

# The *Illuminata*

**Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy**

## Sin-ply Irresistible

By Bret Funk

This month marked the release of *Sin City*, the much anticipated adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novels. The film opened to a strange mix of reviews, ranging from wildly positive to disgustingly deplorable. Regardless of whether or not the film was loved, everyone agreed that it was like nothing ever seen before. And it was good enough to pull me out of temporary retirement to write a review.

The movie follows three intertwined stories through the dark and twisted streets of Basin City, a town ruled by dirty cops, an insane archbishop, and an egomaniacal senator. In the first tale, which bookends the film, Hartigan, an honest cop and the closest thing Sin City has to a good guy, saves a young girl from a serial rapist and is made to suffer for it. Along with Hartigan's story, there's the story of Dwight, a private investigator who must protect Old Town's prostitutes from the mob; and Marv, a tough-as-nails brawler and his campaign of revenge

against the men who killed his love, Goldie.

*Sin City* has a classic film noir feel to it, but the stylized black and white background contrasts dramatically with flashes of vibrant color. The movie was filmed entirely in front of green screen (a relatively new technology utilized in films like *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*) and with high definition digital cameras, making it the first fully-digital live action movie. This technique allowed editors to easily draw out or amplify specific colors in specific areas of a frame, giving Sin

City its unique appearance and making it feel as if the viewer is watching a live-action comic. In fact, the film was story-boarded with frames cut directly from copies of Frank Miller's graphic novels.

While cinematography is *Sin City's* most notable achievement, the film did not skimp of acting talent. A number of A-list actors—Bruce Willis, Benicio del Toro, Rutger Hauer, Jessica Alba, and Rosario Dawson to name a few—signed on eagerly. Most seemed tailor-made for their roles, but perhaps the most surprising performances were by Mickey Rourke as the rough-and-tumble Marv, and Britney Murphy as Dwight's (Owens) girlfriend, who capture their characters' nuances so perfectly that one cannot help but admire their performances. At times, the dialogue does lose its flow, particularly during the Dwight story, but such slips-ups might be the result of the often overdone dialogue and not entirely a failing of the actors.

*Sin City's* story-telling is as engaging as its imagery, and the novel approach to movie making makes this a film best seen at the theatre. That said, this is not a film for children, despite being based on a 'comic book' (Do parents not review movies before taking their children to see it?). Miller and Rodriguez pull no punches, and *Sin City's* dark characters and grisly violence are plainly displayed for all to see. What little violence takes place off camera creates images in the mind far more disturbing than anything filmed, and the characters' dry and often heartless monologues fill in whatever gaps the imagination forgets. Though the black-and-white backgrounds and cartoonish color lessen the impact of the gore, this is not a film for the squeamish.

If you are a fan of film noir, sci-fi, or dark comics, this movie is a must see. If you're a fan of all three, see it in the theatre. Twice. But if your wife, partner, or significant other doesn't care for any of those things, my advice is to go alone. It'll save you a lot of dirty looks.

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Thugs and run-of-the-mill street punks will mindlessly attack the Player Characters as they walk down the street, but villains need more class than that. They need a good sense of timing, and they need to enjoy making the PCs suffer some, even if the PCs are not part of their long-term goals. Think about it. Let's say that you are determined to make it to the movies before your film starts. Some yahoo that you have never seen before in your life thinks you're driving too fast so he runs you off of the road, potentially thwarting your plans to make it to the movie. Given the chance, wouldn't you at least return the favor? Don't you wish you could do more? Villains can and should do more, if the PCs interrupt anything, but keep in mind that your villain will deal with the PCs and then get back on track with his plans. Assuming he is driven enough, he won't put up with many distractions. PCs, as the heroes of the story, cannot stand being marginalized in any way, and while the GM should *never* do that, the villain can and should. He may recognize the PCs as a threat to his plans, but he should never let on to them that he is aware and watching them. If the PCs think he has trivialized them, they'll be more than a little offended, and as I said before, this personal affront will help make the villain more real to the PCs.

A good villain will be the one who has the best chance to defeat the PCs. He is the one who is always ready for the characters and is rarely surprised by what they do, within reason. There is a balance that must be obtained between thwarting the heroes and being thwarted. Encounters that end in a draw are always best when the PCs think that they were actually losses. The Game Master should not be the only one who can appreciate the efforts of the villain. In my experience, leaving clues for the PCs about the doings of the villain as he goes about his plans can really affect the PCs deeply. Creating the mystery around the villain is really where he begins to come alive. The mental image that the PCs build up around their foe will go a long way to creating long-lasting memories about him, and the information that the Game Master feeds to the PCs will ensure that the mental image is very much in line with what the GM wants. By building up a persona for the villain, the GM has a choice when it comes time for the big reveal, either showing that the PCs were right all along about their foe, or that they have totally misunderstood the information that they have received, and have no idea what their villain is actually like.

All of the advice I've given to this point has been in an effort to separate the class of villain from the ranks of

"combat encounter" and "monster." The villain should stand out; details are the way that this happens. In the interest of time, physical descriptions of NPCs who are doomed to quickly expire are usually kept brief. Your villain should be carefully documented, and his physical presence should be noteworthy, unless he is a hidden villain of course. Many villains have some kind of physical identifier to help the PCs pick him out of a crowd, and this can be anything. A scar, a twitch, a peculiar accent or some kind of exaggerated physical trait can be the identifying mark. The easier the villain is to visualize, the more readily your PCs will remember him.

Some say that insanity and villainy go together well, but I disagree. Insanity in the Role-Playing Games that I've seen tends to generally be the wild-man Joker kind of absolute craziness, and as of yet I haven't used an insane villain in a game that I have run. I don't see insanity being a compelling reason to start a character down the path of villainy. For starters, the really savagely criminally insane aren't very good long-term planners. They tend to inflict immediate evil on their environment, and don't usually affect large numbers of people. Serial killers don't kill groups (usually). There is no doubt in my mind that these people are both insane and evil, but they aren't villain material for RPGs. To portray them as they are, there just isn't enough substance. Insanity could be the result of villainy, however. If the GM takes the villain on his own personal journey of the course of the stories, and the crimes and plots and plans drive the villain deeper and deeper in various psychoses, it could lead to a compelling climax as the PCs are ultimately forced to save the villain from himself.

There is also the issue of style. Villains need a smooth way of operating. Some of this style is born of the arrogance inherent in most villains who have achieved a certain degree of success. Hubris is a stereotypical flaw of villains, but probably one of the easiest to swallow for the Player Characters. Villains that reoccur in a GM's stories and who have gotten the best of the PCs more of ten than not need a style, a swagger to their step. This isn't to imply that they need a gimmick. Style and gimmicks are not remotely the same. The difference is plain to see in Batman villains like the Riddler. The Riddler has a gimmick; using the wrapped boxes and clever clues to string the hero along. That is a gimmick, meaning that anyone with enough wrapping paper and a book of haikus can do it. The Joker on the other

# Fandom Who Filk: Creating a Filk Group (part 2)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

*Here are some ideas to start a filk group.* First, find two or three others who are interested, then meet and sing—get used to singing in front of each other. People will be more apt to join in with their own songs or established filking selections if there are enough bold people who can start them out. It may be that public singing is not an issue with the people you have found to filk with. If they are too bold, that's where some guidelines come in to make things fair.

*Second*, list songs everyone can sing together that are easy. This might be Weird Al's Star Wars version sung to the tune of "American Pie" (Don McLean) or "Ghost Chickens in the Sky"—a skewed little parody on the Kentucky Colonel. Camp songs might get your group started, but hopefully it will evolve past them with a little research. Getting a group singing together is one of the best ways to start a filk evening, and a group song at the end sends everyone off with that-song-that-will-not-end stuck in their heads.

*Third*, decide on the format for your group. Of the typical formats, Bardic is easiest, but let's explore the other types as well.

**Bardic**—Everyone takes a turn. They can pick a performer of their choice or ask that a certain song be sung. They can play/sing themselves, or pass.

**Poker Chip Bardic**—Poker Chips are passed out 2-3 times during the evening. Turns are "bought". If you run out of poker chips, too bad. You'll have to wait until the next round of chips are passed out.

**Domino Chaos**—There must be a connection or association with the song you want and the one before it.

**Cats Cradle**—A ball of yarn is tossed around the circle in no particular order. Each time it is tossed, that person holds onto a section and tosses it to someone else. This establishes the order for the evenings' filk.

**Chaos**—No set order, and anyone can jump in at any time. (Midwest)

**Bardic Chaos**—A form that combines the two. (Northwest)

**Polite Chaos**—Canadian style that may or may not have a moderator, otherwise, there is no set order, but they are nice about it all.

Two lesser known forms are Chaosium and the good old Native American version of the Talking Stick.

**Chaosium**—For Chaosium, a graphic theme is agreed on. Dark fantasy, military, horror, Lovecraftian, or hack n' slash themes are common and often includes roll playing and anime themes. There is no set order and anyone can perform at any time. Someone might jump

in while someone else is performing and it becomes a battle for dominance. Chaosium is very rare.

**Talking Stick**—A stick, (walking stick, rain-stick—pick one) is passed around the circle, though not in any particular order. The person who passes the stick to someone is asking them (or sometimes giving them permission) to perform. The receiving person can perform or pass. Traditionally, only the person who actually holds the stick may participate.

In addition to these formats, filks tend to be *themed*. Themes might include: science themes, technology, writer's themes (songs/poems about works from Tolkien, McCaffrey, Haldeman) movie, Star Trek, sci-fi anything, rpg, parody and anything else your group can think of.

Don't think you can find songs like that? Do a search (my favorite is Google) of any topic + songs and you'll be amazed what you can find! We will talk about how to use those songs next month. And, there is a little topic about copyrights we need to discuss.

*Another issue is children.* Filking has become a family affair for many. Leaving children at home may lessen your participation. Conversely, disruptive children may lead to a lessening participation as well. Filking groups who use private homes may be ideally setup for children with shorter attention spans. Or not. If children are not encouraged to come, what age is allowable? Discussing this beforehand can help sooth rough spots later.

*What about filk content?* Johannes Brahms wrote that lovely lullaby tune we hum our children to sleep with; he also wrote some incredibly filthy songs we'd never want our children to hear! Songs explicit in nature are NOT appropriate for children no matter how open-minded you think you and they are. Sing a sexually explicit song the group finds funny, and chances are, your kid will too—and will remember far more words than you will. So, unless you want to hear it sung in places you'd rather not hear it (like the grocery store, the doctor's office or in Sunday School as your child impulsively shares what they learned that week), don't allow them to sing or hear these. Sense and sensitivity around children is paramount.

As always, when children are involved, great care is needed to nurture interest and feelings without letting them take over—most children have little hesitancy to sing on the spot, performing anything at any time. A separate place for them to go to when they become tired or bored is ideal. Parents are usually sensitive

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# The Writer's Block: Horror Writers - The Crazy Truth

I suppose all genres of literature are troubled by myths. You know, those pesky facts that everyone knows are true but which... aren't. Let's see: literary writers are pretentious wannabes, SF/fantasy writers are adolescents in adult bodies, poets are just plain insane, and romance writers... well they just aren't getting enough! But some of the worst myths are told—and believed—about horror writers. Since I write horror, and I know a few dozen other horror writers, let me address some of the myths about my chosen field. Just ignore the nagging voice in your head when it suggests that I might be biased. Nothing could be further from the truth. I assure you.

MYTH 1: People who write horror were abused as children. As I said, I know lots of horror writers. I don't personally know *one* who was abused as a child. In fact, most of them had happy childhoods, or at least childhoods that were no different from those of many others around them. My father died when I was thirteen and that was hard on me. But I always knew that I was loved by my parents and my upbringing was basically happy.

I do know that a very famous writer, Dean Koontz, who is generally known for his horror fiction even though much of what he writes isn't horror, has talked freely of the trauma of growing up with an alcoholic and sociopathic father. But even he wasn't sexually or physically abused. He was a victim of psychological abuse, which I certainly don't mean to minimize. But most horror writers don't have such backgrounds. They are, strange as it may seem, normal.

MYTH 2: People who write horror are weird. Now, I'll admit, most of the horror writers I know have somewhat twisted senses of humor, and they may keep things around their workspaces that most people wouldn't tolerate, such as the skulls (fake for the *most* part) that I keep in my office at home. But I've always found that horror writers are the friendliest and most approachable people you can meet at a writing conference. Every horror writer I know except for one is married. Most have children who are well adjusted. Most also have other jobs and they do well in those jobs. They have friends. They're not any weirder than anyone else. (After all, we all know that it's the "quiet" ones you have to watch, and horror writers aren't usually quiet.)

MYTH 3: Horror writers write their own fears out on paper. This is not *completely* a myth, really, but it's not typically true. One time after I'd finished telling some family members about a story I'd written, my mother-in-law asked me how I could stand to write about such things. She said she'd be so scared to write about ghosts, or demons, or evil aliens, or monsters. She'd be scared they'd come after her. And I told her, "Well I can write about them because I don't believe in them. If I believed in them I might be too scared to write about them myself." She was shocked.

I don't think that most people who write horror fiction actually believe in the vampires and werewolves and ghosts that they write about. They are having fun with the concepts. Those things don't scare them.

*But*, let me clarify something. If I say I don't believe in monsters and ghosts, that doesn't mean I couldn't be scared by the thought of such things under certain circumstances. I mean, I'm probably as scared as anyone else in a "haunted house," because I can *imagine* the ghosts even if I don't, in my rational moments, believe in them.

And, at least for me, when I'm writing a horror story, when I'm caught up in telling the tale, I *do* believe. Right now, I'll sit here and tell you that I put no faith in the concept of ghosts. But if I'm writing a ghost story and I'm alone, and it's storming outside, and I hear a strange noise that I've never heard in the house before, I *am* scared. Because I've worked myself into that state just through the exercise of imagination. I'm sure many other horror writers are the same.

Now, there is one last "myth" about horror writers that *is* true, and I'll let you in on the secret. But keep it just between us. You know the saying, that horror writers make better lovers. Believe me, *that* one is fact. I swear it on the *Necronomicon*.

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Suppose that we are wise enough to learn and know - and yet not wise enough to control our learning and knowledge, so that we use it to destroy ourselves? Even if that is so, knowledge remains better than ignorance.

– Issac Asimov

## OR *How to journey to palaces and ice planets and claim it as a deduction*

Run with any crowd, and after a while you'll begin to hear the same advice over and over. In the parenting crowd you'll hear advice like *praise in public, punish in private; pick your battles; maybe even ... go ahead and have that beer, man, cause you're gonna need it*. Then there's a crowd like the public service sector where you might hear firefighters advising *install smoke detectors on every level of your home; in case of emergency, dial 911; maybe even (to one another) ... go ahead and have that beer, man, cause you're gonna need it*.

What, then, of the *writing* crowd? What advice pops up *ad nauseum* at writers' conferences, in the vast plethora of how-to books, and on agents', writers', and publishers' websites? The most overdone that come to mind are *write what you know* and *read, read, read*. Not only is such advice rather insipid, it borders on knuckle-headed. So now we have to *tell* writers to read? This is roughly equivalent to telling an infant to suck. It's instinctive, right? Don't people develop an interest in writing, in the first place, because they were enchanted by reading? I'm sure people who are serious about writing don't need someone else telling them to *read*, especially, say, agents who devote more space on their websites to promoting their own books than to featuring the works of their clients.

I don't like slapping down a couple hundred bucks to attend some writers' conference or even shelling out \$14.95 for some how-to-write-your-novel ditty that tells me to *read*. Oy. Okay, so then what about that other advice, that *write what you know*? If you're like me you're pretty sick of that one, too. So Herbert knew a coupla giant worms, did he? Roddenberry, I suppose, was secretly a Vulcan, and -- *dang!* -- that Jules Verne dude *musta* really gotten around, eh?

I've met (and read about) my share of writers who, taking the *write what you know* advice to heart, have traveled far and wide to "research" some setting in which they want their novel to take place. Then they write off the travel as a business expense. I'd like to try this, except interstellar travel comes a bit dear these days, even if I can claim it as a deduction. So what's a spec-fic gal to do? Substitute. That's right. Take the Stanislavsky method to writing speculative fiction.

Method acting, developed by that man we'll just call *Stan* for short, recognized that few actors have at their

disposal the requisite grab bag of life experiences to genuinely portray, say, a vicious murderer. So how then does one convincingly portray such a heinous character? Substitute. Uh-huh. Listen. Stan knew that while an actor would not have experienced what it was like to murder another human being, the actor would certainly have experienced rage sufficiently akin to a murderous impulse to be able to use that feeling, to amplify it, and to project it into the audience. How so, you ask? Let's step into acting 101 (don't worry; this is a kissing cousin to *writing 101*, so we're still on task):

Stan hands Joey Wannabe a sliver of script – probably something Shakespearean to really impress him – and has him read a monologue. The delivery must leave us believing that in the ensuing scene Joey will have built up sufficient steam to commit murder. But no matter how loud Joey speaks nor how far he spits, the necessary feeling isn't conveyed. So Stan tells Joey to forget the established scene in the script, and sets a new scene for his student. While Joey starts the monologue over, Stan begins talking him through an improv in which a relentless housefly is tormenting our future star. Joey, reading his lines, swats and swats at the imaginary fly. Stan tells Joey, no matter what he tries to do, the fly escapes his rolled-up-newspaper destiny with death and continues to dive-bomb Joey.

Joey, getting into the little scene, feels his emotions rising. This is familiar: the annoyance that builds to the frustration that becomes the rage that drives the normally sane person to begin plotting the demise of an insect. *Because that's all it really is. Yeah. A measly insect. And no freakin' insect's gonna get the better of Joey Wannabe*, Joey is thinking as he reads his lines. By now, under Stan's capable guidance, Joey is a veritable ball of tension; he is totally into the improv, stalking the fly as he says his lines. The backdrop of Stan's soft voice talks Joey through the action, setting the pace, tightening the spring until Joey whacks!

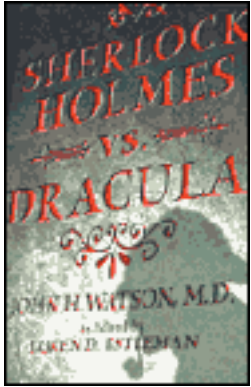
Stan shouts, "It's another miss!" Joey howls, his knees buckling as his balled fists frame his upturned face. "Deliver your line!" screams Stan, and by now, the clever instructor having orchestrated the peak of Joey's frustration to coincide with his final line – some declaration of murderous intent – Joey gives himself over to the playwright's words so convincingly that his audience of fellow students gasp, persuaded for

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## Reviews

### Sherlock Holmes vs. Dracula, or The Adventure of the Sanguinary Count

Loren D. Estleman



Pocket Books, 2000  
Trade Paperback, \$14.00  
ISBN 0-7434-0004-6  
Review by D. L. Parker

When this book passed through my hands in my local library, I could not resist, I absolutely could not *resist*, checking it out and taking it home. Who could spurn a

book sub-titled “The Master Sleuth Meets the Master Tooth?” After all, the two fictional literary giants were indeed contemporaries. How could the Baker Street Duo have failed to be involved in Dracula’s nefarious plot to conquer the Queen’s Sceptered Isle? Really, it’s obvious that Watson – as well as Bram Stoker – must have been holding something to their respective chests. We can only assume that Professor Van Helsing had a serious axe to grind with his rival, that gentleman known throughout the world as the Great Detective.

The fans of the Great Detective, in fact, won’t let the cocaine-snorting sleuth die. Even Arthur Conan Doyle tried it, and was forced to recant the detective’s watery death. There are magazines and publishing companies that specialize in Holmesian stories to this day (Empire Publishing Company, with its Gaslight Publications imprint, is one example). Modern writers have seen Holmes and his straightman sidekick battle Mr. Hyde and his angst-ridden alter ego, Dr. Jekyll; seen Holmes (*gasp! never!*) march down the aisle into wedded bliss; nodded in satisfaction as Holmes made short work of his less famous predecessor, Edgar Allen Poe’s arrogant and nocturnal Parisian detective, C. Auguste Dupin (who may be seen at his best in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”). And of course, in this story, see Holmes get the best of the Master Tooth, Vlad the Impaler himself.

Estleman’s riff on the Holmes and Dracula myths follows the gospel of the Bram Stoker original, which, uncharacteristically, leaves precious little room for the master detective and his “You’re the *ggggreatest*, Holmes!” sidekick to play in. After all, it was Van Helsing and young Jonathan Harker

who followed Dracula, after his failed assault on England, to his snowy retreat in Eastern Europe and who (supposedly) vanquished the King of the Undead. The Great Detective, not one of fiction’s most modest heroes, fails to jell with the equally prideful Van Helsing, which Watson grimly alludes to as the real reason that Holmes does not get his due in Bram Stoker’s narrative. But in fact, there is only a short window allowed for Holmes’ stage appearance at the best of things, because he and Watson must necessarily concern themselves only with events in England. Thus this tale ranks as one of the few cases in Holmes’ career where he did not exactly bring home the bear slung over his tweedy shoulder. Perhaps *that* is the real reason he never permitted Watson to tell the story.

Unfortunately Estleman’s book wastes nearly half of the story trying to drum up false suspense from a well-known tale. Even if the title of the story did not Tell All, any modern reader would instantly recognize the perpetrator of the blood-drained victims. There’s no mystery involved here, and it was a waste of time to try. The book picks up only in the second half when Dracula enters the scene in person. Estleman does do an excellent job of keeping an authentic Holmesian style and tone throughout, and his descriptions of Dracula adhere closely to the original’s as well.

Unfortunately, this being a Holmes-centric novel, we already know that Dracula comes off unfavorably compared to his rival. Sherlock Holmes has *no* equal: that’s the gospel.

So tell me, readers: who would *you* vote for in this Freddy-vs.-Jason contest? *I’d* put my money on the supernaturally strong, aristocratic invader. I suspect, myself, that Dracula would have digested Holmes’s famous brains for dessert and spit out the smoking pipe as decoration for Sherlock’s empty coffin. Fred Saberhagen certainly agreed with me; you can read the Count’s own side of the story in his excellent Dracula series, beginning with “The Dracula Tapes” and continuing to modern times in “A Sharpness in the Neck” and other stories. Needless to say, I suspect the Count himself has less than positive things to say about how the truth was distorted by certain notoriety-grabbing professors and vainglorious detectives.

Still, I’m on the lookout now for more Holmes adventures. Anyone have hands on that missing edition of “Sherlock Holmes vs. Mr. Hyde”? Better *yet*, “Sherlock Holmes vs. Alien”? Ooooooh! Just *call* me.

## Reviews

### Dark Planet

Charles W. Sasser



Medallion, April 2005  
\$6.99, Mass Market, 368 pp.  
ISBN 1932815139  
Review by Harriet Klausner

In the far distant future, when Earth is a wasteland populated by mutants, humanity colonizes countless planets. After they crushed the Indowy technology

which made humans and Zentadons little more than slaves, they became the dominant power in the galaxy. Now under the Galaxia Republic, humans are the species with the most power, and the Zentadon and the Indowy races have evolved into pacifists.

There is a new alien species moving into Federation territory known as the Blobs and it is believed they are building a base on the Dark Planet Aldenia. Deep Reconnaissance Team 2113 is sent there undercover and one of the members is Kadar San, a half-breed human Zentadon with telepathic powers. They discover an old Indowy weapon that could decimate the galaxy and Kadar San wants it destroyed. However another member, of the team Blade who is influenced by the evil Presence wants to take the weapon off planet so it can be used as a weapon of mass destruction. There is a benign Presence who sides with Kadar San in his battle with Blade and the evil Presence and the stake of their encounter is the survival or destruction of the galaxy.

Readers who like military science fiction within a space opera will love *Dark Planet*. The alien seem very real as if the author traveled through time to the future and recorded the cultures of different sentient species. There is a lot of action in this novel but that doesn't mean the characters are stereotypes. The protagonists are well developed sometimes make mistakes but always fight to destroy evil. The romance between Kadar San and one of his teammates adds another dimension to a satisfying reading experience.

### Guardian of the Freedom

Irene Radford



Daw, April 2005  
\$24.95, Hardcover, 544 pp.  
ISBN 075640178X  
Review by Harriet Klausner

Since the time of Merlin, the Pendragons have been charged with keeping Britain safe from her enemies. Drake Pendragon is the present head of the family and the society of magical practitioners; however King George III, unfamiliar with the British heritage, does not believe in the power of the Pendragon. Drake's sister Georgina, unwilling to stay a helpless female, runs away and hires herself as a mercenary to England's enemies.

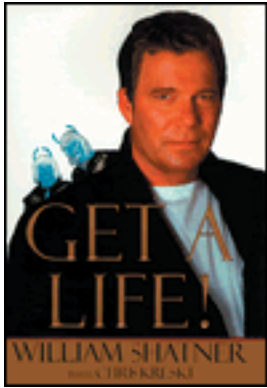
Her brother suffers from ill health and relies on his distant cousin Dr. Millen Marlowe who has the ear of the king. Marlowe wants to bring his eldest who was killed in the colonies back to life but to do that he must enter the archives that are heavily guarded by wards. Another son Barclay, a soldier in King George's army in the New World, has summoned a supernatural entity to cause chaos; when the time is right, he will grab the power his father covets. Georgina fights for the rights of the people who choke under English rule while across the sea; her cousin Emily does her best to keep Marlowe and his minions in check. A magical battle looms and if the forces of good lose, England will dissolve into chaos.

The fifth book in Merlin's Descendants retains the freshness and excitement of the previous books. Georgina would be more at home in the twenty-first century with her ideas of women's rights, but her love for the mortal Major Roderick Whythe keeps her grounded and happy and he is wise enough to give her the freedom she needs. Irene Radford uses actual historical events and intertwines them with the Pendragon magic to create a fascinating and riveting tale.

# Reviews

## Get A Life!

William Shatner, Chris Kreski



Simon & Schuster, May 1999  
Hardcover, 320 pages  
ISBN: 0671021311  
Review by TerryCrotinger

*Get A Life!* is a response to William Shatner's experience (and no small amount of feedback) after appearing in a Saturday Night Live (SNL) bit that lampoons Star Trek fandom (December 20, 1986).

In the skit, he is appalled that fans (portrayed as techno-nerds and gawky-dweebs attending a *Star Trek Convention*) have developed a fanaticism about Star Trek, his character, the Enterprise and everything else having to do with the series. His frustration building at questions he can't hope to answer, Shatner yells at the fans in the skit to, "Get a life!" Since then, Shatner, and that line, are fandom icons.

William Shatner's book, *Get A Life!* attempts to experience *Star Trek Conventions* as an average participant might (with or without costume). Disguised as a nasty-looking alien, Shatner polls Con-goers on everything from why they attend conventions, what Star Trek means to them, and in some cases, elicits feedback about what a jerk William Shatner was for the SNL bit. What the former Captain Kirk came away with was an impression of how Star Trek impacted the nation, not just overzealous fans. And, a bruised ego.

Readers get a history lesson on how the original series was saved by the efforts of "fans", how the first conventions started—and by who, and personal insight about being a presenter/Guest of Honor (GoH). He hints, without naming names, of the darker quirks of some former cast-members' behavior as a GoH at Cons. He also blatantly informs the reader how he feels about other cast members—by name and some of the practical jokes he played, specifically on Leonard Nimoy (who wrote his own response to how fans treated him with, *I Am Not Spock*, in 1977).

As a touch-feely book that made me feel proud to be a loyal Star Trek fan, I question Shatner's motivation. Was it to capitalize on an instant seller or was it to appease Fandom? Is it possible he realized just how offended fandom was by the SNL gag? Does the mighty Shatner want to make amends? (Would Captain Kirk?)

Or, was *Get A Life!* a pre-marketing tool to live down the negativity garnered from the SNL skit? Viewers have watched him launch into unusual ventures such

as Priceline.com, singing, Boston Legal, and lately, Invasion: Iowa—a bogus mini-series that spoofed and duped the gentle folk of Riverside, Iowa (the town where Captain Kirk was supposedly born).

William Shatner does an "about-face" on the topic of possibly obsessed Fandom and convention goers in *Get A Life!* But, I wonder if any real insight occurred? Mr. Shatner may have shown his real opinion of fandom by creating the embarrassing bogus mini-reality series, Invasion: Iowa. If the well-meaning people of Riverside, Iowa write a book about their experience with Mr. Shatner, they could call it, *Get A Clue!*

## Lords of Grass and Thunder

Curt Benjamin



Daw, April 2005  
\$24.95, Hardcover, 464 pp.  
ISBN 0756401976  
Review by Harriet Klausner

After defeating the enemies of the Cloud Country, Count Mergen Khan and his heir Prince Tayyichiut head euphorically home. The Prince was a hero who played a major role in the triumph. His uncle

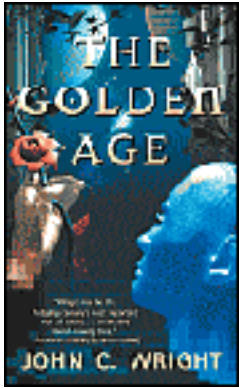
is only waiting for his nephew to gain more experience before he turns the power over to him. Mergen's son Qutvla not officially reorganized as his child wants to be the khan instead of Prince Tayy.

The snake demon who killed Tayy's parents weaves a spell over Qutula to kill Tayy and his father, and marry her so she can be the Khan's wife until she kills him and rules in her own right. Tayy's one hope is the shaman in training Eluneke who is learning how to use her power and is determined to save her beloved future husband (she saw that in a vision) from death from those he trusts. It will take a lot of power for an untried shaman to go against a demon and her consort but go against them she will in order to save her beloved prince.

This novel takes place in the same universe as the *Seven Brothers* where Tayy was a hero. In *Lords of Grass and Thunder*, he comes home an idol but almost immediately he is trapped by court intrigue, serpent demons bent on conquest and the love of a shaman who has much to learn about the use of her powers. His cousin envies Prince Tayy; so out of jealousy of his power and the love his father has for him, starts planning to bring him down. Curt Benjamin has written an exciting and enthralling stand alone book that readers will enjoy immensely.

## Reviews

### The Golden Age John C. Wright



Tor, 2002  
\$24.95, Hardcover, 336 pgs.  
ISBN 0-312-84870-6  
Review by D. L. Parker

Virtual reality has been around in fiction for a long time. The earliest forms of it were dreams or hallucinations: Oz and Wonderland and Xanadu and others, all fantastic worlds that the protagonists interacted with

but did not *control*. Later, in the Information Age, we had the cyberpunk masters, Neal Stephenson and William Gibson and others of their ilk, whose heroes, wish-fulfillment alter egos of the keyboard jockey generation, wielded god-like powers over their bit-patterned realms and could to some extent *master* their external environment.

John C. Wright's trilogy, beginning with "The Golden Age", takes that progression one step further. Now intelligence in its myriad forms controls its own realities completely, both external and *internal*. It is not only his outer world that man may tailor to his satisfaction now. Man may alter his inner world - his mind, his memories, and his psyche - entirely to his personal wishes. He may become a partial of himself, a mannequin, a mass-mind, a bodiless construct or many other neuroforms. The power that man extended over his external world in previous ages has at last also become the power that man extends over *himself*, in Wright's fantastic story.

Wright's far future envisions a Golden Age where humanity seems at the pinnacle of its prosperity and glory. True death as we know it is gone; the manorial system allows humans to spin many copies of themselves that embody their full or partial consciousness, while their actual bodies rest safely under constant medical care and protection. The reality they perceive is many-layered, augmented or sensory-filtered at whim, and threaded everywhere with artificial intelligence. Some of these artificial intelligences are external, such as the Sopotechs; others are internal, representing the various modifications that humanity has chosen to make to its

base neuroforms. Perceived reality is more fantastic and intense and glorious than normal human senses could ever make it, and as changeable as the wishes of its creators, because supposedly nothing - nothing except violence against another - is, it seems, prohibited in this permissive and luxurious world.

Many authors would be content to explore no more than these fertile grounds, but Wright's ambitious story takes on much more. On the threshold of this seeming Utopia we meet a strange and restless man: Phaethon of the elite Radamanthus House. Phaethon finds himself, as our story opens, unable to share whole-heartedly in the joyful festivities of the coming Millennial Celebration. Two unexpected encounters reveal to him that he is the victim of a great conspiracy: more than two centuries of his own memories have been wrested from him, apparently by his own choice. Strangers react with inexplicable affection or hostility; even his wife, who seems strangely changed, seems charged with encumbering his attempt to regain his memories.

In fact, as Phaethon probes the mystery of his damaged self, he finds that the greatest imaginable punishment, utter excommunication from humanity, will be inflicted upon him if he decides to re-open his memories. There, like Pandora's Box, lies his own extracted self - and could any man resist opening the lid? For with its sorrows Hope, too, lies in captivity. And hope is something, like the plagues and wars of ancient eras, that Phaethon's immortal Golden Age seems to have forgotten.

Wright combines the elegance and descriptive lushness of a Jack Vance fantasy with his meditations on the nature of humanity and its goals in an imagined far future. If the story has a weak point, it is, I suppose, in how all these philosophical viewpoints are represented in and as actual *characters*. Some of the characters, though finely drawn, read almost as mouthpieces, and can prose on to the point of exasperated impatience on the part of the reader. Understanding - and *believing* - their purported motivations can be a little challenging at times.

Such minor flaws really don't matter much though. This is a fantastic and highly ambitious story that manages to combine mystery, action, philosophy, imagination and eerie descriptive prose in 336 fast-flipping pages. I can't wait to pick up the rest of the trilogy. Give the generic elves, flippant thieves, cranky

# Reviews

wizards, and hotshot space adventurers cranked out by many writers in the field a rest and pick up something unusual and different. You won't be sorry!

P. S. **Trivia alert!** What is the significance of the name of the main character, Phaethon Radamanthus? I won't explain the significance of his *first* name because the author does so himself in the story.

The last name, however, could use some explication for the ordinary reader. Radamanthus was the name of one of the three judges of the Underworld (the other two being Minos and Aeacus). In Virgil's tale, Aeneas, the Roman hero, follows a road into the Underworld that reaches a crossroad. To the left the quaking hero hears groans and the clanking of chains and other sounds of pain and misery. He is told that the sinister region is ruled by Radamanthus, Judge of the Underworld, who thoroughly punishes the wicked for their evil.

So if the author chose the name of his protagonist by intent, I would expect in the volumes of the trilogy I have yet to read that suffering Phaethon does indeed gain the upper hand and executes justice – somewhat mercilessly – upon his heartless enemies. I can't wait to find out!

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## Hawkwood's Voyage

Paul Kearney



Ace, January 2002  
Mass Market, 384pp  
ISBN: 0441009034  
Review by Scott H. Andrews

British novelist Paul Kearney mixes nautical adventure with epic war and religious politics in *Hawkwood's Voyage*, the first book of his five-volume series *The Monarchies of God*. Kearney's fantasy world is based on 15th

century Europe and includes early muskets and cannons, monarchies clashing with a centralized church, and heathens invading from the east. Contrary to the title and the irrelevant prologue, the major conflict is not Hawkwood's voyage but the invasion of the Merduks. This nation of dark-skinned horsemen, led by a Sultan and worshipping a god with a name that begins with an A, reads like a stereotypical portrait of Muslim infidels.

Hawkwood's voyage into uncharted western oceans in search of an undiscovered continent is the most vividly described and interesting plot thread in the novel.

Kearney has clearly researched nautical procedures and terminology, and these chapters combine the best of adventure fantasy like Raymond E. Feist and nautical fiction like Patrick O'Brian. The other main plotline, the defense of Ormann Dyke against Merduk hordes, becomes interesting only when the soldier Corfe arrives in that city. The remaining plot threads, especially the political wrangling between the kings and the religious officials, feel unimportant by comparison. The ending concludes only one minor plot and leaves the rest completely unresolved, presumably for the four sequels.

Kearney's longwinded prose prioritizes the physical descriptions first, the history of his world second, and the characters last. The descriptions are vivid, but often the prose makes them feel as lifeless as encyclopedia entries. This line from Chapter Two opens a long passage describing a city: "Two things struck the seaward observer about Abrusio: the forest and the mountain." This description would have far more meaning if "the seaward observer" were an actual character rather than a hypothetical narrative personage, about whom the reader knows nothing. Many other chapters open with introductory scenes that are entirely physical and historical description before any character walks onstage. The absence of characters in these scenes leaves the reader with little reason to care about the description or history.

Kearney's characters are rugged adventure types with little weakness or depth. Hawkwood's awkwardness in dealing with his wife predictably vanishes the instant he sets sail. Corfe's suffering on the retreat from Aekir somehow molds him into an insightful commander. The nobleman Murad has some interesting motivations, but he remains largely unsympathetic because he is placed in opposition to Hawkwood. The rare female characters are all wives, prostitutes, and concubines. Nearly all the minor characters, including King Abelyn, the monk Albrec, the Sultan, and Corfe's captured wife feel like gratuitous setup for later volumes in the saga. The sloppy omniscient point-of-view leaves the characters feeling distant from the reader, as it drifts out of their heads in scenes with other characters and in scenes where characters are alone. Kearney attempts the wide, multi-character scale of epic fantasy like his one-time collaborator Steven Erikson, but in *Hawkwood's Voyage* he doesn't pull it off.

Kearney's detailed narrative and meticulous backstory create a rich world in *Hawkwood's Voyage*, but they leave his characters flat as they plod through uninteresting subplots. Only Hawkwood's actual voyage remains captivating throughout the novel.

## Reviews

### Ironcrown Moon Julian May



Ace, April 2005  
\$24.95, Hardcover, 416 pp  
ISBN 0441012442  
Review by Harriet Klausner

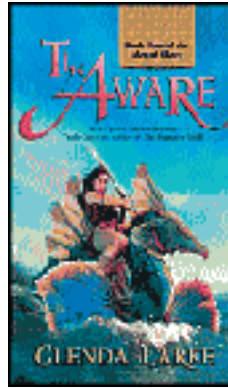
The former prince of Cathra is King Conrig of High Blenholme and the former independent kingdoms are now vassal states. The king sits uneasily on the throne

because he has a small amount of magic, as do his three sons. By law, all of these royals are not suited to rule. He is desperate to keep this a secret but learns that his first wife, that he divorced because he thought she was barren, is the mother of his son, a child who has no magic and should be the heir to the throne.

King Conrig has other enemies, including the former Royal Alchemist Killian and Prince Beynor of the House of Mass. Killian is locked away in an abbey wearing an iron collar around his neck so he can't perform magic and Beynor is exiled to the Downtide Isles with the sentient Salka monsters who want to rule the humans. These two men pair up to overthrow the empire, starting with the destruction of the royal family of Didion. Prince Somarus allies with these two rebels and proclaims himself the king and wants his country to be independent again. Conrig's first wife intends to tell the world that the king has magic flowing through his veins and her son should be the king. All these characters are players in this drama of the Beaconlight, sentient beings in the sky who have the power to activate the sgyls so that whoever wears one has magic. There are forces at work to keep Conrig on his throne because he has the best chance of defeating the evil Beaconlights and be an instrument for the good Beaconlights.

Julian May is a talented and visual writer whose descriptions make High Blenholme seem very real. There are many heroes in this tale who do the right thing for honor while the villains act in evil ways because they want power. May has written a work that is reminiscent of the *Lord of the Rings* whose fans will definitely want read this book and the first Boreal Moon fantasy.

### The Aware Glenda Larke



Ace, April 2005  
\$6.99, Mass Market, 336 pp.  
ISBN 0441012779  
Review by Harriet Klausner

The Isles of Glory consists of eleven island nations each a country with its own laws and rulers. It is an inbred place because it is forbidden for one islander to marry a person from another island. Blaze Halfbreed

is the product of parents of two different islands and was abandoned as a child when it was obvious she was not a purebred. She is not a citizen and cannot gain citizenry from most of the isles but Blaze has Awareness, the ability to see and sense dunmagic (evil sorcery) and sylv magic (good magic).

This ability makes her useful to the Keepers who rule the Keeper Isles by protecting the weaker islands from being assaulted by the more powerful islanders. Blaze works for the Keepers, and in five years, if she performs adequately, she will be made a citizen of the Keepers Isles. She is on the lawless island, Gorthan Spit, looking for a Cirkasian who ran away from home rather than marry the Bastionlord of Breth who prefers his partners to be very young boys. She meets Flane, a sylv practitioner who comes to the attention of a very powerful user of Dunmagic. He tries to turn her into a dun magician but Blaze finds a way to save her. The two women form a bond of friendship so that when one is in trouble, the other will help get her out of it. Blaze learns that there are more important things than citizenships like friendships and ridding the Isles of Glory of Mordred the most powerful Dinmagician of all.

Book one of the Isles of Glory is one of the best fantasy novels imported from Australia. Glenda Larke has written a fantastic fantasy full of action adventure and romance so that readers of other genres will enjoy *The Aware*. Blaze is a very complicated character who wants to be selfish but always manages to do the right thing even though it costs her the chance to be a citizen. It will be very hard to wait for the next book to be published as the audience will want to read more of Blaze's fantastic adventures.

### Research (con't)

the briefest of moments that the ensuing scene could truly be a murder.

What's my point? Well, two-fold, so let's chat while we leave Joey panting, inwardly delighted to have discovered a well of emotional capacity he hadn't realized he possessed and which he can turn into a fruitful resource for acting. Fold *one*: just like actors, writers can employ Stan's tactics. Let's call it *Method Writing*. Through the art of substitution a writer can manifest believable emotional responses for a character even when that character is experiencing things the writer herself never has. It's done all the time. I didn't create it. I'm simply trying to explain it while using up enough editorial space to warrant the front page spot again, while our editor-in-chief is on sabbatical.

Fold *two*: substitutions needn't be limited to emotions. We writers (particularly those of us who would have to travel to Alpha Centari to do legitimate research on our settings) can, after all, be creative. Try this new axiom on for size; *write what you want others to know*.

With that, I take my leave of you, departing this fortnight on a research journey of my own to Iceland and Germany (think the romantically stark glacier-dominated ice planet vs. the lush, forested planet where palaces lord it over quaint, majestic mountain villages). Aw, c'mon now. You must've known I'd tie it all back into the column's title sooner or later. Aye! A pox upon me!

Fare thee well, then, and good morrow to ye all.

Science fiction is that branch of fantasy, which, while not true to present-day knowledge, is rendered plausible by the reader's recognition of the scientific possibilities of it being possible at some future date or at some uncertain point in the past.

— Donald A. Wollheim  
"The Universe Makers"

### RPG Corner (con't)

hand, doesn't stick with one shtick. Although all of his plots are different, they all have the playfully morbid details and execution. The Joker is more sophisticated, and he has great style.

The creation and writing of a villain is only part of the story with RPGs. Sooner or later the PCs are going to get the chance to interact with the NPC, and the GMs performance of the villain will make or break him. Careful consideration should be given to the physical presence of the villain. How big or small is he, how does he hold himself and what does he do with his hands while he speaks? Is he relaxed or nervous, does he stare at the PCs intently or avoid eye contact with them altogether? How does he speak? Is he polite or snotty, aggressive or passive? The dialogue that occurs should reflect the nature of the villain. A wild and chaotic man would not have a formal discourse with his opponents, and he certainly wouldn't use proper grammar. On the other hand it would be entirely out of character for a great manipulating, behind-the-scenes villain to whip off his cloak and step in front of the PCs with brass knuckles and a lead pipe. A GM has to stay sharp, to keep up the persona he has built through the clues that have been left.

(to be continued)

### Filk (con't)

about the needs of the group and can balance this with the needs of their children. If not, your group may have to set some boundaries. But since this is for the good of the group, and not for the comfort of one person, it should not be a problem. If it is, remind them this is for the good of the group, not the one. If they go away mad, you may have done yourself a favor in the long run.

*A word to adults.* While filk music is fun and bawdy, it may be offensive. If there just *has* to be a time to sing hack n' slash, rape 'em and sell their children into slavery songs, do it at a specific time. Split your filking in two components—a set time for general filk, and a later time for "adult" filk.

The fine print about filking deals with copyright issues. The smellier part deals with socks. And, the coolest part about filking is learning new songs and discovering filkers! So, your homework for May is to do a search for filk songs, and while you're at it, do a search for Mr. Michael Hopcroft, a real filker from the Northwest. You are now armed with enough information to start your group. Filkers, start your vocal cords!