

# Tightbeam 298

July 2019



Angela K. Scott ... Sci-Fi Space Dragon

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Fiction reviews are courtesy Declan Finn, Jim McCoy, and Pat Patterson. Declan Finn’s web page [declanfinn.com/](http://declanfinn.com/) covers his books, reviews, writing, and more. Jim McCoy’s reviews and more appear at [/jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com](http://jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com). Pat Patterson’s reviews appear on his blog [habakkuk21.blogspot.com](http://habakkuk21.blogspot.com) and also on Good Reads and Amazon.com.

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# Table of Contents

## Art

Front Cover...Angela K. Scott...Sci-Fi Space Dragon

Back Cover...Jose Sanchez...Land of the Rising Suns

## Editorial

4...Discussion letters are moving to TNFF

## Anime

4...Jessi Silver...Planet With

6...Jessi Silver...Revue Starlight

10...Jessi Silver...Aggressive Retsuko (Aggretsuko)

## Novels

12...Pat Patterson...A Pillar of Fire by Night by Tom Kratman

14...Jim McCoy...Hell Spawn by Declan Finn

15...Pat Patterson...Dark Moon Arisen by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

17...Declan Finn...Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys

19...Jim McCoy...Come, Seeling Night by Daniel Humphreys

21...Jim McCoy...Radioactive Evolution by Richard Hummel

23...John Thiel...11/22/63 by Stephen King

24...Pat Patterson...Blood Moon Eclipse by Lloyd Behm II

25...Jim McCoy...The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell

27...Pat Patterson...The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell

29...Pat Patterson...Possum Creek Massacre by Cedar Sanderson

30...Pat Patterson...Guardzman by Pam Uphoff

31...Pat Patterson...Lay of the Legionnaire by Chris Sommerkorn

33...Pat Patterson...CASPer Alamo

## Comics

35...Jim McCoy...Deadworld: Requiem for the Dead

## SerCon

37...Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D....Miriam Allen deFord: Science Fiction-Writing Feminist

41...Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D....The Whitman Penny Books

## Food of Famous Authors

44...Cedar Sanderson...Daniel Hoyt's Thai Chicken Satay

45...Cedar Sanderson...44Leo Champion's Cassoulet

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## Editorial

Tightbeam has regularly been the N3F's letter zine. Letters surely include letters on club policies, so we started publishing those letters here. However, recently I received a letter entirely justly taking me to task for that policy, for the excellent reason that a modest fraction of our voting members do not use email and therefore never see Tightbeam. Letters on club policies will therefore all be going back to TNFF, including several letters that already appeared here.

## Anime

This issue, I've located Jessi Silver's wonderful reviews of some of the Neffy anime nominees.

### Planet With Review by Jessi Silver

Souya Kuroi has dreams of people with superpowers fighting a massive dragon in the sky, but his real life is almost as weird. He's had amnesia for about two weeks and been taken in by a maid and an anthropomorphic cat. When a UFO in the shape of a stuffed bear approaches Sori-masaka City and other metros around the world, he's startled to see seven rainbow-sparkling heroes zoom out to confront it – just like in his dream. Even weirder, the maid wants him to leave his shelter to confront these heroes and take the source of their power. – ANN



Episode 1 Summary: Souya Kuroi is living with amnesia, but seems relatively unaffected by it. Though his family might be dead (maybe?) and he doesn't really know who he is, he doesn't have enough of a memory to realize that he should be upset. He was taken in by a maid ("Ginko") and a giant cat ("Sensei") after his accident, so he's got a place to stay and food to eat (though he'd prefer if there were more meat). School is fine, too, though he still has some trouble remembering his class rep's name, and she seems to be pretty invested in his life so that creates lots of opportunity for embarrassment on his part. One day while Souya is just sitting around in math class, there's an announcement about a UFO approaching the mainland; it turns out that it's one of many horrifying bear-shaped aircraft that have appeared all over the planet. The world watches as a troupe of seven "superheroes" arrive out of nowhere to dispatch the "enemy" but Souya is given specific instructions from Ginko to leave the school building and, eventually, fight against those heroes. When he finally confronts one of the seven individuals, he joins with Sensei to become a powerful and strange fighting unit that's bigger and stronger than either of them. When he obtains a pendant from the defeated "hero," Souya's memories begin to come back to him and they suggest some horrifying things.

Impressions: If the summary you just read sounds confusing and full of strange twists, turns, and even perhaps multiple genres, well, you don't know the half of it (unless you've actually watched the episode already!). I think a lot about the traits that define a fascinating first episode of an anime and it's very difficult to nail down many specific qualities; much of the success comes down to how well the elements are managed rather than what they actually are. It's very easy to tell when an episode falls flat, because it's often offensive in some way or aims for flash without substance. It might be obtuse for the sake of cultivating a nonexistent "mystery," or

misleadingly complex due to multiple unaddressed plot threads. I think some of the better opening episodes are those that feature interesting ideas and appear to have a road map in place to best explore them. This episode of Planet With has a lot going on, and the compelling bits aren't necessarily what one might expect, but there seems to be some purpose to its construction and that alone bumps it from disastrous to intriguing.

To be honest, I think what initially fascinated me the most is that Souya is the obvious protagonist of this series (or at least he is so far), but his actions pit him against the people who might fit the more typical heroic framework in other series. There's the sense that the seven tokusatsu-esque fighters who appear seemingly out of nowhere to attack the unidentified objects could be the heroes of their own story, one taking place parallel to the one we're watching. In a typical series, we'd be rooting for the super sentai group, not watching a random amnesiac steal their powers after being swallowed by a giant cat. I do get more than a vague sense that this isn't going to be a typical series, though.

We get a precious few moments of insight into the people Souya is pitted against, and to be honest they don't really come across as adversarial. The character who gets some focus (and who Souya battles at the end of the episode) is a man who, prior to getting involved with this group of magically-armored warriors, became a firefighter. As a child he watched as his mother was unable to escape a house fire, and this inspired him to achieve that goal. Firefighters and other individuals who make their living rescuing others are those who we most frequently look up to as real-life heroes, individuals who put their lives on the line for the good of the general public. Our cultures honor that sort of selflessness without questioning it. This series, however, seems to question it, or at least posits that people with the best, most pure motivations may still become involved in something that is not for the greater good or which works against the goals of someone else whose idea of "good" is drastically different from the perceived norm. It's an interesting puzzler and I do like it when my default beliefs are challenged.



They're weird and they can't spell, either.

The teddy bear UFOs, whose origins and goals are complete unknowns at this point, also don't seem particularly malevolent (though they're absolutely creepy and not something I'd want to see floating in the sky above my town). It saddens but doesn't surprise me that the immediate response from multiple parties is to initiate weaponized attacks against them. First the military intervenes unsuccessfully (it's difficult to launch an attack when the adversary can turn missiles into cotton balls, honestly), and then the aforementioned group of mysterious people arrives. Members of both groups are drawn into illusory world that seem to calm them and make them uninterested in being aggressive any longer. The firefighter is even presented with a scenario in which his mother is rescued from the house fire and he gets a

chance to say goodbye to her. It's not out of the question that the UFO may have produced these illusions to induce docility in its targets and to make a future takeover easier, but of all the bad things it could have done I feel like this was pretty low on the intensity scale. Also, the object visually attempts to indicate that it's peaceful, and while that could be a lie why just assume that it is? It just gives me more reason to suspect that this anime is not aiming to be your typical "good guys against bad guys" sort of story, but instead will likely be as complicated as it is strange.

I had a bunch of trouble writing about this episode, because it's not an episode that allows one

to make very many solid presumptions about what's happening and why. It's a bit disorienting. But at this early stage it also gives the impression that it's prodding the viewer to question their own assumptions about story construction and heroism and perhaps a host of other things that are yet to come. This show wasn't on my radar going into the season, but it's definitely on my "watch more" list now.

Pros: It takes your assumptions and causes you to question them. The protagonist isn't a typical hero and the adversaries might very well just be heroes of a different sort.

Cons: The first episode is disorienting.

Grade: B

### Revue Starlight Review by Jessi Silver

"Starlight" is the song and dance revue troupe loved throughout the world. Karen and Hikari make a promise with each other when they're young that one day they'll stand on that stage together. Time passes, and now the girls are 16 years old. Karen is very enthusiastic about the lessons she takes every day, holding her promise close to her heart. Hikari has transferred schools and is now away from Karen. But the cogs of fate turn, and the two are destined to meet again. The girls and other "Stage Girls" will compete in a mysterious audition process to gain acceptance into the revue.



Review: This review contains plot and thematic spoilers for the anime. Heavy spoilers are indicated; the section in question can be skipped.

Do you believe in fate? That once our life is set in motion, its pre-determined pathway is truly an immovable arc of destiny? Anime is filled with stories of prophecies fulfilled and traditions unbroken; it's a theme whose expression allows us to believe in the possibility and comfort of things greater than ourselves. There are also plenty of anime, however, that dare to suggest that we, as human beings, are more responsible for our lives than some of us may be comfortable fully accepting. I tend to like these stories better, because rather than simply implying that our poor state of being is solely the result of our own mistakes, it suggests that we might also have some power to alter the flow of the river and set ourselves on a better course, given the opportunity and support of course.

Revue Starlight is, in its simplest form, a story about a group of girls choosing not to accept an exclusionary story – a fate which does not encompass the happiness of them all. Instead, they attempt to re-write the stage-play of their existence and to reinterpret their story as one which allows room for successful fulfillment of their desires.

The story begins at Seisho Performing Arts Academy, where student Karen Aijo and her friends comprise a particularly talented group of students who held the starring roles in the previous year's production of "Starlight." "Starlight" holds a special place in Karen's heart; she and childhood friend Hikari Kagura, after seeing the play performed, vowed that they would one

day share the stage as stars in a future production. Karen is positive that their dream is about to become a reality when Hikari returns from London and transfers to Seisho. Unfortunately, Hikari behaves coldly to her and seems to have her own very singular ambitions. Karen searches for her friend one evening and happens to find a mysterious elevator that plunges deep into depths below the academy. What she finds is that many of her classmates are embroiled in a series of secret and physically exhausting auditions for the title of “Top Star,” Hikari among them. Against others’ protests, Karen forces her way into these auditions to find a way for her and Hikari’s shared dream to become a reality.

The series appears to be the product of many influences. Takarazuka theater is an obvious one, with its similar stage and actor terminology and school training system. The general makeup of the cast, as well as their wardrobe styling seems to reference various popular idol series. My first gut reaction, however, was to compare the series to Revolutionary Girl Utena; while I wouldn’t necessarily say that this anime has the depth or staying power of Ikuhara and Be-Papas’ powerhouse shoujo series, the way much of the story plays out via duels, the visual eccentricity and sense of scale in many of the scenes, and the way the story provides a vehicle for young women to support one another and seize control of their destiny in the face of a strange (and vaguely threatening) male figurehead definitely feels inspired and somewhat informed by Anthy and Utena’s story. Influences are one thing, though; the end product’s incorporation of those influences and the way in which they’re used to express something different is the more impressive aspect of the show.

Those who haven’t actually seen the series may still be aware of it due to its surreal and lavishly-animated auditions, during which two (or more) of the characters engage in an all-out physical battle while expressing their emotions through song. I think it would be easy to be bombarded by the action grandiosity and miss the forest for the trees so-to-speak; though the theatrical numbers in this series are top-notch and definitely worthy of notice, what I found more powerful were both the moments of character drama and the ways in which the series addresses the central theme of overthrowing fate.

The series is built on the shoulders of its characters’ relationships. Karen and Hikari’s friendship is the beating heart of the story, the one which disrupts the system put in place to declare a single victor in the fight for Top Star. There are also several other couplings between the characters, both platonic and (likely) romantic, which comprise the basis for many of the other duels depicted during the auditions (some of which occur concurrently with others). What impressed me about the series was that it was able to refrain from portraying these conflicts as petty or based on simplistic rivalries, instead wholeheartedly conveying the fact that most of the characters had generally positive feelings towards their competitors and were forced to weigh their own ambitions against the task of maintaining their treasured friendships. This does nothing to deplete the tension of the duels; instead it clearly raises the stakes. Since it’s not entirely apparent whether the songs and sword-fights are actually happening or are instead some shared hallucination between the characters, I found the sense of suspense they generated to be impressive.

Aside from two central characters, there are seven others with relationships and roles of varying significance. I think the one I identified with the most was Nana Daiba (in Japanese name order Daiba Nana or “Banana” as her nickname goes). Nana is portrayed as a helper; she’s supportive to a fault and always bakes banana-themed treats for her fellow stage-girls as they prepare for their performances. Her altruism is somewhat of an illusion, though; her contributions are all

geared towards the end goal of fulfilling her wish as a future top star. What we discover roughly halfway through the series is that the characters have been caught in a time recursion of Nana's making; having won the title of Top Star, the wish she made was to go back and repeat the experience of her first-year performance in "Starlight." In her mind, nothing can possibly top this performance – the feeling of preparing for the play, donning the costumes, and being on stage can never be replicated or surpassed unless all the conditions are exactly the same. Each time she wins the auditions (which she does as, per her wish, the outcomes are all predetermined), the cycle begins anew.



Nana Daiba wishes for her perfect performance.

As much as we can see that this is harmful, it's also very understandable; who among us hasn't wanted to re-live some rose-colored past glory? Nana's desire plays to her self-perceived strength as "background support" – she's the "helper" who makes sure that all the gears are turning and that the show goes as planned. It's just that her hand in it is heavier than the other characters realize. In a strange juxtaposition, Nana's acts of repeatedly allowing her version of the "correct" fate to play out are predicated on her ability to retain control and manipulate her world via the system as-is.

Hikari's arrival is the wrench that stops the cogs from turning, or perhaps it may be more accurate to say that her entrance is what finally causes the timeline to jump tracks and make forward progress again. Eight actors become nine, their roles in the play are shaken and redistributed, and fate is no longer so certain. Karen, who was not originally a powerhouse player, is driven to succeed by Hikari's presence, and now the group begins to question a system that gives all the glory to one while the others walk away with nothing.

Setting this story in the world of live theater was not just an aesthetic choice and relating it to the allegorical tale of lost friendship in "Starlight" was no offhand decision, in my opinion. Much of the series is spent lamenting the fact that the heroines in "Starlight" are never able to achieve the ultimate unity that they seek. The story is tragic and ends with the two characters being separated for all eternity. The ultimate end of the secret auditions will choose a Top Star, and as we learn later on the consequences for coming in second place are dire – the runner-up's love for the stage and performing upon it are stolen for good. Neither of these are fated to be stories with happy endings; the words in the storybook that Hikari has and the lines of the play that the girls perform are locked into that tragic form by tradition and the permanence of the written word.

Or are they? It's lonely at the top.

Some of my favorite anime series (and my favorite characters) are those which question the need to rely on tradition and which refuse to accept the inevitability of fate. Karen Aijo is Revue Starlight's squeaky wheel, the person who holds her promise with Hikari in much higher regard than lines or stage direction or rules. She's convinced throughout the series that there must be a way for Hikari and herself to achieve stardom together, though the way to achieve that goal isn't apparent. A powerful example of Karen's stubbornness occurs within the last couple of episodes, when she takes the copy of the storybook on which "Starlight" is based and creates her own translation of the text. This montage might seem extraneous at first, perhaps a



last ditch effort to glean some meaning in order to rescue her friend. However, I think it conveys something much more meaningful.

We think of literature, especially “classic” literature, as monumental and unchanging, but so much of a story’s meaning can be based on the way one person interprets it for themselves. Stories like *The Tale of Genji* with its complicated relationships and characters with ever-changing social ranks, or even something more familiar to Western audiences like *The Little Mermaid*, which was at one time a tragic allegory for the author’s sexuality, can be given new meaning by people with new perspectives, insights, and, yes, even agendas. Sometimes a story is remade for the society that exists at that point in time. Sometimes a reminder of life’s many tragic outcomes is less valuable than a story which rejects that tragedy for something that lifts up its participants. The value of a sad story versus a happy one is always up to the person doing the reading – personally, I believe that stories which present negative outcomes and emotions have as much purpose and power as light-hearted ones, but not everyone agrees. Sometimes it pays to question if and why a well-regarded, famous, or traditional story or play still has value; throwing up one’s hands and saying “it’s an important part of literary canon” (whose canon?) or “it’s always been performed that way” is often a way of shirking responsibility when we are in the position to question the status-quo.

“Starlight,” which at first seems allegorical not only for the opinion that women must forever compete with one-another, but also that relationships between women (and especially very close and/or romantic ones) are doomed to end in tragedy. Karen chooses to reject that by wholly rejecting all the arbitrary rules of their competitive stage system and choosing to rewrite and refine the story that she and her friend love. I find that to be an incredibly powerful act of creation and rebirth.



Hikari and Karen hope to achieve their shared will.

My understanding is that this series’ production had problems almost from the get-go, the product of an ambitious concept and the expectation of lavishly-animated and unique revue battles for all the characters. While I hate to sound as though I’m encouraging a production system that overlooks the health of its workers, it’s also difficult for me not to admire the sheer force of will it took to bring this story to life. Smooth, expressive animation, unique storyboarding, convincing compositing... these aren’t the sorts of things that I require when I’m watching anime. Though it’s a visual medium I’m generally satisfied if the story itself is interesting. But there’s just something exhilarating about full animation when it’s put to good use. Along with

the massive sense of scale present in many of the later scenes, including depictions of enormous towers and nearly-endless staircases, this series leaves an impression visually and emotionally.

My one minor criticism of the series is that, like so many other anime, its final episode doesn’t allow enough time to resolve all the latent feelings that it generates. As much as I love a good climax, especially ones so emotionally powerful, I feel that huge, grandiose moments of catharsis are only enhanced when coupled with similar moments of reflection.

Speaking generally, I think the ultimate message this series has to share is that both theater and life aren’t doomed to be static. It may feel as though a situation is plunging towards an inevita-

ble conclusion – that our fate is truly unavoidable. This anime presents a full-on rejection of the systems that serve to hamper our relationships – the ones that keep us in endless competition with others for some ill-defined, amorphous “prize” that benefits the few and harms the many. Society pits us, women especially, against one-another in many facets of our lives. Rather than manipulating the system to survive or throwing one-another under the bus to gain a leg-up, sometimes the best answer to this conundrum is to reject the flawed system entirely and relieve it of its power.

I don't know that *Revue Starlight* is an anime series for the ages; I suspect that my connection to it is very personal and that may not translate to anything broader. Occasionally, though, I believe that we receive messages at coincidentally relevant times, and for me this series echoes a lot of my feelings about our society which often encloses us in boxes and pressures us to fulfill roles which don't quite fit. Rather than suffer throughout this dissonance, perhaps the better answer is to, when the option is available, aim to re-make society in a way that is less focused on strict roles, titles, winners and losers. One which honors our diverse goals and supports the relationships that we have built with one-another. A new start, from position zero.

Pros: Lavish animation production throughout. Emphasizes character relationships. Thematically rich.

Cons: Could have used another episode for some falling action.

Grade: A

### Aggressive Retsuko (Aggretsuko) Review by Jessi Silver

Retsuko is a 25-year old red panda who works in her dream company's accounting department. But it turns out that she is forced to keep doing more and more impossible tasks by her superiors and co-workers. She doesn't talk back to them, but she still has to let off steam, so she ends up going to karaoke by herself and singing death metal.

Review: About two years ago I caught wind of *Aggressive Retsuko*, a new Sanrio property debuting in two minute chunks on YouTube. The concept really tickled me – a twenty-something OL who puts up with typical office politics during her day job, lets out her many frustrations in the evening by growling death metal into a microphone at her local Karaoke parlor. A bit of a one-note joke to be sure, but one that hit me the right way and provided some decent belly laughs. I never watched much of it because it wasn't that easily available, but I definitely indulged in some of the merchandise when it started popping up in my local Hot Topic and other Asian pop-culture shops. When this sequel appeared it actually took my by surprise; I only caught wind of it after reading Jacob Chapman's preview of the first couple of episodes in the most recent Spring Preview Guide over at ANN, and initially questioned the choice to make the episodes longer than their original two minute format. I doubted that one gag, even a pretty good one, could sustain a longer episode, much less make it entertaining.

As they say, boy was I wrong. While *Aggretsuko* is still primarily what I would call a comedy, it's also a fairly robust critique of some Japan-specific (but still widely-relatable) office issues,

especially as they affect women in a workplace setting.

One of the series' many successes is how Retsuko is presented as a character, because despite her cutesy, merch-ready appearance her situation feels so genuine. She's a cute, earnest person who feels lucky to be working at one of her dream companies, but her accounting job is anything but satisfying and her situation is greatly complicated by the fact that she doesn't interact well with some of her coworkers and doesn't have the personality that helps her to play games and suck up to the right people. She tries to lay low and get through the day, but this only turns her into a dumping ground for others' work and, unsurprisingly, she's unwilling to tell anyone "no" and spoil the office harmony. While my work situation is leaps and bounds better than depicted in this series, I'm fully sympathetic to the idea that it's just easier to become a "yes man" and take on more and more work than to speak up and potentially make someone else's life more difficult. Maybe it's due to my problems with social anxiety or my poor handle on how to maintain human relationships, but I can see how the idea of "harmony over all else" can be desirable while also ultimately harmful.

Retsuko is also exposed to some of the most blatantly awful chauvinism I've seen depicted in media in a long, long time. Every interaction with her boss, Mr. Ton, is a tension-filled exercise in suffering through off-color comments about women's place in the office and what jobs



Mr. Ton is a literal chauvinist pig.

they're meant to perform. Each time Retsuko got caught in the cross-hairs I could feel myself welling up with frustration. I've luckily never been in her exact position or had a boss so profoundly terrible, but I have been made to feel like an outsider and I've heard my share of casual sexism, so subtle and insidious that it doesn't register even with people who otherwise have a handle on those sorts of things. It's exhausting and defeating, and even several days later I have to marvel at the ability of this series to capture that and bottle it for consumption. I'm reminded a bit of Hataraki Man, another workplace series that follows the trials of

several women working for a magazine publisher and examines their specific hurdles and ways of coping with unjust and unequal treatment and expectations. In that case, the protagonist is hyper-competent and admired for her ability to "work like a man," when the men around her don't put in half the amount of work that she does. Both series are very telling about what we expect of men and women in the same setting, and those concerned with workplace equality will likely be similarly frustrated by both.

This is supposed to be a comedy anime, right?

If the series were nothing more than a string of upsetting circumstances for Retsuko to deal with via death metal therapy, it's likely that it wouldn't be upbeat enough to maintain its own sense of humor. What helps immensely is that the show allows Retsuko to get by with a little help from her friends, as well as with some personal mentorship from a couple of high-powered working women in her company who have seen it all and lived to tell the tale. Retsuko is by no means a loner and often gets support in one form or another from Fenneko, a snarky fennec fox who survives each workday through pure cynicism, and Haida, a hyena who's an everyday normal guy nursing a crush on our heroine. There's a good sense that these three have been in the trenches together for a while and the others do a decent, if flawed, job of talking Retsuko out of some situations. Fenneko in particular was a real source of entertainment for me just because of her deadpan delivery and ability to see right through the world's fakery. She's not a character

who would work well as a protagonist, but in small doses she was hilarious. As Retsuko connects with Washimi and Gori, two women who she has only admired from afar prior to their meeting in a yoga class, she learns that there are opportunities to get things done even when the system seems rigged and unfair. There is a lot of depth in these interactions, especially when Washimi and Gori attempt to help Retsuko directly with her management or try to guide her towards making good life decisions, and I think they really elevate the show.

My one complaint, and it's a relatively minor one, is that the series attempts to insert a sub-plot of sorts near the end and isn't able to devote enough time to it for it to fully mature. In her desperation, Retsuko starts to believe that her only "out" from her job is to find a partner and get married so that she can live as a housewife. She ends up falling for a guy with zero personality whose only real distinguishing quality is his low-key lack of consideration for her. She grins and bears it for a while until she's forced to face reality. The lesson, of course, is that we tend to tolerate so many things when we feel that our lives are hopeless, and in doing so give up our chance at happiness and dignity. I really loved that message, and only wish that the show had been a couple more episodes long to allow it to unfold more gradually. As a sentiment, it was absolutely right on the money and just another way in which the series surprised me.

In the couple of weeks that the series has been available I've seen the amount of fanwork for it blow up completely, so I doubt that my giving it a glowing review is somehow going to inform anyone who isn't already aware and interested. But in case someone does randomly stumble across this article (or, more likely, discover the show while adding dozens of things to their Netflix queue), I hope maybe my words or their own curiosity will give them the push that they need to give it a try. And then, maybe we can continue to try to dispel the myth that cutesy-looking cartoons are only for kids.

Pros: The protagonist is very sympathetic. Portrays Retsuko's tough situations in a way that feels real and relatable. The character relationships and interactions add a lot of depth.

Cons: The late-game romantic subplot could have used a couple more episodes of exploration.

Grade: A-

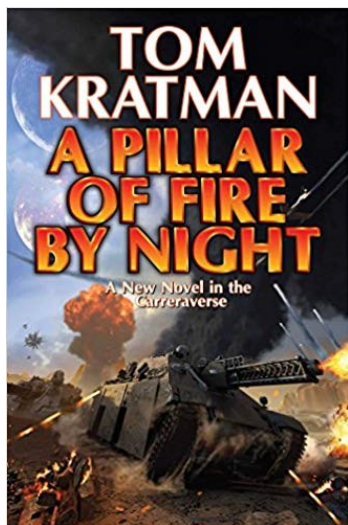
## Novels

### A Pillar of Fire by Night by Tom Kratman Review by Pat Patterson

Carrera's held off his enemies coming by sea from the north, in the process dealing the naval and amphibious forces of the Zhong Empire a stinging defeat. The Zhong won't soon forget the blood-stained waters and the heaped up bodies on the shores of Balboa's Isla Real.

Now, though, his adopted country of Balboa is under assault from the east, from the south, from the west, from the air, and from space. The Zhong, smarting from the butchery around the island, have bounced back and forced a lodgment east of the capital. Their lodgment is still a-building but when it is done Carrera can expect several hundred thousand brave and determined Zhong to show up on his barely defended flank.





The Taurans, remembering their military roots, have assaulted Balboa from the south, taking half the area of, and cutting, the Transitway that joins Terra Nova's Mar Fusioso and her Shimmering Sea. In the process, they've cut off and besieged the second city of the country, Cristobal, trapping inside the city Carrera's Fourth Corps, and overrunning and capturing a large portion of Carrera's artillery train.

West of Cristobal, the Taurans have created, almost from scratch, a series of small ports and airfields to support their siege.

Inside the town, a sense of desperation is growing among the men and women of the Fourth Corps: Has their leader forgotten about or abandoned them?

Meanwhile another Tauran Expeditionary force secures Balboa's eastern neighbor, Santa Josefina, as a base against them.

In space, the United Earth Peace Fleet, under the Command of High Admiral Marguerite Walenstein, keeps as low a profile as possible, all the time spying and feeding intelligence to both Zhong and Tauran.

It's beginning to look like the game is up for Balboa and Patricio Carrera.

But Carrera's been planning this war for fifteen years. He certainly hopes his enemies think they're winning.

At the publisher's request, this title is sold without DRM (Digital Rights Management).

Carrera Series:

A Desert Called Peace

Carnifex

The Lotus Eaters

The Amazon Legion

Come and Take Them

The Rods and the Axe

In 1974, at age seventeen, Tom Kratman became a political refugee and defector from the PRM (People's Republic of Massachusetts) by virtue of joining the Regular Army. He stayed a Regular Army infantryman most of his adult life, returning to Massachusetts as an unofficial dissident while attending Boston College after his first hitch. Back in the Army, he managed to do just about everything there was to do, at one time or another. After the Gulf War, and with the bottom dropping completely out of the anti-communist market, Tom decided to become a lawyer. Every now and again, when the frustrations of legal life and having to deal with other lawyers got to be too much, Tom would rejoin the Army (or a somewhat similar group, say) for fun and frolic in other climes. His family muttering darkly, put up with this for years. He no longer practices law, instead writing full time for Baen. His novels for Baen include A State of Disobedience, Caliphate, and the series consisting of A Desert Called Peace, Carnifex, The Lotus Eaters, The Amazon Legion, Come and Take Them, and The Rods and the Axe, as well as three collaborations with John Ringo, Watch on the Rhine, Yellow Eyes, and The Tuloriad. For Baen, he has written the first three volumes of the modern day military fiction Countdown series.

## Hell Spawn by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy



Did you ever stop to look around you and wonder what the Hell just happened? Yeah, so has Detective Thomas Nolan. In his case though, he meant it literally. I have to hand it to Declan Finn. I really didn't think you could do much to make a homicide detective's day worse. In Hell Spawn Finn decided to throw a demon at one. He owns it and when a demon comes out to play, it gets ugly. Like, double plus ungood ugly. Like, this thing is eviller than evil ugly. Like, I'm cackling evilly remembering how evil this thing was ugly. It's a good time.

I'd be careful with Hell Spawn though. It almost caused me to stay home from work because I couldn't put it down. Oh, and I was reading it while eating solo at a local diner and the waitress was looking at me funny because I wouldn't leave after eating my meal and paying my bill. She was a bit confused. I just wanted to know what happened next. Chick obviously doesn't have a reading problem. Her bad.

Seriously though, don't start this one twenty minutes before you need to be somewhere. Hell Spawn starts off fast and accelerates continuously. Finn has redefined the term "page turner" here. It almost felt like the pages were turning themselves and I was just watching. Sometimes as a reviewer I find myself reading something because it's my job to. This is a book that made me want to read it.

Now, Declan Finn has always considered himself to be a fantasy author. He has stated this on his blog, but I'm too lazy to go find a link. Hell Spawn is a damn good book, but this isn't fantasy. Finn has a much better sense of how to write a plot than most Eighties slasher movie writers, but he's got them beat for gore as well. A lot of what happens in the tome is sick, twisted, disturbing and awesome.

Myself and Mr. Finn don't necessarily agree on all of the finer points of theology (the whole Catholic vs. Protestant thing) but something we do agree on is the power of prayer. There is a lot of it in Hell Spawn. As a matter of fact, there are an awful lot of times when Christian attitudes are shown. I approve. Actually, I'd like to see more of this kind of stuff. Hell Spawn is a Catholic writer telling a story about a saint in the making. It fits. The fact remains that Finn/Tommy's takes on a number of controversial topics, including abortion, are on display for all to see. They're pretty stinkin' close to what I heard from my pastor a few weeks ago. If you're the special snowflake uber liberal type and just can't stand the thought that someone might disagree with you, this might be a good time to go buy a biography of Che Guevara that conveniently omits his stances towards homosexuals and black people. I hate to say it, but Hell Spawn may not be for you. Finn pulls no punches. I love it.

Finn's view of the police is somewhat nuanced as is - surprisingly- his view of saints, but make no mistake about it: Hell Spawn is about a battle between good and evil. Saint Tommy versus the demon (and no, I'm not telling you which demon. That would be spoiling.) is an epic throw-down between the darkness and the light. That much is made clear.

Somewhat missing though, and this may be intentionally, is a clear view of where Tommy v.

Demon fits in the framework of the grand battle of God and Satan. It's treated as a personal battle, albeit one fought with allies. We're not really given much of a sense of the more colossal grand battle. That's the view I became accustomed to a long time ago as a fan of fantasy fiction. Then again, this is horror. It works differently. And Hell Spawn is book one in a series, so maybe I'll get to see where this fits in later. Maybe not too. The book was freaking awesome without it and it's Earthbound, so personal appearances by God and Satan might not work.

Finn lives in New York. The book takes place in New York. I've never been to New York (I know, I'm working on it) but having read Hell Spawn I almost feel like I have been. Finn's relationship with New York is in some ways analogous to Anne Rice's relationship with New Orleans. Both have stories that take place outside of their respective hometowns but both continuously return to the city they love in their fiction. It shows in the work. Both authors lay things out in their work that make you love their cities too. I'm really impressed by this. It's almost like you could make the car trips that take place in the story using the directions in the book. Oh, and do you know how I could tell the book was written by a native New Yorker? There were no references to the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street or Broadway. There is not a single scene in Times Square. It's almost like Tommy had lived all his life in the city and had no desire to comment on things that he took for granted. It made him feel more real and human.

I can't say much more about the plot without giving the whole book away, but it moves. It's logical. The entire thing works within the rules of the work itself. There is no massive, gaping plot hole that you could float an aircraft carrier through sideways. That's always a fear when reading a work like this. It's pretty epic and it's easy for an author to get excited and forget about something. That doesn't seem to have happened here and that's good.

That's not to say that Finn tied up all the loose strings. Hell Spawn is the first in a series, not the last. There are some very obvious plot threads still dangling but there need to be. I am, after all, looking forward to the next book. How could there be one if Tommy solved everything the first time?

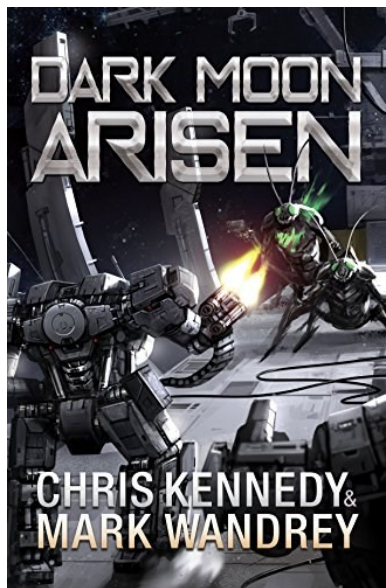
Oh, and if you're wondering: Hell Spawn is the current front runner for my Dragon Award nomination for Best Horror Novel next year. That is, unless Finn beats himself with the sequel to this masterpiece which is due out in Mid-December, just in time for my birthday.

**Dark Moon Arisen**  
**by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**

It was amazing

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program. Yes, I am a year late getting it read and reviewed. I have no excuse.

As I was sorting through the appropriate windows to write the review (Amazon, Goodreads, word processor) I found an opportunity to be grateful that the chosen title for this installment was "Dark Moon Arisen," and not "Bad Moon On The Rise." I spent decades associating that with a plumbing facility on the eastern side of a northbound hallway, and didn't need the ear-worm.



Perhaps others will find meaning in other aspects of this story, of which there are several. However, probably because I have so **DRASTICALLY** read these books out of series, my attention was riveted on the actions of the stupendous genius with all of the lively curiosity of a three-year-old, while possessing not one-fifth of the self-restraint, Taiki Sato.

I am currently Papa to two, no, wait, that's **THREE** three-year-olds, so I know whereof I speak. If anyone needed to be placed in stasis when not under the direct supervision of a competent adult with spanking privileges, it's Sato. Yes, surely it's the case that he will produce some marvelous technological break-throughs for you; however, that **ONLY** serves as a reason not to administer a lethal solution to him post-haste. It is not, repeat **NOT**, an excuse for allowing him unsupervised access to a playroom. Do you want to have banana squished into the bottom cavities of all the Legos? Do you want to have the entire ship converted into plasma? Because this is how you get banana-stuffed Lego plasma ships. And not in a nice way.

Somewhat along those same lines, but not as lethal, and far more amusing, are the SalSha. Is there **ANYONE** who doesn't love the SalSha? Give me the names! Bring them here, right now! True, you cannot have a universe composed of nothing but SalSha, but a universe without them would be a sadder place. Admittedly, the space analogue of the motor pool sergeant would have a vastly different experience. They do have a propensity for bending and scraping the craft they are given to pilot, but **MOST** of the time, that will buff out just fine. Most of the time. And they are always sorry, afterward. However, their own experiences with the voracious grasp on their homeworld have instilled in them a respect for danger, and an understanding of what it means to be a part of the team, that transforms them from clowns in a demolition derby to precisely the sort of people you want with you in tight spots.

I just read that an editorial decision was made at DC comics that none of the main characters were to be permitted to have happy lives at home, so no marriages, etc. This was to preserve an 'edgy' feel to the characters. Well, poot on that! I think it's a **GOOD** thing that folks get to have some romantic satisfaction, even if it **DOES** bring complications. What of it? There are going to be complications in the life of the calmest person, living in the calmest town imaginable. Winged Hussar leader Alexis Cromwell has enough responsibility; I applaud her personal alliance, especially since she isn't violating the rules by taking advantage of someone in her chain of command.

Lots of lovely scenes of exploding space-ships, lots of other aspects of the best of space opera, and plenty of combat scenes which combine super-duper techno whizz-bangs, with the good old fashioned knuckle sandwich to the nose. If you are looking for characters to inspire you, you will find them here.

A final word: I find the names of the four recently acquired battlecruisers to be a bit off-putting. I have no problem with 'Arion,' a mythical horse with unmatched speed, nor with 'Shadowfax,' the horse Gandalf took from King Whatsis in the 'Lord of the Rings.' But 'Phaeton' wasn't a horse; he was a guy who couldn't manage the horses that drew the sun chariot through the sky, which necessitated a lightning bolt from Zeus. And Nuckelavee? Horrid, horrid sea monster horse that ate people and destroyed crops, and **NO ONE** (well, one little old lady-thing) could control it.