

# Tightbeam 304

January 2020



Magic Man  
Jose K. Sanchez

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## Editorial

We reach another issue of Tightbeam, the all-topics genzine of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. We have fine letters, anime, novel, and short fiction reviews, SerCon review of a famous science fiction writer, Food from Famous Authors, and fine artwork from Angela K. Scott and Jose Sanchez.

As some of you know, there is a fanzine convention that gives a series of awards. If you are planning on attending, please consider the N3F's fine fanzines as possible nominations. But don't forget the many fine fanzines published by others around the world.

## Letters

Dear George and Jon:

Many thanks for Tightbeam 302, and I hope I am not too late to respond to the issue. I still fall behind with letter writing, but with right now being a terrible time for job hunting, I find myself with a little more time than usual. I might as well make the most of it.

Gary Labowitz, what Canadian universities do you get books from? I imagine that few other books might come from any university, what with the expenses of publishing. I have some familiarity with the University of Toronto Press.

I see diversity in Harry Potter, not only in the movies and books, but also in the fandom. Yvonne and I recently attended a Harry Potter gala in the city of Burlington, Ontario, and we had ourselves a great time. I did notice that not only were all ages represented at the event, but also all colours and races. All were there is some representation, and all had the same great time we did. I hope they are considering another gala next year; if so, we'll be there.

I am hoping that I am turning a corner, and embracing a new career. I do have some proofreading work coming up in the first five months of the new year, but over the past year and a half, I have been proofing and editing the latest four issues of Amazing Magazine, plus an upcoming book from Amazing, and then, an anthology of older writings by horror writer Nancy Kilpatrick, and now a YA novel from author and old friend Shirley Meier. I am trying to learn all I can to be a book editor in the future, and if that where my career path will go, I will embrace it as best as I can. I have to learn somehow.

All that's coming up for us during this holiday season is a pretty good attempt to bring back the good old con suites of the past. BrunchCon 3 is happening on December 29 at a hotel in the north of Toronto, and we are looking forward to it because of old friends we haven't seen in ages. The conventions we remember are mostly gone here, replaced by toy conventions and massive and impersonal media/comics conventions, cons we have never gone to. BrunchCon will not only supply us with a good meal, but also a trip up Memory Lane with people we miss.

That's all for now... Yvonne and I wish you the best of the holidays, and I look forward to seeing you all in this upcoming visionary year of 2020. See you then.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.



# Anime



## Magia Record: Puella Magi Madoka Magica Side Story Review by Jessi Silver

Streaming: Funimation, Crunchyroll, HIDIVE (Crunchyroll and HIDIVE streams begin on January 11th)

Episodes: 13

Source: Smartphone Game

Episode Summary: Iroha is one of many magical girls who chose to become one in service of a single wish. The problem is, despite this wish being important enough to sacrifice her freedom (and eventually her life), she can't seem to remember exactly what it was. Kyubey believes she may have set a condition that the wish go unknown to protect someone or something, but whether that theory is true or not remains a mystery.

Meanwhile, rumors have been circulating among magical girls that they may be saved from



their thankless existence by traveling to Kamihama City and being released from their turmoil. Several magical girls have awoken from dreams in which a young girl tells them as much. Yet, when Iroha and her friend Kuroe make the journey, all they find are more powerful foes and magical girls who don't want their territory to be invaded by endless salvation-seekers. Still, the urge is strong, and in her dreams Iroha gets an inkling of what she might have wished for.

What could this miniature Kyubey mean? Screenscaps from Funimation.

Impressions: This was yet another of my many anticipated series this season, though I was prepared to temper my expectations in this case. Madoka has been, without question, one of the most memorable and influential anime series of the past decade, as well as one that many fans, including myself, have some pretty strong feelings about. As much as I would have appreciated some kind of direct continuation of the main storyline, which I believe we'll get some time... eventually, I honestly think that the staff made a good choice in producing a spinoff series instead. Magia Record takes concepts from the main series – magical girls, witches, and all the danger involved with navigating those things – and moves the story in a new direction by focusing on different characters and introducing a tantalizing new goal for them – potential salvation.

One of the main takeaways from Madoka was that Madoka herself was salvation, or at close as any magical girls would get to it. While her god-like powers never really freed them from their duty, upon their death they were at least freed from the curse of transforming into a witch and becoming enslaved to their own hatred. The Rebellion film poked holes in that system (or, I would say, pointed out the holes that already existed) and allowed Homura her counterpoint. As far as timelines go it's unknown to me where this series fits and what the nature is of the salva-

tion that the girls are seeking, but perhaps the examination of this mystery at the hands of the characters might help them discover something outside either Madoka's or Homura's sphere of influence. At the very least, I bet whatever they find is bound to be interesting.

For fans of the TV series and films, much of this episode will feel extremely familiar. Bits of the original soundtrack hover in the background, and the overall aesthetic (including the visually-creative witch labyrinths) is intact, though it feels slightly more modern and polished. It's been quite a while since I've really paid much attention to a Shaft production (I'm not a fan of the Monogatari series, and their recent film *Fireworks* was disappointing), but this episode feels a lot more put-together than what they were presenting a decade earlier. For those who are completely new to Madoka, this episode feels very approachable as well; there are no returning characters as of yet (besides Kyubey) and the basic concepts are recounted naturally through the narrative, so there shouldn't be much if any catching-up required (although the experience is definitely richer having experienced the prior stories).

I was honestly a little nervous that this episode might completely drop the ball, but I was truly and very pleasantly surprised. While I don't have a great history with smartphone game adaptations, I do have a pretty decent history with this particular franchise; I feel like if anything can convince me that this sort of material can be the basis for a good story, Madoka can.



Pros: Retains the visual inventiveness of the franchise. The story is interesting for established fans and welcoming to newcomers.

Cons: I still kind of wish it were a continuation.

Content Warnings: Magical violence, characters in peril.

Grade: B+

## Asteroid in Love Review by Jessi Silver



Streaming: Crunchyroll

Episodes: 12

Source: Manga

Episode Summary: When Mira was little, she met a boy named Ao who got her interested in astronomy. Now in high school she hopes to join the astronomy club – only the club has apparently been recently disbanded. As it turns out, the geology and astronomy clubs have been combined into the Earth Sciences club for various reasons, and the joint club is only just getting on its feet in the current school year.

It's been Mira's dream to help fulfill Ao's dream of discovering an asteroid, and as it so happens she won't have much trouble reconnecting with Ao to do so.

The person she previously assumed was a boy was actually a tomboyish girl, who now happens to be her club-mate! While the newly-established Earth Sciences Club still has some kinks to



The Earth Sciences Club embarks on its journey as an organization. Screenscaps from Crunchyroll.

work out, Mira and Ao have the opportunity to re-kindle their friendship (possibly more) and to look up at the stars together.

Impressions: Space, the final frontier... it's almost certain that humans have been gazing toward the heavens since prehistory. Even in modern times, space holds a certain allure for many people. Since almost every form of geekery has been plumbed for anime-related content at some point, so it goes that astronomy should get its turn in the spotlight (or moonlight, I guess?). Despite the nominal discussion of planets, stars, and other heavenly bodies,

though, this series seems more focused on the latent friendly-and-possibly (probably)-romantic feelings between its two main characters. That's not really a bad thing, but it's a different angle than some viewers might be expecting (I at least, was slightly caught off-guard).

The budding (or possibly residual) feelings that Mira and Ao have for one-another seem to be pretty chaste, which thankfully seems to have hit me the right way at this point in time. As much as I enjoy it when romantic anime series cut to the chase (believe me, I can get pretty annoyed when the only thing preventing two characters from getting together is their own inability to say two useful words to one-another), there's also something to be said for the kind of hand-holding, blushing pure-love relationships that get drawn out across many episodes (I was a big fan of *Kimi ni Todoke*, after all). It's a balance very few shows are able to maintain for too long, but at just one episode, this one hasn't had the chance to wear out its welcome – it's still more “d’aww” than “dang it!”

Aside from that, this episode follows all the beats of a typical “cute girls doing cute things” formula, including the awkward school club situation, the blending of various different-but-appealing personality types, and even the club advisor who's almost like another kid in the group. It's not the type of series that seems to want to take any big chances. Even though there are some great moments of character acting throughout the episodes (it's the type of animation that's much easier to notice in such a low-key series like this one), its real goal is seemingly to do what these types of series do best – be inoffensive, comforting, and not challenging to the audience in any major way. I can enjoy anime series like this once-in-a-while, but for those who are looking for a more substantial story or something that might truly challenge gender relationship norms (it's clearly Yuri-focused, but in a passive rather than active form at least for now), or which seriously focuses on astronomy, it would probably be worth looking elsewhere.

Pros: The two main characters are cute together and have a nice dynamic. There's some good character acting.

Cons: The episode is not as astronomy-focused as the title might suggest. Feels somewhat lacking in substance.

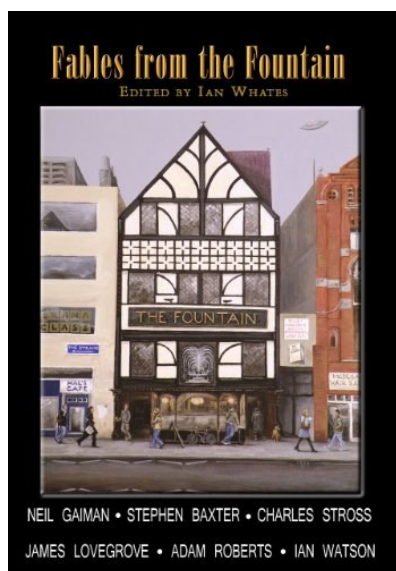
Content Warnings: None.

Grade: B-

# Books

Fables from the Fountain edited by Ian Whates

Review by Bob Jennings



Billed as a homage to Arthur C. Clarke's classic "Tales From the White Hart", this volume collects 18 short stories from 18 of the leading current British authors of science fiction, all creating new stories in the same spirit as the original White Hart volume.

Spurred on by a friend's discussion of the original "Tales From the White Hart", I moved this volume up to the top of my reading list and settled in, prepared to be enchanted.

Unfortunately the expectation did not match the resulting reality. This is a pretty unsatisfying collection of stories. Most of the participants in the anthology are well known, recognized, renowned writers of fantastic literature. Unfortunately they are mostly not up to the task of re-creating the same type of stories that Clarke generated in his original landmark collection.

The problems here are multitude. Most of these stories begin with interesting ideas, but almost all of them bog down, get diverted, fail to follow up their potential, and mostly fail to deliver some kind of satisfactory ending to the story. There were a few good stories here, but most were not so good.

I think there are a number of barriers standing in the way here, the first being that the authors were all severely limited in the wordage they were allowed to work with. Most of these stories are very short, 4,000 to 5,000 words or less, often much less. That doesn't leave much space to create a story and see it all the way thru to a satisfactory conclusion.

Then the writers mostly felt they had to set up the stories within the world of the Paradise Bar in The Fountain alehouse, which generally included re-inserting the regular and irregular cast of characters into each tale.

Third, most of these writers also felt they had to make an attempt at producing humor, and unfortunately almost all of them fail miserably in that effort. There are obvious efforts to be clever, including not very subtle efforts to create unusual and outlandish names for the special guest ale of the week, with puns. It all seemed condescendingly cute to me, people trying way too hard to work in some humor, a format with which most of the folks have no real experience.

But the main problem, for me anyway, was the fact that most of the writers can't seem to reach a conclusion or even deliver a satisfactory ending to their stories. This is not to be confused with the kind of yarn that deliberately asks the reader to believe it or not believe it. No, these folks simply let their stories trail off and never reach any kind of conclusive ending.

There are some notable exceptions to this, of course. The opening story by editor Ian Whates has his protagonist come up with a clever solution to a very dangerous, certain-death disaster.



Neil Gaiman makes the best of the stilted format by introducing a character who describes himself as an un-inventor, and then tells of a few significant things he managed to un-invent to save civilization, a very clever use of a very few pages to deliver a thoughtful social commentary and a well crafted tale as well.

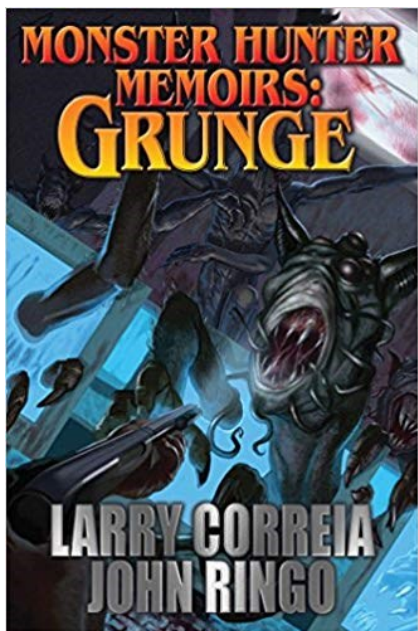
A few of the writers kick the five thousand word restriction out the window and turn in strong stories. In particular I was impressed by Tom Hunter's tale "The Girl With the White Ant Tattoo", which accomplishes this by eliminating almost all of the background of the bar and its cast of Tuesday night regulars, instead concentrating on telling the straight forward story of a genius who managed to communicate with termites, and what that eventually led to. This story has a solid conclusion too.

Another good story was the closing entry by Adam Roberts, a sequel to Clarke's classic "The Nine Billion Names of God" in which one of the Fountain regulars relates how he helped devise the original computer program that led to the stars all going out, and how he managed to find a way to undo that and save the human race. Roberts even manages to tie the story elements in with two of Clarke's other significant story concepts.

There are some interesting ideas that start well, then simply peter out or never reach any kind of conclusion. Andy West's "Book Wurms" comes to mind immediately. So does "The Ghost In the Machine" by Colin Bruce. But mostly the stories are not good. The premises are thin, the writing is sparse, while the interflow of the regular characters with their snarky comments and interruptions tends to bog down the story plots significantly.

It's a mixed bag with most of the stories leaving me unsatisfied. As they say, your own mileage may vary, but for me this seemed like it was going to be a great concept anthology, but the finished product failed to deliver on the premise.

### Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge by John Ringo and Larry Correia Review by Jim McCoy



Wow. I'm like embarrassed to say that I like, totally just read this. Like, OH MY GOD. Like, I'm so amazed that it took this long to like read something written by like two of my favorite like authors. I can't believe that I like, didn't get to it SOOOO much sooner. It's like crazy. Like what? Oh, I'm totally talking about Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge. It's like the coolest thing ever, okay? What, I'm supposed to tell you why? Like how does that work? Like I have to do the work here? Like how is that fair?

Ok, so it's totally set in the Eighties. I'm so old that I like, totally remember the Eighties so it was fun.

And like, I totally hate valley girl so I'm like, totally gonna stop writing that way OK?

I'm glad it's okay. I was starting to annoy myself. I know one girl who

used to speak valley girl and she drove me crazy. (OH MY GO-ODD!) I'll spare the rest of you the hassle. Although, honestly, if you've read the book then you know why the valley girl. If not, you'd best find out. I mean seriously.

Listen, this is my blog. I get free books from people that want their stuff reviewed. I started this thing to feed my reading habit and save money simultaneously without having to give my books back. It was a good thing. For the rest of you, I'm assuming that you've also got book habits (otherwise why would you be here?) and don't get free stuff from people that you then owe reviews to. (But if you do, let me know because I want to check your stuff out.) I don't always have time to read stuff from my favorites because I'm often reading something that I was given. Most people don't have that problem. (But it's free books, so is it really a problem?)

Anyway, if you like the same kind of books that I do, and I'm assuming you do, then these guys should be two of your favorite authors too. I mean seriously, Correia has created one of the coolest Hidden World universes of all time. The Monster Hunter International milieu is amazing. It's like an action flick crossed with gun porn with just a dash of competence porn, this is the universe to be in. The characters in the book seriously do hunt monsters and they really do know their stuff. Usually.

And, of course, John Ringo is best known for his ability to write action as well. His Black Tide Rising series is epic. His Legacy of the Aldenata series is awesome. Those aren't even my two favorites of all his series. My favorite one is his Council Wars series, only it didn't sell enough for him to keep pushing them out. I blame all of you. I bought the whole series in Dead Tree Format and own the first three on .mobi.

To say that I was geeked to read this is an understatement. I couldn't wait to get this thing home and rifle through it at high speed. I wasn't disappointed. Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge is a high speed thrill ride. I mean, we go from place to place and fight to fight with almost no break. Things go bump and then they go boom. In spite of all the action, it's not just an action book though.

Our main character is a medically retired Marine named Chad and he's on a mission from God. He means that literally. Despite that though, he's not exactly a pure soul. As a matter of fact he seems to have a thing for the ladies. A very strong thing for the ladies. I guess you could say he's hornier than a devil. Combine "horny" with "sent by the Almighty" and you get a weird mix for sure. That's okay though, because it sure is entertaining.

Fans of the MHI universe will also be familiar with a character named Milo. Milo plays pretty heavily into Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge. I really liked that. We don't get to see as much of him as we should in the main stories, so it's good to see some backstory for him. And if you love guns then you can't miss Milo. That's his thing. Milo is my guy. Oh, and if you like Agent Franks, he's here too. And really who doesn't love Agent Franks?

The villains in the book tend to be what they always have been: Everything from any mythos anywhere on the planet and anything else that the author can cook up. That's the great thing about MHI in general. You never know what's coming next because the hunters never know what's coming next. That creates a high amount of suspense and keeps you in the book.

It took me less than a day to get through Monster Hunter Memoirs: Grunge. For me, that's fast. I

couldn't put this one down. It's always fun to see a collaboration between two of my favorite authors, but it's even better when it's two veteran authors. A lot of the collaborations I've read, especially from Baen, have been between an established author and a relatively new author but this time around it's two mature, established authors. You can kind of feel the difference. I'm sure it made the publisher happy because both authors already have huge followings, but it made life good for me too.

Of course, this is the first in the Monster Hunter Memoirs series and I haven't read any of the rest of them because I always read a series in order. I can't wait. I knew this was going to rock and I wasn't wrong. There is a lot more to explore. And I do mean explore. I don't even know if the Memoirs series has the same main character throughout or if it's a series of memoirs of separate hunters. I'll be headed either to my local book store or to Kindle as soon as I can so I can find out. I hope to see you there.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Webbed Victims

## Space Traipse, Season 2 by Karina Fabian by Tamara Wilhite

I've been a fan of Karina Fabian's family-friendly and very funny Star Trek parody "Space Traipse" ever since it was spawned from a Tumblr thread. I've kept up with it through several "seasons" or story arcs.

"Space Traipse, Season 2" is the second anthology of 3 "Space Traipse" stories. The first, "Lone Star," is an update of Star Trek the Original Series episode "Where No Man Has Gone Before" with a hint of ST:TOS "The Apple" and "Avatar".

The episode / story "Amock Time" is new and had not previously appeared on her blog. Ensign Gel O'Tin (he's a blob) is graduating from the Academy. It is a deliberate mocking of the Star Trek: The Original Series episode "Amok Time". Yes, she mocks it while making a novel story out of the concept.

"The No Brainer" previously appeared on her blog. It is the start of one of her longest story arcs that ends up on Planet Amazon. Excuse me, Filedise. This episode is dedicated to an experiment trying to turn a star into a torus or some other insane shape in violation of physics, just to see if we can.

The last chapter of the book has the crew of "Space Traipse" arguing after seeing the 2019 movie "Ad Astra". Having seen the movie myself, I had some of the same observations. Her in-universe review is much funnier than mine would be.

What are some of the highlights of this universe?

Do you wonder about sound effects or mood music? The author occasionally recommends riffs to listen to while reading. That's aside from explaining why sound effects and a lot of visual effects are necessary in the "Star Trek" universe. Example: you hear the hum of the engines so you don't overload them, and you feel strikes so that you don't miss draining shields until you're dead. And there's a good explanation as to why they don't use the transporters to cure everything. Then there are the practical diplomatic solutions, such as universal translators not

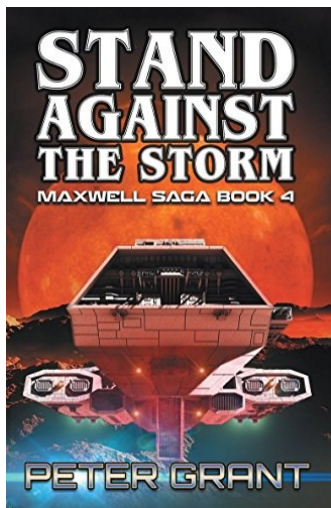
translating profanity.

Fabian's characters react the way real people would react if dumped into the Star Trek universe: "He scanned the room wildly, and when his eyes alighted on the teleporter console, they widened with existential dread. Dour could see the man's intellect fighting against the instinctive urge to throw himself before the console in supplication and fear. Dour found this sensible and respectable. 'What have you done to us?' the alien whispered in his own language. The ship's translator repeated it, even to the same awed, horrified tone." When we discover radical innovations in chemistry, we invent 300 proof (or better) alcohol.

Sometimes I watch Star Trek and find myself sounding like the redshirt character in "Galaxy Quest". You live in a dangerous universe and just brush off risks assuming that there's no big deal. Or they fail to share details, increasing everyone's risk. Karina Fabian actually attacks this trope. "No, seriously, it can't mean anything. Probably my imagination." Jeb sighed. Statements Number 4 and 7 on the "likely indicators of starship crisis" list. Every first-year cadet knew that if you were having such thoughts, you went to the doctor, the chief of security or the captain, and you did not hold back on the details.'

"Space Traipse, Season 2" is scheduled to be released at the end of February, 2020. I give it five stars.

## Stand Against The Storm (The Maxwell Saga Book 4) Review by Pat Patterson



Wonderful heroes, and awful bad guys: who could ask for more? (ummm,,,I want more...)

This is one of the books that I enjoyed so much, that I found myself shifting tasks, to check my email, reply to a Facebook post, and check the weather. Why? Because if I didn't do those things, I would be reading, and if I kept reading, the book would end.

Which it did, inevitably, despite my delaying tactics.

I am SO glad that he finally got rid of the jade knife! I should know by now that Peter doesn't ambush his readers, but as long as he had the knife in his possession, I was fearful it was going to be re-stolen, or lost, or broken. And that would have been awful. But, as I noted, Peter doesn't ambush his readers.

I appreciate MUCHLY the struggle Steve experiences as he looks at the risks taken by troops under his command, when the official policy is non-involvement. And I really feel for him when he is given mutually incompatible orders. However, due to his friendship with senior Marine NCO Kinnear, he is able to come to the moral conclusion, and discharge his duty, even though he has concluded that he will be court-martialed as a result. A career built on the bodies of dead children isn't worth having, they agree.

Without tossing in a spoiler, let me say that Steve's post-action treatment of a certain three-year



old and her mother speaks volumes as to the depth of his character. Yes, he's brave. Yes, he is deadly in combat. Yes, he is brilliant at both tactical and logistical problems. Beyond that, though, he understands that little girls get afraid. and that keeping them safe is our highest priority.

## Manx Prize Review by Pat Patterson



5.0 out of 5 stars. Lawyers, engineers, love, bureaucrats, mountain lions, and de-orbiting space junk: It's GREAT!

This review is from: Manx Prize (Kindle Edition)

Laura is, as I am, a fan of the Mad Genius Club. When I discovered she had placed 'Manx Prize' in KU, it hit my 'QUICK! READ IT!' list. Last night, before I started, I explained to my fat black Manx SugarBelly that the book was written in her honor. She really didn't seem impressed, but such is the nature of cats.

In a discussion last week, I postulated that there are certain Reader Demands. The first of these is that readers should have a reasonable chance on judging a book by its cover. Laura SCORES! Not only is the art beautiful, it also tells you that the book is going to involve satellite manipulation, and that there is going to be an edgy relationship between a nice looking couple.

The cover art is by Phil Smith. Kudos to him!

The lovely lady on the cover turns out to be engineer Charlotte Fisher. The story begins with her discovery that a random piece of space junk has killed two people in Texas, and her justified worry that this is going to hurt her chances for safely de-orbiting dead satellites to win the Manx Prize, consisting of \$50 million in gold. Then comes some excellent writer's craft: Laura mentions just a tiny bit of Charlotte's back story; but the WAY she does it is really quite wonderful. She gives us the bleak, unembellished punchline of "the Erawan disaster of Charlotte's youth, the disaster her father had presided over so helplessly;" and THAT'S IT! That, fellow readers, is as fine an example of setting the hook as you are going to see. Of course, over the course of the novel, we get the whole story, but it's so much more effective the way she tells it.

Honestly, I'm so impressed by that little device, I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about the rest of the story. There is a shy little love story, which is underplayed wonderfully, particularly when it is explained that the reason it goes so slowly is due to the ethics of a lawyer (!).

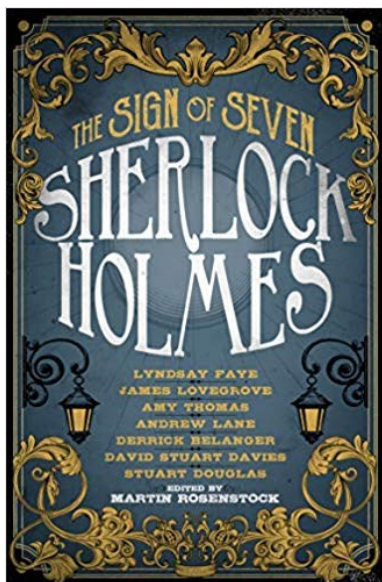
The discussion of the deer problem is funny; there is also a Keystone Kops sort of episode where one of the minor characters shoots (non-fatally) an investigator. There is enough science in the story to make it matter, for those of us who like hard sci-fi, but not so much that you need classes in physics to understand what is going on.

All of the story threads resolve, but there is enough to build on for at least one more book in the series. And the nice-looking young couple on the cover do work out the ethics in the end!

## Sherlock Holmes: The Sign of Seven

Edited by Martin Rosenstock

Review by Bob Jennings



This is the latest Titan volume in their Sherlock Holmes division, a subset of Titan devoted to creating and issuing brand new books based on the adventures of Conan Doyle's immortal creation.

This is a concept anthology. Doyle originally created short stories about his detective character, along with four full length novels. The set-up for this collection is that the seven different authors would create novelette length adventures, with the stipulation that the adventures try to adhere to the time period, and the authentic facts about London and British society of the late Victorian period that were the hallmarks of the original Sherlock Holmes adventures.

Generally speaking the participants work out very well. All of the writers involved with this project are devoted fans of the Holmes character, and all have written some, or in most cases, quite a lot of Sherlock Holmes related fiction and non-fiction, so the results come thru well.

The lead story "Death of a Mudlark" by Stuart Douglas deals with a largely unknown, unappreciated segment of the underclass of London society. Scotland Yard has asked Holmes to solve the murder of a foreign diplomat, but the clues lead to a different murder which in turn leads Holmes and Watson to investigate the human sewer scavengers and mudlarks who eek out the barest of livings searching the sewers and the drainage beaches those sewers empty out onto. This is an excellent adventure, well told, with a puzzling double detective twist and some action to go along with it.

Likewise the following stories, "The Adventure of the Deadly Séance" and "The Adventure of the Heroic Tobacconist" and "The Monkton House Mystery" are very well constructed and again feature not only an adventure, but wheels within wheels plotting to turn what seem to be straight forward detective yarns into something unique and intriguing.

"The Dark Carnival" by Andrew Lane is more adventure than detective story, a grim and unrelenting expose of a member of the House of Lords who has gone insane, and who is then brutally murdered while under special custody in a special elite unit at Bedlam Sanitarium. The solving of the murder becomes secondary after the dark undercurrents that led to his insanity are revealed.

In my opinion the weakest story in the book is "The Adventure of the Koreshan Unity", by Amy Thomas. For openers I had great difficulty accepting the set-up. Homes has retired to Sussex in 1908, and altho he receives many requests for his aid, he is content in his retirement. Except he invites Watson down to spend the New Year with him, then manages to get him on board a ship bound for America, to the town of Fort Meyers in Florida, where he has been asked, begged, to look into the death of the head of a Utopian style religious cult. The founder has died, apparently of lingering injuries he sustained in a fight at Miami village three years earlier.

Even if you swallow all this, the story is strong on characters, but decidedly thin on plot. The cultists expect their founder to rise from the dead any minute, as he said he would. Meanwhile the nearby local inhabitants are happy the old coot is finally dead, while the cult is clearly an elaborate system for ensnaring women, particularly older women, and separating them from their money by getting them to join the group. But now that the founder is dead, the future of the group is very uncertain.

Holmes solves the murder, but exactly how is not really clear, and he then decides he doesn't have sufficient proof to bring the killer to justice. The killer has adequate motive for committing the murder, so neither Holmes and nor Watson suggest they will pursue the matter any further. This incident is apparently based on some real life circumstance in the region of Ft. Myers. Not fun, not a detective story, no real adventure, and the killer gets to walk away scott free. This is not what I expect or want from a Sherlock Holmes story.

I was also not particularly fond of the closing story, "Our Common Correspondent" by Lyndsay Faye. The story plot itself is interesting and is certainly the kind of thing Holmes might investigate just to untangle a vexing puzzle which seems to have very sinister implicates. Unfortunately Ms. Faye has decided to use the framing device of having Inspector Lestrade (whose first name is now given as "Geoffrey") keep a diary of his daily doings, including this particular encounter with Sherlock Holmes.

This is another situation where I just couldn't buy the setup. As Doyle (thru his character Holmes) noted in the original stories, Lestrade is not a particularly imaginative man. Most of the murders and crimes he faces are straight-forward. Establish a clear motive, confront the obvious individuals, ask them why they did it, and eight times out of ten the crime is solved. Sometimes it's a matter of running down the suspects, especially those who try to skip out, and try to sort out who is who, and then the case is solved.

It's those very few cases where things don't completely add up that impel Lestrade to seek out Sherlock Holmes for his advice. Lestrade is a dedicated police officer, determined to combat crime any way he can, but he lacks insight or imagination, so the idea that he would keep a diary of any kind seems ludicrous to me, and the effort to humanize the Inspector wears thin very fast.



**A Dubious Gift — Jose K. Sanchez**

This volume is a mixed bag, but most of the stories are well crafted, with intriguing mysteries that are unraveled the way Sherlock Holmes would have handled the situations. There is more action than you would normally find in a Doyle era Holmes mystery, but it works and fits the longer story format well. There were only a couple of clinkers in the load, and you may find redeeming values even in those. It's well worth the read if you are a fan of the original Sherlock Holmes stories and long to see new material that carries on the grand tradition.

---review by Bob Jennings

# Short Stories

Messages by Sandra McDonald

Review by Greg Hullender

"Messages," by Sandra McDonald (edited by Sheila Williams), appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction issue 09-10|19, published on August 16, 2019 by Penny Publications.

Pro: There are several story lines here. There's Maddy the child's experience of loss of her aunt and her surprise at the app she left Tommy, followed by details on her growing up. But there's also adult Maddy who never recovered from the loss of her child. And then there's the details of how the app changed the world, with people committing suicide in droves, plus the big revelation of what the app cost the people on the other side.

All of these threads are neatly twined together and come to a neat conclusion, which offers a few words of hope.

Dialog is natural, narration is transparent, the writing in general shines. The story is a pleasure to read from many perspectives.

Something amazing about the story is how efficiently it slips in bits of information. Like when Maddy observes that Lucy's nickname for Tommy was "Tough Guy" and she admits that "Maybe he was tough a little, inside, because you don't beat heroin if you're weak."

Con: If Lucy could invent this app, it stands to reason someone else could too. Knowing a thing can be done makes it a lot easier to do a second time. Tommy's shutting the system down isn't likely to make that much difference.

Molecular Rage by Marie Bilodeau

Review by Greg Hullender

"Molecular Rage" by Marie Bilodeau (edited by Trevor Quachri), appeared in Analog Science Fiction and Fact issue 09-10|19, published on August 16, 2019 by Penny Publications.

Pro: Stan has his problems, but he's right that something is seriously wrong. He may have trouble getting to work on time, but he's a brilliant teleportation scheduler, and his boss really should have listened to him.

One of the pleasures of the story is the way Stan's experiences in different parts of the colony dovetail with his discoveries about the mysterious priority beam. At each step, we learn new things about the colony and the technology even as he learns more about what's going on.

Even though Stan seems to have a lot of trouble getting along with people, he really does care about people. He loved his mate, and he still pines for her. He loved his daughter, Lorna, and he's crushed when the soldiers brutalize her—and he never sees her again. It's hard not to come



to like Stan, and that makes his sacrifices poignant.

Ultimately, Stan cares enough about the others in the colony that he sacrifices himself to buy them a couple of centuries to figure out what to do about what must be some sort of frozen nuclear explosion that's trapped in the teleportation beams.

And he even lives long enough to know that he succeeded, that his sacrifice paid off. In the end, that has to be enough.

Con: Stan is the only developed character in the story.

## The Palace Of Dancing Dogs by Allen M. Steele Review by Greg Hullender

"The Palace Of Dancing Dogs," by Allen M. Steele (edited by Sheila Williams), appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction issue 01-02|20, published on December 19, 2019 by Penny Publications.

(Lost Colony; Sanctuary) The story concludes with the humans from Sanctuary coming to the capital of the empire, where they can present their case to the Empress herself. Assuming they can get her to listen.

You must read this series from the beginning for this story to make any sense. It will help a lot if you've also read the original short story, Sanctuary, which describes what happened to the original starships to visit τ Ceti-e .

Pro: The rating is for the series as a whole, not just this episode. It's been fun watching it unfold over the past three years.

Obviously, the great strength of it is the setting, a world where survivors from a pair of doomed colony ships have managed to retain at least some civilization and live in harmony, albeit on the sufferance of the natives. But, hundreds of years after the landings, the natives still don't trust humans, restricting them in lots of ways.

Overall, the plot tells how private investigator Jeremy Crowe gets involved with people who want to learn the true history of their colony, recover the use of the high technology humanity once had, and gain their freedom. More personally, it also tells of Crowe's conflict with Bart the Cetan, whose motives are understandable, making him a worthy opponent—not a cardboard villain.

The concluding episode introduces a lot of new material, not the least of which the revelation that some people from the Santos-Dumont, the other starship, actually survived and their descendants are integrated into Cetan society, albeit as second-class citizens.

Crowe's fight with Bart at the end is remarkable in that it resolves both the larger storyline and Crowe's personal storyline at the same time. I liked Crowe's decision not to fight on the grounds that even if he wins he loses by proving that humans are dangerous. It spoke well of Bart that he couldn't just kill Crowe without understanding why he quit fighting.

Con: The only real complaint I might make is that the victory they earned in the last installment came a little too easily. Given the effort it took for them to get that far, it felt a little rushed.

## Videos

Stop it! STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!

By Jim McCoy

Ok, so I just saw a story about a possible Firefly reboot. I was excited for like two point one seconds until I realized that, yup, they're gonna screw it up if they try it. Seriously. Captain Mal is only Captain Mal if Nathan Fillion is playing him. Kaylee is only Kaylee if Jewel Staite is playing her. Not to mention that you don't just replace the hottest woman in Hollywood. Yeah. I'd tell you what I think when I see Jewel Staite if only I was capable of thought when I see Jewel Staite. Is she married?

Uh...

Never mind.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say, in my own clumsy way is that this would be a bad thing.

Yep, I said it.

Every great once in awhile a good reboot comes along. The Battlestar Galactica reboot comes to mind. That was actually better than the original because it felt more realistic and had a grittier atmosphere. They left enough mysticism in to make it BSG but they removed a lot of the hokiness from it. I admit that it CAN happen. It's hard to catch lightning in a bottle twice though.

So seriously, stop doing it.

Think about it this way:

How many people watched Star Trek: The Original Series before the JJverse stumbled onto the scene? Besides me. I know I did. My first four friends were named James Kirk, Leonard McCoy, Spock and Mike Boldt. (Mike I knew in real life. That's why you've never heard of him.) I was there when Spock's Brain got taken over. I remember the Trouble with Tribbles. I walked along the Way to Eden.

I loved it.

And yes, I know the Hippies in Space episode is not a fan favorite, but sue me. I was probably three the first time I watched it and with that level of maturity it's actually a good episode.

Now think about it this way:

Has the JJverse lived up to it?

I don't know a single person who thinks it has. I've seen all the movies. Viewed for themselves they're good flicks, but they're not good Star Trek. I mean that seriously. What's with transwarp beaming? Who is this guy who thinks he can play my namesake the way Deforest Kelley did? And where in the bleeping blue blank did these scripts come from?

Actually, that's a complaint about a lot of the Next Gen movies as well and those weren't even reboots.

And if there were ever a series that DIDN'T need a reboot, it's Star Trek. If you want more Trek, make another series. That's worked multiple times in the past. But don't reboot stuff.

If it had its run, it had its run.

No, you're not going to be able to improve the original. There is no need for a modern version of something that we all love from way back. There's just not.

I understand the need for new shows and movies for content providers that need to make money. Profits are tied to new product and profitable companies provide jobs. I'm no economist but if you think about it, that's a concept that's pretty easy to understand.

But dude...

There are new ideas out there. Some of them are really awesome. I'd love to see a new Monster Hunter Series or a Saint Tommy, NYPD series. How about an Honor Harrington movie or a series of Four Horsemen stories.

Honestly, it would be worth it just to see if Hollywood could catch up with the 4HU authors. Think about that: A series where the books are actually completed. We could have a competition between Chris Kennedy Publishing and the Writers Guild of America to see who could complete the series the fastest. Whoever finishes first would win the Game of Thrones and not even have to become a salty old man who won't give his fans what they want.

But let's talk about reality for a minute:

The reason for reboots, as well as additions to old series a la the Star Wars sequel trilogy is not fan service. It's not old ideas needing a creative outlet. It's not about a fresh take on something that people love. Hollywood will tell you it is, but they're just trying to say something that sounds good.

No, the real reason behind reboots and remakes, continuations and sequels to movies that were made twenty or thirty years ago is simple:

They're looking for a guaranteed profit and I can respect that.

Star Wars has been big money since it first came out in 1977. Star Trek started slowly, but it's been huge for over four decades now. Put those names on a product and people will pay to see it, whether it's on the big screen or on Disney+ or CBS All Access. I get it.

Here's the thing: