



# The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## Critiquing the Critic: *I don't get it!*

by garrie keyman

When we hold an opinion differing from others, why is it they so often shrug off our point of view with banal declarations? Have you been roundly dismissed with the lamest declaration of all? I have. I'll wager you have, too.

*You just don't get it*, you'll be told, as if you're lacking the intellectual acumen to understand rather than merely holding an opposing view – an informed one, at that.

Last month a small publisher asked me to review a recent release. When I found it sorely overwritten and suspected it had undergone a paucity of editing before going to print, I voiced my thoughts, warning the publisher I wasn't liking the book. It was meant to be an out for us both; I was hoping she'd have told me, *Well thank you then, but never mind*.

Instead she urged me on, asking I stick with it to the end, assured the story's strengths (whatever they might be) would win me over. I was further assured she was "big enough" to take a dissenting point of view, should it come to that.

You'd think I'd have learned by this late stage in life people don't always mean what they say. Even though I've been on this planet long enough to realize the concept of conditional honesty applies to almost everything, I still believe people when they look me in the eye and say, "No go on. Tell me what you *really* think."

The response to my review, which I'll readily admit didn't pull any punches, was to be deemed someone who *just doesn't get it*.

Okay, there *are* things I don't get -- I can deal with that: quantum physics, for one, maybe trigonometry for another. But what's not

to *get* about a fat novel with a slim, slow-moving plot and a whole lotta little else in between?

The first thing I find offensive about '*you just don't get it*' is that it's entirely dismissive. When I write a review I at least try to explain *why* I didn't like a particular work, while the ever evasive '*you just don't get it*' fails to explain why I should.

'*You just don't get it*' is the verbal equivalent of a petulant foot stomping when the ability to counter logically wanes. That's the second thing about it that's offensive. Playing the '*you don't get it*' card means never having to defend your story; it dismisses the voice of dissent as too ignorant to warrant rebuttal.

I realize there are individuals, who feel no review should be written that doesn't praise a work -- indeed, there are sites on the web with just such parameters -- but I've always felt to avoid writing a less than stellar review is dishonest. Doing so robs the truly praise-worthy works, making their five-star rankings meaningless. If every review on or off the web were one of highest praise, how would we know which works are really worth our time and hard-earned cash?

I tried to reassure the publisher that many works get mixed reviews and soon enough positive ones would flesh out, that I'd been asked for my opinion and had given it even though I'd probably be 'proven' entirely wrong in the court of public opinion. Why I should spend time trying to reassure someone who thinks I *don't get it*, I don't know, but sure enough, days later a series of stellar reviews hit Amazon.

Of course they were a little over the top, leading one to suspect they were planted there by friends and family of the author. One went so far as to call the book a *masterpiece*. Twain and Dickens are surely twitching in their tombs. Nevertheless, it goes to show opinion is nothing more than that. Everyone has one, so why put stock in what I say? It's not like anyone out there is actually listening to me. If I wrote reviews for the New York Times, I could understand the publisher's concern.\*

Still, in an attempt to further explain what I saw as the novel's shortcomings, last month I went on to write an entire column outlining writing mistakes for

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## Unwieldy Action and Dramatic Devices in RPG's

Many role-playing games center on great feats of heroism and intense action. This is not to say that the games must feature these things. I have heard of role-playing games that are based on poor farmers struggling with bad weather and unruly pests, games based on corporate ladder climbing and even games about the real lives of gamers. If you really like the Self Exploration model of gaming, then these games would appeal to you because they easily provide for opportunities for introspection and exploration of real life issues and consequences.

While there is absolutely nothing wrong with these seemingly mundane games, an overwhelming majority of gamers do what they do as a kind of escape from the pressures and limitations of their own lives. As a form of recreation, the games should be fun, and usually doing things like saving the world and being worshipped, or slaying orcs and being famous, are fun. As an action and drama-oriented medium, you would think that there are no types of action or drama that would be out of place in an RPG. While correct in the belief that all types certainly belong, I think that there are a few types of action and drama that just do not translate well to Role Play Games. Keep in mind that I'm not saying these things *don't* work; I'm saying they don't work *well* (or haven't worked well for me, at any rate).

## Chases

A staple of most action-oriented television, movies or novels is a little device called *the chase*. The pursuit of, or flight from, an antagonist is a staple dramatic device that can create tension easier than almost any other. Whether the chase is on foot, in a car, in a star cruiser, or in the inner reaches of cyberspace, the possibilities for drama abound, as tension rises from the possibility of the fleeing group getting away, apprehension over what may happen should the pursuer succeed in catching his prey, and along the way there are frightening near collisions, clever feints and spirited risk taking all in an effort to either get away, or catch up.

In the visual mediums of television and film, these chases are unbelievably fast, adding high risk of injury to the list of tension creating elements, and we are treated to amazing stunts, narrow escapes and triumphant captures. Book can also provide lots of exciting narration and visuals through description. We fear for our heroes for the threats that loom around them, but more for the threat of being caught and what that could mean for our intrepid heroes.

Yet, when the chase happens in a Role Playing Game, everything tends to slow down. In television or books, the writer knows who will succeed, and how, and how long it should take. Remember that in RPGs, the Game Master doesn't necessarily control the actions of the characters. Let's say the heroes (the PCs) are fleeing the mountain top retreat of the villain. If this were a movie, we'd just sit back and see what happens. As this is an RPG, what happens is very much in doubt. A truly impartial GM will have the PC who is driving make skill tests to see how well they are handling the treacherous roads and well placed bullets of the pursuing thugs. Likewise, the pursuing thugs must make driving skill tests to see how well they are keeping up, as well as making firearm skill tests to see if those bullets are in fact, well placed. If the other PCs are returning fire, then that's another die roll. If the piloting PC fails a driving skill roll, the good guys may end up flying off of a cliff, and likewise for the thugs. The pursuers being thwarted by ineptitude, while realistic, is not much fun dramatically. With so many dice being rolled, and the possibility of failure ending the pursuit prematurely, the whole thing kind of starts to feel like more trouble than it's worth. The crucial element to chases, namely speed, is lost as each second of driving breaks down to almost two minutes worth of skill tests, die rolls and result tabulations.

GMs can take steps to streamline chases, such as only having the PCs make skill checks if they want to try something dangerous or that they have never done before as they attempt to elude their pursuers. Likewise, the pursuers should not be foiled by a bad roll of the dice (unless the PCs need help like that to escape, and to advance the plot of the scenario). The thugs in this case should be handled dramatically, looming close to increase tension, and falling back to create a break for the PCs. GM's should also know beforehand what the outcome of the chase should be, or at least have contingency plans for either of the two most likely outcomes (heroes get away, or heroes get caught), so that there are no derailing surprises.

Using these techniques, you can shave some of the time off the chase, but ultimately, at least for me, without sometimes overwhelming amounts of GM intervention and narration, chases just take too long in RPGs to be effective sources of quick thrills and rapid builds in tension. It is important to remember, that the Players may feel different about this than the Game Master. The GM should never forget to consult his PCs and get their

# Michael Hopcroft Interview: Crossover Filker/Gamer

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Michael Hopcroft is a rare combination of *filker* and *gamer*, seamlessly crossing over from one science fiction genre to another. Based in Portland, Oregon, he is beginning to gain momentum in filk circles as one of the newer talents to emerge in an affinity genre that has little formal organization other than local interest and a few smatterings of public acclaim from filkers—almost all is done by internet posts and word-of-mouth. As a gamer, he develops and publishes RPG (roll playing game).

Going high-tech was one of the only ways I could catch up to this entrepreneur so I wasted no time in asking how he got started filking?

*Michael:* It started in the late '80s for me. I got my start in Doctor Who fandom and there were filkers in my club. One of them was Cecilia Eng, who had started recording with what was then, Off Centaur Productions. Eventually I was invited to one of her housefilks, and soon after I started writing songs. My first filk was interesting, and I was hooked right away. But again, having Cecilia there was a huge help. Portland has the problem that there are several good filk artists but few housefilks because they are so hard to organize.

\*What is your favorite kind of filk music?

*Michael:* Hard to say. Cecilia Eng holds a special place in my heart, of course, because personally she's been so helpful to me over the years. Leslie Fish was also an important influence as well. But I like a lot of different artists and styles.

\*You write your own lyrics; where do you get your inspiration?

*Michael:* Well, there's a lot of good song material in the [sci-fi] field. You just have to pay attention. I found a lot of really good song material in series like Slayers and Card Captor Sakura.

\*Having Cecilia Eng as a coach must have been fun.

*Michael:* Having Cecilia as a coach was good, but it was also frustrating. When I started out I had very little confidence. It must have really annoyed her because I would continually hand her lyrics and ask if she would sing them for me.

\*Cecilia Eng was about to leave for a trip to China but made time to respond to my query about you saying, "I'm happy that Michael is getting some recognition for his talents outside the Portland area."

*Michael:* She is unfailingly kind to me.

\* You filked at WorldCon. How do you think you were received?

*Michael:* WorldCon 1993 was a great experience for me. I was at the circles run by Lee Gold, the most legendary example of someone who is both an RPG enthusiast and a filker. I wrote "Norton's Empire" at the con because one of my correspondents there requested it. I did a cappella appearances at two of the open mikes that went pretty well.

\*How many cons have you sung at?

*Michael:* Lots. But I've only had concert space at two: SakuraCon 2003 and Oyrcon last year [2004]. I'm better known as a published songwriter than as a performer, although I'm hoping the album will eventually change that.

\*I hope so too. Describe your style. I know you sing a cappella...

*Michael:* I do sing a cappella. As for describing my style, it depends on the song for the most part.

\*I have heard your work; you are a robust, full-bodied baritone. Let me add, dark, adult and challenging.

*Michael:* I do a little of everything in terms of tone... serious, comedic... songs that get in the head of a particular character in a story that show what they are thinking and feeling.

\* You seem to expose those things we wish we could keep hidden. You do character development with RPG, so doing this with songs would be a natural progression.

*Michael:* Yes, that's right. It's one of the things I love about the fandoms I'm in. If the people in a story don't interest me, the story won't. I did theatre in college, (Shakespeare, Sondheim, Ibsen, Gilbert & Sullivan) so I got used to playing before an audience in a hurry. There is still a lot of theatre in the songs I write.

\*There seems to be an unwritten rule that gamers don't filk, but you do.

*Michael:* Gamers and filkers compete a lot for attention at conventions, and sometimes for function space.

\*Is it even possible to have filking be more acceptable at all Sci-Fi genres?

*Michael:* A lot of fans are not aware of the music or, if they are, have pre-conceived notions that prevent them from listening to other kinds. In addition, filkers have been more reluctant than they ought to embrace new genres such as anime as songwriting fodder.

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# Cross Plains, Lost and Found

by Charles Gramlich

If you'd like an extraordinary literary getaway that few people know about, then journey to Cross Plains, Texas for the Robert E. Howard Days festival. Cross Plains is a tiny hamlet that lies about a three hour drive south of Dallas, and it was the home town of writer Robert E. Howard, the creator of a dozen fantastic characters, including Conan the Cimmerian, Kull the Conqueror, and Solomon Kane, the Puritan adventurer from whom Van Helsing's look was pinched in the recent movie of that name.

Howard died June 11, 1936, but his memory lives on in movies, books, comics, and in the minds of his many fans. Each June, Cross Plains hosts a Howard Days celebration on the weekend closest to the anniversary of his death. The 2005 celebration was on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> and the 2006 one should be around June 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. I attended the 2005 gathering, as I've attended many others since the mid-1990s when I joined REHupa.

What is REHupa, you ask? The name stands for the "Robert E. Howard United Press Association." This is a group of thirty individuals (never more) who, every two months, produce a personalized mailing focused on Howard and related topics. The membership of REHupa changes, but the group's dedication to keeping Howard's memory alive has never wavered in its over thirty years of existence. Many current and former REHupans are at the heart of what is a current *boom* in Howard publishing and Howard studies. There are at least three magazines that appear fairly regularly, and an academic journal as well, all of which are published by REHupans or, in one case, an ex-REHupan. In the last two years alone, more than a dozen books have been published containing Howard's stories, and two more have been published *about* Howard or his work. Both of the latter are by present day REHupans. If you would like to know more about REHupa, you can find that information at the group's website, <http://www.rehupa.com/index.htm>

Two current REHupans, Rusty Burke and Indiana Bill Cavalier, were among a small group of Howard fans who first went to Cross Plains in 1986 to visit his home. Town folk made them welcome, and before long the fans were making the trip an annual event. A local community group calling themselves Project Pride soon began planning for the regular visits. They purchased the Howard Home and have worked to restore it. The house is now a museum, one of the most comfy ones you'll ever see, and it is at the house that the main events of Howard Days take place.

As for the events, they are varied. The house is open

for tours and you can see the tiny, cramped room where Howard wrote his hundreds of short stories and poems. There is a walking tour of the town—sites such as the "Ice House," where Howard used to box, are pointed out—and there is a bus tour of the surrounding countryside that covers some of the local history. This year there was also a screening of an old TV adaptation of one of Howard's best known horror stories, "Pigeons From Hell." And at some point, most fans make a trek to Greenleaf Cemetery in nearby Brownwood where Howard and his parents are buried. It's about a half hour drive.

Although discussions of Howard go on throughout the two day event, there are panels where specific topics are examined. This last year, for example, Howard publisher and bibliophile Paul Herman looked at the care and feeding of a book collection, and REHupans Jim Keegan, Rusty Burke, and Marcelo Anciano talked about the time-consuming process involved in producing limited edition books. Anciano is the head of Wandering Star, a publishing company that was formed to produce illustrated and limited editions of Howard's work. (To find out more about Wandering Star, visit <http://www.wanderingplanet.com/ws.html>)

There is a banquet for Howard fans one evening, which costs only 10.00 dollars a head and which is catered by a local restaurant that cooks the best country fried steak I've ever eaten. The banquet also features a silent auction where various Howard items, books, comics, and oftentimes some rarities can be had for cheap. The speaker/guest of honor for the banquet this year was Marcelo Anciano, who showed slides of brand new art that he's commissioned for the next Conan book that Wandering Star is publishing.

For the second evening, a local ranching family hosts a free barbecue at their Caddo Peak Ranch, where visitors can climb the peak to see an incredible view of the local landscape. (Climbing doesn't require ropes and pitons, just a little foot work.) REHupans, or the occasional local, will read selections from Howard, and, weather permitting, there will be a beautiful sunset to enjoy. Following the barbecue there is a return to the Howard House pavilion where people talk late into the night. Jack and Barbara Baum, the heirs to the Howard estate, generally stop by over the weekend for a visit and often close out their stay at the pavilion.

The 2005 festival is over, but plans are already underway for 2006, which will mark Howard's centennial. A big gathering is planned, and everyone who's anyone in Howard fandom will be there. On a

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## Reviews

### Going Postal Terry Pratchett



Harper Collins, 2004  
\$24.95, Hardcover, 377 pgs.  
ISBN 0-06-001313-3  
Review by D. L. Parker

The jacket blurb on Terry Pratchett's *Going Postal* says that the author has sold more than thirty-five million books worldwide. There are all sorts of reasons why Pratchett's fans are giving the Golden Arches

a run for their Billions Served boast, and I'm sure I would hear a dozen different ones.

In my case, I know exactly why I'm a fan. It's not because I think Pratchett is some kind of modern-day Chaucer, as the aforesaid jacket blurb boasts; it's not that his Discworld tales are insanely inventive; no, nothing about Depth of Character or Serious Heft Underneath It All or anything of that sort. It's the sly use of *language*. I hardly care about the plot or even the characters when I read a Terry Pratchett story. What I read for is the rip-roaring fun Pratchett has with puns and allusions and double-entendres and everything else he can load on a sentence. Chaucer? Nope. Pratchett would be almost Swiftian in his language and inventiveness if Jonathan Swift just hadn't been such a bitterly savage old fellow. Leaven Jonathan Swift with a little lightheartedness (*well*, given that the latter was the author of that black tongue-in-cheek essay on the troublesome children of Ireland, a whole *lot* of lightheartedness) and then... well, you *might* have something that approaches Terry Pratchett.

Pratchett, unlike Swift, is an optimistic and rather sweet soul. Unlike Chaucer too, his characters are not Life. Case in point is the protagonist of *Going Postal*. The story stars Moist von Lipwig, a gentleman described by the authority figure who orders his hanging as "a natural-born criminal, habitual liar, fraudster, and totally untrustworthy perverted genius." *Just* the sort of person you'd want to put in charge of the Postal Service, wouldn't you? In any event, in the process of reforming the defunct letter-carrying institution into something The People Trust, our ne'er-do-well is himself transformed into a suitably Upright Soul worthy of a gold-plated statute or two in civic pigeon roosting areas (a minor remaining predilection for lifting pencils *aside*, of course).

Chaucer would have smiled at such a fantasy, because of course thieves don't Do It because they never really understood what harm they're causing and are So Sorry when they finally come to their senses. That's Pratchett's optimistic feel-good spin, and while it makes for great, satisfying reading, it's certainly not Life, as Chaucer would have portrayed it (never mind the famous Wife of Bath: anyone remember just how all-too-human the *Miller* was?). Pratchett's stories almost always have something moral and feel-good about them. I'd give every one of his books to my son or daughter (if I had any, of course). No doubt the author would blanch at being labeled "morally inspiring", but yes, of course his characters are... even if all the thieves I ever met in *real* life wouldn't have cared *what* pain they caused other people because they just didn't give a darn for anyone but themselves *anyway*. Enjoy *Going Postal* instead, where a thief with a heart of gold reforms in the happy realm of fantasy!

So I don't say read Pratchett for his characters, which are certainly not Chaucerian, or for his plots, or for the suspense, or for the moral imparted with a wink. Read Pratchett for the *language*. The wit, whether low or high. Read him for passages like the one in which Daniel 'One Drop' Trooper, the assigned executioner of our hapless thief, greets his victim. "*I am your executioner for today, sir. Don't you worry, sir. I've hanged dozens of people. We'll soon have you out of here.*"

It may not make you laugh out loud, but it'll make you smile. And goodness knows, after stories where the heroic torturer eats a piece of his lost love on a cocktail plate or a self-pitying cyber-jock shoots up another jolt or two and dives into Cyberland on an explosion of liberating profanity, we *need* a few more gentle Terry Pratchett witticisms. I've lost track of the number you've written already, Mr. Pratchett, but keep at it. I am really, truly, sincerely, and happily rooting for you to beat out that hamburger-flipping non-rival for the Billions Served award. *Spin* on, Discworld!

A subtle thought that is in error may yet give rise to fruitful inquiry that can establish truths of great value.

— Issac Asimov

## Reviews

### Building Harlequin's Moon

Larry Niven & Brenda Cooper



Tor, June 2005

\$25.95, Hardcover, 464 pp.

ISBN: 0765312662

Review by Harriet Klausner

In Earth's distant future, AI's don't always act in a manner that will help humanity, nanotechnology is out of control; and politics make the planet

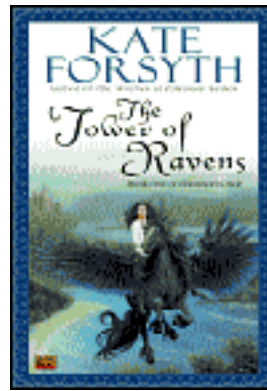
a very unsafe place to live. The machines that were designed to help mankind might very well be the seeds of their own destruction. Three spaceships flee earth heading for the planet Ymir vowing to do away with the advanced technologies that brought their home world to the brink of ruin.

The John Glen had a mishap that caused them to end up in a solar system dominated by the gas giant Harlequin. Gabriel, a terraformer, creates Selene out of the various moons. When Selene is habitable the High Council has the colonists breed children that are native to Selene. Their job is to help the Earthborn to build a collidor that will gather anti-matter to power the John Glenn so they can travel to their original destination. As the moonborn, who are little more than slaves, begin to realize their ultimate fate once they are left behind, a schism opens up between the two groups that could lead to violence unless the council takes a less militant attitude and rectifies the situation.

Larry Niven and Brenda Cooper are an excellent writing team. Readers are able to see how Selene is created from an uninhabited rock into a terraformed world capable of supporting humanity. The authors concentrate on world building and characterizations so that readers are privy to the birth of a new orb and how it was done. A sequel involving the planet Ymir would satisfy many readers' curiosity about the eventual fate of the other two ships.

### Tower of Ravens (Rhiannon's Ride, 1)

Kate Forsyth



Roc, June 2005

\$7.99, Mass Market, 448 pp.

ISBN 0451460324

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the mountains live wild satyricon, fairies with horns and hoofs instead of feet. Living among them is a female outcast who has human feet and no horn.

She captures a flying winged horse and escapes to the home of Lewen, an apprentice witch and his family who tend to her injuries. They name her Rhiannon and decide that she should be taken to the city of Lucescere to the Tower of Two Moons to be tested for any power she might have.

They travel with a caravan of witches' apprentices but when they find the body of Connor A Yeoman of the Guard, they race to the capital to report the murder. Rhiannon doesn't volunteer the information that it was her arrow that killed the man but because she has his possessions she falls under suspicion. They travel to Fettercain Valley where the dead walk and children are snatched from their homes and killed. The laird, Malvern MacFerris invites the tired troupe to stay at his haunted castle but the evil that resides within the walls threatens their lives. It is up to Rhiannon and any power she may have to rescue her friends and break the malevolence that surround them.

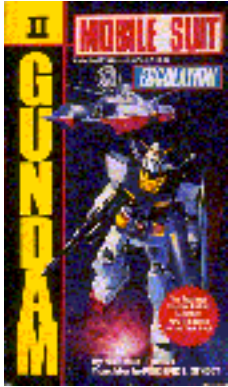
Book one of Rhiannon's Ride is a fabulous fantasy where magic is taken for granted and the people acknowledge and grant equal rights to species straight out of mythology. The hero turns from a feral girl into a caring woman willing to risk her life to save those she has come to care about. The Highlands of medieval Scotland are the basis for *Tower of Raven* and Kate Forsyth proves once more that she is a master of creating a mythical world based on an actual bygone era.

# Reviews

## Gundam: Mobile Suit

Yoshiyuki Tomino

Review by Terry Crotinger



The Gundam phenomenon is the foundation of most anime in Japan in the late 1970's, exploded as a moneymaking industry and slowly leaked to the U.S. In Japan, anime is a huge industry and Gundam led the way with toys, manga, and videos. (Geez! The best we had was Speed Racer and Astro Boy in the 60-70's.)

The series introduced the robot, known in the States as mecha—mechanical robot—a war machine that was less caricature and more realistic. (Remember Transformers?)

The word “Gundam” means a type of mobile suit of armor or exoskeleton, reminiscent of the monsters that Japan gave us that stood as high as skyscrapers and caused havoc, while citizens fled in terror. Substitute giant man-controlled robots with giant swords and bazooka-type guns to shoot the monsters and you have a good idea what to expect. This mecha forerunner is America's version of the Transformer-type toy best used in the Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future TV series. A host of other similar toys quickly followed; McDonald's food chain even offered them in Happy Meals.

However, all the action in Tomino's Gundam occurs in space, in the future, and each side in the ensuing civil war has their own version of the Mobile Suit. He did not like the typical toy-like representation of the giant robot, so he made the Mobile Suit more realistic and plausible.

In three books, readers understand that because of the Earth's overpopulation, forced immigration began as orbiting habitats were being built. These colonies, up to forty at a time, are grouped together and called “Sides”. The Sides and Luna II—an independent station, share the Moon's orbit. There are two sides to the main conflict: The Federation and The Zeon Archduchy locked in a civil war. To make things more fun, the Zeon Archduchy has its own internal civil war beginning with a faction of the top leaders (Zavi Dynasty) vying for dominance with plans of their own for the loyal followers of the Archduchy. It gets complicated from there.

## The Gundam Mobile Suit: Awakening

Author: Yoshiyuki Tomino

ISBN 0-345-35738-8(PB)

List Price: \$4.95 (US)

214 pages, paperback.

Book I, Awakening, begins with the introduction of Mobile Suits (MS)—massive robot prototypes being developed by both sides, and still being tested. The Federation's green-barely-a-cadet, Amuro Rey, dons on an empty Mobile Suit when the Zeon forces, with their MSs, attack the Federation colony—Side 7. The reader is introduced to Zeon's top-gun, Sha Aznable, who has the nickname of “Red Comet” because of his skill in handling the suit. And, we learn that Sha is related to the assassinated Zeon leader, and that his sister is a loyal crewman on a Federation ship.

Only a few individuals can pilot these suits efficiently. The ones who are obviously gifted with agility and some otherworldly sense in handling the giant armor are thought to have developed new space-evolution ability, a New Type of space dweller or fighter. The term “New Type” starts a small controversy of it's own.

## Gundam Mobile Suit: Escalation

Author: Yoshiyuki Tomino

ISBN 0-345-35739-6(PB)

List Price: \$4.95 (US)

212 pages, paperback.

As Book II, Escalation unfolds, readers glimpse Federation and Zeon cultures as they re-group from the last battle. Each side's true motives are revealed; court intrigue is exposed. The MS of both forces fight often, each time learning new abilities about themselves and the enemy. Relationships end in death or separation. Readers learn that “New Type” is a type of human that has adapted to space and can move with lighting speed, something needed if a Mobile Suit pilot is to survive. The loyalties of Amuro and Sha begin to flag as they wonder what the future of the war they are fighting will bring, but more importantly, what will become of New Type if such a thing exists?

## The Gundam Mobile Suit: Confrontation

Author: Yoshiyuki Tomino

Copyright 1991

ISBN 0-345-35740-X(PB)

List Price: \$4.95 (US)

214 pages, paperback.

## Reviews

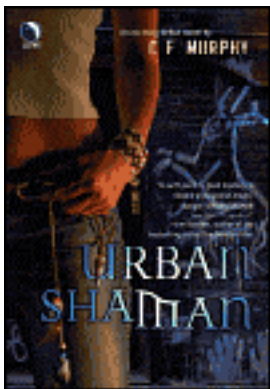
Confrontation, Book III, continues this question of the future of New Types. If there really is a new breed of space dweller, will they be used for war then outcast as too violent to live in proper society? In hopes of a final victory, Zeon/Zavi forces aim a giant laser at the main enemy forces. This will destroy Federation ships, and, oops, a couple Zeon ships—one just happens to carry Commander Krishia Zavi, the sister of the main commander, Gren Zavi who ordered this fiendish laser to be built. But Krishia Zavi is warned—just in time—and in a surprise twist, both enemies—Federation and Zeon, and their mobile suits attack Gren's position to bring the war to a possible end by killing Gren. Some of our favorite heroes are killed; everyone else begins to reclaim life and pick up the pieces of war.

In the Gundam book series, people die, age and come of age, lose their virginity and often end up tragically morose. Readers are exposed to unusual future (?) fighting perspectives and traditions—like taking clippings of their girlfriend's pubic hair into battle as a good luck omen. The question of a New Type evolutionary race is never satisfactorily answered. How well both sides were able to retain a tenuous peace is left unexplored.

Like the song that never ends, Japanese and American fans can't get enough of Gundam! "After more than two decades, the Gundam saga has expanded to include nine television series, four video series, ten movies, and countless novels, comics, and original video and rpg game adventures. This saga encompasses six different worlds, each with its own unique history and society, and showcases the work of the most celebrated talents of the anime industry." (gundamofficial.com) Gundam fans don't have to wonder if that's all there is. Given time, there will be more. I'd bet my best Transformer on that.

### Urban Shaman

C.E. Murphy



Luna, June 2005  
\$13.95, Trade, 324 pp.  
ISBN 0373802234

Review by Harriet Klausner

As the plane lands, passenger Joanne Walkingstick sees a man with a knife, a pack of dogs and a woman running. Joanne grabs a taxi to head to the spot where she saw the crime take place. She finds Maria D'Ambra who tells her

she was being chased by Cernunnos a Celtic god and leader of the Wild Hunt. She is a banshee who can tell when someone is about to die making her invaluable to the Wild Hunt who collects the souls of the dead.

The metaphysical is not in Joanna's world view until

Cernunnos runs her through with a sword and while near death her spirit guide Coyote tells her how to heal herself. She also learns she is a shaman with the power to heal. When she goes to talk with Maria, she finds her murdered in the same way five other shamans were killed in recent weeks. Not much later, the killer attacks schoolchildren in their classroom murdering some and injuring the teacher. He is Herne a demigod who was once mortal and has his own plans for the world and the Hunt. Unless Joanne can grow into her powers to send Cernunnos and Herne back to where they belong Earth is doomed.

The relationship between Cernunnos and Herne is familial but there is an enmity that exists between them because of their different goals with mortals caught in their cross fire. Joanne accepts the metaphysical work and her shamanic powers a bit too easily but she has the strength and determination to use them in order to fight the two gods. C.E. Murphy has written a spellbinding and enthralling urban fantasy in the tradition of Tanya Huff and Mercedes Lackey.

### Silver's Bane

Anne Kelleher



Luna, June 2005  
\$13.95, Trade, 406 pp.  
ISBN 0373880226

Review by Harriet Klausner

The goblin hordes who feast on flesh threatened humans and Sidhe with extinction. To contain them in the wastelands, a silver Caul was made with faery magic by a mortal silversmith. Now, due to the treachery of a mortal who betrayed the Sidhe

prince he made a deal that enables Cadwyr, heir to the Duke of Gar, to possess the Caul.

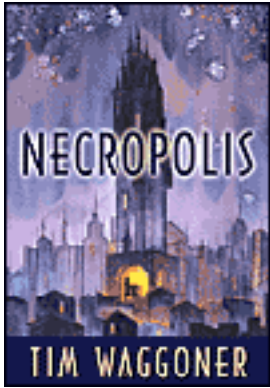
The Goblins roam the mortal realm, eating on human flesh and Cadwyr has no plans to stop them. He kills the Duke and claims the title but the dowager duchess Cecily flees and plots to overthrow the traitor and become queen if the people will accept her. In the land of the Sidhe, the goblins are coming and the land is dying. The people, mortal and Sidhe, must find a way to UNmake the Caul otherwise both the human and faery realms will cease to exist.

*Silver's Bane*, the sequel to *Silver's Edge*, is a fantastic fantasy that leaves no questions left unanswered or threads left for any other sequel though a prequel in which the making of the caul is told in *Silver's Lure* which is coming in 2006. There are many heroes and heroines in this book who band together to fight the goblin horde praying to end the threat that Cadwyr poses. Anne Kelleher has written a memorable spellbinding work.

# Reviews

## Necropolis

Tim Waggoner



Five Star Press, 2004  
\$13.95, Trade Paper, 247 pgs.  
ISBN 1-4104-0215-0  
Review by D. L. Parker

I'm a sucker for tragic love stories. *Anna and the King of Siam* (the newer version with Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat, not the shrill original with bald-headed Yul Brynner) made me snuffle. *Casablanca* choked me

up. I blubbered through Mimi's dying scene the first time I saw *La Boheme*, right along with the young man who kept sniffing suspiciously in the row behind me. Now we've got *Necropolis*, which features a lover in the most hopeless situation of all... he's a *zombie*. Once upon a time he was a cop, but now he's a dead man trying to preserve his desiccated hide with regular pickling spells, and of *course* he's a prime candidate for Tragic Romance with capital letters and dripping tear adornment. He can't even *feel* a kiss, and the sort of people who'd even *give* him one, luckily, are not his cup of tea. He's a lump of gray-tinged meat that has to reattach an arm or a finger now and then, but he's still got his soul. And you can't take the chivalrous knight out of the man on the white horse even if he's dead.

Tim Waggoner's book surely features one of the most unusual heroes in the detective genre. Matthew Adrion is the ex-cop who doggedly followed a perp into the shadowy realm of *Necropolis*. He got his man, but he fell afoul of a Darklord in the process, and now he hangs half in and half out of life, a decaying zombie. He can't go back to Earth, of course, but old habits die hard. Matthew's still doing what a cop does best, and *Necropolis* being what it is, there are plenty of folks who need a knight in shining armor, even if he's getting a little over-ripe and scabrous in the face.

One of those needy folks is a damsel in distress, a youthful seventy-three year old vampire who's too frightened to go to Daddy and tell him she's lost an artifact she was supposed to be looking after. Daddy's one of the Darklords, and he tends not to be forgiving of mistakes. So it's up to Matthew and his dame in deep doo-doo to find the missing artifact. The heat's on pretty quick, because they soon learn that Daddy's notorious wrath is the *least* of their worries. The missing

object is the Dawnstone, and it has the potential for shedding unwelcome light upon a realm that depends upon shadow to survive. Only... *who's* got the Falcon cum Dawnstone? We've got to check out a lot of *very* strange characters to find out.

Waggoner writes his story in the style of the old hard-boiled classics, which appealed to me as a rabid fan of Chandler and MacDonald (both Ross and John D.) and other great detective classics. There's the tough-but-tender hero, the slice-of-strange-life vignettes (given that this is *Necropolis*, *very* strange life indeed), the twisty plot and the red herrings to detour reader and detective up another crocodile-laden creek. The only thing that spoiled it for me was the unfortunate use of a certain horror cliché in the denouement. While I can't tell you what it is without spoiling the show, the "\_\_\_ Done It" is a classic of horror just about as much as the "Butler Done It" is in the old pulp mysteries. No *wonder* I hated the nasty little things so much when I was in my first infested college dorm...

So what can I say? It's a *classic*. If you're a fan of Simon R. Green, who does a series very much like this one, you'll especially enjoy *Necropolis*. It's a horror spoof done with a sense of wit and pulp detective done tongue-in-cheek. Sam Spade, watch out. There's a slow-footed zombie creeping up on you!

## Rogue Berserker Fred Saberhagen



Baen, 2005  
\$22.00, Hardcover, 281 pgs.  
ISBN 0-7434-9873-9  
Review by D. L. Parker

Years ago when I was green out of college and untarnished by Life I worked for Boeing. My job, which was supporting the computerized brains of various robotic systems used to deliver screws and widgets and

the like to a bored human picker, took me out on the factory floor on a regular basis. Boeing shop buildings are enormous beyond belief. They were strange and mysterious worlds to me at the time. There I could see giant ovens along the wall, jockeys riding multi-story machines of unimaginable purposes, and *there* – surrounded by their own little fences to keep tender human flesh safe from the blazing tips – were the robot welders.

## Reviews

I still remember my intense fascination with my first robot welder. The thing was like a giant skeletal arm whose elbow flexed and moved with an inhuman smoothness. So what if I, a computer programmer by trade, had a better idea of most of what was actually controlling its eerily efficient and utterly alien movements. *The thing moved of itself*, and for someone who was a child pretending to be a grownup still, that was fascination enough.

Somehow Fred Saberhagen manages to impart that eerie sense of the machine's danger and fascination in his *Berserker* series more than any other writer has. Lay down your laurels, Hal. I do not believe there is another villain as chilling in the entire genre as Saberhagen's life-phobic machines. Sauron's showy eye and Dracula's sublimated death-as-sex just can't compare. This is an enemy of cunning and implacable purpose, clever enough to exploit our own weaknesses and temptations against us. It is the zealot of zealots, the ultimate Mad One, the demon servant gone utterly out of control.

In *Rogue Berserker*, Harry Silver, a veteran of too many Berserker encounters and earner of the dubious distinction of Super Badlife, receives an offer he prefers to refuse. It looks like a berserker has kidnapped a rich man's family. The rich man wants Harry's help, but though Harry sympathizes, he doesn't feel the man's pain to the extent of risking his life. He's got a wife and child of his own to look after. But in no time at all, that same wife and child disappear just as Winston Chang's did.

Now Harry has no choice but to go after the metallic monsters. Only... is there a *human* motivation behind the Berserker's uncharacteristic actions? What do a shape-shifting machine, a nutty inventor, and an old comrade with a grudge have to do with the abduction of Harry's family? Before it's over, more than *one* human will have found himself with an unexpected metallic ally.

This is a worthy book in the series. My only complaint is that the protagonist goes through much of the story in a sort of emotional shock, and the cotton-wool feeling lingers too long for the reader too. We don't kick in with our own sweaty involvement until Harry does. The ending's enough of a roller-coaster whirl to make up for it, but Harry's a little too detached for real visceral reader involvement for too long. But it's a minor flaw in a well-done book.

Saberhagen's a prolific writer. The *Berserker* series includes several previous works and another coming up soon; he has an excellent modern Dracula series too, as well as various others dealing with Greek Gods, magic Swords, and a time-traveling thieving

Pilgrim. He's a competent writer in all of them, and one of the few in whom I can see actual improvement in writing abilities and style on an on-going basis (compare his early *The Golden People*, with its villain's wince-inducing dialog, with later works). His works verge on horror in many cases; in fact, I still flinch from a few remembered scenes in the *Books of Swords* and *Pilgrim* series. But there aren't all that many writers doing action-adventure with a science fiction, fantasy, or horror edge as well as Saberhagen. He's an old-timer of the genre now I suppose, but one of the greats, too. Now that we've lost Andre Norton and Marion Zimmer Bradley and Frank Herbert and many other giants, I appreciate him all the more.

So, Mr. Saberhagen, when are you going to deliver us another Dracula book, *please?* We Love Ya!

### Stolen Magic

M.J. Putney



Del Rey, Jun 2005

\$23.95, Hardcover, 352 pp.

ISBN: 0345476891

Review by Harriet Klausner

In 1748 England, the Guardian Council Chief Enforcer of the use of magic, Earl Simon Malmain travels to the castle of Lord Drayton to charge him with using his mage skills to abet the Jacobytes. Drayton remains relaxed considering

who is unwanted guest is and coolly changes his foe into a unicorn; only a virgin can convert Simon back into a human. The evil magician boasts that having a unicorn will make him the most powerful person ever on the planet. However, Simon escapes from the castle though he remains in his mythological form.

Simon the unicorn meets Drayton's servant "Mad Meggie", who is a virgin with a special skill with animals. She frees him from the spell and in turn he liberates her from an enchantment that left her under Drayton's control. They partner in an effort to stop Drayton, who wants to halt the Industrial Age from replacing the enlightened magical era.

This is a terrific romantic fantasy that uses mid eighteenth century England as a backdrop to anchor the magical elements so that the audience believes in spells, unicorns, and the battle of the mages. The story line is action-packed yet insures the key three characters appear fully developed. The romantic subplot between Meg and Simon accentuate a fabulous tale that will send enchanted readers seeking *A Kiss of Fate*.

## The God Particle Richard Cox



Del Rey, Jun 2005  
\$13.95, Trade, 320 pp.  
ISBN: 0345462858  
Review by Harriet Klausner

Los Angeles-based businessman Steve Keely is in Zurich with his assistant Serena who does not hide how much she wants him although he plans to marry

Janine. After a spat with Serena, Steve answers his ringing cell phone to overhear his beloved Janine making love to someone named Barry. Heartbroken he quietly and sadly says goodbye. He picks up a Russian, Ana, in a bar and goes to her place, but someone enters her room and beats Steve up. He goes to the hospital where after physically healing he finds he is able to predict the future with uncanny accuracy and perform things on a par with a Jesus miracle.

Mike McNair is the head physicist of the North Texas Superconducting Super Collider project. On a plane heading to Dallas, he meets news anchor Kelly Smith over Mark Twain. As they become acquainted his Noble Prize obsession takes back seat to this woman who has opened his eyes to a vast world he ignored. However, she will take a back seat to the universe that Steve shows him when the business mogul desperately turns to the physicist for help as he struggles to cope with powers beyond that of a human.

*The God Particle* is a superb science fiction thriller that uses relatively up to date theories on subatomic particles as a base for a terrific action-packed thriller. The amazing feat of this tale is even with a deep science base that educates the reader and plenty of non-stop action, the key players, especially Steve and Mike, seem genuine. Richard Cox writes a deep thriller that will remind readers of Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*.

## Hopcroft Int. (con't)

\*Filking is not your main livelihood. You are a businessman, own your own game development business AND publish games?

*Michael:* Yes, I've owned and operated Seraphim Guard since 2001. It's hard to define success in fields like mine. And I'm a very harsh judge of myself.

\*From the game titles, it looks like you have fun, fantasy and what else?

*Michael:* I just finished the license RPG for Bill Holbrook's webcomic "Kevin & Kell", which will be out soon. I do a lot of anime-inspired stuff. They're pretty much traditional RPGs in terms of the way they are played—I mainly have different ideas I'd like to bring in.

\*Are these various systems or one particular system?

*Michael:* Various systems. My first published RPG, HeartQuest, used a system called FUDGE. K&K is an Action! System game. About the only system I haven't used at one time or another is d20, which seems to have become the RPG industry's version of Windows.

\*What are your thoughts on professional filkers?

*Michael:* The term "pro filker" means different things to different people. I know only two people in the filk community who make their full living as musicians. One is Heather Alexander, who plays Celtic clubs, gives kick-ass live shows, and seems to be torn on whether she should distance herself from filk in pursuit of her larger career. The other is Leslie Fish, who helped start it all back in the 1970's, and these days I suspect she gets most of her money from her writing because she hasn't released an album in a while and doesn't really tour anymore.

For all the others, filking is something they do as a creative supplement. Most have a wide variety of careers. Jeff Hitchin works for Microsoft and does theatre. Ceilia

Eng, I believe still draws her paycheck from one of the local banks and runs a business called "Friends of Filk" that sells tapes, CDs and books at Northwest conventions. I don't know what Callie Hillis (half of the now-defunct duo Echo's Children) does for a living, but I can't wait for her first solo project. Her voice and her flute playing are angelic.

*Michael is releasing his first album this summer.*

### Critiquing (con't)

which authors can easily edit their own works in order to strengthen their fiction prior to submitting to agents and/or markets. Those ten tips were prompted by my having read and reviewed the novel in question.

But not everyone agreed; I, too, was met with a voice of dissent (the main difference between the reader who emailed me and myself, however, is that I *sign* emails I write). The individual felt the *KISS* method suited non-fiction only, but I beg to differ. While I may be developing into more of a minimalist than is presently trendy in some circles, who wouldn't appreciate the skill of any writer who could set mood with incisively lean narrative and draw detailed character portraits with little more than the dialog they speak?

Of course, maybe I'm being presumptuous. The reader who emailed me might have meant something different by the term *KISS* than what I supposed. Perhaps it stood for *Keyman Issues Superior Sophistry*.

In any event, I stand by my analysis and I will continue to tout praiseworthy works while detailing the shortcomings of others. As with all critics, the measure I use is my own.

Because I appreciate intelligent debate, all serious, well thought-out and *signed* rebuttals will be warmly welcomed at [Jsolus@hotmail.com](mailto:Jsolus@hotmail.com).

\*1. *Sincerest apologies to my dear editor-in-chief for any negative implications created by the comparison.*

\*2. Speaking of the NY Times, let me take this moment to shamelessly plug an acquaintance's work and congratulate him; I heard his book, *The Biggest Brother*, reached #25 on the New York Times Best Seller list. It currently sits at #34. Way to go, Larry Alexander of Ephrata, Pennsylvania! I know Larry through Civil War reenacting.

Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy.

— Sam Moskowitz

### RPG Corner (con't)

input on things, because their point of view is crucial to the success of a game. Just because the GM finds chases anticlimactic, doesn't mean that the Players do.

A good alternative to the traditional chase is the cat and mouse, or stealth chase, where the hero must outwit or sneak by his enemy. Fleetness of foot may not be as valuable as an ability to disguise oneself or creep silently. The occasional checks as the thugs search the crowd for the hiding hero create a great deal of tension for the PCs, and the slower the thugs go, the greater the tension, which is perfect for the RPG format. Another good variation on a traditional chase scene is a beat the clock kind of scenario, where the PC's must accomplish a goal in under a certain amount of time. Allowing for a low number of die rolls to accomplish the task creates a great deal of tension hinging on each roll, and draws the PCs in quickly. A variation of the beat-the-clock chase scenario is the race to the finish, where the PCs are competing with another group to arrive at a destination. It is best in this instance not to have the other group in view all of the time. A quick glance of their competitors as the PCs zip through narrow alleys and streets will provide all the tension you need, and the final straightaway at the end should be brief, allowing the sense of speed to remain, while still providing a direct competition between the two groups.

I could keep going, but let's face it, no one has read this far anyway, so why not stop? I'll pick up next time with another aching miserable device for GMs to glare at ruefully from across the room.

### Cross Plains (con't)

related note, the World Fantasy Convention in 2006 is dedicated to Robert E. Howard, and it's being held November 2-6 in Austin, Texas, which is just about forty miles from Cross Plains. If you have plans to attend that convention, you should take at least one day to drive up to Cross Plains and look around.

If you're interested in seeing more about Howard Days in Cross Plains, or just in visiting the home, see Project Pride's site <http://www.crossplains.com/howard/museum.htm> Since the museum is not open for regular hours outside of Howard Days, you'll need to write or call ahead to make sure you can schedule a tour. The address and phone numbers are below.

### Project Pride

P.O. Box 534

Cross Plains, TX 76443

or phone: (254) 725-7251, (254) 725-7351, (254) 725-7432