fish. Their babies are born human and left on the beach to be raised either by true humans or finfolk still in their human stage. The problem, the Healys learn upon their arrival, is that no new babies have arrived for over a month. After they begin their investigation, there is the added complication that their baby daughter, whom they named Alice, arrives prematurely. Among the people they meet are Angus, Gentling's mayor, his sister Lynn, their cousin Chastity, all finfolk, Elaine, a human nurse, and Nathaniel, her father, who took a finfolk woman as his second wife.

Oh Pretty Bird—

By 1940, the Healys have finally tracked down Heloise Tapper, the person responsible for Daniel's murder back in 1935. She and her husband Robert are living in Whiting, Indiana, a small factory town on Lake Michigan. She is the town librarian, and he is the school principal. They are powerful telepaths who now control the town. Accompanied by Erin and Alexander, as well as a contingency of Aeslin Mice, they leave their infant daughter Alice with Mary, their baby sitter whom they do not realize is a ghost, and travel to Whiting with the intention of killing Heloise. To protect them from the Tappers's telepathic powers, they have obtained warding necklaces from a contact in the New Orleans voodoo community.

Bury Me in Satin—

Two years later, the Healys discover that Mary Dunlavy, their babysitter, is really a ghost who has been dead for three years. Mary had been walking alone on a country road at night when she was killed in a hit-and-run accident, and her body had never been found. Although she knew that she was dead, Jane continued to walk home, where she had been living with her widowed father. Jane was sufficiently corporeal to pass as living and continued to cook and clean for her father as well as earn extra money by babysitting for the Healys. When Jane's father does not show up for work for a week, Frances and Alice pay them a visit and bring a tray of cookies. They discover that the father had died, because they can smell his dead body from the front door. Then Jane admits that she is also dead.

Snakes and Ladders—

By 1944, Alice is old enough to understand the concept of Trick or Treating on Halloween, so she and Fran dress up as cowgirls with some of the talking mice in Alice's goodie bag and take part in the tradition. Unfortunately, Alice is kidnapped by members of a snake cult. (The snake god himself turns out to be a rather nice person named Naga who becomes friends with Alice.) Fran, with the assistance of Mary the ghost, and Carl, a Sasquatch, rescues her.

Broken Paper Hearts—

It was a good thing that Alice got to spend time with her mother, because the night before St. Valentine's Day in 1945, Fran went hunting. This was not an unusual occurrence, but she did not return by the following morning. The adult Healys send Alice off to school while they search for her. Unfortunately, they find her dead body. Apparently, she had been taken by surprise by some supernatural creature. It was still difficult to read as I had gotten rather attached to Fran.

The Star of New Mexico—

This story describes Fran's funeral in Buckley Township. The title refers to a nickname of Fran's when she was a carnival performer before her marriage. Among the mourners are Juniper Campbell, Fran's best friend during her carnival years and witch in her own right, Mary the ghost, and Lynn, a finfolk, and Elaine, a normal human, both from "We Both Go Down Together".

The Way Home—

By 1954, Alice is a sixteen year old with no interest in becoming a cheerleader in Buckley Township's high school, but enthusiastically grabs her rifle and heads into the woods when she hears about salamanders that spit acid. Unfortunately, she finds them and almost dies. Her storyline consists of her efforts to find her way home, which include an encounter with a carnivorous plant.

Thomas Price is an English agent for the Covenant of St. George. He is assigned to travel to Buckley, embed himself in the community, and spy on the Healys. Thomas is NOT in good standing with the Covenant, and they consider him expendable. They buy a house for him

called the “Parrish Place”, which they got cheap because Parrish murdered his entire family. Alice and Thomas meet and, according to the later stories, get married and become the ancestors of major characters in the later stories in the series.

Lay of the Land—

Without the permission of her father, Alice takes Thomas some shortbread that her grandmother has baked. Then she introduces him to Mary the ghost and takes him on a tour of the woods outside the town.

Target Practice—

Alice is walking in the woods outside of Buckley Township when she encounters a “dire boar”, which is essentially a wild boar the size of a cow. She is lightly armed, for her, with only her second-best hatchet and six throwing knives. She reaches the Parrish Place, where Thomas rescues her by scaring off the boar with a handgun. Alice later returns to the woods with a shotgun to hunt down the dire boar and is almost killed. Fortunately, Enid and Thomas, who just happens to have an elephant gun, rescue her.

Take the Shot—

The following winter Thomas, who we learn is a sorcerer, is still living in Buckley Township, but the Healys have gone on vacation to Florida. At Alice’s request, Mary the ghost checks in on him periodically. Not a whole lot goes on this story other than Mary taking Thomas to a bar frequented by legendary creatures such as sasquatches, but you do learn more about Mary. She is unable to use a hammer, but she is sufficiently corporeal that she can hold the nails while Thomas is assembling book cases. She can even drive a car and drink alcoholic beverages without getting drunk.

Winter Sunshine—

While Thomas is living through his first Michigan winter, the Healys are on a vacation in Florida, where they stay with the Campbell Family Carnival. Alice and her friend Laura bicycle to the beach, where they encounter a female water sprite. The sprite’s younger brother was inadvertently scooped up by two of the carnival workers when they were obtaining some fresh sea water for the carnival’s seals. They rescue the brother, of course.

The Ghosts of Bourbon Street—

Now the stories fast forward to the present day. One of Thomas and Alice’s granddaughters, Verity Price, and her boyfriend Dominic de Luca pay a visit to New Orleans during Mardi Gras and look up a Price family friend, Rose Marshall, who is a ghost originally from Buckley Township. One of the oldest ghosts in New Orleans, Jermaine Favre (there is no mention of the quarterback), asks for their help with a new ghost who lives in a haunted house that was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina. The new ghost, Benjamin Georges, has been vandalizing Mardi Gras floats to the annoyance of the older ghosts. They are assisted by a ghost named Lady Amelia who is addicted to romance novels.

Swamp Bromeliad—

Next Verity and Dominic, accompanied by the Aeslin Mice, visit Buckley Township. Dominic is a former Covenant agent who has faked his own death. No one in the Healy-Price family lives there anymore, but they still own the Parrish Place, which is where they stay. Mary the ghost is still around to greet them. A young boy gets caught by a carnivorous plant called a “Swamp Bromeliad”, and they rescue him.

Snake in the Glass—

Verity and Dominic then pay a visit to Chicago and stay at the Carmichael Hotel, which is owned and operated by the same family of gorgons from “Sweet Poison Wine”, where they get in the middle of a domestic dispute. Arranged marriages are a tradition with gorgons. However, the oldest daughter doesn’t like her father’s choice, but Verity helps resolve the situation.

Waking Up in Vegas—

Verity and Dominic’s next stop is Las Vegas for a working vacation accompanied by some of the Aeslin Mice. Dominic needs the documents to establish a new identity and for them to get married, and Verity’s Uncle Al, a pawnbroker, just happens to also be in the false document business. Complications ensue, of course, especially when someone wants to kidnap the mice and sell them on the black market.

My Last Name—

Verity and Dominic finally reach the Price family compound outside of Portland, Oregon so that Dominic can meet her parents. It starts roughly, but eventually turns out OK. The story is rather anti-climactic and reminded me of “No Place Like Home”, but it was good to finally meet the generation between Alice and her grandchildren.

Survival Horror—

Verity’s sister Antinomy, aka Annie, is visiting their cousin Artie when he downloads a video game that sucks them into another dimension where they must solve a series of puzzles to return to their world. Annie’s solution is ingenuous rather than ingenious, to quote Professor Moriarty in the old Sherlock Holmes movie, *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*.

Blocked—

Annie liked high school in Portland, Oregon, because she got to be a cheerleader, unlike her grandmother Alice. Unfortunately, Annie felt at loose ends when she graduated. At the suggestion of her cousin Elsie, Artie’s sister, she tries out for a roller derby team called the “Slasher Chicks”. She is accepted and takes on the roller derby name “Final Girl”.

Bad Dream Girl—

In this story, Annie has not just made the roller derby team, but has become a star. Mysterious things happen during the games, however, and Annie solves the mystery with the help of her cousins Artie and Elsie.

Jammed—

Annie had just finished one of her roller derby games, when a murder takes place at the warehouse where the game took place. It is not a normal murder, however, as the only body part remaining was one leg. They identified the victim as one of the skaters on the opposing team, and Annie quickly concludes that the perpetrator is not human. With the help of Elsie, Artie, and several of the other skaters, Annie tracks down and kills the monster.

Sleepover—

Elsie, a lesbian, is watching one of Annie's games when she allows herself to be picked up by another woman. Unfortunately, this turns out to be a ruse, and she gets kidnapped. Fortunately, the kidnappers, a group of teenage boys, have good intentions, which is to have Elsie rescue a little girl named Angie who herself has been kidnapped by boogeymen. Now this series does NOT have vampires, but the boogeymen dwell underground and are sensitive to light. Elsie is able to persuade them to release Angie.

IM—

The title of this story is the abbreviation from "Instant Message" and the narrator is Artie. The love of his life, Sarah, has been injured saving Verity's during one of her adventures and is recovering in the home of her mother in Ohio. Artie refuses to leave his parents' house in Oregon in case she calls, texts, or instant messages. (Actually, this is not much of a hardship for him, because he only leaves his basement apartment to attend a comic book convention or visit a comic book store.)

The Measure of a Monster—

By the time of this story, Sarah, a telepath, has sufficiently recovered to help Alexander Price, another grandson of Alice and Thomas and the brother of Verity and Annie, and his girlfriend Shelby in solving a crisis in a nearby gorgon community. The crisis is that a large number of their children have been kidnapped by poachers who intend to sell them on the black market. The story itself is not as interesting as the discussion of gorgon physiology.

The Recitation of the Most Holy and Harrowing Pilgrimage of Mindy and also Mork—

The title refers to a journey made by two of the Aeslin Mice, Mork and Mindy. At the request of Annie who has long given up roller derby and disappeared on an adventure, her boyfriend Samuel Coleridge Taylor drops them off at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport. They intend to stowaway on a flight to Portland, which is now the base of the Healy-Price family. The main story line, narrated by Mindy, consists of their adventures in the airport. Besides humans, they encounter female dragons who can pass for human.

Taylor is an intelligent, human-sized monkey who is also a shape changer. He can pass for human when necessary. The secondary story line consists of his conversations with Emery, his human grandmother, and Mary the ghost. Among other things, they discuss Annie's disappearance.

Red as Snow—

This is a story in the series that does not involve members of the Healy-Price family. Istas is a Waheela, a shape-changing resident of the Arctic. In their native form, they are ravenous 11 foot long wolves, but they can pass for human. Her boyfriend is Ryan Yukimura, who is a Tanuki, a shape changer from Japanese legends. In their human forms, they live in New York City and work in a strip club, her as a waitress wearing Lolita-style clothing and him as a bartender. Unfortunately, her father and her two brothers pay them a visit. Her mother has died or was killed, so her father wants her to come home and become his wife. Obviously, this does not sit well with either Istas or Ryan, so they have a big fight.

Black as Blood—

When Istas meets Ryan's family, it does not go as badly as when Ryan met Istas's, but it does not go well either. They fly to Seattle to meet them, but Ryan's family does not approve of the idea of his marrying outside his species and do not make her welcome. The fighting in this story is strictly with words.

Conclusion—

The author's approach to urban fantasy is alone the lines of "everything but the kitchen sink". All the stories I have read are interesting, many of them are fun, but some of them are sad, especially the ones that concern the death of a recurring character. While the characters go on adventures, they also have lives. They grow up, get married, have children, and die. I definitely recommend this series to anyone interested in urban fantasy.

Video

Rabid Ears: Ravings of a TV Fiend By Cathode Ray

The last few issues of TV Guide and TV Weekly have been sitting on the floor in the corner of the dining room, conspiring since our last column. Sometimes at night, we can hear them chuckling, sometimes telling stories, sometimes making plans. We don't yet know what they're planning. They won't let us see their blueprints or their shopping lists, and they stop talking, to—silent-eyed—watch us walk through the dining room as we come and go to get the mail. This week's issue of TV Weekly hasn't arrived yet, so we've put out an All Points Bulletin with the local constabulary. It's time for another edition of "Rabid Ears: Ravings of a TV Fiend," a periodic column about the most interesting and important offerings of sf, fantasy, horror, and other genre television programming. Let's see what's what—now, and next—on the old boob tube, shall we? Look. Up in the sky. It's a bird. It's a plane.

The March 29 to April 11 double issue of TV Guide marks a milestone of sorts since the editors of this fine fanzine first accepted my collect and reverse charge calls, and this column began. For the first time in this column's history, Jim Halterman's "25 Top Shows" column, which draws on Nielsen Media Research, included a genre offering in the top 25. In the week of Jan. 4

-10, 2021 (so the magazine says, though I think that's a misprint; maybe March 1-7?), Debris on NBC made the list with a Watched Live viewership rating of 4.4. Reportedly, it was the second-highest broadcast drama debut of the 2020-21 season, following *The Equalizer*'s premiere after the Super Bowl.

Matt Roush's "Ask Matt" column leads with a question from Tony—if that even be his real name—asking whether the actors on Disney+'s *WandaVision* could be nominated for an Emmy despite the show's superhero lineage. Roush suggests that given *The Mandalorian*'s seven wins last year, genre shows can totally contend, even saying that *WandaVision* "wasn't an ordinary 'superhero' show by any measure." I've now watched the first five episodes of the series—four in a row last night—and it is seriously good TV. Even people who don't like superhero movies—or comic books—will be intrigued by the program. For example, my wife, who doesn't read comic books or like the Marvel movies at all otherwise, absolutely loves *WandaVision*. Last night, she watched sitting at the edge of her seat.

As we pass from March into April, there are a few notable premieres and renewals: *Supergirl* on the CW on March 30, a new *Kung Fu* series on the CW starting April 7, *Fear the Walking Dead* on AMC on April 11, and *Outlander* renewing for a seventh season on Starz. *Supergirl*'s month-end premiere features Jon Cryer as Lex Luthor, and virtual reality. We are intrigued by the NBC season premiere of *Manifest* on April 1. Returning for its third season, the show—which I haven't watched yet—focuses on the disappearance and later return of an airline flight, audio-visual hallucinations (and perhaps more?), and the concept of a "death date," which reminded this wretched writer of the *Final Destination* franchise. Have any Neffers seen *Manifest*? What do you think? Write care of this fanzine and let us know.

On April 9, a new original horror anthology titled *Them* debuts on Prime Video. The first episode focuses on racism and the supernatural in the '50s. The show's creator and executive producer is a self-proclaimed Alfred Hitchcock geek who calls the program a classic cinema throwback. We shall see, but with a title like *Them*, we've got ants in our pants already. Meanwhile, the 2019-20 UFO period piece *Project Blue Book* has arrived on Prime Video's IMDb TV channel. Episodes are based on actual documented ET encounters and events, so UFO nuts will have plenty to phone home about. And the 1984-86 British series *Robin of Sherwood* is now streaming on Prime Video. Don't use the loo on the lift on the lorry! At least, not after Little John, guv'nor.

But the most notable program this column, perhaps, is *Debris* on NBC. Not only is it the first genre show to break the top 25 since this column first saw print—and that's a big deal—it's getting pretty heavy promotion by the network. Current episodes continue to earn inclusion in "What's Worth Watching," and the show snagged a two-page cover feature in the March 1-14 TV Guide—which also promoted a contest in which readers could locate pieces of debris throughout the issue to enter and multiple ads—and a p. 3 callout in the Feb. 28 to March 6 edition of TV Weekly. I watched the first episode on demand last weekend, and it's a good, good show. Created by the writer and executive producer of *Fringe*, the show will certainly pique the interest of X-Files fans.

Pencil these in your calendar, fans and fellow freaks: April 1—no fooling—Season 2 of *Creepshow* premieres on Shudder. April 5, a 1977 *Starsky & Hutch* two-parter, "The Plague," hits a little close to home on getTV with its virus-related storyline. On April 7, a reboot of the David Carradine classic *Kung Fu* will premiere on the CW. Starring Nicky Shen, the show follows the

adventures of a Chinese American woman who returns from training overseas to “clean up the streets of her crime-ridden San Francisco nabe.” April 10, HBO2 will air a *Game of Thrones* Season 1 marathon and Epix will enable fans to binge on Season 2 of *Pennyworth* leading up to the next day’s finale. And April 11 brings the HBO premiere of *The Nevers*, a supernatural steampunk program set during the Victorian era. An 1896 cosmic event causes a group of women to develop unusual powers, which leads them to discover an underground community of other misfits and malcontents. That show sounds really, really cool.

Also of potential interest to Neffers: The new *Superman & Lois* airs Tuesdays on the CW. The DC Comics action drama focuses on Clark Kent and Lois Lane as the parents of two teenage sons, the family’s return to Smallville, and a series of events unfolding around Morgan Edge, Lex Luthor, and—to be honest—puberty. I’ve watched the first episode, and it’s worth checking out.

It’s a close No. 2 to Debris’s No. 1 this column. In the Feb. 28 to March 6 edition of *TV Weekly*, Matt Roush’s “Ask Matt” column considers how well *Superman & Lois* could do in the ratings. Roush says that even though *Smallville* averaged 6-7 million viewers—then seen as a small number—in its first seasons in the early 2000s, it later averaged 2-3 million. Roush doesn’t expect *Superman & Lois* to hit the top 10, but perhaps the top tier of CW shows. “[I]f it gets too tangled in some CW ‘verse’ where it can’t stand on its own as a series, that would probably inhibit it from being the breakout you’re hoping for,” he writes.

The first season of the new sf anthology *Amazing Stories* is now available on Apple TV+. If you haven’t yet finished *WandaVision*, it’s still available on Disney+—highly recommended. The season finale of *American Gods* aired on Starz near the end of March. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* debuted on Disney+ in mid-March, and the end of the month brought us a new animated original, *Invincible*—based on the comic book—on Prime Video, and the second-season closer of anthology horror series *Into the Dark* on Hulu. And if you like Sherlock Holmes, the new Netflix show *The Irregulars* focuses on the street-savvy supporters of Dr. Watson and the insightful investigator.

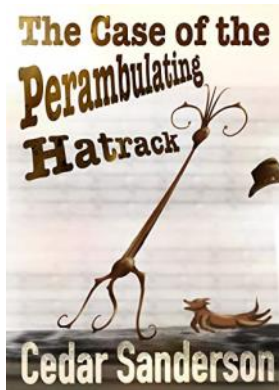
The April 2021 issue of *Remind*, which features vintage and retro media in every edition, regularly showcases Sci Fi & Horror in its “Classic TV” schedule. On MeTV alone, Neffers can tune in to *The Twilight Zone* (Monday-Friday, 12:30 a.m. ET), *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (Saturday, 12 a.m.), *Lost in Space* (Saturday, 1 a.m.), *Land of the Giants* (Saturday, 3 a.m.), *The Invaders* (Saturday, 5 a.m.), *Star Trek* (Saturday, 10 p.m.), *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (Saturday, 11 p.m.), and *The Powers of Matthew Star* (Sunday, 6 a.m.). And, of course, you can also watch *Svengoolie*, on which the eponymous modern-day horror host screens old sf and horror flicks at 8 p.m. ET—also on MeTV. (If I could only have access to one network, I do believe MeTV might suffice.)

The March 29 to April 11, 2021, *TV Guide* crossword, Puzzle #1411, held a handful of cantankerous clues. 15 Across is “Shrek is one.” 32 Across is “Poisonous Batman villain.” 9 Down is “Biology teacher on *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*.” And 42 Down is “One ____ Beyond.” Who dares speculate? Send in your educated guesses by mail care of this clubzine.

Until next time, true believers, this is “Cathode Ray,” ducking into all the phone booths, not just to change clothes—I have so many outfits!—but to check the coin return for slugs. Turn on, tune in, and blast off!

Gourmet Bureau

Food of Famous Writers
 Salat Sanderson for Cedar Sanderson
 By George Phillies



As some of you are aware, Cedar Sanderson is preparing to move to Texas. She is therefore a bit busy, so I am offering up a recipe for this month. This is a Russian Salad, meaning it is a salad that includes cooked as well as raw vegetables. Inspiration was drawn from a recipe for Salad Nicoise I saw someplace on the internet a few days ago.

In any event, the Author of Honor published — on April 1 — a new book, *The Case of the Perambulating Hatrack*, available on Kindle and as an Amazon paperback. It is meant as a not-serious tale, as witness its date of publication.

Salat Sanderson

And now the recipe, for one. It takes about a half hour to make, mostly to boil the potatoes.

5 new potatoes — boil for 20-25 minutes, until very tender, then chop by cross-cutting into thin spears

2-3 eggs — hard boil for 15 minutes or longer. These are going to be fine chopped, so they do need to be fairly hard

5 asparagus stalks — section crosswise, sprinkle with lemon and microwave to tenderness.

A half-dozen salted anchovy fillets — fine chop

A Campari tomato — chop fine.

A small tin of tuna fish in oil, about five ounces

I do not use salt in cooking; I let guests and myself do that at the table.

Put a bed of chopped or hand-shredded lettuce on a large plate. Layer onto the plate the chopped tomato, the anchovies, the asparagus, and after shredding the tuna fish. Put down in bands the cooked, sliced potatoes and the chopped eggs. Douse liberally with an oil dressing. I used a garlic-basil vinaigrette. With some care everything is visible in places, giving a full range of color to the dish. Bon Appetit!





Moonlight Escape
by Angela K. Scott